



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES  
COMMISSIONER NICOLE “NIKKI” FRIED

THE CAPITOL

December 28, 2021

The Honorable Ron DeSantis  
Governor  
The Capitol  
400 South Monroe Street  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Governor DeSantis,

As you may know, COVID-19 is once again surging throughout Florida, fueled by the omicron variant’s increased transmissibility and inadequate state public health response. Florida currently has the nation’s worst new case percentage among states – up 1,051 percent over the past two weeks – as well as the second-highest total of new cases, breaking records for daily new cases twice this week.

The dramatic increase in cases threatens to create avoidable crises of testing shortfalls and needless risks to seniors and children, our most vulnerable residents. By taking long-overdue action now, we can mitigate and even prevent further harm as this pandemic evolves.

Omicron is spurring massive demand for COVID-19 testing, resulting in long lines, hours-long waits, and test shortages in parts of Florida. In Miami, lines for testing are backing up local traffic, with locations running out of COVID-19 tests and police cutting off lines. In Orlando, hundreds waited in the dark before testing capacity was reached by mid-day. In Tampa, lines are stretched around buildings, pharmacies are fully booked for testing, and at-home COVID-19 tests are sold out, while area hospitals are reporting a four-fold surge in COVID-19 hospitalizations.

Meanwhile, Florida is the third-worst state in percentage of nursing home residents having received COVID-19 booster doses, with our state’s 38 percent rate lagging far behind the national average of 55 percent. Just 17 percent of Florida nursing home staff have received their booster shot, also well behind the national average. Even before omicron’s emergence, Florida led the nation in nursing home resident and staff COVID-19 deaths. This presents an emergent health threat to our most vulnerable senior citizens who have borne the brunt of this pandemic.

At the same time, millions of Florida children will return to school within two weeks. With common-sense measures, from required face coverings to frequent disinfecting, in place during less transmissible COVID-19 variants, school districts will need to re-evaluate their plans and policies to ensure students, teachers, and school staff are safe in the classroom.

Despite your recent assertion that you “don’t think there’s any evidence” that testing “has done very much to interrupt” the spread of the virus, health experts agree that testing is crucial. While President Biden is doing his part by securing 500 million free at-home rapid COVID-19 testing kits for Americans, he was also clear that “this gets solved at a state level.” Governors across the nation are being called upon to meet the urgency of this moment and redouble their efforts to fight this virus, and your fellow governors, both Republican and Democrat, are stepping up to the challenge.

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I am calling on you to immediately mobilize additional state-run COVID-19 testing facilities across Florida, to protect Florida's seniors in nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and senior living facilities by swiftly increasing the administration of booster shots to residents and staff, and to empower Florida school districts to take all reasonable measures to keep kids and teachers safe at school.

Your administration must specifically put plans in place to help local governments stand up COVID-19 testing and vaccination sites, and to help school districts provide a safe learning environment for vulnerable students, such as those with disabilities or who cannot be vaccinated. I am also calling on you to empower your Division of Emergency Management, as our state's experts in disaster preparedness, to coordinate and respond as needed to this public health crisis.

We cannot continue to burden Floridians with unnecessarily long lines and frustration, and risk the health and lives of our most vulnerable citizens, due to inaction and political ideology.

Regards,



Nicole Fried  
Commissioner of Agriculture

cc: Kevin Guthrie, Director, Florida Division of Emergency Management