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New England First Amendment Coalition

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January 19, 2021

Dear Gov. Gina Raimondo,

We're writing on behalf of the New England First Amendment Coalition and the New England Newspaper & Press Association.

Our organizations are concerned about your lack of availability to the press since Dec. 22 when you were named as a nominee for Commerce Secretary in President-Elect Joseph Biden's Administration. On behalf of NEFAC and NENPA, we implore you to resume full press briefings and to allow direct questioning from the many local journalists serving our communities each day.

We represent these journalists, their news organizations, and all other concerned citizens throughout the state who have the right to know how public officials are acting on their behalf. This right to know is especially important during the current public health crisis when the state is governed, in part, by executive order and Rhode Island residents look to you for leadership and reassurance.

While your nomination to President-Elect Biden's Cabinet is a great honor that carries with it certain responsibilities, these must not be prioritized over your duties as governor. Making yourself available for questioning by journalists — who serve as a proxy to the public — is one of those duties.

With Rhode Island reeling from cases of COVID-19 and a need for timely and accurate health information, there is no substitute for direct access to the governor. While officials from the Department of Health may now lead press conferences regarding the pandemic, they cannot provide the same level of insight into the deliberative process behind your policies. Only through the direct questioning of you as governor can Rhode Island residents best understand how these immensely consequential public health policies are formed and what they are intended to do.

Since last March, you have been the key decision maker on pandemic-related questions such as how to open schools, whether to restrict businesses, or if certain health mandates or economic incentives should be put in place. Rhode Islanders now face questions about vaccine distribution and demographic priorities for inoculation, as well as whether federal assistance may be needed in the months ahead.

There are questions — related to the pandemic and otherwise — that must be answered. As the state's top-ranking elected official, you are the best person to answer them. Limiting your availability and avoiding the press not only deprives the public of this much-needed information, but the lack of transparency shakes the confidence we have in our state government.

Again, please recognize the public value that results from taking questions from the press and reconsider your recent inaccessibility. In times of crisis and rampant misinformation, we are looking to you for answers.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Justin Silverman
Executive Director

Linda Conway
Executive Director

New England First
Amendment Coalition

New England
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