

Report on Research Compliance Volume 18, Number 11. October 28, 2021

HHS Leadership Changes: Collins to Step Down, OCR Welcomes New Director, FDA Still Waiting

By Theresa Defino

In what struck many as a surprise announcement, NIH Director Francis Collins gave word last month that he plans to step down from a leadership role in the agency to resume running the lab at the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI).^[1] Collins, who became NIH director in August 2009, said he intends to make the change by the end of this year. No interim replacement has been named, and whomever President Biden selects as director will have to be confirmed by the Senate, which can lengthen the replacement process.

Collins wasn't the only recent HHS leadership announcement. A little more than a week before Collins' Oct. 5 statement, HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra announced that Lisa J. Pino would be the new director of the Office for Civil Rights (OCR).^[2] This position, which does not require Senate confirmation, had been vacant for nine months—since the start of the Biden administration.

Another prominent HHS agency—the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)—is still waiting for the president to appoint a nominee, but a name may be coming soon. Like the NIH director job, the FDA commissioner position requires Senate approval. Janet Woodcock, who has been the acting FDA commissioner since Jan. 20, is a long-serving veteran of FDA, but she is not expected to be nominated to the position permanently. In mid-October, media outlets reported that former FDA Commissioner Robert Califf was under consideration by the Biden administration.^[3]

Collins, the longest-serving NIH director, is also the only one to have served under three presidents. Appointed by Obama, he was retained by President Trump, and Biden, for his part, described Collins as “one of the first people I asked to stay in his role with the nation facing one of the worst public health crises in our history.”^[4]

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