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Florida Members of Congress Raise ‘Grave Concerns’ with DeSantis Push to Reopen Florida

Members of Florida’s Congressional delegation wrote to Gov. Ron DeSantis today to raise “grave concerns” with his plan to reopen Florida and urged him to prioritize the health and safety of the state’s residents. The Members also pressed the governor for answers to key questions surrounding testing, contact tracing and social distancing guidance plans.

“A rushed reopening may very well serve only to increase the human loss caused by an already historic public health crisis, as states moving forward with reopening are seeing increases in new COVID-19 cases,” the Members wrote to DeSantis today.

Among the Members who signed the letter: Reps. **Alcee Hastings**, FL-20, **Debbie Wasserman Schultz**, (FL-23), **Ted Deutch** (FL-22), **Frederica Wilson** (FL-24), **Lois Frankel** (FL-21), **Val Demings** (FL-10), **Al Lawson** (FL-05), **Darren Soto** (FL-09), **Debbie Mucarsel-Powell** (FL-26), **Donna Shalala** (FL-27).

Florida was among several states to begin a push to reopen this week, yet the Governor has previously delayed or resisted precautionary measures throughout this crisis. The Members pointed to this troubling pattern, and pressed DeSantis to address a series of questions that would ensure that certain safety and testing thresholds are being met.

“You have, since the rise of this crisis, resisted the implementation of science-based and data-driven mitigation strategies and withheld valuable data from the public. Florida is not an experiment and its residents are not case studies,” the Members wrote. “As our state and our nation grapple with the complexities and risks of reopening, we need forthright assurance, tangible evidence and relentless effort to ensure every decision you make in this process is based on the best scientific fact and public health guidance experts have to offer.” Read the entire letter below:

Dear Governor DeSantis,

We write to express our grave concerns with the reopening of our state and its implications for the safety of Florida’s residents as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. While we fully recognize the tremendous burden placed on the economy by stay-at-home orders and closed

businesses, we urge you to prioritize the health and safety of Floridians above all else. A rushed reopening may very well serve only to increase the human loss caused by an already historic public health crisis, as states moving forward with reopening are seeing increases in new COVID-19 cases.

According to data released by the state as recently as Thursday, May 7th, Florida continues to experience a rise in confirmed cases statewide. Furthermore, the number of documented cases is almost assuredly lower than the number of actual cases due to insufficient testing.

Florida is lacking essential tools that public health experts agree are critical to a safe reopening process: widespread testing, a robust contact tracing workforce, and supported isolation are interconnected pieces of the larger puzzle of reopening. Without all pieces in place, it is unacceptable to reopen the state and expose our population to increased risk of infection. According to data released by the state on Monday, approximately two percent of Floridians have been tested. The South Florida Sun Sentinel reported that there are only 500 contact tracers in the entire state of Florida and quoted an official with the Department of Health as saying, "there are no immediate plans to hire more." Surely, you are aware that interpersonal contact will be inevitable with any reopening. The job of contact tracers who ensure that individuals infected with or exposed to someone with COVID-19 isolate themselves for two weeks, will become even more essential for containing a highly contagious disease that passes easily from person to person.

Testing is the only way to gain and maintain an accurate understanding of the prevalence of the virus. We need a comprehensive testing strategy to reopen safely. On April 24, 2020, President Trump signed the Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act (P.L. 116-139). The law provides \$25 billion in additional funding to boost COVID-19 testing efforts around the country. Under the law, each state is required to develop a comprehensive COVID-19 testing plan. The plan must include goals for the remainder of the year, including: (1) the number of tests needed, month-by-month, to include diagnostic, serological, and other tests, as appropriate; (2) month-by-month estimates of laboratory and testing capacity, including related to workforce, equipment and supplies, and available tests; and (3) a description of how the state will use its resources for testing, including as it relates to easing any COVID-19 community mitigation policies. The state's plan is due 30 days from enactment of the law, May 24, 2020.

We are relieved that the three South Florida counties (Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach) that continue to be at the epicenter of the pandemic in Florida are excluded from the State's reopening plan. Nevertheless, we know all too well that a virus does not respect borders or county lines, and a reopening in one area does not preclude another area from increased risk. We are one state, and therefore we should have one statewide plan that accounts for the cross-county interconnections that define everyday life.

You have, since the rise of this crisis, resisted the implementation of science-based and data-driven mitigation strategies and withheld valuable data from the public. Florida is not an experiment and its residents are not case studies. As our state and our nation grapple with the complexities and risks of reopening, we need forthright assurance, tangible evidence and

relentless effort to ensure every decision you make in this process is based on the best scientific fact and public health guidance experts have to offer.

Therefore, we ask for your prompt explanation of the following:

- *Experts agree that robust testing is key to safe reopening. Given how integral robust testing is to a safe re-opening, why are you beginning to reopen the state without a robust system in operation?*
- *What efforts are being undertaken by the state to develop a comprehensive COVID-19 testing plan as required by the Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act as discussed above? Please describe progress on each aspect of the plan as discussed above.*
- *Is it accurate that the state has no plans to hire additional contact tracers in the immediate future? If so, why not? Do you have plans in place to meet an increased need for inpatient hospital care, including intensive care, that could result from a spike in infection rate following reopening?*
- *What does the inventory of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) look like currently at health care facilities across the state? What actions are you taking to ensure that the supply of PPE is adequate to meet an increased demand as a result of more person-to-person contact and a potential spike in infection following reopening?*
- *What social distancing criteria for businesses reopening are you requiring, such as masks for clientele and employees and limitations on the number of customers in a business at one time? What guidance do you have for local governments on enforcement of social distancing criteria to keep people safe and ensure compliance?*
- *What guidance are you providing to local governments to enforce social distancing in public spaces, such as beaches, parks and public gathering places?*
- *Are you providing guidance to local governments on plans for supported isolation for individuals who test positive for COVID-19?*

Thank you for your prompt response to our questions and concerns.

Sincerely,