

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Date:** September 2, 2020

Contact: Shawn Benjamin

Desk: (414) 286-3780

Cell: (414) 316-8316

Email: [sbenja@milwaukee.gov](mailto:sbenja@milwaukee.gov)**Commissioner Kowalik will Return to Washington D.C. to Join Renowned Health Policy Organization**

MILWAUKEE - Dr. Jeanette Kowalik has been the Commissioner of Health for the City of Milwaukee since September 2018. She returned to her hometown to help the City of Milwaukee Health Department (MHD) during a time of crisis. During her tenure, she was able to [stabilize the health department](#), reorganize and reconnect the city to community, regional and state public health partners, and led the city through the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 13<sup>th</sup>, the city and county of Milwaukee has grappled with a rapid and ever-changing pandemic response that has been centered on policy in the form of local public health orders. With the support of Mayor Tom Barrett, Dr. Kowalik has [issued several orders](#) to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and save lives.

More importantly, “Milwaukee was the [first to declare racism as a public health crisis](#) in 2019. These policies framed how we responded to COVID-19. In March, we began to [publically share data](#) on the [impact of COVID-19 by race and ethnicity](#). We discovered that [racism was playing out through the pandemic](#), which led to a shift in our strategy. Sharing disparities data early on enabled us to set the standard for other communities to do the same; this facilitated action at multiple levels,” said Commissioner Kowalik.

In addition to orders and declarations, many public health officials, including Commissioner Kowalik, acknowledged how historic underfunding of public health in this country has negatively impacted our ability to manage the pandemic. Dr. Kowalik elaborated on these barriers in a [national article in June](#). Furthermore, there is a dire need to address national public health funding beyond 2020 as public health braces for increased chronic and vaccine preventable disease, childhood lead poisoning, and the need for robust violence prevention programming. “Funding is required for meaningful health equity and anti-racism work as well,” said Commissioner Kowalik.

Considering the significant role that policy has played during this pandemic, Dr. Kowalik realizes that there is an urgent need for policy to support public health and diverse communities for the long haul. She stated, “This policy development and advocacy has to occur at the national level for sustainability.”

“It is with mixed emotions that I have submitted my resignation to Mayor Tom Barrett to join the Trust for America’s Health (TFAH), a national leader in health policy. As much as I love my hometown, I believe that I am limited due to factors that are out of my control. This was evident at multiple points in time through our pandemic response. From

access to testing, promotion of masks/face coverings, gathering limits, orders, messaging and outreach for communities of color, and various threats to Health Officers. I have decided to redirect my energy and skills to upstream approaches that will improve the health of millions of Americans. I am excited to join TFAH's leadership team as Director of Policy Development and return to Washington D.C. My experience as a local Health Officer will be an asset to policy development at TFAH. I am confident that the [MHD leadership team](#), which consists of five Deputy Commissioners and a Chief of Staff, are highly competent and able to continue to manage the department in my absence. I will continue to provide support through the transition and believe that the progress made over the last two years will set the stage for continued growth and innovation under the next Commissioner. In closing, I am deeply thankful for the opportunity to serve my hometown in this capacity.”

“I am grateful to Commissioner Kowalik for her dedication and leadership, especially during this pandemic. She is leaving the department in a solid position to continue to make progress. I wish her the very best as she advances to her new position.” – Mayor Tom Barrett, City of Milwaukee.

“In a relatively short amount of time, Dr. Kowalik has helped the Milwaukee Health Department make significant strides and improved the health of many Milwaukee residents, even during an unprecedented health crisis. She has created a strong foundation for whoever becomes the next Commissioner. I hope that her successor has the same foresight, decisiveness, dedication to public health, and love for Milwaukee as Dr. Kowalik.” - Caroline Gomez- Tom, City of Milwaukee Board of Health President.

[TFAH](#) is a non-partisan public health policy, research and advocacy organization that envisions a nation that values the health and well-being of all and where prevention and health equity are foundational to policymaking at all levels of society.

Mayor Barrett and Commissioner Kowalik will address the media on Thursday, September 3<sup>rd</sup> at 2pm (e.g. the standing Milwaukee County Unified Operations Center briefing). For more information about the City of Milwaukee COVID-19 response, please visit: [www.milwaukee.gov/coronavirus](http://www.milwaukee.gov/coronavirus)

###