

# FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SETS THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON FALSE DATA CLAIMS BY THE MIAMI HERALD



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**TALLAHASSEE, Fla.** – Today, the Miami Herald published an article riddled with contradictions and false claims – specifically in regards to their [front page headline](#): *“Florida changed its COVID-19 data, creating an ‘artificial decline’ in recent deaths.”*

The Miami Herald also published a misleading [article](#) on Friday, August 27, stating: *“It is the largest single-day increase to the death total in the state’s COVID pandemic history... The jump in the number of reported cases and deaths is due to the newest way deaths and cases are counted. The CDC implemented the change earlier this month, causing occasional one-day aberrations like the 901 additional deaths on Thursday and 726 more deaths reported Monday.”*

These narratives surrounding “artificial decline” and “jump” contradict one another, are patently false, and have zero credibility. The Department of Health welcomes the opportunity to highlight these contradictions and falsehoods. COVID-19, and public health in general, should never be politicized. Publications like the Miami Herald have a duty to their readers, and to all Floridians, to report on the pandemic in a factual and objective manner.

## Myths vs. Facts

**Myth:** *“Florida changed its COVID-19 data, creating an ‘artificial decline’ in recent deaths”*

**Fact:** This is completely incorrect and misleads the public. Florida reports COVID-19 deaths by date of death for precision, accuracy, and transparency in public communications. As stated in the article itself from an epidemiologist:

*“Deaths by date of death curve is **the most accurate** you can get,” Salemi said. “You know exactly when people died, you know how to construct the curve and exactly when we were experiencing surges in terms of deaths.”*

Updating already provisional data does not create an “artificial decline,” nor does it distort the data. These are the deaths as they occurred by date. The fact that these data are provisional is made clear by both DOH reports and the data displayed by the CDC. This ensures that the most accurate data are provided to the public. As the Miami Herald article reported, many other states report COVID-19 deaths the same way Florida does.

This month, the Department worked to develop a procedural improvement with CDC to ensure the most accurate data is consistently provided to the public. The Department has reported deaths by date of death to the CDC since March. This information comes from numerous sources, including labs, medical examiners, hospitals, and physicians. All deaths are required to be filed with the Department’s Bureau of Vital Statistics to ensure verification and accuracy. This reporting process is epidemiologically sound and is not unique to COVID-19.

**Myth:** *“The change came the day after the state health department’s official Twitter account posted [a series of late-night tweets](#) accusing the CDC of publishing incorrect numbers, but offering little explanation.*

*“The health department did not acknowledge the subsequent change in the data structure or its abrupt onset, leaving the public scrambling for answers as more than a year’s worth of data changed from one day to the next....*

*“At first, the data on the CDC website was updated in a largely predictable manner, similar to the way that the DOH had reported daily changes throughout the pandemic. Then on Aug. 10, without warning or any explanation from the health department or the CDC, the data for nearly every day of the previous year changed. Neither agency immediately explained the changes.”*

**Fact:** DOH provided multiple reporters, including those involved in recently published news stories, statements explaining this process, and provided clarity on Twitter – the same medium on which this misinformation was perpetuated.

From: Khoury, Weesam  
Sent: Monday, August 30, 2021 11:15 AM  
To: Chacin, Ana Claudia <schacin@miamiherald.com>  
Cc: slskesey@miamiherald.com  
Subject: RE: Comment needed- Miami Herald/el Nuevo Herald

Ana –

I am not sure what you're referring to when you say we have not provided definitions. Not only do we have definitions on the last page of our weekly report, but the CDC has their own footnotes to provide clarity on their display of this reported data. We have no control over the way the CDC displays or contextualizes data.

To proactively ensure accurate data are consistently displayed, the Department submits daily death data Monday through Friday to CDC, including retrospective COVID-19 data. This ensures that continuous epidemiological analyses provide the most updated data to the public.

The 901 deaths reported by the Miami Herald August 26, 2021 are the total number of deaths reported to the Department on Monday – Wednesday of this week (8/23/21 – 8/25/21). It is not a single day record because it is multiple days of reported data that occurred over the course of two or more weeks, and includes deaths that occurred previously.

Due to inherent delays in deaths being reported to the Department, the previous 14 days may be incomplete and are updated over time. The Department reports deaths by date of death to the CDC upon notification to the Department. The process for reporting deaths to CDC's National Center for Health Statistics is a nationwide process.

The CDC has started displaying the Department's submitted retrospective file twice a week on Mondays and Thursdays, which updates previous day deaths that were subsequently reported to the Department.

Data are provisional, and as the Department conducts daily data analyses, Florida data displayed on the CDC website may change slightly as retrospective data is provided.

Hope this helps.

Weesam Khoury  
Communications Director  
Florida Dept. of Health

From: Chacin, Ana Claudia <schacin@miamiherald.com>  
Sent: Monday, August 30, 2021 9:45 AM  
To: Khoury, Weesam <Weesam.Khoury@flhealth.gov>  
Cc: slskesey@miamiherald.com  
Subject: Comment needed- Miami Herald/el Nuevo Herald

EXTERNAL EMAIL: DO NOT CLICK links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Hi Ms. Khoury,

I hope this email finds you well.

On behalf of the Miami Herald and el Nuevo Herald, I am requesting a statement from the Department of Health regarding the changes made to the way DOH reports COVID-19 data that the CDC then presents to the public. Why does this new form of presenting data make it look like deaths are decreasing, and don't appear to have a proper disclaimer?

Epidemiologists we've spoken with have said it is important to be transparent about definitions and any changes made. In that light, why hasn't DOH responded to Herald questions about data definitions regarding data reported to the CDC?

We are on deadline and need a response by 5pm today.

Thanks for your time.

From: Khoury, Weesam  
Sent: Wednesday, August 11, 2021 10:40 PM  
To: dcetoute@miamiherald.com  
Cc: Media@flhealth.gov; Strickland, Katie <Katie.Strickland@flhealth.gov>; Fenske, Taryn M. <Taryn.M.Fenske@flhealth.gov>  
Subject: RE: Media: Statement on CDC Number changes

Devoun –

The Governor's office passed along your inquiry. Happy to provide some context.

Prior COVID-19 reporting protocols included case data submissions to CDC Monday through Friday. This was per guidance they issued on June 18, 2021. As such, data from Friday, Saturday and Sunday were reported on Mondays. This resulted in some weekends being inaccurately displayed on the CDC website, which occurred this past Monday.

As a result of data discrepancies that have occurred, this week, FDOH worked quickly and efficiently with CDC to ensure accurate display of data on their website the same day. The data was updated Tuesday afternoon.

To proactively ensure accurate data is consistently displayed, the Department will begin daily submission of a complete renewed set of case data to CDC, including retrospective COVID-19 cases. This will ensure that continuous epidemiological analyses provide the most updated data to the public.

Data is provisional, and as the Department conducts daily data analyses, Florida data displayed on the CDC website may change slightly as data is provided.

Thanks.

Weesam Khoury  
Communications Director  
Florida Dept. of Health

From: Cetoute, Devoun <dcetoute@miamiherald.com>  
Sent: Tuesday, August 10, 2021 8:30 PM  
To: Khoury, Weesam <Weesam.Khoury@flhealth.gov>; Media <Media@flhealth.gov>  
Subject: Media: Statement on CDC Number changes

Hello,

This is Devoun Cetoute with the Miami Herald. I wanted to know what statements were given out regarding the changes to numbers given and counted by the CDC. I see the Sun Sentinel reporting this:

"The changes reflect adjustments based on accounts of when cases or deaths occurred rather than when they were reported to the state, according to CDC and Florida DOH statements. Ultimately, though, the changes do not reflect a more favorable picture of the course of the pandemic in Florida; the sharp peaks and dips have been flattened, but the cumulative counts are the same or higher."

Wondering where this info is coming from? Have CDC changed case and death numbers since March 2020? Was this because the FDOH directed them too?

Several of my colleagues have also emailed asking similar and other questions around all this. Do you have answers to those? Michelle Marchante, is one for example.

Hope to hear from you soon,

**Myth:** *"The Herald also found that during the last two surges the trend lines using date of death showed peaks 25% and 8% percent higher respectively than the corresponding peaks by report date."*

**Fact:** Miami Herald admits there are fluctuations, both increasing and decreasing. This contradicts their own misleading narrative claiming "distorted and artificial declines."

**Myth:** *"The DOH weekly report notes "death counts include individuals who meet a standardized national surveillance case definition" but includes no descriptions of how the health department presents the numbers."*

**Fact:** This is not true. Please reference the clearly labeled chart available on every report.

## COVID-19 Weekly Situation Report: Death Overview

Previous week (August 20, 2021 - August 26, 2021)



2021 deaths by week of death (43,979 deaths)



**Myth:** *“When numbers are presented in a flattering light, an expert will generally be able to see through the dazzle quite quickly,” Harford said. “That said, I still think the truthful-yet-deceptive framing of numbers is a serious problem.*

*“When data are subtly distorted or presented differently than expected — something Harford called “statistical sleight of hand” — it can prompt dangerous levels of general mistrust and cynicism, he said.”*

**Fact:** Epidemiologists do not rely on “flattery,” and this disregards the hard work of thousands of public health professionals that have worked around the clock for over 500 days. The data are the data.

As many epidemiologists and informed health professionals would know, there is an inherent lag when deaths are reported to the Department from external sources. That is why relying on date of death, rather than date reported, is the most accurate representation of COVID-19 trends and surveillance. Again, to reiterate:

*“Deaths by date of death curve is **the most accurate** you can get,” Salemi said. “You know exactly when people died, you know how to construct the curve and exactly when we were experiencing surges in terms of deaths.”*

### About the Florida Department of Health

The Florida Department of Health, nationally accredited by the [Public Health Accreditation Board](#), works to protect, promote and improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county and community efforts.

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