

Democrats plan to censure lawmaker who credited Trump for COVID-19 recovery

Beth LeBlanc | The Detroit News
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Detroit Democrats plan to vote to censure and bar any future endorsements of a Democratic lawmaker who credited President Donald Trump with advocating for the drug that she said cured her of COVID-19.



President Donald Trump listens as Karen Whitsett shares her story of recovery from COVID-19, in the Cabinet Room of the White House, Tuesday, April 14, 2020, in

Washington.

Evan Vucci, AP

State Rep. Karen Whitsett, D-Detroit, broke protocol by meeting with President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence during an April 14 meeting of COVID-19 survivors, during which she credited hydroxychloroquine for saving her life, a Democratic district leader said.

“Thank you for everything that you have done,” Whitsett told Trump at the meeting. “I did not know that saying thank you had a political line. ... I’m telling my story and my truth, and this how I feel and these are my words.”

Trump appeared to offer his support for the state representative late Thursday, tweeting, "Disgraceful. (Whitsett) Should join the Republican Party!"

The president also tweeted Friday morning about the controversy: "The Fake and totally corrupt News is after her as a means of getting to me. She’s smart and strong, knows the truth. Already a heroine to many!"

The meeting and other comments Whitsett made prior to and during the coronavirus pandemic have landed her in hot water with the 13th Congressional District Democratic Party Organization.

The group, as first reported by Gongwer News Service, plans to vote Saturday via Zoom on a resolution to censure Whitsett, a first-term lawmaker representing the 9th Michigan House District.

The admonition means she will not get the group’s endorsement for this year nor will she be able to engage in the group’s activities for the next two election cycles.

“At the end of the day, we have political systems,” said Jonathan Kinloch, chairman of the organization. “We have political parties, and political parties exist for a reason.

“They do not belong to themselves,” Kinloch said of endorsed candidates and elected officials. “They belong to the members and precinct delegates of the

Democratic Party.”

Up until March, Kinloch was Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's community liaison to southeast Michigan.

The developments quickly drew the ire of Donald Trump Jr., who tweeted Thursday: "What a joke. Remember folks, the narrative can only be against Trump and if you break those rules the left will turn on their own."

'I will continue to fight'

Whitsett, meanwhile, said she plans to continue working for the district, adding she has been delivering food and cleaning products to those in need throughout the pandemic.

"I will continue to fight for the city of Detroit and the people in Detroit who need it the most, and that is the black community," Whitsett said. "We're the voiceless, and I don't care who I got to go up against to do that.

"I'm a Democrat, and I plan on continuing to be a Democrat, but they will change their ways. I have my First Amendment right, and no one will take that away from me."

It's not unusual for there to be strife within parties, but those differences usually play out at the state or local level, said Greg Bowens, a Detroit-area Democratic political consultant and a member of the executive board for the 14th Congressional District.



Karen Whitsett, center, and her husband Jason Whitsett, right, listen as President Donald Trump speaks during a meeting with people that have recovered from COVID-19, in the Cabinet Room of the White House, Tuesday, April 14, 2020, in Washington.

Evan Vucci, AP

In Whitsett's case, the issue quickly rose to the national stage and could be used as a wedge to peel off Democratic supporters in Michigan, Bowens said. Whitsett's actions, he said, could be "undermining the party's ability to win Michigan."

"She is in her own way trying to champion the inequities in our system," Bowens said. "But everybody knows Trump's a user. If you give him any praise, he's going to use it in his campaign to win the state."

Several lawmakers in Detroit or elsewhere have been censured in some way by their parties over the years because of "serious trouble with the law," but the idea of zinging a lawmaker for meeting with the president is "unheard of," said Bill Ballenger, a longtime political analyst, a Republican former state lawmaker and head of the online Ballenger Report.

"They obviously feel this is something that cannot be tolerated," he said.

Kinloch said the party's problems with Whitsett date back to comments she made about House Democratic leadership and the Democratic legislative caucus at large.

In February, Whitsett told WWJ-AM (950) that House Democratic Leader Christine Greig of Farmington Hills was a racist because she wouldn't consider an urban agenda for the caucus. Greig also pulled Whitsett's communications staff because of an unfavorable vote on an early rendition of the no-fault auto reform bill, Whitsett said.

A later version of the no-fault auto reform legislation received overwhelming support in the state House and was signed into law by Whitmer.

Slammed for misrepresenting Dems

The resolution Detroit Democrats will vote on notes she has "misrepresented the needs and priorities" of Democratic leadership to the president and public.

The resolution also notes she's participated in events with the Republican Women's Federation of Michigan to express gratitude to the president.

Whitsett, the resolution said, "has repeatedly and publicly praised the president's delayed and misguided COVID-19 response efforts in contradiction with the scientifically based and action-oriented response" from Michigan's Democratic leadership, "endangering the health, safety and welfare of her constituents, the city of Detroit and the state of Michigan."

Michigan State Medical Society President Dr. Mohammed Arsiwala prescribed hydroxychloroquine and an antibiotic for Whitsett after she visited one of his Michigan Urgent Care clinics in Wyandotte. She had symptoms of COVID-19 and an underlying condition, he told The Detroit News.

The Trump administration has deployed about 28 million doses of hydroxychloroquine from the federal government's Strategic National Stockpile. While hydroxychloroquine is effective at treating lupus and

rheumatoid arthritis, the drug can be dangerous for people with certain heart conditions.

On Sunday, after Whitsett continued to make negative comments about the party and Whitmer, the 13th Congressional Democratic group asked her to come in for a “screening” of candidates for her house district. Whitsett refused, Kinloch said.

“Don’t play with us,” Kinloch said. “This is very serious when we ask to have a conversation with you and you choose not to.

“We’re not going to accept that. How they handle you in Lansing as far as the Democratic caucus that’s on them. But how we handle you back at home, that’s on us.”

Whitsett said she didn't have time for the screening.

"I don't have time for politics," Whitsett said. "That's ridiculous, during a pandemic, that they think I have time for a screening. ... I have people that need me."

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