

Congress of the United States  
Washington, DC 20515

March 11, 2021

The Honorable Merrick Garland, Attorney General  
United States Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20530

Dear Attorney General Garland,

As Members of the Florida Congressional Delegation, we offer enthusiastic congratulations on your successful Senate confirmation. We look forward to your service to America as the People's Lawyer. It is in that vein that we write with urgent concern about consistent reporting that Florida Governor Ron DeSantis is establishing coronavirus vaccine distribution and administration sites in select locations to benefit political allies and donors, over the needs of higher risk communities and existing county waitlists. Prioritizing political donors for government resource distribution raises ethical and legal concerns on its face, but given the severity of the stakes – literal life and death – we request that the Department of Justice immediately review the well-documented reporting alleging what we, as Representatives of those being left behind, believe to be blatant, politically motivated vaccine distribution decisions made by the Governor.

The Department of Justice was made aware on February 21 about a “pop-up” vaccination site set up by Governor DeSantis in Lakewood Ranch in Manatee County. The pop-up site allowed residents in ZIP codes with the highest income and lowest infection rates in the county to jump ahead of the line established by a county-administered, randomized lottery. Disturbingly, wealthy contributors to the Governor's campaign have direct ties to the affluent development<sup>1</sup>. Since then, reporters across our state have uncovered additional pop-up sites that strongly suggest trading official acts for campaign contributions. In one instance, the exclusive, secure Key Largo enclave of Ocean Reef Club received its own pop-up vaccination site in January, long before seniors in the rest of the state<sup>2</sup>. Following the trail of early, exclusive access to vaccines, records show that an Ocean Reef resident gave a \$250,000 contribution to the Governor's campaign<sup>3</sup>. In another instance, the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* reports that a developer and significant contributor to Governor DeSantis was contacted by the Governor directly about setting up a pop-up clinic in two communities he developed: Grand Palm, a luxury community with lavish amenities,<sup>4</sup> and Boca Royale, a gated country club with high property values<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan Callihan and Jessica De Leon. “Well-off Manatee residents get special vaccine access, courtesy of DeSantis.” *Tampa Bay Times*. February 17, 2021. <https://www.tampabay.com/news/florida-politics/2021/02/17/well-off-manatee-residents-get-special-vaccine-access-courtesy-of-desantis/>

<sup>2</sup> David Fleshler and Skyler Swisher. “Hospital System contradicts DeSantis on COVID vaccine delivery to luxury Keys enclave.” *Sun Sentinel*. March 5, 2021. <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/coronavirus/vaccines/fl-ne-ocean-reef-baptist-health-vaccines-ss-prem-20210306-6sbx345w5jqbjbyhy24c4iku-story.html>

<sup>3</sup> David Goodhue and Mary Ellen Klas. “Wealthy Keys enclave received COVID vaccines in January before much of the state.” *Miami Herald*. March 5, 2021. <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/florida-keys/article249666463.html>

<sup>4</sup> Zac Anderson. “Another upscale Florida community got special vaccine access; this one has a splash park.” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*. February 24, 2021. <https://www.heraldtribune.com/story/news/politics/2021/02/24/grand-palm-community-venice-received-special-coronavirus-vaccine-access/4574349001/>

<sup>5</sup> Zac Anderson. “Sarasota County community with million-dollar homes got special vaccine access.” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*. February 23, 2021. <https://www.heraldtribune.com/story/news/politics/2021/02/23/emails-show-how-upscale-sarasota-county-community-got-special-vaccine-access/4541248001/>

Given the Governor’s own admission that he does not have a comprehensive strategy for distributing vaccines, Floridians deserve transparency on how the decisions for pop-up vaccination sites are being made. Texts messages between a DeSantis-allied county commissioner and a large DeSantis donor before the Lakewood Ranch pop-up was established<sup>6</sup> seem to indicate that politics and campaign donor influence are trumping the public health needs of our state. Given the Governor’s threat to withhold vaccines from those who criticize his actions<sup>7</sup>, it is reasonable to believe that more wealthy, politically connected neighborhoods have been prioritized than what has been reported to date.

Over 10,000 Floridians have died from COVID-19 since our state began vaccinating our residents at the beginning of the year. Considering the enormous latitude governors have over vaccine distribution, it is no exaggeration to say that these decisions are life and death. If politics and quid pro quo are factoring into Governor DeSantis’ vaccine strategy – as it appears to be – it would be an unspeakable abuse of power and possibly a violation of federal law. We appreciate your full attention to these concerns, and we are confident that upon review, the Department will be able to determine whether the allegations merit a full investigation.

Sincerely,

Charlie Crist  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Alcee L. Hastings  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Debbie Wasserman Schultz  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Kathy Castor  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Ted Deutch  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Frederica S. Wilson  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Lois Frankel  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Val Demings  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Al Lawson  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Stephanie Murphy  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

Darren Soto  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

CC: The Honorable Christopher Wray, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation

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<sup>6</sup> Jessica De Leon and Mary Ellen Klas. “DeSantis’ political fortunes a focus of Manatee vaccine event, texts show.” *Tampa Bay Times*. March 10, 2021. <https://www.tampabay.com/news/florida-politics/2021/03/09/desantis-political-fortunes-a-focus-of-manatee-vaccine-event-texts-show/>

<sup>7</sup> Ryan Callihan. “DeSantis threatens to divert vaccines from Manatee after backlash on access.” *Tampa Bay Times*. February 17, 2021. <https://www.tampabay.com/news/florida-politics/2021/02/17/desantis-threatens-to-divert-vaccines-from-manatee-after-backlash-on-access/>