

Senate confirms Department of Health secretary 38-1

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The state Senate confirmed Dr. Tracie Collins on Friday to become the next state Department of Health Cabinet secretary responsible for helping lead New Mexico out of a deadly pandemic through continued testing, tracing and vaccination.



Dr. Tracie Collins

Collins was confirmed by a 38-1 vote hours after she faced a grateful and supportive panel at the Senate Rules Committee, where she promised more equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and defended the closure of some businesses as necessary to contain the virus and save lives.

Collins was recruited by Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham for the job in late fall, when the state was at its “darkest hour” contemplating rationing medical care as a surge of new COVID-19 cases tested limited hospital capacity, said Dr. David Scrase, secretary of the state Human Services Department and chief medical advisor to the governor on the state’s COVID-19 response.

She is on indefinite leave from her post as dean of the University of New Mexico College of Population Health. Collins made it clear at her Senate Rules confirmation hearing Friday her priority was containing the virus, but said she hoped to tackle “other issues around health inequities.”

Asked about DOH data showing the low vaccination rate of minority populations in New Mexico, Collins said, “one of the issues ... the initial rollout did not address equity appropriately.” She offered no details.

“And so we’re looking at where doses are going and wanting to make sure that for the most vulnerable populations, we have vaccine providers in those areas.”

The vaccine rollout came just as Collins joined the DOH as a secretary-designee. Back in December, the first group to be vaccinated were first responders, health care workers and those in long term facilities. Currently, those 75 and older and those 16 and older with a chronic health condition are eligible to be vaccinated.

She said the state has potentially more than 400 providers and currently 289 providers who have doses of the vaccine to administer, but wants to add providers in smaller, more remote communities.

At the Senate Rules hearing, Collins raised the issue of “vaccine hesitancy.”

“It is very concerning. There’s a lot of history in our country, there’s structural racism, there’s a lack of trust of the health care system, and so we can’t expect because a pandemic has hit, that suddenly people are going to trust the health care system or want to actually receive a vaccine. So the onus is ours, the Department of Health and others, to work with these communities, to understand what their concerns are, to provide clear information on vaccines, on their efficacy and what we know and the value of them to save lives and to actually help those hardest hit, which are communities of color.”

Collins sounded hopeful about a third vaccine from Johnson & Johnson due to arrive in New Mexico in the coming weeks.

“The wonderful thing about Johnson & Johnson is it’s one dose, it has a good shelf life, there’s not the ultra cold storage issue.” That type of vaccine could be best “for people who are hard to reach, transient, who don’t stay in one place long enough, those populations,” she told the committee.

Sen. Peter Wirth, D-Santa Fe, thanked Collins for stepping up “at a moment when we really needed you to help all of us.”

Wirth asked her about the argument from some lawmakers that “we would have been just as good in New Mexico if we had just left all the businesses open, as some other states have done.”

From a “public health lens,” Collins responded, “if we think about the pandemic and what it could have done to our hospitals, health care had we not put in measures to contain it, we could have been overwhelmed beyond what we experienced with this recent surge. So we really have to think about what’s in the interest of keeping New Mexicans alive.”

Collins, who came to New Mexico in 2019 after serving as chair of the department of preventative medicine and public health at the University of Kansas, has “truly world-class level credentials,” said Dr. Michael Richards, vice chancellor for clinical affairs at the University of New Mexico. Her education and training includes fellowships at Harvard and Dartmouth College.

“You are by far the most qualified secretary of health we’ve ever had,” Sen. Mark Moores, R-Bernalillo, told Collins. “You are stepping into the breach at the worst possible time in modern history.”