

Milwaukee Ald. Donovan: Commissioner Baker's departure leaves us all with many, many questions

Posted on Tuesday, Jan 16, 2018

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Statement from Alderman Bob Donovan:

As the Common Council begins to explore the width and breadth of the Milwaukee Health Department's failure to properly notify thousands of families that their children had elevated levels of lead in their blood, one date will be foremost in my mind: December 28, 2017.

On that date, Mr. Benjamin James, a health department employee, e-mailed all fifteen members of the Common Council and Mayor Barrett expressing his concerns about the way lead testing was being conducted and the results reported. His concerns were taken seriously enough that then-Commissioner Bevan Baker sent a widely-distributed e-mail that same day — December 28 — offering assurances that the matter was being investigated.

On January 4, 2018, however, Alderman Michael Murphy sent a letter to the Commissioner describing the issues raised by Mr. James as “disturbing” and asking what action had been taken to correct the mistakes of the past and ensure they would not be repeated. No prompt response to this inquiry has been made a part of the record.

And for months now, Alderman Tony Zielinski has had to fight a seemingly unending battle to get a resolution through the Public Safety and Health Committee dealing with this issue. Even once it was adopted, he continued to say that little was being

done to implement its requirements.

Add all this to the reports of employees leaving the department in large numbers and the impression given is of an agency in disarray.

Commissioner Baker has resigned. The idea, however, that all this dysfunction can be placed at the feet of one man is absurd. Others must be held to account and will be.

In the end, though, the commissioner of the health department is an office in the cabinet of this City's mayor. Surely the Mayor has an obligation to know what is working and is not in those departments under his care. And, if the Commissioner's resignation on January 11 be taken as an end-point, more should have been said and done in the two full weeks from the release of Mr. James' e-mail.

A certain slowness of response is so typical of government that it is nearly a cliché; and in trivial matters it is bearable, if annoying. In matters of this urgency it is intolerable.

My own questions concerning all this will touch on many subjects, but I will have December 28, 2017, on my mind and I will be expecting an answer from the Mayor.