

Florida stalls jobless pay to force workers back to work

By Alex Johnson
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Florida's state government is moving rapidly toward reopening non-essential businesses and public spaces under conditions in which the COVID-19 infection rate is showing no signs of slowing down, while the economic crisis produced from the pandemic is further impoverishing hundreds of thousands. The official number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 stands at near 47,000 and the death total is nearing 2,000.

Governor Ron DeSantis approved a "full phase one" statewide reopening that began on Monday without putting in place any measures to revamp public health infrastructure and implement the necessary testing, contact tracing, and quarantine strategies that health experts say are crucial to prevent the spread of the disease. Under the governor's new guidelines, restaurants have been allowed to seat customers at 50 percent of their normal capacity. Retail stores, museums, gyms, fitness studios, and other large-venue areas are also permitted to operate at half their normal capacity.

State legislators have moved swiftly to reopen businesses in large part to avoid further paying out unemployment benefits to the hundreds of thousands of workers who have been laid off or furloughed. DeSantis has adopted the same strategy that dozens of states across the country have embraced in alignment with the Trump administration. The ultimatum being presented to workers is to either go back to work and risk becoming sick, or stay home and be denied any financial assistance.

Even before lockdown measures were taken, the state government made conscious efforts to restrict funding as much as possible. A local television station revealed that Florida did not start sending unemployment checks until the stay-at-home order was lifted. While thousands of families sought desperately for unemployment aid, the state only withdrew \$80 million in federal funds provided under the CARES act to pay the unemployed, although a billion dollars' worth of federal aid was available.

The state has only started withdrawing significant portions of the federal aid in the last several weeks, which means many households have gone more than a month without paychecks and receiving no benefits. In fact, the sudden increase in unemployment compensation disbursements this month began after a report was released showing that the state had received millions of dollars in interest to its state unemployment fund, which is separate from the federal stimulus, showing that it was actually taking in more money than it was paying out to applicants.

In explaining the delayed response, a spokesman for the Department of Economic Opportunity said, "we are pulling the funds down as we pay claimants. We have made significant progress over the last several weeks of getting individuals paid." In an interview with WFTS in Tampa, one person who works at an autism therapy center that has been shut down during the pandemic said, "they're making more money like, off our suffering ... they're getting all of this money back and none of us are seeing it."

Up to now, just under 22 percent of more than 700,000 people who filed claims since emergency measures were implemented in mid-March were being paid benefits. A much larger number of claims processed were found ineligible, while thousands of Floridians have expressed outrage over the state's online unemployment filing system. The system has reportedly crashed consistently, rendering many unable to apply, and call centers have been too overloaded to provide any assistance.

DeSantis has sought to shift blame for this disaster to the applicants, claiming they failed to receive benefits due to incomplete applications. At a press conference Monday in Orlando, he brushed off the criticisms being directed toward his mishandling of the state's filing procedures as "common pitfalls." The governor made similar comments in Jacksonville last Friday, saying "nine times out of ten

the application's incomplete." An estimated 322,500 people have been deemed ineligible for state unemployment benefits, which is more than 40 percent.

DeSantis is using the financial pressure to impose the reopening measures on the population. This is being done with complete indifference to the ominous rise of infections and in defiance of warnings being issued by epidemiologists and medical experts. The claims of political officials that Florida has "flattened the curve" are being belied by recent statistics. Florida's Department of Health tallied 850 new cases on its Monday coronavirus update, which is well above Florida's average daily increase.

In an article written in the *Miami Herald* earlier this month, a former state deputy for the health division, Dr. Les Beitsch, criticized the plans being made to reopen for their complete lack of consideration of the long-term political and social consequences that will follow restarting economic life. "Once you reopen, it's difficult to have a time out. It creates serious concern about people's trust in their leadership," Beitsch said. "And if you're incorrect, the consequences could be catastrophic."

Beitsch and many experts share the view that Florida is far from close to the testing levels needed to control the pandemic. Only an estimated 370,000 tests have been carried out in the state, which is less than 2 percent of a population of 21 million. Moreover, until the last couple of weeks, the state mostly tested people who were hospitalized or experiencing symptoms. In the majority of workplaces, testing is virtually inaccessible as companies and businesses are not being compelled to search for positive cases when workers return to work en masse. Rural communities are also expected to be hit particularly hard due to the severe lack of testing and scarce health resources.

A vast and criminal underestimation of death and suffering is taking place as a result of the single-minded focus on driving workers back to work in unsafe conditions to resume the businesses of profit-making. This has been epitomized most clearly by the firing earlier this month of Rebekah Jones, the Graphic Information Systems manager of Florida's COVID-19 infection and fatality tracker dashboard. The dashboard is the chief monitoring system being used by the state and has been praised by researchers and the population for its availability of newly confirmed cases, testing information, and death data.

Jones notified public health researchers in an email last

week that she had been removed from her position due to her refusal to manipulate data for the state's tracker system and provide dubious evidence to support the governor's reckless reopening plans. In the email she said she was forced to resign due to the "level of accessibility and transparency" that she made "central to the process during the first two months." She noted that her "commitment to both is largely (arguably entirely) the reason I am no longer managing it."

At a news conference addressing the firing, DeSantis called Jones' termination from the Department of Health a "nonissue." DeSantis' communications director, Helen Aguirre told the *Miami Herald* that Jones' behavior amounted to "insubordination" against the demands placed by the heads of her department who were working in conjunction with top political officials.

The forced resignation of Jones is a dangerous indication of attempts being made by the political establishment to distort the real scope of infections and deaths occurring all across the state and to suppress any scientific information that contradicts the incessant demands for abandoning social distancing and lockdown procedures. Researchers in the state have reacted with astonishment and dismay over Jones' dismissal and many in the medical community and population see it as an effort to censor data that undermines the case for reopening.

Lucky Tran, a biologist and public health expert at Columbia University reacted to the announcement with a series of tweets denouncing the firing. One of her tweets states, "when politicians censor scientists and manipulate the numbers, the rest of us suffer."

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