

States Curtail Reporting Amid Surge

BY JOSH FUNK – *The Advocate* – July 25, 2021

OMAHA, Neb.- Several states scaled back their reporting of COVID-19 statistics this month as cases across the country started to skyrocket, depriving the public of real-time information on outbreaks, cases, hospitalizations and deaths in their communities.

The shift to weekly instead of daily reporting in Florida, Nebraska, Iowa and South Dakota marked a notable shift during a pandemic in which coronavirus dashboards have become a staple for Americans closely tracking case counts and trends to navigate a crisis that has killed more than 600,000 people in the U.S.

In Nebraska, the state actually stopped reporting on the virus altogether for two weeks after Gov. Pete Ricketts declared an end to the official virus emergency, forcing news reporters to file public records requests or turn to national websites that track state data to learn about COVID statistics. The state backtracked two weeks later and came up with a weekly site that provides some basic numbers.

Other governments have gone the other direction and released more information, with Washington, D.C., this week adding a dashboard on breakthrough cases to show the number of residents who contracted the virus after getting vaccines. Many states have recently gone to reporting virus numbers only on weekdays. When Florida changed the frequency of its virus reporting earlier this month, officials said it made sense given the decreasing number of cases and the increasing number of people being vaccinated.

Cases started soaring soon after, and Florida earlier this week made up one-fifth of the country's new coronavirus infections. As a result, Florida's weekly releases - typically done on Friday afternoons have consequences for the country's understanding of the current summer surge, with no statewide COVID stats coming out of the virus hot spot for six days a week.

In Florida's last two weekly reports, the number of new cases shot up from 23,000 to 45,000 and then 73,000 on Friday, an average of more than 10,000 day. Hospitals are starting to run out of space in parts of the state.

With cases rising, Democrats and other critics have urged state officials and Gov. Ron DeSantis to resume daily outbreak updates.

"There was absolutely no reason to eliminate the daily updates beyond an effort to pretend like there are no updates," said state Rep. Anna Eskamani, a Democrat from the Orlando area.

The trend of reducing data reporting has alarmed infectious disease specialists who believe that more information is better during a pandemic. People have come to rely on state virus dashboards to help make decisions about whether to attend large gatherings or wear masks in public, and understanding the level of risk in the community affects how people respond to virus restrictions and calls to get vaccinated.

"We know that showing the data to others actually is important because the actions that businesses take, the actions that schools take, the actions that civic leaders take, the actions that community leaders

take, the actions that each of us individually take are all influenced by our perception of what the risk is out there," said Dr. Kirsten Bibbins- Domingo, who leads the department of epidemiology and biostatistics at the University of California, San Francisco.

But reporting the numbers on a weekly basis still allows people to see the overall trends while smoothing out some of the day-to-day variations that come from the way cases are reported and not the actual number of new cases. And experts have long advised that it makes sense to pay more attention to the seven-day rolling average of new cases because the numbers can vary widely from one day to the next.

And Florida health officials say that they have not curtailed the sharing of data with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Maintaining daily updates on the virus does require significant resources for states. For instance, Kansas went to reporting virus numbers three times a week in May because the state health department said providing daily statistics consumed too much time for its already overwhelmed staff.

In Nebraska, officials decided that continuing to update the virus dashboard daily wasn't the best use of state resources now partly because there had been a steady decline in the number of views of the website indicating less interest in the numbers, spokesperson Olga Dack said. The state could return to providing daily updates if the governor's office decided that was needed, she said.