As COVID-19 spreads throughout southern US

# Florida scientist was fired for ‘refusing to manipulate’ COVID-19 data

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In a statement issued Tuesday, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis defended the firing of Rebekah Jones, the scientist who created the coronavirus tracking database for the state. “I don’t know who she is,” DeSantis said. He then said he considered Jones’ warnings that his administration was manipulating coronavirus case counts to prematurely reopen a “nonissue.”

Rebekah Jones told *Florida Today* on Monday that she had been fired the previous week after having developed the database used by the Florida Department of Health for the past two months. In a letter about her removal, she declared, “As a word of caution, I would not expect the new team to continue the same level of accessibility and transparency that I made central to the process during the first two months.”

She continued, “After all, my commitment to both is largely (arguably entirely) the reason I am no longer managing it.” In further comments made to the CBS12 television station in West Palm Beach, Jones stated unequivocally that her removal was because she refused to “manually change data to drum up support for the plan to reopen.”

The story of Jones’ firing broke as the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in the US neared 1.6 million and the number of deaths approached 100,000. There are 47,000 cases and just under 2,100 deaths in Florida alone, with more than 500 new cases each day. Other major hot spots for the pandemic in the US include Maryland, Illinois, Virginia and Texas.

On Saturday, Texas recorded its highest one-day rise in cases since the beginning of the pandemic. In Texas, hundreds of workers at a Tyson Foods plant in Sherman have tested positive for COVID-19 and at least one worker has died.

The governor’s office justified its actions by claiming that Jones displayed “insubordination” and “blatant disrespect” for her colleagues. As such, they felt “that it was best to terminate her employment.”

Florida Democratic Party Chair Terrie Rizzo said, “Allegations that Florida’s government may have tried to manipulate or alter data to make reopening appear safer are outrageous.” Rizzo added that such actions would be considered “criminal.”

Neither the state Republicans nor Democrats have responded to the dangers of the pandemic itself, which has seen a steady increase in the number of cases in the state since Florida’s reopening on May 4. Despite this, major attractions such as Disney Springs, a section of the Walt Disney World Resort, are now open to the public.

A different type of data suppression has occurred in neighboring Georgia. A bar chart found on the Department of Public Health’s website appears to show that the number of new confirmed cases has steadily decreased in five counties over the course of 15 days. The chart ranges from April 28, just after the state began to reopen, through May 9.

A closer inspection of the chart, however, reveals that the data is not displayed in chronological order, and the counties are not presented in the same order for each day. This creates the illusion that the number of COVID-19 cases in the state is falling off very quickly.

Georgia Department of Public Health spokesperson Nancy Nydam has since attempted to claim that the issue was “incorrect sorting logic,” which somehow ignored both the order in which the counties were displayed and time itself.

In a more subtle attempt at manipulating the state’s

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new coronavirus cases and deaths, the new plots include a disclaimer stating that "Confirmed cases over the last 14 days may not be accounted for due to illnesses yet to be reported or test results that may still be pending." Combined with the fact that the standard plot on the department's website is two weeks, this gives the impression that the state's new case count is generally always on a downward trend.

In fact, there were 572 new cases in Georgia on Monday, according to the data collected by the Worldometer website, and 792 on Tuesday, refuting the idea that the state is meeting the necessary criteria for reopening. The state currently has more than 39,000 known cases and nearly 1,700 confirmed deaths.

While there have been no reports of similar levels of data manipulation and suppression related to the coronavirus pandemic in other states, it is likely that such things are or will be occurring elsewhere, especially as states rush to open offices, factories and workplaces and begin to prepare for the height of tourism season.

There is increasing turmoil surrounding the collection of coronavirus data at the national level. According to CNN, there are informal conversations within the Trump administration about "what to do" with Robert Redfield, the director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). These come in the wake of a TV interview Sunday with White House trade adviser Peter Navarro, who claimed that the CDC, under Redfield, "let the country down" regarding testing.

President Trump himself reportedly claimed at a lunch with Republican senators earlier this week that the lack of testing was solved by his son-in-law Jared Kushner. The lack of testing in February and March in the United States has been widely criticized as one of the main reasons the pandemic spread so far in the country.

Other members of the Trump administration have attacked the CDC for supposedly over-reporting the number of deaths. White House Coronavirus Task Force Response Coordinator Deborah Birx told CDC Director Robert Redfield, "There is nothing from the CDC that I can trust." She also claimed that the organization was inflating its death counts by up to 25 percent.

In response to such claims, Bob Anderson, the chief of the Mortality Statistics Branch in CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, told the *Daily Beast*, "I don't worry about this over-reporting issue." Instead, Anderson said, "We're almost certainly underestimating the number of deaths."

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