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URISA Statement Regarding Recent Events in Florida June 19, 2020

Alongside citizens of Florida and the nation, URISA¹ members watched the unfolding situation concerning the Department of Health's COVID-19 Dashboard that had been lauded in an April 20, 2020 online article² by Esri, creator of the GIS software used to build the dashboard, and by Dr. Deborah Birx, White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator, in an April 19, 2020 CBS Face the Nation interview³. Dr. Birx specifically mentioned that she was "... trying to really drive Americans to a website [Florida COVID-19 Dashboard] that I think is really quite extraordinary." Dr. Birx further stated that the dashboard provided the "... kind of knowledge and power we need to put into the hands of [the] American people so that they can see where the virus is, where the cases are and make decisions."

According to published reports in the media, it was shortly after this recognition that troublesome changes to the dashboard were requested by state officials. Specifically, it was reported⁴ that Rebekah Jones, creator of the dashboard and a GIS Professional (GISP)⁵, was asked to make a series of changes that diminished its accuracy and obscured some data. While voicing her objections to the initial change requests before complying, Ms. Jones ultimately refused additional changes that would have included false data.

While all the facts have yet to be made public, we are concerned that the actions taken potentially put the public at risk and prevented a certified GIS professional from following the Code of Ethics⁶ that guides all GIS professionals working in government, non-profit and private sector positions.

The URISA Code of Ethics⁷ is identical to the one that GISPs agree to when they earn their certification. The GIS Code of Ethics is similar to those of other professional and scientific ethics codes. The Code guides GIS professionals as they make decisions on collection, analysis, and presentation of data, whether through reports, maps or online systems.

The GIS Code of Ethics first states to "Do the Best Work Possible" by being objective and using due care. It says to practice with integrity and not to be unduly swayed by the demands of others. Provide full, clear and accurate information. Be aware of consequences both good and bad. Finally, strive to do what is right, not just what is legal.

¹ The Urban and Regional Information Systems Association (URISA) is a 53 year old nonprofit association that provides education and training, a vibrant and connected community, advocacy for geospatial challenges and issues, and essential resources for GIS professionals throughout their careers. <https://www.urisa.org/>

² Geraghty, Este MD, MS, MPH, GISP and Ryan Lanclos *COVID-19: Dedicated Scientist in Florida Made Quick Moves to Map the Disease*; <https://www.esri.com/about/newsroom/blog/scientist-maps-florida-covid19-cases/> (Accessed June 2020)

³ CBS Face the Nation April 19, 2020 Transcript; <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/full-transcript-of-face-the-nation-on-april-19-2020/> (Accessed June 2020)

⁴ *Florida scientist was fired for 'refusing to manipulate' COVID-19 data, she said*, May 19, 2020, Florida Today <https://www.floridatoday.com/story/news/2020/05/19/florida-scientist-refused-manipulate-covid-19-data-and-fired/5219137002/>; *Florida COVID-19 dashboard manager raises red flags about accuracy of state data after being fired*, May 19, 2020, WFLA News Channel 8 <https://www.wfla.com/news/florida/floridas-coronavirus-data-questioned-after-removal-of-woman-who-designed-dashboard/> (Accessed June 2020)

⁵ GIS Certification Institute of which URISA is a founding member; <https://www.gisci.org/> (Accessed June 2020)

⁶ *Ibid.* A GIS Code of Ethics, <https://www.gisci.org/Ethics/CodeofEthics.aspx> (Accessed June 2020)

⁷ URISA International, GIS Code of Ethics, <https://www.urisa.org/about-us/gis-code-of-ethics/> (Accessed June 2020)

The GIS Code of Ethics says to make data and findings widely available, striving for broad citizen involvement, and to speak out about emerging issues. GIS professionals should also call attention to the unprofessional work of others.

Finally, GIS professionals are required to deliver quality work and have a professional relationship with those they work for and with, which may involve accepting the decisions of employers and clients, unless they are illegal or unethical. They are honest in representations and strive to resolve differences. GIS professionals work respectfully and capably with others in GIS and other disciplines.

The GIS Code of Ethics includes more, but this is the heart of the ethical standards that URISA members and all GISPs follow. While endeavoring to follow these guidelines, situations may arise that make choosing the right course to follow difficult, and the GIS professional may need to emphasize some guidelines over others. What is important is to strive to do the right thing.

The situation in Florida has highlighted this dilemma. Published reports demonstrate that Ms. Jones was under extreme pressure to ignore her Code of Ethics. URISA will always support its members and all GISPs who follow the GIS Code of Ethics which in this case were indeed being followed.

Approved by the URISA Board of Directors on June 19, 2020