

Florida faces pressure, sees record high virus deaths

July 30 2020, by Adriana Gomez Licon and Brendan Farrington



A man waits to be tested at the new COVID-19 testing site at Pinellas Community Church on Wednesday, July 29, 2020, in St. Petersburg, Fla. Residents are required to make an appointment beforehand. A new free testing site opened on Wednesday in south St. Petersburg with the help of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who sent 7,500 tests to seed the site. (Jonah Hinebaugh/Tampa Bay Times via AP)

Florida tallied on Thursday a new record high in daily confirmed COVID-19 deaths for the third straight day as the state faces pressure to outline new measures to combat the pandemic.

The Florida Department of Health said 253 more deaths were reported raising the state's total death toll to 6,586.

The new deaths bring the average reported deaths per day to 154 for the past week, second only to Texas in the resurgence of the outbreak. Florida's current rate of deaths is about one-fifth of those logged in New York at the height of its outbreak in mid-April.

The head of a congressional coronavirus oversight panel sent letters to Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and three other Republican governors Wednesday requesting documents to show how their states are fighting the pandemic.

According to the letter, Florida is not following three recommendations outlined in a White House coronavirus task force report by allowing gyms to remain open even in worst-hit Miami and Tampa, permitting a larger capacity for indoor dining and not limiting social gatherings. The report hasn't been made public.

The request by South Carolina Rep. James Clyburn, a Democrat, comes days after White House coronavirus task force leader Dr. Deborah Birx implored leaders to close bars and for residents to wear masks.

The letter also says Florida is only partially complying to three other guidelines by not mandating masks in all counties with rising test positivity singling out Polk County as one that is currently not requiring the use of facial coverings. DeSantis has refused to issue a statewide mask mandate.

On Thursday, DeSantis spoke to reporters after watching the launch of the Mars rover in Merritt Island and was asked about large crowds gathering outside to watch the liftoff, many of whom were not wearing masks.

"Our guidelines have been that physical distancing is important, closed sustained contact is what is the best mechanism for transmitting the virus," DeSantis said before lifting up a mask. "If you can't maintain the physical distance, wearing the mask, this may be able to stop some of the droplets. It doesn't stop them all."

The letter also says that even when the state ordered bars to close in late June, restaurants that make less than 50% of their revenue from alcohol sales could still operate bar-top seating, which draws crowds to establishments such as sports bars that also sell food.

Counties such as worst-hit Miami-Dade have implemented curfews to discourage social gatherings in such establishments. Neighboring Broward County, home to Fort Lauderdale, has also ordered a curfew to curb the spread of the virus. And in the Florida Keys, two residents were jailed for failing to quarantine after testing positive for the new coronavirus.

Florida's efforts to keep the outbreak under control have been complicated by Tropical Storm Isaias, projected to head north along the state's east coast over the weekend. Emergency officials have announced that they will close state-run COVID-19 testing sites late Thursday and through the weekend as a precaution.

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Florida reported each day remains high, at 9,956, with a cumulative tally of infections now surpassing 460,000.

But the number of patients treated for COVID-19 in Florida hospitals continued to decline Thursday, with 8,425 logged in the state's online census in the late morning—down about 300 from the previous day and down more than 1,000 from peak levels last week.

Even with hospitalization trends improving, schools in South Florida and the Florida Keys have already announced they would start their school year fully online in late August.

DeSantis continued to advocate for schools to teach in person this fall, saying children will be affected with the online models.

"With this distance learning, how many kids will just totally fall off the map after doing this for months, and months and months? Remember, we started this with 15 days to slow the spread," DeSantis said Thursday. "It was never supposed to be just keep society in the fetal position indefinitely."

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