The firestorm surrounding how a new administrator at the state Department of Health in Leon County was hired prompted a rare exchange Monday when Florida A&M University faculty expressed feeling invisible in the selection process.

Initially a town hall meeting was planned. A lack of publicity prompted NAACP members to cancel it and instead allow FAMU, Florida State University's College of Medicine and health department officials, including newly hired administrator Claudia Blackburn, to hear and respond to concerns.

FSU and DOH admitted the process should have been more inclusive. One NAACP leader, while still unsettled by the hiring process, offered an apology for how Blackburn was greeted by some community members.

Plans are being made for another town hall meeting in coming weeks. Those in attendance favored creating a grassroots advisory health committee to further examine health issues and disparities in Leon County, strategies for tackling them and gathering community input to determine priorities.

Blackburn's appointment was seen by some as blatant disregard of extensive work done to provide public healthcare, particularly by FAMU, for decades. Community unrest boiled regarding the partnership between DOH and FSU's College of Medicine as sole decision-makers to hire Blackburn, former health director of the Sedgwick County Health Department in Wichita, Kan.

"It wasn't even thought of that we should come to the table and that's what got me," said Michael Thompson, dean of FAMU's School of Pharmacy, noting the historically black university's extensive experience providing community-level public health. "It had nothing to do with Ms. Blackburn. It had to do with our procedures and the feeling of being overlooked.

"Sometimes there's good blood between the universities and sometimes there's not," Thompson added. "That's just the way it is."

C. Meade Grigg, DOH deputy secretary for statewide services, said he wasn't aware of friction between the two schools.

He said Blackburn, whose reputation for and history of addressing community health issues stood out as stellar, was picked based on the same model used previously by DOH partnerships at University of South Florida for Hillsborough and Polk counties and the University of Florida in Duval County.

Dr. Les Beitsh, director of the FSU college's Center for Medicine and Public Health, previously said FSU intended to include FAMU, Tallahassee Community College and others in ongoing talks to strengthen partnerships.

In this case, he said the university followed its normal hiring procedure.

"It didn't work very well in this instance," said Beitsh, who was intimately involved in the search. "That's the faux pas and the misstep and we would have done it different."

Tallahassee Branch of the NAACP President Dale Landry said NAACP officials in Wichita spoke highly of Blackburn and that endorsement "offered a lot credibility."

"They made it very clear to me, 'Hands off,'" Landry said to the group following some reports of media outlets digging into Blackburn's background and hostility by some aimed at Blackburn.

The local branch took on the issue following the Leon County Commission's unanimous vote to concur with Blackburn's appointment as presented by DOH and FSU. Landry said his issue was never with Blackburn, but rather the process.

Although not in attendance, Leon County District 1 Commissioner Bill Proctor suggested the roundtable talk be a start for both schools to meet and forge common ground on care for Leon County's poor and under- and uninsured residents, especially because the majority of the health department's patients are minorities.

At-Large Commissioner Nick Maddox, who also expressed concern about the hiring process and the county's lack of front-end input, said he was encouraged by the roundtable talk.
"What matters is what's going on right here today," Maddox said.

Blackburn, who mostly listened throughout the discussion, said she sensed a real desire for a community process on daunting public health issues.

"There’s a real commitment, at least from the universities and by the people at this table tonight to continue to work on those issues," Blackburn said.

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