

Antivaxxers spearhead protests against lockdown orders, demand “freedom”

Enlarge / SALEM, OR. – MAY 02: A nurse holds a sign at the ReOpen Oregon Rally. Demonstrators gathered at the state capitol to demand a reopening of the state and to protest Gov. Kate Brown’s stay-at-home order, which was put in place to slow the spread of COVID-19.

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Prominent anti-vaccine voices have joined the din of those protesting social-distancing measures amid the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a report by The New York Times.

The merging movements have some health experts concerned that anti-vaccination sentiments may spread among the various factions protesting the mitigation efforts. Those factions include Tea Party activists, armed militia groups, protesters carrying Confederate flags, and some business owners who merely want to be able to reopen, according to experts who spoke with the Times.

“There is a tremendous amount of cross-pollinization of ideas

as these factions get to know each other,” Devin Burghart, who runs the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights, told the Times.

Anti-vaccine advocates see it differently, however, arguing that the groups already share a common motive. “From Day 1, it’s been difficult that we’re always castigated as antivaccine, and these protests are castigated as antilockdown. We have always been about freedom,” Heidi Muñoz Gleisner told the Times.

Muñoz Gleisner, along with the two other women, founded the Freedom Angels Foundation, which is best known in California for opposing vaccination requirements in the state in recent years. On Friday, Muñoz Gleisner co-hosted a protest in Sacramento against the state’s stay-at-home orders, where she was arrested.

Other examples of anti-vaccine advocates protesting social-distancing measures include New York’s Rita Palma, a prominent “vaccine choice advocate,” joining an anti-lockdown protest in Albany, also on Friday. Jonathan Lockwood, a consultant who has helped support states’ anti-vaccination efforts, founded the Reopen America project.

California state Senator (and MD) Richard Pan, who has authored several pieces of pro-vaccination legislation in the state, noted that “these groups all ultimately have the same message: We want you to get sick.”

Health experts fear that the spread of anti-vaccine ideas and conspiracy theories could thwart efforts to defeat COVID-19 when or if a vaccine for the devastating disease becomes available. While a majority of people in the United States support vaccination, having pockets of people opposed to life-saving immunization can keep the virus circulating—as has been seen with measles and other vaccine-preventable illnesses in recent years.

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