

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 22, 2021

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Office of Governor
State of Florida, The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Dear Governor DeSantis:

We write to express grave and urgent concern over the worsening COVID-19 surge in Florida. Highly contagious variants are propelling the current surge, infecting high rates of Floridians who remain unvaccinated, primarily among rural and historically marginalized communities. The surge is also being facilitated by misguided orders from Tallahassee that block local leaders and businesses from pro-actively protecting individuals from unnecessary exposure. We urge you to address the current public health emergency by aggressively addressing lingering vaccine hesitancy issues in Florida, and by making it clear that Tallahassee will not interfere with efforts by local governments and businesses to reduce exposure to their citizens and customers.

The Florida Department of Health reported that cases have increased more than fourfold in a month, from 10,095 cases for the week ending June 17 to 45,603 on Friday, July 9. Further, the State reported nearly 900 Delta variant cases last week, more than three times the amount reported the previous week. Florida's positivity rate has exploded to 11.5 percent and our state now accounts for more than 20 percent of new COVID cases nationwide. And about 3,600 patients are currently hospitalized in the state, representing a 95 percent jump in a month. As we have seen over the course of the pandemic, when there is a major spike in cases and hospitalizations, deaths inevitably follow.

Nearly 40,000 Floridians already have lost their lives to the pandemic. With highly successful vaccines available to all Americans, every additional death can and must be prevented. As vaccination rates stall, hesitancy and misinformation continue to stymie the significant progress made over the last months. Since April, the number of vaccinations administered statewide per week has plummeted by roughly 80 percent. That must be remedied immediately.

Since the start of the pandemic, Florida has remained a national focal point due to your administration's lax, delayed, and incomplete responses to this serious threat. Your administration's reluctance to use all the science- and evidence-based tools available to defeat the virus has created unwarranted roadblocks at the local level. For example, your administration has thwarted statewide mask requirements, acquiesced to those who broke local COVID restrictions, suspended all emergency local protections, banned businesses from requiring proof of vaccination, and discontinued daily reporting. These actions are dangerous and are complicit in engendering this surge.

The pandemic is not behind us, and our communities remain at risk. Further politicizing a public health crisis is causing long term, negative consequences. As such, we request that you immediately take the following actions:

First, we request that you reverse the policy that prevents local governments and businesses from implementing COVID restrictions, such as mask mandates and vaccine requirements. Your May executive order makes it more difficult for local leaders and businesses to respond to the pandemic and ignores the dangers that remain to public health and safety.

Second, we request that you allow Florida businesses to adhere to CDC health experts' guidance without interference from Tallahassee. This only creates uncertainty for the businesses you claim to protect. Many businesses, such as cruise lines, have stated their intention to abide by the CDC's requirements. Rather than limit risk, your decisions have heightened the probability of introducing more variants into the U.S. and are enabling the spread of the virus. Further, banning businesses from requiring employees or customers to be vaccinated inserts the government into a business owner's decision where it doesn't belong and propels the spread of the virus.

Third, we request that your administration stop pardoning those who violate local rules, thus rendering those rules null and void. Your March executive order that wipes out fines imposed on individuals found to be in violation of local COVID-related ordinances inhibits the ability of local leaders to thwart community spread.

Fourth, we request that your Administration return to issuing daily COVID reports. In early June, the Florida Department of Health stopped releasing daily COVID reports, instead issuing weekly reports. Your administration said there was no need to continue providing daily updates because the state was returning to normal. While we disagreed with this decision, conditions have now changed and Floridians as well as Florida's healthcare community benefit from knowing in real time whether their communities are at risk and where the hot spots are.

Fifth, we request that as Governor, you lead by prioritizing combatting vaccine hesitancy and misinformation, with particular emphasis on rural areas and communities of color. Instead of suing the CDC for trying to enforce rules that keep people safe, your administration should launch more vaccination tours across the state, address hesitancy concerns with science and facts, and encourage Floridians to reject misinformation and seek medical guidance from qualified professionals.

Finally, we request that you reinstate the flexibilities for telehealth, out-of-state provider licenses, and Medicaid prior authorization requirements that expired at the end of June. Although your public health emergency declaration expired, the pandemic is not over, and these flexibilities have provided life-saving care throughout the pandemic. Telehealth waivers have allowed millions of patients to see their providers without barriers caused by lack of access to transportation, paid leave, or childcare. This has led to increased utilization throughout the pandemic, lower attrition rates, and fewer unnecessary in-person trips. This is not the time to remove such flexibilities and diminish patients' access to care as we continue to fight this disease.

Given the sustained and dramatic rise in COVID cases, we call on you to exercise the full extent of your powers as governor and the leader of our State, to properly address this escalating situation. We hope that you will encourage Floridians to get vaccinated and take concrete steps to protect the health of all Floridians.

Sincerely,



Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Member of Congress



Stephanie Murphy
Member of Congress



Kathy Castor
Member of Congress



Ted Deutch
Member of Congress



Lois Frankel
Member of Congress



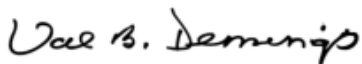
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Darren Soto
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