

Virginia's Republican Governor vows to reimburse businesses fined for COVID-19 health violations

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Earlier this month, Virginia's Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin announced that his administration planned to reimburse state businesses that were forced to pay "unjust" fines for violating public health measures imposed by his Democratic predecessor Ralph Northam during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The measure will exclude violations that occurred in "nursing homes, assisted living facilities and hospitals," according to *The Hill*.

"The fact that businesses are still dealing with COVID-19 related penalties and fines is infuriating," said Youngkin in a public statement on December 6. "In the previous administration, we saw our government shut down businesses, close our schools and separate us from each other," Youngkin declared demagogically. He added that while "we can't undo the damage done during the Northam administration, we are taking action going forward to end COVID-era draconian overreach." Youngkin declared that his next budget request would include the demand to cease collection for all other fines relating to businesses during the pandemic.

Youngkin explained that he would work with the Virginia General Assembly to "forgive COVID fines and fees and restore licenses that were unjustly suspended." Youngkin issued an executive order demanding that state agencies "report any fines, fees and suspensions for violations of restrictions imposed under his predecessor, Democrat Ralph Northam," according to the *Washington Post*.

Youngkin, who is currently considered a potential Republican candidate for the 2024 Presidential election, was elected in 2021 and entered office in January this year. Throughout his election campaign, Youngkin

appealed to wealthy voters on a right wing platform of ending all public health measures that were implemented in schools and public places by the Northam administration to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. In addition, Youngkin has signaled support for former President Donald Trump's claims that the 2020 election was stolen or otherwise illegitimate.

No sooner was Youngkin in office than he began removing public health measures and banning "divisive concepts" such as the teaching of racism and the history of slavery in schools. Since then, Youngkin has governed on an increasingly reactionary basis. This includes enacting policies that attack transgender students and introducing Standard of Learning proposals that require right wing indoctrination in public schools.

The increasingly reactionary and fascistic trajectory of Youngkin's administration exposes the myth promoted by sections of the corporate media and Democratic Party of a so-called "moderate" wing of the Republican Party. In addition to imposing anti-scientific and authoritarian policies at home, Youngkin campaigned nationally for Trump-backed candidates during the mid-terms. His behavior "is a reminder that he's never been as moderate as he was commonly perceived by the pundit class," admitted a recent article published by MSNBC.

The declaration that Youngkin would pay back businesses that violated COVID-19 restrictions came days after the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control Authority (ABC) served a search warrant to a business in Fredericksburg in Central Virginia for selling liquor without a license. Previously, Gourmeltz sandwich shop had been shuttered in 2021 because its owner had

refused to abide by public health measures that had been put in place by the previous administration.

The Youngkin administration came under Republican criticism for serving the search warrant (for the liquor license violation) against Gourmeltz's owner, Iraq and Afghanistan war veteran Matt Strickland, who had become a local cause célèbre of the far right. As a face-saving measure, Youngkin responded four days later by declaring reimbursements for all businesses fined for COVID-19 violations.

Despite Youngkin declaring that pandemic fines imposed on these businesses have been “unjust,” an administration spokesperson told the media that they had “no information on how many businesses or individuals have been penalized for violating the pandemic restrictions,” stated the *Post*.

The blanket demand for reimbursement of pandemic fines, without first obtaining proof of supposedly “unjust” decisions, raises the question of how Youngkin would track down the businesses owed, or if he considers any fines for violating public health to be legitimate.

Former Northam spokesperson Alena Yarmosky, in response to Youngkin, stated that “Governor Northam made Virginia one of the safest states in the nation during the height of COVID-19” in comments to the *Washington Post*. Yarmosky also praised the fact that Virginia won CNBC'S “Top State for Business” twice during the pandemic.

Northam, a pediatrician by trade, made a show of supposedly adhering to health protocols while also moving toward complete reopening of schools and businesses. In fact, Northam's administration stacked his coronavirus task force with big business anti-lockdown advocates. This led to a massive surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths in the state throughout the first years of the pandemic.

There are further questions about how Youngkin would ascertain who he would reimburse. Under the circumstances in which the Virginia social services were strained to their utmost limit during the first years of the pandemic and are still seeking to recuperate, how Youngkin plans to organize a response to address these various claims of “unjust” fines for public health violations remains unclear.

According to statements given to WRIC by the Virginia Employment Commissioner (VEC) Carrie

Roth, there are almost 186,000 backlogged unemployment claims, as of October. Virginia is ranked fifth when it comes to reviewing unemployment claims, forcing applicants to wait 305 days on average at the first level. It is ranked fourteenth for second level appeals, where a person has to wait 98 days on average.

“The system remains broken and dysfunctional,” said Martin Wegbreit, director of litigation at the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society in statements given to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* two weeks ago.

Unemployed Virginians expressed outrage at Governor Youngkin's decision to continue ignoring their needs while promising to reimburse businesses. “Many of those fined were endangering their own employees with zero regard for their safety,” stated one commenter on social media in response to Youngkin's announcement. “In the meantime, Youngkin's appointed VEC commissioner has managed—against all odds—to actually make things worse at the VEC than they were back at the height of the pandemic,” they added.



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