

Florida data scientist Rebekah Jones granted whistleblower status

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Rebekah Jones, a former Florida Department of Health employee, has been granted whistleblower status a year after being fired for speaking out against the state government's campaign to reopen schools and workplaces amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Inspector General Michael J. Bennett informed Jones' attorneys May 28 that she met the criteria set down in state law for whistleblower status, which begins a process of investigation to determine whether her complaints are justified by the evidence.

The *Miami Herald* reported Bennett said Jones' complaints demonstrate "reasonable cause to suspect that an employee or agent of an agency or independent contractor has violated any federal, state or local law, rule or regulation." Under the state's whistleblower rules, Jones could be reinstated to her previous job or be eligible for compensation if an investigation finds her firing was in retaliation for the concerns she raised.

In the complaint, filed July 17, 2020, Jones alleged she was fired for "opposition and resistance to instructions to falsify data in a government website." She described being asked to bend data analysis to fit predetermined policy and delete data from public view after questions from the press—actions she claimed "represent an immediate injury to the public health, safety, and welfare, including the possibility of death to members of the public."

Jones, a geographer specializing in Geographic Information System (GIS) data science, who helped build Florida's online presentation of its COVID-19 data, garnered national attention for refusing to strategically manipulate the information to minimize the severity of the pandemic. At the time, Florida was an epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic.

Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, who had been pushing to reopen the state for commerce, bitterly

denounced Jones and claimed she displayed "insubordination" and "blatant disrespect" for her colleagues. DeSantis said he felt "that it was best to terminate her employment."

Within a few weeks of being fired, Jones launched her own website to keep track of Florida's COVID-19 information. Her website, COVID Monitor, uses the same data science software and data extraction techniques Jones had used to build the Florida Department of Health dashboard. Jones' new website included an enhanced metric with hospital bed availability by facility, something that was not being publicly reported.

Jones also continued to raise doubts about the official figures reported by the Health Department and challenge the drive to reopen schools and workplaces. The Florida Department of Health filed a complaint against Jones on November 10 alleging she gained unauthorized access to a department messaging system. The 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 denied the hacking allegations, which were quickly proven to be false. Still, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement announced they had issued a search warrant "after suspecting Jones of being responsible for a computer hack into the health department website." Police also claimed she downloaded unauthorized health department state data.

On December 2, Jones and two colleagues published an article in *US News & World Report* critical of the reopening of schools across the country. The article noted that more than 1 million children had been infected with COVID-19 by that time.

"Our data demonstrates that schools are not the safe

havens or silos some believed they would be, and that they in fact contribute to the spread of COVID-19 in a number of ways,” they wrote. “In our opinion, the data suggests schools are NOT safe and DO contribute to the spread of the virus—both within schools and within their surrounding communities,” the article concluded.

Jones’ exposure of the disastrous “herd immunity” policy made her a target and officers raided her home on December 7, pointing their guns at Jones’ husband and children. During the raid, police seized Jones’ phone, all her computers, and other equipment she used to keep Florida COVID Action up-to-date. She also said flash drives seized by the police contained proof that state officials “were lying in January about things like internal reports and notices from the CDC,” in addition to “evidence of illegal activities by the state.”

She compared the scene to a Nazi raid, saying police intended to terrorize her and use 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 later turned herself in to police after they issued a warrant for her arrest in January.

The COVID Monitor documented that at least 491,403 students and 206,894 educators have been infected in K-12 schools across the US. An additional 74,944 cases linked to schools have not been specified.

The Florida state government and the ultra-right have stepped up their campaign against Jones in recent months. DeSantis recently hired as his press secretary Christine Pushaw, the author of a vicious smear attack on Jones in the right-wing magazine *Human Events*.

Rebekah Jones was silenced because of her efforts to tell the truth about the pandemic, which threatened the ruling class’s drive to end health and safety restrictions. Just as with whistleblowers Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, Jones is being persecuted for the crime of telling the working class the truth: in this case, about the pandemic and the criminal response of the state and federal governments.



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