

New Jersey health department whistleblowers' letter highlights criminality of state's pandemic response

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New Jersey's response to the pandemic is "an unmitigated failure" that has resulted in "preventable deaths," according to anonymous whistleblowers from the state's department of health. As it rushes to reopen businesses, the administration of Democratic Governor and former Goldman Sachs executive Phil Murphy "is making things up as they proceed" without finalizing "a widespread testing and contact tracing plan," the whistleblowers write.

In a letter to Democrat Stephen Sweeney, president of the state Senate, and Republican Tom Kean Jr., the state Senate's minority leader, the whistleblowers demanded that Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli resign because of her "neglect and malfeasance" and that other responsible administration officials be investigated.

As of June 5, New Jersey officially has had 162,530 cases of the novel coronavirus and 11,970 deaths. Because of a shortage of testing, deaths that have occurred at home and other factors, the real tolls likely are considerably higher. New Jersey, which is nominally the second richest state in the country, has been affected to a greater extent than any other state except New York.

Understaffing and shortages of protective equipment have created a catastrophe at the state's nursing homes, which accounted for 53 percent of the state's coronavirus deaths as of May 11. In April, police found 17 bodies piled up in one nursing home. New Jersey also has the country's highest rate of coronavirus deaths among prisoners. At least 42 prisoners and three prison employees had died as of May 15.

The whistleblowers' letter makes clear that many, if not most, of these deaths would have been preventable.

The horrific toll of sickness and death is the result of the ruling class's deliberate policy of malign neglect and decision to ignore scientific data and public health expertise.

Persichilli, Murphy's health commission and the former interim president and CEO of University Hospital in Newark, is the object of the whistleblowers' harshest criticism. "The horrific outcomes in New Jersey nursing homes ... [resulted from] neglect and malfeasance on the part of our Commissioner of Health," they write.

Persichilli ordered that long-term care facilities take residents back from hospitals even without negative tests for the coronavirus. The public justification for this decision was that nursing homes would separate infected patients from the other residents. But few nursing homes were able to properly separate residents as the state required because the state had not allocated enough personal protective equipment (PPE) or staff to them, said the whistleblowers. However, since the elderly no longer create profit through their labor, Persichilli judged that resources should not be expended on protecting them. Similar decisions were taken across the US and internationally as nursing homes recorded horrific infection and death tolls, which for weeks and sometimes months went underreported.

The whistleblowers claim that Persichilli ignored their calls for more PPE and test kits to be distributed to long-term care facilities and nursing homes to minimize the spread of the virus. Instead, she allegedly pressured some of the whistleblowers to relax the requirements for PPE during testing with nasopharyngeal swabs. This relaxation was intended, the whistleblowers say, to help Murphy reach his "arbitrary testing goals" that had

been “set with political lenses in mind.”

The letter further suggests that state officials and corporations worked hand in glove to ensure profits from the unfolding public health disaster. Thus, according to the letter, Commissioner Carole Johnson of the Department of Human Services persuaded the governor’s deputies to hire consultants with whom she has personal relationships. The consulting firm was given a half-million-dollar contract to provide recommendations for long-term care facilities, while the whistleblowers’ advice was ignored.

The letter also starkly exposes the criminal character of the premature “reopening” of the economy. To reopen business as quickly as possible, and to force workers to resume generating profits, Murphy already has relaxed restrictions previously put in place to slow the spread of the virus. He plans to reopen nonessential retail businesses and outdoor dining on June 15 and hair salons and sports practices on June 22.

The letter states that top officials in the Murphy administration “specifically asked us to ‘avoid putting any concerns into email’ and have cut us off from meetings and discussions around the most important questions that lay ahead: when and how we should open, and the data-based, public health triggers that would inform such decisions.

“Despite the governor’s slogans, there are, in fact, no established thresholds ... that came from the public health experts in his state government,” they continue. “His own public health officials in the health department have no idea what inputs he is using to make opening decisions.”

The anonymous officials claim to have been “punished, suppressed, or otherwise reprimanded for using their public health expertise to recommend the right course of action.” They also indicate that the Murphy administration is retaliating against officials who attempt to speak out about their concerns. “In the wake of a number of us pursuing our efforts to get the truth to the public, the administration has started investigating Department of Health officials in a ‘gunshot [sic] approach’ to see who will blink and reveal these efforts out of fear.”

Recent developments lend credence to this allegation. On May 29, Christopher Neuwirth was fired from his post as assistant commissioner for the Division of Public Health, Infrastructure, Laboratories and

Emergency Preparedness, ostensibly because he had failed to disclose that he worked for Margolis Healy and Associates, a consulting firm specializing in safety, security and emergency preparedness.

Neuwirth is also the subject of an investigation relating to the leak of confidential information about New Jersey’s response to the pandemic, according to NJ Advance Media. This information included the number of nursing homes that reported shortages of PPE, and the suspicion that his leak of this information may have been the basis for his dismissal.

When asked about the leak investigation, Murphy stated. “We’re going through stuff that we’ve never gone through before, as a state and as a nation. And the last thing we need are people speaking out of school about it. So frankly, enough already. Let’s move on.”



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