COVID-19 cases surging rapidly in Florida

By Alex Johnson
29 June 2020

More than three weeks after Florida Governor Ron DeSantis unveiled phase 2 of the state's reopening plans, the state is witnessing an astronomical spike of COVID-19 cases and has emerged as one of the central hotspots for the coronavirus pandemic in the United States. As in other states where cases are now rising at a record pace, the swelling of cases in Florida demonstrates the disastrous and homicidal nature of the back-to-work campaign and the premature lifting of social distancing measures.

Florida has now recorded at least 141,000 cases of COVID-19 and more than 3,400 deaths. The number of added cases that have been released the past couple of weeks is setting record-breaking daily totals. Florida reported nearly 9,000 new cases in a 24-hour period on Friday, the highest number of new cases since the pandemic was unleashed on the population in mid-March. This record broke the previous record, which was 5,511 new cases recorded on Wednesday, just two days earlier. The total number of recorded cases rose by more than 35,000 in just under a week.

Due to the acceleration of cases, Florida is universally considered a major hot zone for the spread of COVID-19 which, if the current trend holds, will likely match or even surpass the number of cases recorded in the initial US epicenters of New York and New Jersey. The health crisis in Florida has become so dire that New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut officials have issued orders for a two-week quarantine for travelers coming from places battling "significant community spread," which includes Florida and many other locations concentrated in the South and Southwest.

Nearly every single county in the state is seeing a surge in cases, with a tremendous rise in areas that had low rates before June. Orange County, which includes Orlando, a large tourist destination, broke its own record through the course of this week when it recorded 1,063 cases Friday, according to the state's health department. Orlando is the second-highest city in regard to infection count at 5,872 and is right behind Miami, which is sitting at 17,909 infections. Seminole County recorded a one-day record of 173 cases this week, while Polk County reported a record 175 cases.

Health officials in the state told media that Orange County reported more new cases of COVID-19 on Thursday than were reported as totals in 38 separate states. New cases have also shot up 205 percent in two weeks.

The Florida Department of Health (FDOH) conducted an examination of the total daily increase rate throughout the course of the virus' spread. It found that from March 15 to March 26, the entire state of Florida did not exceed more than 714 reported cases of COVID-19 on any given day. This was chiefly due to the lockdown measures and shutdowns put in place which dampened the rate of spread. Now, with containment policies virtually abandoned and as the political establishment encourages public gatherings, nearly every single day this month has seen thousands of newly confirmed cases in the daily reports.

Testing sites are being overwhelmed by the number of people seeking a test either for the coronavirus itself or for antibodies. On Thursday morning, the Orange County Convention Center, which is a COVID-19 antibody testing site, revealed that it reached maximum capacity, according to the Florida Division of Emergency Management.

Antibody testing is an instrument utilized to determine whether someone suspected of COVID-19 has developed antibodies for the novel coronavirus, which indicates they had the virus at some point. The convention center saw very long lines fill up in the early hours Thursday morning, with cars lining up as early as 2:30 a.m. the day before. One Emergency Management official said in response to the surge in testing that residents should "plan ahead" and "be prepared for a long wait."

The state also recorded 39 new deaths from Thursday to Friday and 212 new hospitalizations. The colossal rise in infections is also coinciding with a spike in hospitalization for people infected with COVID-19 and is placing medical and healthcare infrastructure on the brink of collapse.

Hospitals are experiencing an overflow of patients that require life-saving treatment for COVID-19 and other health issues, which is already pushing the hospital system beyond capacity. The increasingly limited number of beds—and ICU beds in particular—is the result of enormous cost-cutting, severe under-staffing, and the central focus on high-profit procedures.

Several Florida facilities have either reached or are near full capacity. Orlando Health Orlando Regional Medical Center in Orange County, one of the largest hospitals in the city, has already topped its number of total beds at 630, and its available beds are at 0 percent. Advent Health Hospital in Orlando only had 17 percent of beds available out of 1,200. Other hospital

facilities facing full capacity are:

· Sarasota Memorial Hospital in Sarasota: The number of available beds stands at 4 percent, with 693 beds being occupied out of 720.

· In Polk County, Lakeland Regional Medical Hospital has only 76 available beds out of 822 total occupancies.

· Alachua County, home to Gainesville and the University of Florida, has seen UF Health Shand's Hospital's available capacity drop to 16 percent, with only 168 beds open out of 1,046.

· St. Josephs' hospital in Hillsborough County, covering the Tampa metro region, is also at 16 percent available capacity, with 586 beds filled out of 699.

· Three other large hospitals in the state—Baptist Hospital of Miami, Tampa General Hospital, Memorial Regional Hospital of Broward County—have less than 30 percent of their total beds available.

Nationally, the number of confirmed new coronavirus cases per day in the US hit an all-time high of 47,341 Friday and has eclipsed the mark set during the deadliest stretch of the outbreak in late April. This resurgence has even led some of the governors who were ferocious proponents of the back-to-work drive to pause or backtrack on reopening their states. In Texas, for example, Governor Greg Abbott is now urging residents to stay home, avoid going out excessively, and follow public health protocols after prematurely relaxing social distancing measures and reopening businesses.

Florida's DeSantis is now backtracking on plans to go to the next phase of his re-opening campaign in response to the inundation of confirmed cases, but has refused to say whether or not the state would resort back to previous lockdown measures. Bar owners were ordered Friday to stop selling alcohol in an effort to discourage large indoor gatherings, but the new restriction does not apply to restaurants which take in less than half of their revenue for alcohol sales. One of the main contributors to the spread of COVID-19 is the reopening of non-essential businesses in every county, with certain exceptions of the devastated Miami metropolitan area.

On May 4, most of the state entered the first phase of the reopening plan which allowed restaurants and retail stores outside of Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties to operate with outdoor seating and 25 percent indoor capacity. This phase also allowed hospitals and doctors to resume providing elective medical procedures. The occupancy limit was later pushed to 50 percent, and gyms, barbershops and hair salons could open, while the other three aforementioned south Florida counties, which have been virus hotspots, were able to take part. In early June, the second phase started in all but South Florida. In part, bars and movie theaters could operate with limited indoor seating capacity.

The Republican Governor is facing widespread criticism not only for his failed and negligent response to the coronavirus pandemic but also from accusations that his administration has been manipulating data pertaining to the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths in order to bolster the claim that it's safe to reopen businesses and allow social congregation. This claim has come primarily from Rebekah Jones, who was a leading COVID-19 data scientist in charge of tracking the state's official COVID-19 database.

According to Jones, she was fired last month for refusing to manipulate the official figures released on the data tracker. Jones has become somewhat of a prominent figure in the media and opponent of the DeSantis administration, who she claimed sidelined her for her protest against censoring information related to tracking COVID-19 data and refusing to, in her words, "manually change data to drum up support for the plan to reopen." On Tuesday, Jones claimed on her Twitter account that she had evidence that employees at FDOH "have been instructed this week to change the numbers and begin slowly deleting deaths and cases." She declared this plan is underway so Florida can look as though it's improving in the lead-up to July 4 celebrations.

Jones has also created an alternate COVID-19 dashboard that she claims is more accurate than the official one still in use by Florida's health departments. According to her data tracker, the number of confirmed COVID-19 tests in the state is more than 10,000 cases higher than the number reported in the official state tracker. Under Jones' DOH total tests, she mentions that "DOH 'Cases' include residents and non-residents but exclude those who received positive anti-body test results."

DeSantis has spent the last month stridently denying the allegations put forward by Jones and redirecting all blame for the uptick in cases on the population. He angrily dismissed a reporter from the *Miami Herald* and called him "embarrassing" for asking about the circumstances pertaining to Jones' termination. He bemoaned at a press conference Thursday over the "conspiracy bandwagon" that journalists and other critical opponents of his coronavirus mandates have fallen behind. Without addressing the specifics of Jones' assertion, he denounced all claims to suggest that he was fudging the numbers and told everyone "you need to move on."

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