

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis issues executive order removing county-level COVID-19 restrictions

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5 May 2021

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed a pair of executive orders Monday that immediately suspended all the state's remaining COVID-19 emergency measures and other local public health restrictions aimed at limiting the virus. The executive order is meant to "bridge the gap" until a new law giving him the power to overturn local emergency measures, which he also signed on Monday, comes into effect on July 1.

"The fact is, we are no longer in a state of emergency," DeSantis declared during Monday's news conference, adding that the blanket removal of restrictions during a pandemic, which is still killing more than 700 Americans every day, was the "evidence-based thing to do."

Citing one element of the "evidence" that drove the order, DeSantis asserted that vaccinated individuals should not be asked to continue to wear masks as it would supposedly undermine public confidence in coronavirus vaccines. In overriding all local restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19, the governor sought to portray officials and health experts who advocate for such restrictions as those who promoted "policing people" and "don't believe in the vaccines, the data, or the science."

The new measures place the most draconian requirements on any potential emergency orders which local governments sought to implement. Before the governor's order, local public health emergencies could have been extended indefinitely and reversed by county and city officials. But under the new legislation, such orders could only exist in seven-day increments for a total of 42 days, and the governor would also have the authority to overrule any order passed on a county-by-county basis, thereby handcuffing major cities that are suffering major outbreaks to the dictates of the state's executive.

DeSantis's executive order also allows for counties and

private entities to be handed hefty penalties for imposing their own health and safety measures. Businesses, schools and local governments can be fined up to \$5,000 for requiring proof of vaccinations from customers and patrons for each incident where it occurs. Although institutions are granted the authority to institute COVID-19 screening protocols to detect possible cases, such as temperature checks and questionnaires, these policies are far from adequate in detecting infections and preventing local transmission of the virus.

The governor and the state's Republican leadership have cited the nation's decline in COVID-19 infections and deaths from the winter peak as the justification for overturning local restrictions. It comes on the heels of President Joe Biden's announcements last week that his administration was relaxing all federal public health guidance on wearing masks outdoors, a change that has encouraged state officials nationwide to propose and adopt their own abandonment of essential public health protocols.

The claims by Florida officials that the deadly virus has been all but defeated in the state and that trends in cases and deaths are trending significantly downward were contradicted just a day after the governor's announcement, which saw cases jump to 3,682 on Tuesday from Monday's 3,075. Florida has seen more than 2.25 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and over 35,400 deaths, marking it the third most hard-hit state by total number behind California and Texas. The weekly coronavirus case average stands at 4,595 per day as of May 4, while average daily deaths stands at 62.

According to the latest data from the Florida Department of Health (DOH), the state's positivity rate has risen significantly over the past week. The positivity rates for new and old COVID-19 tests were 7.00 percent

on Thursday, rising all the way up to 8.72 percent on Sunday, before declining slightly to 8.09 percent on Monday. Weekly hospitalizations for COVID-19 also spiked last week after rising three of the past four weeks. The DOH reported there were 1,366 hospitalizations from April 24 to May 1, up from 1,244 the week prior.

By declaring all local safety protocols pertaining to mask wearing and COVID-19 vaccinations null and void and only permissible through the governor's approval, Florida's top state officials are embarking on a policy which threatens to spur on a new wave of the pandemic under conditions in which just 31 percent of the state's population has been fully vaccinated.

From the beginning, DeSantis's pandemic policy has been bound up with the ruling elites' homicidal "herd immunity" strategy, which entails placing as few impediments as possible on profit making and allowing the virus to spread, regardless of the consequences. Moreover, dismissing and discrediting public health guidelines is central to the capitalist class's and both corporate-controlled parties' agenda of "normalizing" the unchecked spread of the virus throughout the population and numbing popular sentiment to continued deaths.

Early last summer, the governor issued a mandate approving phase two of his reopening plan and opened up bars, tattoo parlors and restaurants, as well as two of the state's largest theme parks, SeaWorld and Universal Orlando. These policies were put into effect even as cases began to rise by the thousands. In the face of the staggering growth of infections and deaths, DeSantis obstinately refused any reversal and maintained that because an increasing number of younger people were getting sick, the spread of the virus was largely harmless.

A recent report from state health officials, disclosed to the *Orlando Sentinel* on Monday, points to the increasing danger of new COVID-19 variants. According to health experts, over 10,000 cases of COVID-19 "variants of concern" have been reported in the state, more than double the total just two weeks earlier. The officials highlight further that this is an indication that the spread of the virus accelerating, not diminishing.

The most common variant was B.1.1.7, which was logged at 9,050 cases statewide. The strain is estimated to be 60 percent more infectious than the original dominant strain of COVID-19, while also leading to more severe illness and higher hospitalization rates. A recent estimate placed the strain as 67 percent more lethal.

Democrats and other local officials who scorned DeSantis for issuing his unilateral order, mostly expressed

contempt over being "blindsided" by the order and given no notice. Democratic Mayor of Orange County Jerry Demings released a statement criticizing DeSantis for being "slow to act in responding to the pandemic" and causing "local elected officials (mayors) to take action to fill the void and keep their residents safe." Demings accused DeSantis and the entire national Republican Party of "usurping the authority of Democrat-led" cities. He declared that his county "will not wait on the governor to tell me what to do."

Such claims by Democratic officials are essentially worthless as President Biden has reiterated his rejection of lockdowns and the closure of nonessential businesses and public schools, setting the tone for the rest of the nation. In Florida, every county, whether headed by a Democrat or Republican, has either already moved forward or issued plans for fully reopening major industries and in-person classrooms.

In Democratic-controlled Miami-Dade and Broward counties, public schools are slated to have students return to classrooms for the fall with 100 percent in-person face-to-face instruction, according to an announcement made by Broward Superintendent Robert Runcie in mid-April. Even more outrageous is that neither county has elected not to make blended or hybrid, remote learning an option for students and parents. Both counties have been the two worst COVID-19 hotspots in the state, with Miami-Dade having around 487,000 infections and above 6,200 deaths and Broward racking up over 233,000 cases and more than 2,900 fatalities.

In the case of Democrat-led Orange County, the region facilitated DeSantis's reopening plans by opening major theme parks and resorts already in summer last year. In Orlando, the largest city in the county, the Democratic mayor signed off on plans to reopen Walt Disney World Magic Kingdom and Animal Kingdom in July. This decision proved to be extremely reckless as Orange County witnessed one of the largest surges in cases during the second wave at the end of 2020.



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