

Florida orders National Guard to assist in nursing home COVID-19 testing

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Florida Governor Ron DeSantis ordered the state National Guard to begin testing residents and staff of nursing homes to stem the spread of COVID-19. The Guard personnel will be embedded with medical teams that will begin testing nursing homes in the hardest-hit southern part of the state. They will then continue to other regions, according to DeSantis, “until supplies run out”.

As of Tuesday, there were 1,135 confirmed COVID-19 cases among staff and residents inside Florida nursing homes. Overall, the state has nearly 25,000 diagnosed cases, with 726 deaths so far. The number of deaths inside nursing homes has not been disclosed to the public at this time.

The governor’s office has not provided the public with the names of the facilities where most of the positive cases have been found, further endangering the residents and workers there. Representatives of the Florida Health Association, a trade group that represents long term care facilities, recently requested that Governor DeSantis grant them immunity from any civil or criminal liability related to the COVID-19 outbreak.

On Tuesday the *Sun-Sentinel* reported that the DeSantis administration interfered in a public records lawsuit filed by the *Miami Herald* regarding nursing home coronavirus cases when it contacted the newspaper’s law firm, Holland and Knight. The firm subsequently ordered Sandy Bohrer, a partner and longtime counsel for the *Herald*, not to file the lawsuit.

Holland and Knight issued a statement claiming that they withdrew due to a conflict of interest. George Meros, the firm’s registered lobbyist, is currently representing the DeSantis administration in its attempt to deny convicted felons who have not yet paid their court fees the right to vote, an effective poll tax.

Herald is continuing to pursue the lawsuit with a different law firm.

Meanwhile, the millions of Floridians who have become unemployed since the beginning of the outbreak continue to struggle with the state’s antiquated unemployment system. The total number of jobless claims in the state now stands at 600,000.

That figure likely represents a sum far lower than the actual number seeking unemployment assistance, as the state’s computerized system for filing claims has repeatedly crashed due to the overwhelming volume of traffic. There have been thousands of reports of residents unable to make the initial filing for benefits due to a variety of problems. This has forced many to seek assistance from the state’s hotline, where the wait time is hours long and they are often arbitrarily disconnected. Many thousands more have filed by mail.

According to the *Miami Herald*, the call centers set up by the state to handle the overflow of claims have also been overwhelmed, with only one to two percent of calls answered and an average wait time of 6.5 hours. In the last week of March, according to the *Herald*, only 8,395 out of a total of 864,313 calls were answered.

Those who have successfully filed claims have faced difficulties in collecting benefits, as they are required to use the same program to request payment every two weeks. Last week, DeSantis announced the state would roll out a new website to process claims faster, which immediately resulted in a huge surge in claims.

Despite the new website and the addition of 2,000 additional call center employees to handle the huge number of claims, many residents have reported that they are still typically disconnected from the website when they try to log on. Media across the state have reported that more money has now been spent trying to

fix the existing system than was spent developing it in the first place.

From the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, the response of the Governor's office has been characterized by criminal ineptitude and corruption. After initially resisting calls for a statewide lockdown, DeSantis capitulated after the Trump administration extended its social distancing guidelines through April 30. There has been no push for mass testing, with only 236,000 of the state's more than 21 million residents tested so far.

Among those Floridians who have received tests are the entire population of Fisher island, a 216-acre enclave off the coast of downtown Miami that is the wealthiest zip code in the US. Accessible only by boat, the island is home to approximately 1,800 residents spread across 800 different residences, ranging in price from \$2 to \$40 million.

The island's administration was able to purchase the tests through a partnership with the University of Miami Health System, which operates a clinic on the island.



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