

R.I. Senate committee endorses pick to head BHDDH

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A key Senate committee has recommended the appointment of Kathryn Power to return as director of the state hospital and mental health services agency she headed from 1993 to 2003 under three different governors.

The unanimous vote by the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services sends the Power nomination to the full Senate, which has been on hiatus since the legislature and much of the rest of Rhode Island shut down to reduce the spread of the coronavirus.

It remains unclear when the full Senate will reconvene to officially confirm Power to the position she has held through five rocky months, as she attempted to steer the Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals out of a financial crisis and through the pandemic.

The financial problems she inherited continue, with the state still blocked by federal rules from billing Medicaid for federal reimbursement for patients sent by state court judges to the forensic unit in the state-run Eleanor Slater Hospital.

But she told the senators via a remote connection that she counts this as a major achievement: while a dozen staffers tested positive for the coronavirus, not a single patient in the Eleanor Slater Hospital became infected.

Her list of priorities as director was long.

She promised to focus on finding “community alternatives” that provide “the least restrictive environment” for the people in her agency’s purview; developing “aggressive strategies, tactics and public health education ... to reduce and eliminate the scourge of opioid deaths and the overuse of opioids themselves.”

She also embraced a “move from a state-operated system of intellectual-developmental disability services and supports to a system that is privately operated within community settings.”

There was no public testimony from anyone affiliated with any of the advocacy groups for individuals who would be affected by her stated goals.