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CORONAVIRUS

# Florida to investigate all COVID-19 deaths after questions about 'integrity' of data

By MARC FREEMAN, ANDREW BORYGA and CINDY KRISCHER GOODMAN  
SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL | OCT 21, 2020



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Governor Ron DeSantis explains "problems" with COVID-19 data that is reported to the state.



Florida, which has reported the deaths of over 16,400 people from COVID-19, now says the public may not be able to trust any of those numbers.

The state Department of Health on Wednesday ordered an investigation of all pandemic fatalities, one week after House Speaker Jose Oliva slammed the death data from medical examiners as “often lacking in rigor” and undermining “the completeness and reliability of the death records.”

House Democrats then blasted the House Republicans' report as an insult to coronavirus victims and an attempt “to downplay the death toll.”

The political battle over COVID-19 death reporting — and now the new review — follows Gov. Ron DeSantis' push for a full reopening of the state's businesses and tourist attractions and a picture of the virus being so under control, Tampa should host a packed Super Bowl in early February.

Health officials on Wednesday announced that “fatality data reported to the state consistently presents confusion and warrants a more rigorous review.” The review is necessary to “ensure data integrity,” they said.

The state delayed the release of its daily coronavirus data about cases and deaths for over five hours because of the developing situation.

## **Scrutinizing the data**

In a news release, officials highlighted concerns about 95 deaths reported to the state on Tuesday.

The department said 16 of the deaths occurred more than two months after the person tested positive, and 11 people died more than a month ago.

And in five cases, there was a three-month gap between the time of infection and death.

Palm Beach County had 50 of the COVID-19 deaths in the latest report, which shattered the previous one-day record of 27 deaths reported Aug. 7.

The state says it just learned about an 85-year-old Palm Beach County woman who died Sept. 27 — 3½ months after she was diagnosed with COVID-19. In another case, an 87-year-old county woman died Oct. 1, more than three months after her positive test on June 25.

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The issue involves numerous other counties, such as the new report of a 58-year-old Miami-Dade woman who tested positive June 23 and died Oct. 6. There were no Broward irregularities listed.

These delays raise red flags that have to be examined, according to Florida Surgeon General Scott Rivkees.

“During a pandemic, the public must be able to rely on accurate public health data to make informed decisions,” Rivkees said in a statement. “To ensure the accuracy of COVID-19 related deaths, the Department will be performing additional reviews of all deaths. Timely and accurate data remains a top priority of the Department of Health.”

## **‘Is that a COVID death?’**

DeSantis spokesman Fred Piccolo Jr. told the South Florida Sun Sentinel on Wednesday that officials have been struggling to get timely data. He said they’ve been running into the issue of labs reporting on one day the results of positive tests from weeks before.

“That’s a problem,” he said because it makes it harder to spot trends. What is different about the deaths, is that the health department was finding people who were admitted as positive as far back as March or April and who passed away in August or September or October. “Is that a COVID death?”

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“It presented a new kind of red flag,” Piccolo said. He said there wasn’t ever such a large gap between someone testing positive for COVID and when they passed away.

He said he expects skepticism about Wednesday’s action.

“They think we manipulate the data and everything else,” Piccolo said. “But it’s really one of those things that you gotta know if someone is dying of COVID or if they’re not. Then you can legitimately say, here are the numbers.”

He said they realized that something was off in the numbers when they received Tuesday night’s data on Wednesday morning. He said when they looked into the data they were finding people who tested positive way back in the beginning of the pandemic but were listed as having died of COVID in October.

“It’s just a matter of making sure we’re cataloging things the right way,” he explained.

## Seeking timely figures

Local health officials said the state health department has asked them for weeks to work harder at reporting death data in a timely manner and make sure that COVID-19 is the actual cause of death, rather than a gunshot wound, car accident or other injury.

All deaths entered into the health data system are supposed to be reviewed by an epidemiologist to avoid errors. In most counties, the backlog in medical examiners

offices has been cleared, leading Rivkees to question on Wednesday why a COVID-19 death during the summer months would be reported now.

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Darren Caprara, director of operations at Miami Dade County Medical Examiner Office, said that as of Aug. 15, the state medical examiner's commission no longer made it their responsibility to certify COVID-19 deaths. He said they certify only deaths that come to their office from regular channels, such as a presumed homicide, a presumed accident or no primary care physician.

"Our COVID exposure, in terms of the number of cases that we are certifying, dropped drastically," Caprara said, adding they are no longer the "gate guard" from a medical examiner standpoint.

He said at this point, the people certifying COVID deaths in most cases are primary care providers.

Paul Petrino, operations manager for the Palm Beach County Medical Examiner's Office, said he is not sure whether primary care doctors might be taking longer than county medical examiner's offices to process COVID deaths.

"I can't account for the level of review that they are doing now," he said.

Petrino said a county medical examiner tends to process bodies quickly. "We have to complete death certificates and keep the process moving." He said he can't account for how timely other doctors are. "But I think, obviously, we are in the business of processing bodies that way."

He said he's wondering about the reporting delays. "I'm curious, too, what is broken in the system," Petrino said. "Especially in Palm Beach County where it stands out so much."



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Sen. Jose Javier Rodriguez, a Democrat, said the death data may not match the narrative that the governor wants to reflect — a portrait of COVID-19 being in the rearview mirror. But “there are ways to deal with the issues they are raising other than choosing to massage the information, which is very dangerous,” Rodriguez said.

If there is a delay in reporting death information, that still is no reason to discount the data, he said. “Because the data took as long as two months to arrive is not a reason not to report it,” said Rodriguez. “The only conclusion to draw is maybe the portal needs to be more robust.”

## The latest data

State health officials meanwhile reported 2,145 new cases of COVID-19 on Wednesday, which was down from Tuesday’s tally of 3,662 new infections.

[Since the coronavirus pandemic began](#), the state Department of Health has reported 762,534 people have tested positive for the highly contagious disease.

Also as of Wednesday, 16,210 residents and 203 non-residents have died from COVID-19 illness, according to the state figures that are now under scrutiny.

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Marc Freeman covers Palm Beach County criminal and civil courts for the Sun Sentinel. He previously wrote about K-12 education, local government, and consumer issues. Marc's work has also appeared in The Palm Beach Post, The Philadelphia Inquirer, and The Patriot-News.

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