

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis sabotages vaccinations of young children

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Over the past week Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and state health authorities have declined to pre-order and approve mRNA COVID-19 shots for children aged 6 months to 5 years, setting off a wave of outrage and opposition among parents to the governor's anti-scientific repudiation of vaccines.

In a statement Wednesday, the Florida Department of Health, which is overseen by DeSantis' office, declared it did not place orders for the federal government to ship vaccine doses for pediatric patients because it has not "advised" that all children become vaccinated. DeSantis and state Surgeon General Dr. Joseph Ladapo have justified their denial of vaccines with talking points common of the far-right, including an entirely phony concern for the health of small children.

Without offering a shred of real evidence, DeSantis claimed that the U.S Food and Drug Administration's authorization of the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines for children was aimed mainly at reducing parent's fears about the virus.

At an event last Friday, DeSantis categorically denied claims from the Biden White House that there had been a change in policy by the state to administer vaccinations for toddlers and infants. "We are not going to have any programs where we're trying to jab 6-month-old babies with mRNA," he declared. "That's just the reality. I think what they thought would happen was that we'd be embarrassed about it."

The governor also denounced the media, saying, "definitely not surprised that legacy media would amplify the lie, because that's what they do." DeSantis admitted he regretted state authorities had no "authority to prevent" practitioners and hospitals from ordering the vaccines, but that this was no cause to believe "somehow we've reversed" the DOH's anti-vaccination policies.

DeSantis' remarks at the press conference ranged from unsubstantiated claims about European handling of the vaccines to baseless pseudo-science. The governor said Florida had been watching the policies of European countries and taking cues from them. He claimed some countries don't "allow Moderna for under age 30, or they recommend against it," but refused to list any of the countries he was referring to specifically, before highlighting that as a reason not to order any children's doses of the mRNA vaccines.

The fascistic opposition to child vaccinations comes amid an alarming shift in the pandemic, as Florida reached the harrowing milestone this week of 75,000 deaths, while COVID hospitalizations are rising to levels last experienced during Florida's winter surge. As of Friday, more than 3,500 patients were in Florida hospitals for COVID-19, up from 3,200 patients a week ago and barely 1,000 COVID patients in early April.

For the week ending on June 16, Florida reported 74,323 confirmed new COVID cases, up from about 60,000 per week just a month ago. These numbers are believed to be a vast undercount since state statistics do not include the people who are confirming infections using at-home tests. Health experts note that at least four highly infectious strains of the deadly Omicron variant are circulating in Florida at this time: the highly transmissible BA.2.12.1 Omicron subvariant, the BA.2 subvariant, as well as newcomers BA.4 and BA.5.

The entire record of DeSantis throughout the pandemic has been to staunchly oppose all impingements on the profits of big business, not only banning mandatory vaccinations in workplaces but also prohibiting mask wearing in schools and rejecting the closure of all non-essential businesses.

The latest far-right assault on child vaccinations flows logically from the demands of the Democratic

and Republican parties that schools be fully reopened so parents could return to work and that lockdowns be ended. The capitalist politicians articulate the interests of corporations and the super-wealthy, who see any limitation to business activity as an intolerable barrier to the production of profit and who call for letting the disease rip through communities without restraint.

In seeking to further burnish his credentials among the extreme right, DeSantis is opposing even the limited and ineffective mitigation policies of the Democrats. They long ago abandoned all essential public health measures meant to contain the spread of COVID-19 and embraced the strategy of “herd immunity,” which means the normalization of continued death from the disease.

DeSantis’ decision not to order child vaccines by last week’s federal deadline, and the demented anti-vaxx conspiracy theories accompanying this, stand sharply at odds with the scientific research supporting the deployment of vaccines for children.

Florida remains the only state in the country that has refused to pre-order shots for infants and preschoolers, as state pediatricians and hospitals were forced to begin making their own order requests directly from the federal government. Although DeSantis could not forbid health care providers to order the newly authorized vaccines, Florida won’t be included in the first two waves of vaccine shipments, delaying their arrival at pediatricians’ offices and hospitals. Only large-scale pharmacies like CVS and Walgreens that participate in a federal program will get vaccines in the first wave.

At the Friday press conference, DeSantis referenced an examination of the FDA’s study by Dr. Ladapo, claiming the Surgeon General had supposedly proved the vaccine had given no proven benefit for babies. “Joe Ladapo [and] our department of health has looked at it. There is no proven benefit to put a baby with an mRNA, so that’s why our recommendation is against it. ... That’s different from prohibiting the use of it,” he declared.

But DeSantis himself acknowledged the study established effectiveness of the vaccines for younger children. Moreover, neither DeSantis nor Ladapo have offered up any credible evidence that the vaccines pose a risk to the health of infants and toddlers.

Barring state programs for COVID vaccines means

Florida’s county health departments, which are state agencies, won’t receive any shipments of the vaccines for children under 5 because state health officials refuse to recommend them. The refusal to stock the vaccines at local health departments will have a devastating impact on working class families and the most vulnerable who rely on the cheaper costs and subsidies from state programs for medical services.

There is outrage among parents and the public as a whole over the criminally indifferent policies that will exacerbate the spread of the disease and place untold numbers of small children at risk. Lisa Gwynn, the Academy of Florida Chapter President, said “our phones are ringing off the hook with concerned parents eager to know where they can get the vaccine.”

“Right now,” she continued, “we don’t have a good answer.”

Refusing to enact state programs for the distribution of vaccines will place all the burden on doctors and individual pharmacies, which will place a heavy strain on health services and disrupt their distribution.

According to Gwynn, Florida’s vaccine distribution system is state-based and not designed to allow individual doctors and institutions to order directly from manufacturers. Gwynn noted further, “The state’s decision to obstruct access to COVID-19 vaccines is anti-science, an affront to parental rights, and an intrusion into the relationship between doctors, patients, and the families they serve.”



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