

HOW MANY COVID-19 DEATHS IS RON DESANTIS HIDING?

I had been told a couple of days ago, either here in comments or on Twitter, that Ron DeSantis had put his cronies in charge of the Florida database for COVID-19 cases and deaths. I hadn't followed up on that, but then on Twitter last night i learned that the scientist who had been in charge of the site was fired back on May 1. She spoke last night with a West Palm Beach TV station which broke the blockbuster story of why she was fired:

Rebekah Jones said in an email to CBS12 News that her removal was "not voluntary" and that she was removed from her position because she was ordered to censor some data, but refused to "manually change data to drum up support for the plan to reopen."

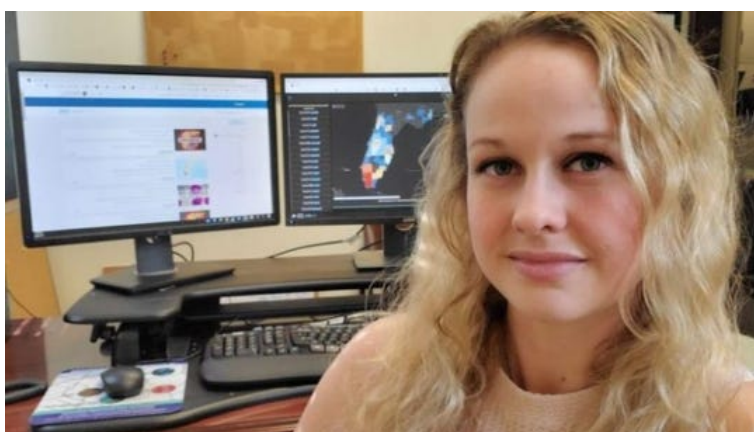
Jones made the announcement May 5 in a farewell email to researchers and other members of the public who had signed up to receive updates on the data portal, according to Florida Today. She said that for "reasons beyond my division's control," her office is no longer managing the dashboard, involved in its publication, fixing errors or answering any questions.

Wow. Note that DeSantis "reopened" Florida on May 4. So the timing here, coupled with Jones saying she was ordered to change or censor data, shows a clear intent by DeSantis to game the numbers and create the false impression that the reopening would be a success. Just how stupid can a governor be?

Well, in his case, pretty stupid. He can't even figure out how to wear a mask:

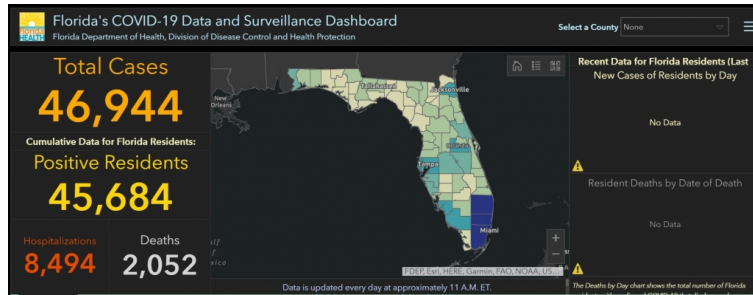


So who would trust this clown, compared to the scientist he fired? Here she is in a photo she supplied to Florida Today:



Near the end of the story filed last night, Jones notes that the Florida database still hasn't been repaired. Here's what I got when I checked at 1:40 this afternoon (refreshing 15 minutes later gave a plot for cases but not deaths, so there may be some "repair" work underway as I write this; and both plots were

visible at 2:50):



There are big holes where the plots of new cases by day and deaths by date of death for the last 30 days would show up. Back on May 5, when Jones talked to Florida Today about her firing (but without mentioning the orders to censor data), Jones noted that near the end of her time in the job, the database suddenly started to malfunction:

Late last Friday, the architect and manager of Florida's COVID-19 dashboard – praised by White House officials for its accessibility – announced that she had been removed from her post, causing outcry from independent researchers now worried about government censorship.

The dashboard has been a one-stop shop for researchers, the media and the public to access and download tables of COVID-19 cases, testing and death data to analyze freely. It had been widely hailed as a shining example of transparency and accessibility.

But over the last few weeks it had “crashed” and gone offline; data has gone missing without explanation and access to the underlying data sheets has become increasingly difficult.

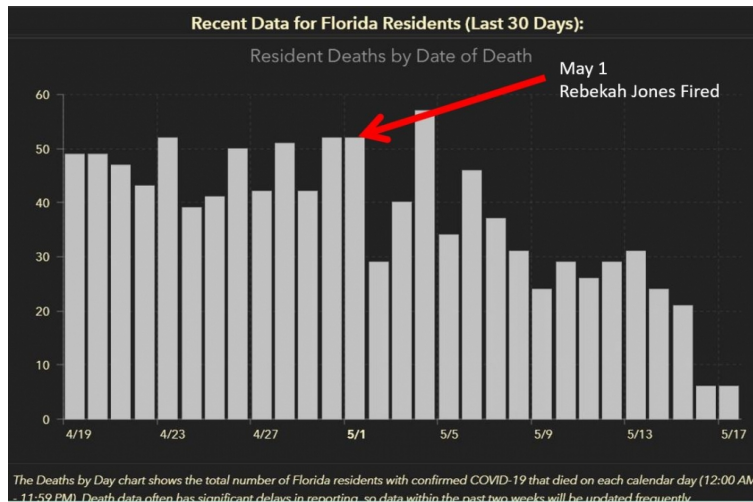
The site was created by a team of Florida Department of Health data scientists and public health officers headed

by Rebekah Jones. She announced last week her removal as of May 5 in a heartfelt farewell note emailed to researchers and other members of the public who had signed up to receive updates on the data portal.

Citing "reasons beyond my division's control," Jones said her office is no longer managing the dashboard, is no longer involved in publication, fixing errors or answering questions "in any shape or form."

Note that the story from the West Palm Beach TV station says Jones announced her firing on May 5, but this Florida Today story makes it clear she informed people on May 1 that she was being removed May 5. Since she speaks of the database malfunctioning at the time of her firing, for the purposes of discussion here I consider May 1 the firing date and the time when fuckstickery of the database began. With today being May 19, it's clear that the database has been malfunctioning for nearly three weeks at a minimum.

The big problem, though, is that the plot for deaths magically starts dropping right after Jones was fired. I captured this version of the death plot around 9 this morning and noted the date Jones was fired (did she insert a parting shot of a bit more reality on her last day of May 4?):



There should be one partial note of caution here even though it's really hard not to get the impression death numbers are being artificially reduced. There is a note on the death graph that I'm pretty sure popped up fairly recently and may well have been added around the time of Jones' departure. The note says that deaths are now counted on the day of death rather than on the day the report is entered into the database. Since it can take a while for deaths to be reported depending on the county involved, the last few days in the plot can be expected to show increases as more death reports get entered into the system. But it has been long enough now since Jones was removed for it to be clear that there is a discontinuity in the plot that coincides precisely with her removal.

I haven't included a plot of cases by day, but I also find the current data there (site is here) not believable. With the partial reopening of the state on May 4, it's simply incomprehensible that the number of new cases per day is holding steady rather than increasing.

Will DeSantis ever face consequences for this egregious breach of public trust? Odds aren't good. The Republican Party in Florida has a long tradition of doing whatever it pleases, rules and laws be damned. Just look at how they overruled the will of the people on the initiative overwhelmingly passed in 2018 to restore voting rights to felons who have served their sentences. It would seem that firing a scientist

because she refused to censor data and mislead the public on a life or death matter would be the end of a normal political career. But in Florida, there is no limit to how criminal Republican officeholders can be.