

DeSantis and Florida Republicans support lawsuit against Gainesville employee vaccine mandate

More than 200 people involved in filing the lawsuit gathered at Clark Plantation Wedding Venue in Newberry Monday



Gov. Ron DeSantis speaks to a crowd of over 200 involved in a lawsuit filed

against the City of Gainesville for mandating vaccines for city employees at Clark Plantation Wedding Venue in Newberry, Florida, on Monday, Sept. 13, 2021.

Photo by [Alan Halaly](#) | The Independent Florida Alligator

Hundreds of cars lined up in both directions on Southwest 202 Street in Newberry. The drivers, anxious in their seats, waited their turn as the event organizers ushered them into Clark Plantation Venue the morning of Sept. 13.

The crowd of more than 200 Gainesville city employees and their families made its way into a decorated barn where Gov. Ron DeSantis, Rep. Kat Cammack, Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody and more government representatives were scheduled to speak in support of their lawsuit attempting to reverse



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[Gainesville's vaccine mandate](#) for city employees.

Mostly maskless attendees donning "Make America Great Again" hats and shirts branded with Gainesville's local agencies, carried signs that read "No more medical tyranny," "Help! Save us from our Mayor & School Board!" and "Thankful for our great governor."

Gainesville attorney Jeff Childers, who is representing the city employees against the mandate, said he was honored to see so many politicians support the case.

"My clients finally saw that somebody cares," Childers said. "Somebody in government is paying attention to what's happening to them. They're not alone, they're not abandoned and they're being heard."

While the plaintiffs, many of whom are city government employees and first responders, are fighting the city's vaccine mandate, the governor is also fighting [President Biden's vaccine mandate](#).

DeSantis does not agree with the idea of approving a [mandate that exempts](#) part of the [federal workforce, members of Congress and the staff of Congress](#).

"When I was in Congress, I proposed the 28th Amendment: Congress shouldn't make any law that doesn't apply to them," DeSantis said.

Threatening people's jobs over this issue is fundamentally wrong, he added.

Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody also expressed her support for the lawsuit. As a career-long law enforcement officer, she said the city's decision was unacceptable.

"This is about, very simply, how much power our government officials have when we have never given them that power," Moody said. "Now you have city officials saying they're going to fire employees if they don't take a backseat. It is unlawful."

Cammack, who represents District 3, said she knows firsthand what goes into the daily life of a first responder family. Cammack's husband, Matthew Harrison, is a SWAT medic and firefighter and paramedic at Gainesville Fire Rescue. While she said he chose to be vaccinated, she ultimately believes the choice for city employees should be an individual's own choice.

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Vaccine mandates, she said, don't align with core American values of liberty and freedom.

"I don't know about you," Cammack said, "But I don't know where in the Constitution the government's power over one's personal health decisions can be found."

Christina Ludovici-Benck, a 43-year-old Alachua County resident, held up a sign that read "Biden's COVID-19 politics killed my mother! #JusticeForRita" while standing a few feet away from the crowd that surrounded the politicians.

Ludovici-Benck said her mother was refused a monoclonal antibody treatment — a protein that mimics the immune system's ability to fight off harmful antigens such as viruses — due to not meeting [the requirements](#). Her mother died at [North Florida Regional Medical Center](#) two weeks ago due to COVID-19 complications.

"I can't bring her back, but I just hate that she didn't have access to what was available," she said. "They're pushing the vaccine, and people are dying because they don't have alternatives to it. Not everybody can take the vaccine."

Nicole Winningham, a 36-year-old Alachua County resident, held up a sign that read "Choosing between a job that feeds my children and my religious and medical freedom is not the land of the free" on one side and "Fire wives against mandates" on the other.

"As was reiterated multiple times during this rally, this is not

anything to do with vaccines," she said. "[But it's] absolutely against mandates that take away our freedom to choose what's best for us."

Her husband, Alachua County Fire Rescue Lt. Chad Winningham, was named [Firefighter of the Year](#) for 2019 for Gainesville's Sunrise Rotary Club in 2020. He may be let go from the force if he doesn't comply with the mandate.

"He was considered the best last year and now is ready to be terminated for doing the exact same job he's been doing the whole time," Winningham said. "That's unacceptable and illegal."

Zefnia Durham, a 54-year-old Alachua County resident and the president of the Gainesville Amalgamated Transit Union, said he approves of mask mandates, but believes people should have a choice when it comes to vaccines.

"I still think people should have a choice of what they put in their body ... especially if it has been tested for less than a year and you don't know about any long, lingering effects," Durham said.

But some city leaders like Gainesville Mayor Lauren Poe, don't approve of the governor's stance.

Poe said he's disappointed about the message that came out of DeSantis' press conference and is worried about

misinforming the public.

"It's simply not helpful to have folks out there spreading misinformation about the effectiveness of vaccines. It's actually deadly to do that," Poe said. "Our responsibility is to protect the health, safety and well-being of each one of our city employees ... and protect the people that they serve, that we serve."

Contact Jiselle Lee at jlee@alligator.org or follow her on Twitter [@jiselle_lee](https://twitter.com/jiselle_lee).

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Jiselle Lee is a freshman journalism student and a news assistant for the Independent Alligator. She loves trying new restaurants around Gainesville in her free time.