

Florida COVID-19 data scientist whistleblower raided by state police at gunpoint

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“I tell them my husband and my two children are upstairs ... and THEN one of them draws his gun. On my children. This is Desantis’ Florida.” - Rebekah Jones in a tweet Monday

Early Monday morning in Tallahassee, Florida state police raided the home of Rebekah Jones, the former Florida Department of Health data scientist turned whistleblower, with guns in hand prepared to fire at any sign of commotion. Jones had the lucidity to stage a camera in the house before letting the police inside.

The video shows her opening the door and quickly raising her arms as she is rudely ushered out by the police brazenly wielding their guns. They then enter like a SWAT team shouting, “Mr. Jones, come down the stairs now! Police! Come down now!” The second officer points his gun up at the top of the stairs as Jones can be heard crying, “My husband and children are upstairs. What are you doing? They just pointed a gun at my children!”

Jones likened the harrowing scene to a Nazi raid intended to terrorize her and set her as an example. “This was Desantis. He sent the gestapo,” she tweeted shortly after the raid. “This is what happens to scientists who do their job honestly. This is what happens to people who speak truth to power,” Jones noted in a subsequent tweet.

According to the *Tallahassee Democrat*, the Florida Department of Health filed a complaint against Jones on November 10 alleging unauthorized access to a department messaging system, part of an emergency alert system. During the raid, they seized her phone, all her computers, and equipment that she uses to provide up-to-date metrics on COVID-19 cases in Florida, an alternative source to Florida’s official dashboard which

has been notoriously unreliable for tracking the course of the pandemic.

Late Monday afternoon, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement made a press statement that they had issued a warrant “after suspecting Jones of being responsible for a computer hack into the health department website,” as quoted by the *Tampa Bay Times*. The November 10 message urged health officials to “speak up before another 17,000 people are dead. You know this is wrong. You don’t have to be a part of this. Be a hero. Speak out before it’s too late.”

Jones, a geographer specializing in Geographic Information System (GIS) data science and responsible for tracking the COVID-19 pandemic in Florida, had garnered national attention for refusing to strategically manipulate the data to align it with Republican Governor Ron DeSantis’ push to reopen the state for commerce. She was bitterly denounced by the governor’s office, claiming that Jones displayed “insubordination” and “blatant disrespect” for her colleagues. As such, they felt “that it was best to terminate her employment.”

In a letter drafted on June 9 by the Urban and Regional Information Systems Association of GIS professionals and sent to the governor’s office, they wrote, “While all the facts have yet to be made public, we are concerned that the actions taken potentially put the public at risk and prevented a certified GIS professional from following the Code of Ethics that guides all GIS professionals working in government, non-profit and private sector positions.”

Within a few weeks of being terminated, Jones launched an alternate Florida COVID-19 dashboard, Florida COVID Action, which uses the same data

science software and data extraction techniques she had used to build the Florida Department of Health dashboard, adding an open data platform. The new dashboard provides an enhanced metric that includes hospital bed availability by facility, which was not being made public.

In September, she drew the ire of school superintendents and state officials while speaking in opposition to schools remaining open at a virtual town hall organized by Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried.

She noted that “cases are trending upward for every single age group in the state. We have seen an astronomical increase in pediatric cases. We have seen additional pediatric deaths that the state has not been transparent about. Florida is now one of only a few states in the entire Southeast that is not reporting this information. More than half of all school districts have taken it upon themselves to publish information about cases in their schools every single day because the state leadership has failed to do so.”

In August, she and her COVID Action nonprofit proceeded to launch a second COVID-19 dashboard specifically to track cases in schools across the nation. This is being done in collaboration with Google’s COVID-19 Open Data Project. She explained that the number of school-related coronavirus cases had jumped ten times since the state accidentally released statewide data in August. Needless to add, the state data has since been taken down.

A recent *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* investigation found that Governor DeSantis’ administration has been concealing and spinning the pandemic data to mislead the public on the dangers associated with the virus. Florida has seen more than one million COVID-19 cases and over 19,000 deaths. Cases have been surging again, approaching the summer peak. There has been a 23.3 percent rise in cases over a 14-day average. Hospitalizations and deaths have been following.

According to the paper: “DeSantis, who owes his job to early support from President Donald Trump, imposed an approach in line with the views of the president and his powerful base of supporters. The administration suppressed unfavorable facts, dispensed dangerous misinformation, dismissed public health professionals, and promoted the views of scientific dissenters who supported the governor’s approach to

the disease.”



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