

HARRISBURG UPDATE – NEW TWO-YEAR LEGISLATIVE SESSION STARTS

The members of the 2019-2020 session of the General Assembly came to Harrisburg on New Year's Day for their ceremonial swearing in and election of top legislative leaders for 2019-2020.

The new version of the General Assembly includes more women and more Democrats, but the GOP still controls both chambers – 110-91 in the House, and 28-21 in the Senate. There are 43 newly elected members in the House, with more than half of those from either the Philadelphia or Allegheny County areas. Women now hold 51 seats in the House and 12 in the Senate.

The House re-elected Rep. Mike Turzai (R, Allegheny) as Speaker. The Senate re-elected Sen. Joe Scarnati (R, Jefferson) as President Pro Tempore.

Speaker Turzai also announced House Republican Committee Chairs for the 2019-2020 session. Key Chairs for internists and their patients include Reps. Kathy Rapp of Warren Co. (Health); Tina Pickett of Susquehanna Co. (Insurance); Gene DiGirolamo of Bucks Co. (Human Services); Rob Kauffman of Franklin Co. (Judiciary); and Dave Hickernell of Lancaster Co. (Professional Licensure.)

Key House Democratic Committee Chairs for internists and their patients for the 2019-2020 session include Rep. Steve Samuelson of Northampton Co. (Aging and Older Adult Services); Rep. Dan Frankel of Allegheny Co. (Health); Rep. Angel Cruz of Philadelphia Co. (Human Services); Rep. Tony DeLuca of Allegheny Co. (Insurance); Rep. Tim Briggs of Montgomery Co. (Judiciary); and Rep. Harry Readshaw of Allegheny Co. (Professional Licensure).

The House also passed a new set of operating rules with language covering procedures responding to issues from the last session. The rules cover actions regarding sexual harassment, criminal convictions and legislative voting procedures. They also create a House government oversight committee. The rules changes passed 142-58 with significant bipartisan support, including 32 Democratic votes.

The rule defines sexual harassment for the first time and gives the House Ethics Committee power to investigate such complains when filed internally rather than the individual caucuses.

The rules require a vote on a resolution of expulsion for any member convicted of a crime that relates to their office or triggers Constitutional disqualifications on the next scheduled House session day after their conviction. Rep. Vanessa Lowery Brown of Philadelphia was convicted of bribery last year but was re-elected and waited until mid-December to resign.

The new rules also create a Government Oversight Committee in the House. The nine-member committee will have subpoena power and is expected to hold hearings on what House Republicans have called a lack of cooperation and transparency by the Wolf Administration.

State House special elections are set for March 12 to fill the seats of Rep. Brown, and that of Rep. Sid Kavulich who died last fall, but was re-elected in November. Sen. Guy Reschenthaler resigned as expected to take his Congressional seat representing southwestern PA. A special election has been scheduled for the 37th Senate District for April 2.

Governor Wolf announced additional changes to his cabinet in the week between Christmas and New Year's Day. Among those changes, Kathy Boockvar, Senior Advisor to the Secretary at the Department of State, has become Secretary of the agency which includes all professional licensing boards. Boockvar had also been executive director of a birth center in suburban Philadelphia and chief counsel in the Auditor General's Office.

The House and Senate will return January 15-16 during the Governor's inaugural activities, and will be back in regular voting session the week of January 28.

PA-ACP will continue to provide updates as the other three legislative caucuses announce their choices for Committee chairs and fill out the key committees impacting internists and their patients.