



Jan. 19, 2021

The Hon. Gina M. Raimondo
R.I. Office of the Governor
82 Smith St.
Providence, R.I. 02903

Dear Gov. Raimondo,

We, the Rhode Island Press Association, a nonprofit that supports and advocates for local print journalism and open government, come to you sharing our collective concern about you not answering questions from news reporters during the Jan. 13 COVID-19 press conference at The Vets, both inside and outside the facility.

It was the first time since Dec. 22, nearly a month ago, that you addressed Rhode Islanders in Rhode Island about the pandemic and since you were named a nominee as commerce secretary for President-elect Joe Biden's cabinet. But outside of a brief statement, the lone response the public – including news reporters – got from you Jan. 13 was a wave as you closed the passenger door in your SUV and left The Vets.

While you have publicly stated that you plan to remain as Rhode Island's governor until, and if, the U.S. Senate confirms you as the new commerce secretary, that process could take weeks or even months. Your office has informed the media that you will be "focused on ensuring a smooth transition and continuing to manage the public health response." However, it does not make it clear that you plan to answer any questions publicly, whether it is regarding the ongoing pandemic that has devastated Rhode Island – and the world – or anything in general in your remaining time as governor. This is extremely troubling to us.

The Rhode Island Constitution states that sitting governors have executive power during emergency situations. Since early March 2020, per your order, the state of Rhode Island has been in a state of emergency due to the pandemic. Much of our life in Rhode Island since March 2020 has been lived under the executive orders that you have put in place.

Any policies that are introduced and enforced by you, which can make or break a person's life and livelihood, must be answered about publicly both from the media and from your constituents. And, while Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott from the R.I. Department of Health will take lead on the COVID-19

press conferences going forward, she is not the one who ultimately decides on what statewide policy needs to be implemented to address the pandemic. You do.

The way schools, colleges and businesses have operated, and how people lived in Rhode Island have changed dramatically in the last year due to the pandemic and due to the policies that you have implemented in response. The public demands to hear directly – and ask – about why such policies are put in place, how it will affect the citizens of the state, how the state plans to respond to help serve those impacted by the policies and announce updates if plans change. It is your duty to properly respond to your constituency in times of crisis, not remain silent.

You, as governor, promised full and complete transparency to the public throughout this health crisis. That includes answering questions from the public in a public forum, such as press conferences, and the pandemic did not stop in Rhode Island on Dec. 22. Other governors in neighboring Northeast states, such as Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker, Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, have not only addressed the public multiple times since Dec. 22, but also announced new policies and initiatives in response to the health crisis. In the process, those governors took questions from the public and news outlets about those new policies and initiatives.

Those governors did not take a month-long hiatus from the public eye, unlike you. Such action is unacceptable during normalcy, let alone during a health pandemic where more than 2,000 Rhode Islanders have died from COVID-19 in less than a year.

In closing, Governor, you took an oath to be the leader of this state, and promised the citizens here full transparency. You are still the governor of Rhode Island, not yet in Washington, D.C. We demand that you fulfill the oath of office and promise for transparency from now until you leave office. That includes publicly addressing, and answering questions about, any updated policies that are currently in place related to the pandemic.

“No comment” is not applicable with COVID-19 still posing deadly consequences to the community at-large.

Sincerely,

The Rhode Island Press Association Executive Board

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