

“Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott has been the conscience of Rhode Island, we're better off for it”  
McGowan, Dan. Boston Globe (Online); Boston. 13 Jan 2022

During almost every one of her weekly, and sometimes daily, COVID-19 press briefings over the last two years, Rhode Island Department of Health Director Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott has taken a minute to thank residents for everything they're doing to keep their friends and family safe during the pandemic. That message never makes the news because the data and advice she provides are what's actually important. But it has always been her way of acknowledging the toll this virus has taken on everyone and the sacrifices all of us have made.

Now that Alexander-Scott has announced plans to step down from her post after seven years on the job — yes, she was here way before the masks and the shots, the shutdowns and the reopenings — it's about time that we thank her for the leadership she has shown in the face of an unimaginable health crisis. She never asked to be a household name, but Alexander-Scott has become the conscience of Rhode Island, providing all of us with reliable information to protect ourselves against a virus that has killed more than 3,100 of our family members, friends, and neighbors in Rhode Island since March 2020.

Working for two very different governors, albeit from the same party, Alexander-Scott has been the constant in Rhode Island's response to COVID-19, and her advocacy for vaccines, mask-wearing, social distancing, and yes, at times, restrictions on businesses, has saved lives. **All the while, Alexander-Scott has relied on the science and the experts — not talk-radio or political pressure — to guide her thinking.** Anyone who has actually been in the room for these discussions will tell you that she has at different times clashed with both former governor Gina Raimondo and current Governor Dan McKee, always pushing them to think about public health before all else.

She didn't win every internal debate with Raimondo and it's no secret that she's had her share of disagreements with McKee, but her voice, with that no-nonsense subtle New York accent, has helped make Rhode Island one of the best-run states in the country during the pandemic. It hasn't been perfect, but our vaccine rates are high, our economy has rebounded, and our schools are open. That's success. As House Speaker Joseph Shekarchi said on Thursday, Alexander-Scott “has led our state with compassion, confidence and dignity” during the pandemic, and she's done it while raising a young son who was just an infant when the virus first struck.

We don't know what's next for Alexander-Scott, but she deserves a vacation first and foremost. There's going to be plenty of speculation about why she's leaving now, and how much the growing friction between her department and the McKee administration played a role in the decision. But the political intrigue isn't nearly as important as the decision McKee now has to make. It would be really easy to pick a “yes” man or woman for the job, and that would be the wrong choice. There are already too many people around McKee who tell him what he wants to hear. There's a difference between dissent and defiance, and McKee needs to strike that balance.

**Rhode Island's response to COVID-19 was better because of voices like Alexander-Scott's,** and her successor would be wise to take the same approach.