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# Fred Ordoñez: In her rush to reopen, Governor Raimondo puts the poor and people of color at risk



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By Fred Ordoñez





*“Right now, if a person’s workplace is considered essential or reopens, they cannot stay home and refuse to work and still collect unemployment, because if they do they lose their benefits. They, their families and communities face either starvation or exposure, and too often death. This is not a choice.”*

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My name is Fred Ordoñez and currently I am a Commissioner on the Commission on Health Advocacy and Equity (CHAE) created in 2011 to advise the Governor, the General Assembly, and the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) of racial, ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic health disparities in Rhode Island. Among other policies, we have been discussing interventions to help marginalized communities that have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

Last week we were asked by an official from Governor Gina Raimondo's office to help provide ideas on how to “re-open the economy” in an equitable manner, as if forcing people to their potential deaths can somehow be done equitably. The Commission plans on communicating some polite suggestions, so I will probably be dismissed from the Commission for my following statement, but it needs to be said.

There are some indisputable facts in this moment. Countries that have been able to successfully survive this pandemic have implemented the policies that scientists and medical professionals all agree are absolutely necessary: national shutdowns/quarantines that slow the curve of the spread and give time to set up testing and tracing systems, setting up systems of mass testing of their general populations (testing everyone, not just the symptomatic), free effective personal protective equipment (PPE), testing all people that could not stay in their homes (such as essential workers), checkpoints with mandatory testing and temperature checks, sorting the infected from the non-infected, and tracing down all contacts of those possibly infected. And most importantly, not relaxing their national quarantines or “re-opening their economies” until these systems had been in place long enough to not risk further spread.

In Rhode Island we have yet to even start testing everyone, we are still only testing people by appointment if they have symptoms, we are nowhere near ready with the first system – setting up the testing we need – never mind having all the systems in place long enough to prevent the spread. Though our curve is currently flattening, it only means that our hospitals are currently able to keep up with new cases; we have only delayed the contagion, slowed its process, but not stopped it by any means. To ease restrictions now is to guarantee more preventable deaths.

The other fact is, people of color in Rhode Island are disproportionately infected with COVID-19. This serious racial disparity with COVID-19 is not due to ignorance of safety suggestions and the need for their translations, but rather the structural racism which keeps black and brown people part of the working poor and struggling for safe housing and basic services. They are the service,

factory, restaurant, warehouse, food market, and low wage employees, considered “essential” – which is code for “disposable.” People with this essential designation are forced to work because they cannot collect unemployment and/or stay home like the rest of us. While many of us are able to stay home and order our groceries from Whole Foods, most black and brown folks cannot afford that privilege.

Working right now could be a life or death situation, and a decision that many of us are being forced to make on behalf of our families and communities. If some people want to take that risk, it should be their choice. Right now, if a person’s workplace is considered essential or reopens, they cannot stay home and refuse to work and still collect unemployment, because if they do they lose their benefits. They, their families and communities face either starvation or exposure, and too often death. This is not a choice.

Too many “essential workers” that we applaud on social media are actually just poor individuals trapped into risking their lives and dying for our privilege to stay home. We cannot continue to keep poor people and people of color trapped into continuing to expose and infect themselves, their families and communities.

Governor Raimondo can easily change state unemployment laws for the duration of this pandemic. Rhode Island unemployment law could be changed so employees of these businesses, who do not want to risk exposure to COVID-19, can choose not to work and still collect unemployment. Then it would be a humane choice. Anything less than this is sickening immorality.

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Lockdown protestors are choosing to expose themselves. The science says that elected leaders need to risk their popularity and force their populations to quarantine, even if they don’t want to, because all people can spread COVID-19 beyond their circles. These protestors are making a

conscious choice. During this pandemic, poverty and structural racism should not be why some people don't have a choice at all. We have yet to learn the greatest lesson the world is learning: that we are all interconnected, that our health is dependent on others' health. Forcing poor people and people of color to their potential deaths is unconscionable.

I can't understand why officials, scientists, and medical professionals in Rhode Island are not speaking out publicly against this move to "reopen the economy" before we have mass testing and tracing, when the science and experience across the world have proven that it is absolutely necessary. This science doesn't change from border to border.

Trump and governors in Red States are willing to sacrifice a percentage of our population. Why are we willing to let our Governor do the same thing?

Yes, she is smarter and more skillful, and has done a great public relations job so far, but actions speak way louder than words. We still don't have mass and constant testing and free effective PPE in this state. We only have workplace closings and a stay at home directive, ending these now is a callous and calculated decision. While other governors are blunt and say idiotic things, our Governor is taking the exact same actions, only with the savviness to control the state's messaging and control those state public health bureaucrats that should object.

This method of operation is not new when it comes to people of color in Rhode Island. Governor Raimondo is smart enough to hire people who can speak the language of inclusion and racial equity but at the same time oppress people of color with a facade of consideration. For example, during her first election campaign she promised the Latino community an Executive Order to reinstate the ability for undocumented immigrants to get driver licenses. Since then her only response has been to wash her hands of the issue and pawn it off on the General Assembly, even though Governor Carcieri took driver's licenses away from undocumented residents without action from the General Assembly. She keeps saying that she legally can't do it through an Executive Order, which is not true- It's just a matter of political will – and all the while she has managed to keep most Latino officials and bureaucrats supporting her every move. This slickness may help her political career but during this emergency we cannot stand by and allow her to cause unnecessary deaths. This is not the time for neoliberal games. Given that a large proportion of people of color have these low-wage jobs and are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, forcing more of these individuals back to work is exasperating structural racism at best and is racial cleansing in effect.

It is alarming that governors across the states are considering lifting distancing restrictions in the middle of this pandemic. Although Rhode Island has suffered many preventable deaths because of the federal administration's greed and incompetence, there is no reason to make local matters worse. Any local deaths due to local policies should come with eventual accountability, including charges of negligent homicide and wrongful death lawsuits. If the current political and economic pressure to ease restrictions before mass and constant testing, and contact tracing is not ignored,

we will be dealing with a much worse situation later. As with everything in public health, prevention is key.

I will not be polite even if the rest of the CHAE Commission wants to tread lightly and sugarcoat this grave reality. Months from now, when poor people and people of color in Rhode Island suffer the cascading consequences of this decision, the Governor and other state bureaucrats will try and say they made the best decision they thought at this time and there were no public health officials that said otherwise or politicians that pushed back. Well, here is one whose objections will be recorded so that we can eventually have some accountability.

For those of you who have a less pessimistic view of our current Governor, please try and appeal to her. From my experience I know how she operates and know this political decision is a forgone conclusion and any “listening sessions” with people of color or community groups will just be used as public relations to support her actions.

I know we are all frustrated and wish things were a little bit more normal again. The summer is here and we all wish it was over. Other countries are getting past it but only after months of mass testing of their populations, setting up systems of checkpoints, tracing down all infections, sorting out those who are infected and much stricter and national quarantines. We haven't even started these measures. Just because we have people like our President who think it will be different within our borders and COVID-19 will magically disappear, we cannot let that narrative affect our diligence. And more importantly we cannot allow some people to be forced to expose themselves and contract COVID-19 so they can provide us with more services that make our choice to stay home a little easier.

There are many people who can't get unemployment benefits or have no income and several actual interventions that are desperately needed in this moment that community organizations have been asking for, including:

- Hazard pay, free effective PPE, and mandatory testing for all folks that are forced to work in Rhode Island to protect them, their families, and their communities;
- Multiple free walk-in testing centers in communities of color;
- A moratorium on eviction and foreclosure and rear mortgage forbearances like laws and Executive Orders that have been passed in Massachusetts and California;
- Stop utility shut offs and penalties for nonpayment;
- Use the flexible Federal Relief Funds for rent assistance (to more than just a couple of hundred people) making sure landlords who receive this benefit agree not to evict people, help people affected by COVID-19 pay their utility bills, housing vouchers and rapid rehousing for the homeless dealing with COVID-19 and victims of domestic violence;

- Allow medical furlough for all medically vulnerable incarcerated people, provide adequate supplies to those held in detention, grant parole to anyone eligible and cease arrests for nonviolent offenses (as many cities and states have done);
- Release people being held at Wyatt on immigration issues.

This direct help needs to be prioritized in communities of color because of structural racism. They are the last to hear about it and have the most barriers to navigating the system. These interventions were needed yesterday, but our state's slow response with them is as pathetic as our federal response is on testing, PPE and a national lockdown.

I wish that forcing people to their deaths in an equitable manner was just a sick joke and that Rhode Island wasn't a Red State guised as a Blue State. Though party affiliation is irrelevant during this emergency, there is a pattern that we need to reject in Rhode Island. Scientists, medical professionals and residents across the world who have beat this pandemic have told us the steps we have to take. Let's do as they have done. Let's not ignore their experience, no matter who says otherwise, how eloquent they are about it, or how tired we are with our government's slow response to enact all the necessary steps. These must be medical decisions not political ones – All our lives depend on it.

## About the Author

### Fred Ordoñez

Fred Ordoñez is a member of the Commission on Health Advocacy and Equity (CHAE), created to advise the Governor, the General Assembly, and the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) of racial, ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic health disparities. He is the former executive director of DARE (Direct Action for Rights and Equality), a former policy director for Progreso Latino and has been working on racial justice for the past 20 years.



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