

President Trump and Florida Governor DeSantis declare south Florida a COVID-19 epicenter

By Matthew MacEgan
21 March 2020

During his live conference Friday morning, President Donald Trump labeled the City of Miami in south Florida as one of the COVID-19 epicenters in the United States. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis also applied this moniker to Miami-Dade and its surrounding counties on Tuesday, ordering that all nonessential businesses closed for at least 30 days.

More than 200 new cases were reported in Florida between Thursday and Friday, and the death toll rose to 10. The majority of cases are currently in the southern Florida counties: 124 in Broward County, 113 in Miami-Dade County, and 34 in Palm Beach County. The next highest counts outside of south Florida are to be found in central Florida: 30 in Hillsborough County, where Tampa is located; and 22 in Orange County, where Orlando is located. Thirty-six of the state's 67 counties have at least one confirmed case.

Reports show that 19 long-term care facilities either have suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19, and one of those cases has killed a 77-year-old man. To date, the state has only performed 3,416 tests, and they are currently awaiting the results of 1,026 of those tests. Most counties do not yet have drive-through testing available. One center opened in Palm Beach County Friday morning, and another is planned to open at the Orange County Convention Center next week.

Aside from the closing of nonessential businesses in south Florida, DeSantis and government officials have taken some further measures to slow down the spread of the virus in the state:

- All testing in K-12 schools has been cancelled, and schools are to remain closed until April 15.
- All university courses are to be moved online until the end of the current semester.

- All gatherings of 10 or more people are banned for 30 days.

- All bars are to be closed, and all restaurants are to limit their capacities by 50 percent for 30 days.

- All spring-break activities are to be shut down, and all beaches and concert venues are to be closed.

One of the greatest concerns has been the health of the many inmates residing in Florida's prison and jail system. Florida has the third largest prison population in the United States, with over 100,000 in state prisons and thousands more in county jails. The incarceration rate of the state prison system is 513 inmates per 100,000 adult residents, higher than the national average of 471.

The state corrections department has placed transfers of inmates from local jails to state prisons on hold until March 30, which has resulted in many jails maxing out and exceeding their capacities. Several counties have begun releasing inmates who are being held on nonviolent charges, and others are reconsidering bond amounts to reduce their numbers. Volusia County plans to release 88, Lake County has released 44, and Hillsborough County has released 164 of their 2,700 inmates.

Pinellas County has come under the most scrutiny and has received criticism on a national level for the number of incarcerated it is currently holding in its jail. According to recent reports, more than 200 inmates are being forced to sleep on the floor on rubber mats, and this has solicited a joint statement signed by 31 elected prosecutors from across the country to call for some inmates to be released.

Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri has stated that he will consider other options before releasing inmates,

including moving them to the jails of other counties. He sent an email to Pinellas County officers on Monday, asking them to use “good judgment and decision-making” on whether to make an arrest that would result in a jail booking. He asked, but has not ordered, that they consider other options, such as giving notices to appear in court.

The State of Florida has 21 juvenile detention facilities, and Governor DeSantis ordered that all juvenile lockups be closed to visitors until April 15. This order does not apply to attorneys, medical staff, law enforcement or teachers. Many local activists have called for the state to release all children currently being detained in such centers.

Due to the necessary closing of nonessential businesses and the limitation on larger gatherings, Florida workers are already losing their jobs in large numbers. Leisure and hospitality jobs, which see their most business during the spring break weeks, account for nearly one in seven jobs in Florida. The state’s unemployment call center reported that it received more than 76,000 calls between Monday and Wednesday, up from about 28,000 the previous week. The center has stated that they will hire 100 additional workers to answer calls and guide applicants, and the center will be open seven days a week beginning March 23. Through last Friday, Florida saw a 17 percent increase in claims.

Florida has some of the worst unemployment benefits in the United States. Fewer than one third of qualified applicants actually receive benefits, which places the state at the bottom of rankings, and those who do receive benefits are only entitled to \$3,300 over the course of 12 weeks, or \$275 per week. Twelve weeks is the shortest amount of time that one can receive unemployment benefits in the country, and the amount is among the five lowest.

These low numbers are the result of legislation made in 2011 under the administration of Governor Rick Scott, who lowered the benefits from \$7,150 over 26 weeks, which was what available during the Great Recession of 2008-2009. This was done with the claim that it would eliminate debts that the state accrued to the federal government, which it borrowed from during those years.

The *Tampa Bay Times* reported Friday that a company that distributes smart thermometers to track

the flu has observed an unusually high spike in influenza-like illnesses in Florida, even though national flu levels are declining. A spokesperson for this company stated that they believe that it is related to COVID-19 and that the illness level in Florida is about 2.4 percent above what they normally observe.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>