

Thousands of Florida residents claim unemployment benefits as state governor says schools must reopen despite increasing COVID-19 infections

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On Wednesday, ABC published video footage taken by its South Florida affiliate of hundreds of Florida residents lining up to receive paper applications for unemployment benefits, due to problems with the state's web site. Meanwhile, Governor Ron DeSantis, the Trump-style Republican who was elected in 2019, is spreading misinformation about COVID-19, claiming that the virus is not a danger to children, and is using this as an impetus to talk about reopening schools next month.

As elsewhere in the United States, Florida has seen a huge surge in unemployment assistance applications since the pandemic began. More than 520,000 people in Florida applied for unemployment benefits in March, far higher than the 326,000 who applied during the entire year of 2019.

The overload of applications to the state's web site has caused technical errors to occur, which are preventing people from even applying for benefits. Angry Floridians took to Twitter to share images of the error message they were getting when trying to file their claims. The error message describes an "unexpected technical error" and asks the user to reopen their web browser and start again. One Twitter user complained that he had filled out the first page with his social security and driver's license number over 40 times.

Some sources are claiming that the problems with the state's web site is a result of a scheme by Senator Rick Scott to overhaul the online systems, which was really designed to make it more difficult for people to claim assistance online, driving down the number of

applicants. When asked to comment on this, Scott's office responded that the change was designed to ensure that the state helped only those "who truly needed the assistance."

The breakdown in the computer system has pushed hundreds of people to break social-distancing rules in Hialeah, a city just north of Miami, to physically join long queues in order to claim unemployment assistance. The ABC News video published earlier this week, which has since gone viral, shows that some people were attempting to observe social distancing rules--wearing face masks and maintaining a six-foot distance from others—but others were standing close to each other and were not wearing masks. One resident in line told reporters that "everybody out here is risking their lives to get these applications. It's very hard to do it online because everybody is applying online and the website is crashing."

This was the work of Hialeah's Republican mayor, Carlos Hernández, who decided to hand out paper unemployment forms to residents in person, even though they can be retrieved online or printed from home. Four sites were set up Monday, intended for "drive-thrus," but residents began lining up on foot early that morning. Mayor Hernández apparently did not consider that some people who live in his city do not own motor vehicles. By Tuesday afternoon, the city stated that people "must be in a vehicle to receive the unemployment application."

Governor DeSantis announced on Monday that the state will be boosting its capacity to handle the surge in online unemployment applications and hiring extra

staff to process them. He claimed that the state has increased the online unemployment system's capacity, equipping it to handle up to 120,000 connections at once, which is double its typical peak prior to the pandemic. On Tuesday, Florida's Department of Economic Opportunity stated that they are trying to fix the web site but have not addressed questions on why it continues to malfunction.

Perhaps more disconcerting than these events are statements that DeSantis made about Florida schools on Thursday—particularly that there is a possibility they could reopen in May. “If it's safe, we want kids to be in school ... Even if it's for a couple of weeks, we think there would be value in that.”

DeSantis continued, stating that he did not think that anyone under the age of 25 has died from COVID-19: “This particular pandemic is one where, I don't think nationwide there's been a single fatality under 25. For whatever reason it just doesn't seem to threaten, you know, kids. And we lose in Florida between five and 10 kids a year for the flu. This one, for whatever reason, much more dangerous if you're over 65 ... If you're younger, it just hasn't had an impact, so that should factor into how we're viewing this.”

According to the CDC, four people between the ages of 15 and 24 and one person younger than 5 has died from the virus. There also appears to be no consideration of the tens of thousands of teachers and support staff who make school operations possible, many of whom do fall into the senior-age range. DeSantis stated that a possible reopening would be approached in two-week increments.

Florida has been relatively slow to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, with DeSantis only announcing a statewide lockdown last week. This is despite the fact that Florida is projected to be among states that will be hit the hardest by the virus, with its large proportion of senior residents and substantial retail and hospitality sector. As of Friday, 17,531 people in Florida had tested positive for COVID-19, and 390 deaths had been reported.

DeSantis, who is widely recognized as a political hanger-on of President Donald Trump, only reversed his opposition to a statewide quarantine after Trump ordered an extension to April 30 of the White House's social distancing guidelines. When announcing the lockdown, DeSantis stated, “This is another 30-day

period. At this point, even though there are a lot of places in Florida with very low infection rates, it makes sense to make this move now.”

Just a few days before issuing his statewide mandate, DeSantis refused to heed advice from medical experts on the grounds that most of the cases were the result of out-of-state residents flooding Florida and that there were minimal instances of community transmission. Throughout the month of March, the governor scapegoated visitors from New York and New Orleans, which are suffering severe outbreaks, as the real culprits of the spread of the pandemic.

Checkpoints were implemented on highways to identify travelers from these areas with the threat of jail time for non-compliance with quarantine orders. This was happening even as evidence began to pile up of Florida residents constituting the overwhelming majority of the number of cases, conclusively showing community spread in multiple counties.

As a result of this delayed approach, Florida's healthcare infrastructure has been placed on the brink of collapse. According to data released by the Health Care Administration last Thursday, nearly two-thirds of the state's 6,000 ICU beds are now being occupied, while experts are saying that the worst of the health crisis will not arrive until early May when the number of COVID-19 cases is expected to reach its peak.

Across Florida, there have been 26 state and private prisons with employees who have tested positive for the virus, with the most recent revelations coming from Blackwater Correctional Facility in Santa Rosa County in the western Panhandle region where five staff members along with two inmates have become infected. There is little doubt that the number of cases in the state's prison systems is far higher, given the fact that the Florida Department of Corrections has downplayed for weeks the looming danger of the virus spreading in packed jail settings while refusing to implement even the most basic social distancing measures or testing.



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