

POLICY BACKGROUND:

COVID-19

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Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, which [began in the United States](#) in February of 2020, it appeared Florida might be spared the worst of the outbreak, with fewer cases and deaths than many other parts of the country. The [first two cases were recorded](#) in the Tampa Bay area on March 1. Gov. Ron DeSantis [declared a limited public health emergency](#) the same day and a broader [state of emergency](#) on March 9.

On March 17, DeSantis [ordered](#) bars to stop selling alcohol for 30 days, ordered restaurants to serve patrons at half capacity and to limit parties to 10 or fewer people. The governor's order also required restaurants to prohibit employees from working if they were sick, or had recently been on a cruise ship or in an airport. Some local communities had closed beaches in their jurisdiction, but [DeSantis didn't want to close beaches statewide](#), reasoning that some areas of the state had seen very few cases, and that individuals or couples walking on the beach weren't a problem. His order did limit groups gathering to 10 people on beaches that were still open. Unfortunately for Florida, the pandemic arrived just before Spring Break.

Although some local jurisdictions did close beaches, the state came in for national criticism as pictures showed crowds of unmasked Spring Breakers [bunched together on beaches](#) as if nothing were different than any other year. DeSantis said the order shutting down bars and requiring social distancing on beaches would take care of the problem. "Spring break's done," he said of his order to limit gatherings on beaches to no more than 10 people. "They don't have a place to go."

Despite criticism of a lack of swift action at the state level, at a [coronavirus media briefing](#) on March 24, DeSantis continued to argue for "tailored approaches" rather than a blanket order for the state, again noting the disparate level of severity in the outbreak. But on April 1, DeSantis issued an [executive order](#) requiring that residents [avoid going out](#) except to obtain or provide certain essential services.

DeSantis [publicly bristled](#) under the tone of media coverage of his reaction to the virus, especially from the national media. From a numbers standpoint, Florida fared very well in the spring in comparison to other parts of the country, and DeSantis, on a number of

occasions, aggressively criticized the public health officials and doctors, editorial writers, politicians and others who had warned the state could face a much worse problem. DeSantis told reporters during an availability outside the White House, for example, “You got a lot of people in your profession who waxed poetically for weeks and weeks about how Florida was going to be just like New York. ‘Wait two weeks and Florida’s going to be just like Italy, wait two weeks.’ Well hell, we’re eight weeks away from that and it hasn’t happened ... Florida has the lower death rate, and I was the number one landing spot [for] tens of thousands of people leaving the number one hot zone in the world to come to my state so we succeeded and I think that people just don’t want to recognize it.”

DeSantis also blamed people from New York, which had been one of the worst hotspots in the early part of the outbreak, for spreading the disease in Florida. “You started having people flood out of New York City, including taking hundreds of flights from the New York City area, direct flights to the state of Florida,” DeSantis said in late March. “Those are the folks who should be staying home and sheltering in place. Instead, they’re seeding in different communities throughout the United States, including here in Florida.” The same day, DeSantis issued an [executive order](#) requiring people traveling to the state from the New York City area to quarantine for two weeks when coming to Florida, though there was no real enforcement mechanism.

The state’s case numbers in April continued to be low compared to elsewhere, and in late April, DeSantis again said the “doom and gloom” hadn’t come true as [he announced](#) he was lifting the stay-home order and easing restrictions on businesses in most of the state. In June, the [Republican National Convention announced](#) it would move most of its program from Charlotte, N.C., which had more coronavirus restrictions, including a mask mandate, to Jacksonville.

Starting around the same time, however, [cases were increasing](#), especially in South Florida, which continued to have restrictions after they’d been lifted in the rest of the state. The region continued to bear the brunt of Florida’s pandemic and by mid-September, Miami-Dade County had recorded more than 164,000 cases, second-most among U.S. counties behind only Los Angeles, Calif. Broward County also was in the Top 10 counties in the nation for cases. In late July, the [GOP convention](#)

activities in Jacksonville were [canceled](#) by President Donald Trump.

But as summer went on, case numbers dropped again and local governments and the state eventually lifted most restrictions in South Florida as well.

In the fall of 2020, as the nation began seeing a strong resurgence of the coronavirus in late October and into November, the number of cases also [began to increase in Florida](#), though not as dramatically as in some other parts of the country.

Opening of Schools

Over the summer, school districts and state officials debated whether to reopen schools for in-person learning. With school districts in Florida answering to independently elected boards, the counties started making their own plans for how to begin school in the fall.

In early July, Florida Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran surprised many local school officials when he issued [an emergency order](#) requiring districts to open all schools for five-day-a-week, in-person classroom instruction. The schools could continue to offer online learning options for families who wanted it, but the schools had to make in-person classroom learning available. [The order](#) had an out for counties if local health officials prohibited in-person gatherings, but made it clear the expectation was that schools would be open. Some counties opposed the idea. Hillsborough County's school board, for example, voted to begin the year with four weeks of online-only school. But the state said the county risked losing some state funding if it didn't follow Corcoran's directive, and eventually the county and state [reached a compromise](#), with the county's schools doing one week of online-only preparation for an in-person school year.

The state's teachers union, the Florida Education Association, and three school employees [sued the DeSantis administration](#) to try to block the Corcoran order, as did an Orange County teacher and parent. A district appeals court initially agreed with the FEA,

but after a series of legal decisions in the case, the result was that school districts had to reopen classrooms as the [legal wrangling continued](#) through the fall of 2020.

The 2021 Session

When lawmakers held their organizational session for the 2020-21 legislative cycle, new Senate President Wilton Simpson acknowledged in [his opening remarks](#) that trying to fund the budget essentials in a time of declining revenues – with tax collections down severely because of business shutdowns – would take up much of the Legislature’s time, even as the state continued to face an ongoing pandemic.

“Over the last several years, we voted many times to set aside money to prepare for a rainy day,” Simpson said. “Senators, it’s raining. In fact, it’s pouring.”

Simpson also told reporters after the organizational session that legislation related to protection against COVID-related lawsuits would likely be another pursuit during the 2021 session.

Speaker of the House Chris Sprowls announced that his chamber will be [implementing multiple measures](#) to help mitigate the risk of exposure to COVID-19 for those who will be at the Capitol. [The new protocols](#) include room sanitation, on-site testing, limited staff and an alternating meeting schedule for shorter committee weeks. The Senate said it would be [implementing similar protocols](#) as well in preparation for the 2021 interim committee weeks and the annual Legislative session.

COVID-19 Vaccine

Towards the end of 2020, coronavirus vaccines became accessible. Florida currently has two COVID-19 vaccines available: Pfizer BioNTech and Moderna. The former requires two shots, three weeks apart, and can be given to people 16 and older. The latter requires two shots, one month apart, and can’t be given to minors. According to the Centers for

Disease Control, the two available vaccines are not interchangeable and neither [contain the live virus](#).

Gov. Ron DeSantis began initiating a [vaccine distribution plan](#) that prioritizes the state's most vulnerable population, in addition to front-line health care workers. He signed an [executive order](#) mandating that people 65 and older be placed in Florida's first vaccine priority group.

Additional Resources

[Florida Department of Health COVID Vaccine Page](#)

Recent News

["COVID-19 in Florida: Hospitalizations up 43% in Three Weeks,"](#) Sun Sentinel, 11-9-2020

["COVID-19 slashes Florida tourism numbers,"](#) News Service of Florida, 6-2-2020

[Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis issues statewide stay-at-home order,"](#) Miami Herald/Tampa Bay Times, 4-1-2020

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