

Florida governor reopening state while suppressing reporting of COVID-19 deaths

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On Wednesday, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis announced that his state's economy will begin to reopen on Monday, May 4, excluding Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties, where the rate of coronavirus infection is highest. The move comes as reports emerge that Florida officials are suppressing lists of COVID-19 deaths being compiled by medical examiners across the state.

A *Tampa Bay Times* report on April 11 showed that the Florida Department of Health's count of COVID-19 deaths was inaccurate and missing 10 percent of those recorded by medical examiners. This was due to the fact that the health department is only counting deaths of people who claim residency in Florida, which is well-known for having a regular population of "snowbirds" and other seasonal residents numbering in the hundreds of thousands who only live in the state for part of the year.

Shortly after this exposure, the Florida Department of Health said that the list being published in real time by the Medical Examiners Commission needed to be reviewed and possibly redacted. The medical examiners list has now been withheld by state officials for nearly two weeks.

Dr. Stephen Nelson, the chairperson of Florida's Medical Examiners Commission, told the *Tampa Bay Times* that state officials plan to remove causes of death and case descriptions. "Without that information, the list is meaningless. This is no different than any other public record that we deal with. It's paid for by taxpayer dollars and the taxpayers have a right to know."

Under Florida law, all medical examiner officers in the state are required to investigate and certify all coronavirus-related deaths. Nelson told reporters that the commission has compiled lists of fatalities during

every state emergency since Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and that these have always been made public.

This is not the first time that state officials have tried to block information about COVID-19 deaths. In March, the *Miami Herald* reported that the medical examiner's office in Miami-Dade County was asked to restrict access to its death records. The county ignored the request and released the records, which included the names of those who died. Last week, the Palm Beach County Medical Examiner was directed by county attorneys to stop releasing a spreadsheet of its COVID-19-related deaths.

When asked why state and county officials are seeking to suppress such information, Albert Moscoso, a spokesperson for the state health department cited "privacy concerns for the individuals that passed away related to COVID-19." This declaration of "privacy concerns" is being used to hide and falsify health statistics with a definite political aim: to underplay the severity of the pandemic and convince workers in Florida to put their lives and those of their loved ones in danger so that corporations and banks can continue to exploit their labor for profits.

Governor DeSantis is moving to reopen the state next week as part of the nationally-coordinated move to put workers in harm's way spearheaded by President Donald Trump. Echoing the detestable platitudes of Trump, DeSantis stated: "Florida will take a step. Small, deliberate, methodical, and based on consultation with some of our greatest physicians, towards a more helpful future."

Florida has seen a consistent number of confirmed coronavirus cases reported over the past two weeks, with daily peaks of over 1,200 each Thursday and over 11,000 total, which account for about a third of the 33,193 positive tests reported in the state so far this

year. For Tuesday alone, the day before DeSantis' announcement, 83 people were reported dead from COVID-19 in Florida, the largest daily number reported in the state so far.

Thomas Unnasch, co-director of the Center for Global Health Infectious Disease Research at the University of South Florida, told WUSF Public Radio that it is not possible at present to determine whether cases have peaked, due to the lack of testing data. "We will really not know if we're past it until we actually see a week or two of steadily declining case numbers across ... the entire state before we can really say we're on the downslope."

The bulk of the deaths in Florida have been among people aged 55 and older. The state health department reported that 1,313 residents in long-term-care facilities (LTC) have tested positive for coronavirus and that 1,263 staff members at such facilities have also tested positive.

During a recent press conference, DeSantis flagrantly stated that "Florida is ground zero for the nursing home; I mean we're God's waiting room." This phrase is a decades-old derogatory joke about Florida due to its popularity with retirees that sums up DeSantis' and the American ruling class' attitude toward the COVID-19 pandemic in the state and nationwide.

Phase One, according to DeSantis, will be reopening retail stores and restaurants at 25 percent capacity, with eateries allowing people to sit outside and maintain social distancing, and resuming elective surgical procedures. Schools, bars, gyms, hair salons, nursing homes and long-term care facilities are to remain closed, but libraries and museums will be allowed to open at 25 percent capacity with local government approval.

DeSantis says that large gatherings of more than 10 people should be avoided, but "we're not going to fine people if they're not doing it." This toothless directive means that churches and other organizations that have controversially tried to keep their doors open during the pandemic will be free to do so, despite the efforts of local and county officials to stop such gatherings from occurring.

Last week, Florida received the highest number of unemployment benefit claims of any US state. According to the US Department of Labor, 432,465 initial claims for jobless benefits were filed in Florida,

slightly fewer than the half million claims submitted the previous week. Since the middle of March, more than 2 million jobless claims have been filed in the state, but only 835,000 have been verified and only 404,000 have been paid benefits.

Reports are emerging that many were denied unemployment benefits due to a "glitch" in the application process. Some workers who were deemed "ineligible" for state benefits but who are still eligible for the federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance benefits were not able to submit their claims through the website. Rather than contacting those who were wrongly denied, the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity is forcing such applicants to reapply.

This means navigating the state's website, which has caused a host of problems for Florida workers. Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber has been openly critical about Florida's Unemployment Assistance Program, which he says "was essentially set up, unfortunately, to be stingy, to be cumbersome and to not really give out employment checks. The State of Florida has been really unforgivable when it comes to unemployment benefits."



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