

Florida Governor DeSantis prioritizes vaccine rollout for wealthier communities

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According to press reports, Florida Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has been implicated in a scheme aimed at setting up private, politically motivated COVID-19 vaccination drives in upscale, affluent communities while deprioritizing other poor and working class regions in the state.

News of the pop-up sites emerged last month when email leaks from county officials showed that emphasis had been placed on providing wealthier, Republican-held communities such as Manatee and Charlotte counties before other communities in the state. The private vaccination drives have reportedly allowed more than 6,000 people to jump ahead of tens of thousands of older residents, seniors and other vulnerable populations in desperate need of a vaccine, as demand for vaccinations in the state has greatly exceeded supply since the state began administering them in late December.

Governor DeSantis has been the subject of public scorn due to the state government's gross negligence of the health of the population, with its nearly complete abandonment of even the most minimal mitigation efforts to stop the spread of the pandemic. This has included above all an absence of any restrictions on the reopening of nonessential businesses since the summer and the reckless push to reopen in-person classroom learning in schools throughout the state this spring.

The accusations center around a coordinated, state-sponsored plan to administer vaccines to two pre-selected affluent neighborhoods with political ties to DeSantis. Knowledge of the program became known after emails from Vanessa Baugh, chair of the Manatee County Board of Commissioners, revealed Baugh asked county workers to pull a list of potential vaccine recipients who would participate in a vaccine drive from only two ZIP codes.

At a public county commissioners' meeting, Baugh admitted that DeSantis called Rex Jensen, the CEO of Lakewood Ranch Community and one of the vaccine sites, to ask for help in setting up the drive in the community. Jensen was to later call Baugh for assistance in organizing the drive, with its stated aim to vaccinate 3,000 people over three days.

In addition to Lakewood Ranch, a vaccine clinic was put in place at a 55-and-older gated community in Kings Gate in Charlotte County, a resort-style community that invited residents from another suburban area, Grand Palms, to receive vaccinations. The vaccination drive prioritized doling out vaccines for specific individuals in the communities, while others, who lived minutes away from pop-up clinics, were not invited and left completely in the dark.

The revelations serve as a further indictment of the homicidal policies pursued by the DeSantis administration, which has overseen a state with one of the largest concentrations of COVID-19 infections and deaths in the country. According to the COVID Monitor website, hosted by data scientist and COVID-19 whistleblower Rebekah Jones, the total number of infections for Florida is more than 2.1 million, while more than 32,000 lives have been lost to the virus.

Included in the data gathered by Jones is the role that schools have played, serving as major vectors of transmission in dozens of counties where districts have pushed ahead with the back-to-school campaign demanded by both pro-corporate parties. Total cases in K-12 schools have skyrocketed to nearly 83,000 since the start of the pandemic, with student cases at around 62,000 and staff at 20,000. Jones tweeted earlier this week that there were more than twice as many infections in the first two months of 2021 as there were

from August to December.

Information has already been released placing DeSantis in the middle of behind-the-scenes agreements with various business entities. Both the Kings Gate and Grand Palm were constructed in part by real estate developer and long-time Republican crony Patrick Neal, who is also a loyal donor to DeSantis. Neal is also a member of DeSantis' Judicial Nominating Commission.

Between 2018 and 2019, Neal donated \$125,000 to the Friends of Ron DeSantis PAC, according to campaign finance records. Records also show conservative donor Richard Uihlein, who has family ties to Lakewood Ranch, donated \$900,000 to the PAC during that same period.

News of the scandal led to severe backlash and condemnations of Baugh, DeSantis and other administration officials for engaging in unbridled corruption and political nepotism in relation to vaccine distribution at a moment when the state's distribution infrastructure has been disastrous, with a very small portion of the population of well over 21 million having received a vaccine.

An outpouring of outrage from county residents and media exposure of the scandal forced Baugh to issue an apology for her role in the operation before saying at another public county commissioners' meeting that she did nothing wrong and if given the opportunity again would do "exactly what I did this time." Governor DeSantis also deflected criticism of the private sites during a February 17 news conference, in which he stated lamely that the communities picked were based on finding communities with a "high concentration of seniors" that have the ability to administer vaccines.

The Manatee County Sheriff's Office was forced to launch an investigation into the matter last week following a complaint that was filed by Michael Barfield, a local resident who claimed that Baugh may have broken the law by misusing her public position to benefit herself and other political and business interests.

DeSantis and other state officials' have favored communities that are Republican strongholds and affluent for vaccine distribution, while there has been only a minimal rollout of doses to predominately working class and poor communities in the state. During a press conference in Hialeah, Democratic

Mayor Carlos Hernandez reportedly interrupted the event following a speech from DeSantis, denouncing the governor for the severe shortage of vaccines made available for the city.

Hernandez said he needed "help for my people in the city of Hialeah," before noting further, "I've been saying that since this started. It's sad he (DeSantis) talks about politics aren't involved. You know what? Give me the vaccines."

Democratic Party officials have jumped on the scandal to issue accusations of corruption and bribery against DeSantis and to call for federal agencies to intervene. Democratic Rep. Charlie Christ sent a letter to the Department of Justice last month requesting an investigation into DeSantis to discover whether the vaccine drives benefited his political donors and business affiliates.

The occasion has also been seized upon by the Democrats to promote racist politics. Christ told CNN, "If you're Hispanic or black, you're not getting these pop-up vaccines that the governor is giving ... [to] more white and more Republican parts of Florida." Statements such as these are meant to blur the growing class divide in the vaccination roll-out between workers and the upper-middle class and super-wealthy, who are able to acquire vaccines through corporate connections and other means.



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