May 19, 2020

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor
State of Florida
The Capitol
Tallahassee, Florida 32301

Scott Rivkees, M.D.
Surgeon General
State of Florida
4052 Bald Cypress Way
Tallahassee, FL 32399

RE: Concerning Lack of Transparency and Likely Suppression of COVID-19 Public Health Information - Urge Answers Regarding Firing of State Public Health Data Scientist

Dear Gov. DeSantis and Surgeon General Rivkees,

I am very concerned to learn of reports that Rebekah Jones, the geographic information system manager for Department of Health’s Division of Disease Control and Health Protection, who manages the State’s Coronavirus data portal, was removed from her job. She has raised serious concerns about the lack of transparency of COVID-19 data being reported by the State of Florida.

According to reports, she advised, “As a word of caution, I would not expect the new team to continue the same level of accessibility and transparency that I made central to the process during the first two months. After all, my commitment to both is largely (arguably entirely) the reason I am no longer managing it.”

This appears to be a troubling pattern by the State of Florida. The State previously withheld important data regarding nursing home infections and deaths, and overall mortality data reported by Medical Examiners across the State. Floridians, scientists and public health experts need accurate and timely information regarding infections, testing, disparities and mortalities in order to make the best decisions about going to work, going to school and going out in public. The State’s lack of transparency around COVID-19 public health data is troubling and unwise. It is vital to help us keep our neighbors safe and that they have confidence that our government is reporting honestly. Therefore, I respectfully request immediate answers as to why Ms. Jones was fired and how the State intends to fully report all COVID-19 public health data without censorship by the Department of Health or anyone else.
As steps are taken to reopen our economy, it is imperative that we have easily accessible, detailed and protected data available to help our neighbors make decisions for their families, fight this pandemic and start building back our economy – but only when it is safe to do so. You both must commit to providing this data in a credible and transparent manner, so Floridians and our public health experts have the information they need in this fight.

Sincerely,

Kathy Castor
U.S. Representative
Florida – District 14