

This is an enterprise piece I wrote for The Georgia Recorder, Georgia's branch of States Newsroom, based on spreadsheets with complaints submitted to The Georgia Attorney General's office for the last four years that I got from a FOIA request. It was [published](#) online on Sept. 22, 2023. As a result of my reporting, a lawsuit is being filed against the city of South Fulton for violating the Open Records Act.

Georgia AG shrugs off open records violations but demands local DAs enforce all laws equally

When Gov. Brian Kemp signed the GOP-backed Senate [Bill 92](#) in May, he set Georgia on a path to creating something the state had never seen before: a prosecutorial oversight [commission](#) with the muscle to shove an elected local district attorney out of public office.

An appointed panel with the discretionary power to remove county prosecutors from office for not pursuing low-level offenses, the commission was aimed at curbing “far-left prosecutors” who were “making our communities less safe,” according to Kemp. Republican Attorney General Chris Carr echoed Kemp’s position, promising to hold local prosecutors accountable.

“All Georgians deserve to be safe, and all crime victims deserve justice,” Carr [tweeted](#), writing that a prosecutor’s refusal to enforce the law was “a dereliction of the law.”

Carr seemed to be singling out local prosecutors from Democratic strongholds across Georgia who vowed they wouldn’t prioritize charging people for violating the state’s new anti-abortion law or for low-level marijuana possession violations.

But does Carr’s office meet his own exacting standards?

From the top, the standard is supposed to be enforcing the law for all crimes at all levels. But some Georgians say Carr’s office hasn’t kept its promise of enforcement when it comes to local government transparency, particularly after Jennifer Colangelo, one of the leaders of that mission left the attorney general’s office a few months ago.

Since 1997, the Department of Law has run an informal [mediation](#) program, designed to help citizens get access to the records and meetings the Georgia statutes say they are entitled to. Citizens can file a complaint through the state's top prosecutor's online portal. If attorneys at the Department of Law determine there has been a violation of the Open Meetings or Records Act, they will send a "mediation letter" to the local government and give them up to 10 business days to respond. The program was intended as an alternative to litigation to resolve agency disputes.

Sharnya Thrasher, a city employee at the Department of Watershed, tried to use the mediation program to obtain her personnel records from the city of Atlanta because she needed them to research the pay raise process for money she felt she was due in 2021 and 2022 but hadn't received. When the city took more than three days to respond to her request and failed to deliver the correct records, Thrasher filed a mediation complaint. Assistant Attorney General Kristen Settlemire emailed her back, telling Thrasher to try requesting the records again. The city, again late to respond, sent Thrasher the same incorrect records.

Settlemire stepped in and wrote a letter to the city. Once again, Atlanta provided the same response. When Thrasher wrote to Settlemire to explain that she still hadn't gotten her records, Settlemire told her the city attorney assured her that the city had fulfilled Thrasher's request. Thrasher explained the city had not, and Settlemire suggested Thrasher find a private attorney.

"I didn't understand why Settlemire just turned around and told me to get a private attorney," Thrasher said. "She just took HR's word that they gave me everything, so I'm disappointed in the AG."

Thrasher still hasn't received the records she asked for and is getting an attorney.

"[Settlemire] said if I had another case to not hesitate to reach out to her and I asked her what's the point? I'm still at ground zero with nobody to help because she just let it drop," Thrasher said. "I didn't get the records that I asked for and she just cut it off, so I'm wondering what is the program that the AG's supposed to have?"

"What has to happen in order for the attorney general's office to go forward with this program?" she added.

Reshard Snellings, a resident of South Fulton, requested electronic copies of emails between two city council members and the city manager, planning to post them online to show residents what was happening behind the scenes after a public controversy sowed mistrust between the community and city government.

“These two city council people – they forced our city manager out of her position,” Snellings said. “I just wanted to let the public know what was going on behind the scenes.”

In response to his request, the city of South Fulton charged him \$387.63 and notified him of the charge 30 days after his request, contrary to the three business days the open records law requires for a response. He wrote to the attorney general’s office to enlist help in obtaining the records.

“What they’ll always do, because I’ve complained a lot of times to the AG’s office, is they send a letter to the city, they let the city respond back and then it’s closed. No further action was taken,” he said.

When Snellings wrote to Carr’s office, complaining that he still hadn’t received the records he needed, they told him there was nothing more they could do because their goal was only to open up communication between the parties.

With assistance from the Georgia First Amendment Foundation, Snellings wrote to Carr’s office again to ask for help. In response, the AG’s office sent a mediation letter to the city attorney, giving South Fulton officials the opportunity to explain themselves.

The city continued asking for \$387.63 for a week’s worth of emails, which Snellings called “exorbitant.” Settlemire told him to hire an attorney out of his own pocket, which Snellings did, filing a lawsuit against South Fulton.

“I have wasted a lot of time and money trying to get these records from the city of South Fulton,” Snellings said. “I can’t get the records because they won’t follow the law and the attorney general’s office will not enforce the law.”

Assistant Attorney General Settlemire said in a forwarded statement that if a local government’s attorney tells the AG’s office that they have provided records and the complainant disagrees or

provides a “reasonable explanation” for relying on a particular disclosure exception, she suggests the complainant hire private counsel.

“These are disputes that we cannot continue to mediate, largely because our mediation program does not have the same jurisdiction and authority that a court does,” she said. “We also do not have the authority or jurisdiction to conduct an *in camera* inspection of records where an exemption is being relied upon – only a court can do that. Per the Open Records Act and Open Meetings Act, any person may file a private suit related to alleged noncompliance.”

Joy Ramsingh, a government transparency attorney with Ramsingh Legal firm in middle Georgia, is one of the attorneys receiving the complaints the attorney general’s office redirected to private practice. People usually reach out to the attorney general’s office for help before contacting her firm because it is the only free enforcement resource available, Ramsingh said.

“The way that the attorney general presents itself to the public is that you don’t need an attorney or anyone to help you with the process. You can just get online and file a complaint yourself,” she said. “Every person that has come to me has advised me that they have not had any success with that avenue.”

“The resources just don’t exist for requesters to be able to file a lawsuit every time their request gets denied,” she added. “If that person could afford an attorney, they would start there. There’s a reason why they’re calling the free enforcement resource for the public as opposed to a private attorney.”

Legal fellow with the Georgia First Amendment Clinic Allyson Veile said Memorandums of Understanding, a public [negotiation](#) memo between the AG’s office and the agency violating the Open Meetings or Records Act where the agency admits the violation and promises corrective action, haven’t been posted publicly on the AG’s website since 2016. Carr, a long-time government worker, was appointed attorney general in 2016 and subsequently won statewide elections to keep the position.

“I’m also not aware of any official or unofficial attorney general opinions that have been issued on the open records act since 2012,” she added. “Those are opinions that the office of the

attorney general can issue through the AG's website providing an official interpretation of the law from the AG's office."

Carl Appen, director of Content and Development for Appen Media online news outlets, has used the mediation program multiple times to get access to records for his reporting. Appen said he used to have a good relationship with Colangelo, who was in charge of the mediation program until this summer when she stepped down and Settlemire took over.

"It has been really, really, really disappointing how much of a difference we have seen before and after Jennifer's departure," Appen said.

Citing a general unresponsiveness, Appen said that of the approximately dozen times he has reached out to the AG's office since Colangelo left, he has only received one response back from Settlemire, who told him she was unable to help in that situation. He reached out several times after to ask why they were unable to help, but received no further communication from Settlemire. Almost all of the dozen requests to Settlemire were issues Colangelo had responded to in the past, Appen said.

"Very obviously, their practices are not following the spirit of the open records law," he added. "Seeing that indicated to me that they genuinely were just looking for a solution. They were not trying to check the box and say that they had this mediation office that wasn't actually doing anything."

Colangelo declined comment.

With 159 counties in the state of Georgia, the potential for open records violations is high. Settlemire said in a statement that Carr's office receives requests for mediation almost daily.

Assigning one person to handle the entire mediation program, Ramsingh said, is like "trying to empty the ocean with a teaspoon" and "even the best intentioned human being could not do this job alone."

The attorney general has an obligation to individual citizens, Ramsingh said, but also to the state at large.

“It benefits the state government itself to ensure that state and local government branches are being held accountable to the people that they serve,” she said. “The public records act is only as good as the teeth that’s in it.”

Snellings expressed disappointment in the AG’s performance, saying he expected more from his elected officials.

“I expect them to enforce the law each and every time,” he said. “Not just pick when they want to enforce it and when they do not want to enforce it.”

This is a breaking news piece I wrote for The Daily Beast. It was published [online](#) on Sept. 10, 2023. We were the first outlet to reach out and interview people after the announcement of the volunteers' deaths broke online. I connected with sources in Ukraine immediately after the assignment via social media and filed the story in an hour.

Two Foreign Aid Workers Killed by Russian Artillery Fire Near Bakhmut

Two foreign aid workers volunteering in Ukraine were killed on Sunday after coming under Russian [attack](#) near Bakhmut, their organization confirmed over the weekend.

The volunteers, part of a humanitarian team sponsored by the nongovernmental organization Road to Relief, were headed toward the bitterly contested city from Slovyansk to assist civilians in need in the eastern Ukraine town of Ivanivske when their vehicle was struck by Russian artillery fire.

Canadian volunteer Anthony “Tonko” Ihnat, and the organization’s director, Emma Igual, both died in the blast.

According to a statement on [Instagram](#) by Road to Relief, the vehicle, which also held German medical volunteer Mawick and Swedish volunteer Johan Mathias Thyr, took a direct hit, flipped over and caught on fire while passing Chasiv Yar. Ruben and Johan were severely injured, but were taken to hospitals away from the scene and are now in stable condition. Ihnat died as a result of the blast.

Igual’s status was initially unknown, but Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares confirmed her [death](#) hours later while speaking to Spanish press.

58-year-old Ihnat also volunteered with Brave to Rebuild, an initiative that rebuilds Ukrainian homes destroyed by the Russian invasion. The organization announced Ihnat’s passing on their Instagram page, noting that he was “A wonderful, compassionate, always joyful, bright, caring, hardworking man.”

A Canadian of Slovak descent, Inhat lived in Ontario and worked freelance gigs until 2022, when he sold his truck and came to Ukraine to provide aid during the war. He volunteered with

multiple organizations moving bags to people on the Polish border, evacuating people and repairing schools.

“The news of what you have going on hit me in the heart. My parents are from Slovakia, I didn’t get to visit there, but it’s close by,” Inhat previously listed as the reason he decided to volunteer.

“To Ukraine I have warm feelings. That’s why I’m here to help in any way I can.”

Leonid Knysh, another volunteer at Brave to Rebuild, remembered Inhat as someone who “always smiled,” was “very active,” and befriended all of the other volunteers—even people that didn’t speak English.

“I can’t forget about his Coca Cola ‘addiction,’ as he called it,” Knysh remembered. “Actually, it was nearly impossible to see him without a bottle of Cola.”

Besides Coca Cola, Inhat was also a fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey club, according to Road to Relief’s post.

“One thing I know for sure, he wouldn’t want us to be upset or cry,” Knysh said. “He would want us to keep fighting.”

The area in which the international aid team was struck remains the scene of heavy fighting and has been the source of a number of non-combatant casualties over the past year. Ukraine valiantly held onto Bakhmut for nine months while under heavy Russian attack beginning last year, with the city ultimately falling in May.

A pair of British volunteers, Chris Parry and Andrew Bagshaw, were killed just a few miles north of Bakhmut in January amid heavy fighting—while Pete Reed, a former U.S. Marine Corps member and the head of a charity called Global Outreach Doctors, was also struck and killed by a laser-guided missile outside Bakhmut in February.

Then in May, Arman Soldin, a videographer working for Agence France Presse, was killed by rocket fire near the same site where Inhat and Igual died.

This is an enterprise piece I wrote for The Georgia Recorder, Georgia's branch of States Newsroom. It was [published](#) online on December 26, 2023. It was also picked up and [published](#) by Georgia Public Broadcasting, the state's NPR/PBS affiliate. The story received a lot of social media interaction and was reposted by state representatives from DeKalb and Macon.

Congressional OK for an Ocmulgee Mounds national park could be in store in 2024

Georgia is well on its way to getting its first national park.

Georgia's senators along with U.S. House representatives, both Republicans and Democrats, are in the process of drafting legislation to make the Ocmulgee Mounds in middle Georgia a National Park. Bills in the House and Senate will likely go through in the early part of 2024.

Last month, the National Park Service completed a Special Resource Study assessing the national significance and feasibility of giving the Muscogee (Creek) cultural site increased federal protection. If the mounds do become Georgia's first national park, they will also be the first national park co-managed by a removed indigenous tribe.

The Ocmulgee Mounds were built around 900 A.D. and were [used](#) by early Mississippian farmers for multiple purposes including a funerary site and the village chief's home. It was later home to 60 villages that comprised the Muscogee Nation. Over 2,000 artifacts have been found in the area and [date](#) back as far as 8,000 or 10,000 BC. But in 1836, the Muscogee people were one of five tribes forcibly removed from their land during the Trail of Tears to what is now Oklahoma.

Tracie Revis, a citizen of the Muscogee Nation and the director of advocacy for the Ocmulgee National Park and Preserve Initiative, says the nation's goal is to partner with the National Park Service and help make the park accessible so that the public can learn about the land's 17,000 years of continuous human habitation and enjoy the natural beauty it has to offer. Under the co-management plan, the Muscogee Nation will help oversee the property, assisting with issues such as species and land management techniques and cultural or historic knowledge.

“It is bringing the original people back who can tell you the stories of this land whose words are still etched on the landscape, all over middle Georgia, helping to educate what that all means and bringing it together,” she said.

While the park may be in Georgia, Revis says the issue is much bigger than one state.

“It’s beneficial for our people in Oklahoma for them to be able to come back and enjoy this land and know that it’s protected and know that our artifacts are protected and our ancestors who are buried here in this ground are protected,” she added.

Efforts to preserve Ocmulgee have been ongoing for almost 100 years. Former president Franklin Delano Roosevelt set aside 678 acres to make the mounds a national monument. In 2019, it became a national historic park, which was the starting point for the Special Resource Study and now, a chance at achieving national park status.

“We’ve made a case to our representatives in the Senate in the House, here locally, that it’s time to re-designate a full blown National Park and Preserve,” said Seth Clark, the executive director of the Ocmulgee National Park and Preserve Initiative and a Macon-Bibb County commissioner.

The potential national park has support from both Sens. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff. Warnock visited the site in Macon last month and reaffirmed his commitment to seeing legislation through for establishing the mounds as a national park.

Ossoff said that he expects legislation for the park will move forward in the coming months. “I am working right now with colleagues in both parties in Congress to draw up legislation to establish Ocmulgee Mounds as a National Park and Preserve, which would create a protected space for its native sacred sites and preserve hunting and fishing rights for local folks,” he said in a statement. “We are making solid progress on this in large part because there is such unified and intense local support.”

The bipartisan effort has also been championed by U.S. Rep. Austin Scott, a Tifton Republican, and U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop, an Albany Democrat, for more than 20 years.

“Designating the Ocmulgee Mounds as a National Park and Preserve is a bipartisan, bicameral effort to help protect our state’s history and have a lasting, positive economic and cultural impact in Middle Georgia,” Scott said in a statement.

Bishop echoed Scott’s endorsement of the national park effort.

“Creating this national park will not only spur economic development in Middle Georgia and its surrounding communities, drawing tourists and recreators from around the country, it will also help conserve the land, preserve the history of Georgia’s indigenous people, and ensure this site’s legacy is appreciated and enjoyed for generations to come,” Bishop said.

Bipartisan support has been foundational to the project, Clark said, as well as approval from local people. “Middle Georgia is not a homogenous community. We are urban, we are rural. We are Black and white and liberal and conservative and the advocacy for this effort needed to match that,” Clark said.

Middle Georgians have strongly supported the park’s creation and were involved in the process from the beginning. A national park in the area is expected to increase tourism and boost the economy. An economic analysis of the proposed park by the National Park Conservation Association said that it could increase visitation six-fold in the next 15 years and bring in \$206.7 million to the annual economic activity, supporting over 3,000 jobs through visitor activities and tourism.

The timing of the imminent legislation is, perhaps, most meaningful of all, coming just past Macon’s 200th anniversary.

“It’s just a very poignant moment that we are going through this together. Macon was chartered on the heels of Indian removal – that’s why we existed,” Clark said. “The creation of this park and the process of creating this park has been a real source of healing and reconciliation between the tribal and non-tribal communities working on it that’s needed to happen for a long time.”

Revis emphasizes that national parks, at their core, benefit all communities by allowing people to get outside and connect – no matter the political party.

“It’s beneficial for our health, it’s beneficial for our mental health, it’s beneficial for our family time together,” she said. “That is what these parks do. They allow us to have places to go and reflect and enjoy land that was here longer than any of us.”

This is an enterprise piece I wrote for The Georgia Recorder, Georgia's branch of States Newsroom. It was [published](#) online on November 15, 2023. It became one of the most viewed stories on The Georgia Recorder's website in the history of the paper. The story was also picked up and [published](#) by Georgia Public Broadcasting, the state's NPR/PBS affiliate.

Brick and mortar reminders of Georgia's mistreatment of psychiatric patients could be erased soon

Thousands of Georgians were once confined to the world's largest mental institution, authorized by the [state](#) in 1837 as the "Lunatic, Idiot, and Epileptic Asylum." The Milledgeville asylum's miserable conditions were infamous with practices of the time like lobotomy and electroshock therapy as well as primitive tactics like metal cages, straitjackets and involuntary sterilizations.

The nearly 13,000 patients were served by just 48 "doctors," some of whom were patients at the asylum themselves. In 2007, 42 suspicious [deaths](#) at the asylum, which had been downsized and renamed Central State Hospital, spurred a U.S. Department of Justice investigation, and by 2010, the state announced that most of the asylum would be closed for good.

But now, the state is demolishing three prominent buildings at Central State Hospital – and wiping away some of the brick-and-mortar testament to the darker side of Georgia's history. In July, Gov. Brian Kemp issued an executive order allowing the state Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities to demolish three main buildings that sit on what is known as the campus' pecan grove: Walker, Green and Jones. The iconic Powell building, which was the original building, would be left untouched.

The planned demolition has prompted outcry from historic preservationists and local citizens, who argue with the local authority charged with transforming the property and the state agency's plan to demolish the buildings. Preservationists argue that the hospital's historical significance is too valuable to be destroyed.

While there is no set date for demolition, conversations about the hospital's future, which have continued for more than 10 years, remain ongoing.

On Oct. 26, DBHDD sent an initial submittal to the Georgia Department of Community Affairs Historic Preservation Division for consultation on the demolition, according to Jennifer Dixon, the division's director. The state agency is expected to respond to the agency's consultant by Nov. 22 and while not typically required to conduct site visits, did conduct one for the Central State Hospital property.

Back in 2010, the state established the Central State Redevelopment Authority, which was tasked with creating an initiative to repurpose some of the buildings for jobs and tax revenue that was eventually named "Renaissance Park." The redevelopment authority has brokered several commercial deals on some of the buildings, but has not taken control of all the buildings or the three currently in contention.

Unofficial historian of the hospital and founder of the preservationist [group](#) Friends of Central State Hospital, Edwin Atkins said that the Renaissance Park rebranding was the first indication he remembers that the property would likely be up for future demolition.

"They want to get rid of the bad image of Central State Hospital, so they changed the name to Renaissance Park, a rebirth, something new, and they want to get rid of all the old buildings," Atkins said.

The state had a contract with Baldwin County to provide fire services for the hospital, but conflicts over that agreement resulted in the county filing a lawsuit against DBHDD in 2021.

"If you're going to look at a catalyst for demolition, it would probably be the lawsuits that Baldwin County brought against the state," Chairman of the Central State Hospital Local Redevelopment Authority Johnny Grant said. Part of the Baldwin County lawsuit addressed the hospital's deterioration that presented a fire hazard and increased liability for the state.

A few years ago, Grant said, a company out of Florida also showed interest in the property the hospital is located on. They eventually pulled out because they did not have the money to demolish the buildings – a problem that would make most projects on the Milledgeville property economically unfeasible, Grant said. If cleared, "the space would be more attractive, less dangerous, and more conducive to finding some future purpose," he said.

Grant and Mike Couch, the previous executive director of the redevelopment authority, agree that the demolition allows for greater economic opportunity in Milledgeville. “We did something that’s never been done in the state of Georgia before – we quantified the value of real estate as something other than dollars. It becomes the value of jobs, the value of property tax inducement,” Couch said.

The set up of the redevelopment authority allows property to be transferred from the state to the redevelopment authority for economic development purposes, Grant explained, noting that the redevelopment authority declined an offer for the bulk of the hospital property, including the three buildings and many more, because of an inability to maintain them or deal with the buildings’ liability. Instead, the hospital property remained in the hands of the state.

Several controversies riddled the lead up to the demolition executive order. A year ago, an asbestos abatement at the hospital prompted [criticism](#) after DBHDD, which had not gotten demolition approval, [characterized](#) the work as a safety issue unrelated to demolition. The Saporta Report later [reported](#) that DBHDD had a list of buildings targeted for demolition after reviewing the contractor documents.

“The state began work on abating asbestos a little more than a year ago, and it was made known at the time that discussions were underway about how to mitigate the very real safety risks those properties present,” said Ashley Fielding, assistant commissioner of agency affairs with DBHDD.

The Saporta Report also [reported](#) that DBHDD’s numbers for the cost of preservation were made after a single undocumented phone call with an unnamed architect. Their open records request for all documents pertaining to the demolition decision yielded no evidence of historic preservation alternatives or consultations about cost. A DBHDD official later told the online news outlet that the preservation analysis was based on the undocumented phone call. Fielding told the *Georgia Recorder* that the agency’s staff talked to an architect who gave them some estimates about the cost.

“They didn’t even have a name, so they had no accurate figures of what it was going to cost to save a building,” Atkins said. “That means that the governor didn’t have an accurate [amount]

because when they got the governor to sign the executive order to take them down, I'm sure they told him those same amounts, which were totally false.”

DBHDD officials say it is not in the agency's budget or purpose to save the hospital buildings. Its nearly \$1.6 billion budget is almost entirely designated to serving individuals with mental illness, substance use disorder and intellectual and developmental disabilities, Fielding said. The buildings also pose a public safety liability.

“Trespassing on these properties presents a significant risk to these individuals in terms of their safety and their lives, and as the owners of these buildings, the state has to protect against those very serious risks,” Fielding added.

As conversations between state officials and preservationists continue, the fate of Central State Hospital hangs in the balance.

The Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation and others opposed to demolition are asking the state for more time to find a way to salvage the buildings and for proof that the agency has put a fair effort into preservation.

Ben Sutton, director of preservation with The Georgia Trust, noted that each of the buildings are great examples of particular historical architectures that provide “a much higher level of significance that would be lost if individual buildings were torn down,” and, of course, the importance of Central State Hospital in 19th and 20th Georgia and United States history.

“That is a history that means different things to different folks,” Sutton said. “But it's important to remember that history and to remember that part of Georgia's history.”

This is a breaking news piece I wrote for The Daily Beast. It was [published](#) online on October 22, 2023. I updated the story continuously over six hours as it developed and police posted updates online. I also attended the memorial service livestream and tracked social media for information on the story.

‘No Evidence’ of Antisemitism in Detroit Synagogue Leader’s Killing: Cops

Samantha Woll, a beloved synagogue leader, was remembered as the “most beloved person in [Detroit](#)” by friends and family Sunday after she was fatally stabbed to death just a day earlier, an incident that has the Jewish community in Motor City reeling.

Despite the killing’s headline-grabbing nature—and a charged environment made worse given the recent war between [Israel](#) and [Palestinian](#) militant group [Hamas](#)—police are urging the community to be patient as their investigation continues.

Precious few details about the incident have been made public, though Detroit Police Chief James E. White said in a statement Sunday that “no evidence has surfaced suggesting that this crime was motivated by antisemitism.” He asked that the community continue to remain patient as the investigation is ongoing saying, “Everything that can be done to bring this matter to closure is being called into service.”

Meanwhile a funeral was held for Woll on Sunday afternoon at Hebrew Memorial Chapel in Oak Park, [Michigan](#), with a cross-section of local leaders lining up to sing her praises.

Woll, 40, was the president of the board of the Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue and active in Democratic campaigns for local politics—including the current Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, who spoke at her memorial service.

“I know as of this moment we still don’t know who the monster is who took Sam from us or what possible reason there would be for God to allow a person such as her to be taken so soon, but Sam did more for our our community, our state, our world, our lives in her short time here on earth than most will ever accomplish in a thousand lifetimes over,” Nessel said.

Multiple speakers noted Woll's ability to bring people together. Her sister, Monica, read a letter to her sister, saying: "You were the kindest, most generous human I've ever met. If someone complimented something of yours, you took it off and gave it to them."

"This was not supposed to happen," she continued. "A light has gone out in Detroit, in our hearts, for our people, for the world."

Arianna Silverman, a friend who previously worked with Woll at the Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue, fondly recalled Woll's ability to connect with anyone she came across.

"So many people think of her as someone with whom they had a particularly close or important relationship and each of them is right," she said.

Police originally found Woll's body early Saturday morning after a 911 caller reported an unresponsive person near her home, local reports said.

Police have yet to identify a suspect or a motive in the case, and the FBI has stepped in to aid in forensic analysis.

This is an investigation I co-authored for The Chronicle of Higher Education in partnership with The Investigative Reporting Workshop. I co-wrote the text of the article, conducted over 40+ interviews for the story and analyzed data from universities after gathering information through FOIA requests. The article was published [online](#) on Dec. 6, 2023. The piece garnered media attention and was cited in a Washington Post [article](#).

Why Faculty Members Are Fleeing Florida

By the time she took a faculty position with Florida State University College of Law, Mary Ziegler had earned a degree from Harvard Law School, worked as a postdoctoral associate at Yale Law School, and clerked at the Vermont Supreme Court. After joining the Tallahassee-based university in 2013, her academic career soared.

Ziegler's work was soon appearing in top law journals and her observations were often sought out in the media. The university rewarded her with a named professorship and its "Transformation Through Teaching" award. She published six books and quickly came to be regarded as a leading expert on the history of reproductive rights.

But last year, nearly a decade after her arrival, Ziegler resigned. Her reason? Dismay at the way that Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis was using the state's colleges as political battlefields.

"That made me feel like I couldn't stay," said Ziegler, who took a job as a law professor at the University of California at Davis. "I didn't want to have a career there."

Data from the 12 public institutions in the [State University System of Florida](#), analyzed by reporters at the Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University, show that she was far from alone: Nine of them saw a significant spike in faculty resignations in 2022. The University of Florida saw a 20-percent increase in tenured and tenure-track faculty resignations (391 total) from 2021. At Florida State, 136 faculty members resigned in 2022, up 28 percent from the prior year. Faculty losses from Florida International University, in Miami, including both retirements and resignations, rose from 82 in 2021 to 97 in 2022.

The spike in Florida faculty departures came during a difficult transition back to in-person instruction amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and at a time when colleges across the country faced budgetary challenges. In statements, several Florida college officials noted that when all faculty and staff members were considered, their resignation rates last year remained in line with national averages.

But faculty members in Florida frequently cited an additional reason for leaving: DeSantis's hyperpoliticized stewardship of the state.

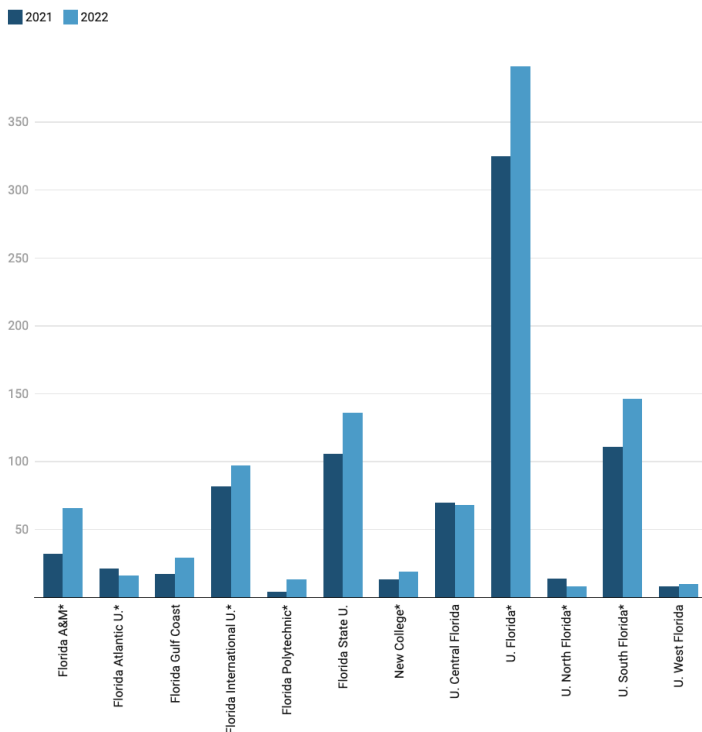
"They're trying to purge academia of people who don't agree with their radical world view," said Mark Paul, an economics professor who resigned from New College of Florida in August 2022 and now teaches at Rutgers University, in New Jersey.

In interviews with 40 faculty members from various academic disciplines who have left Florida colleges in recent years, 33 said the state's political climate was a direct factor in their decision — citing state leaders' attempts to curb tenure protections, bans on classroom discussions of race and gender, the state's response to the Covid pandemic, and legislative efforts such as the so-called "Don't Say Gay" bill. Even among the seven professors who departed for personal or professional reasons, several said they were happy to escape Florida's current political environment.

"I'm not sad that I'm getting out now," said David Reed, a tenured theater professor who resigned in May from the University of Central Florida to take a similar role at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, significantly shortening his trips to see family in Kansas. "It's not a bad time to go."

Faculty Members Leaving Florida

Data from the 12 institutions in the State University System of Florida show that nine saw a significant spike in faculty resignations in 2022.



Note: Adjuncts are excluded where possible: New College and U. of Florida. Data received from colleges with an asterisk did not allow an assessment of whether retirements were included.

Source: Investigative Reporting Workshop • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Presented with the findings of this reporting, a DeSantis spokesman referred requests for comment to the state’s education department, which in turn referred questions to the State University System leadership. In a statement, Chancellor Ray Rodrigues said there’s been “no data provided to indicate that turnover across the entire SUS is significantly greater than turnover in past years.”

Yet in [annual reports](#) filed to the state in June, seven Florida universities cited faculty recruitment or retention as a key challenge or strategic priority. A [survey](#) of Florida professors conducted by the faculty union in August found that one in five said they had interviewed for a job out of state since 2021, and that nearly half said they planned to seek employment outside of Florida in the coming year. In October, seven former university presidents co-wrote a column in the [Tampa Bay Times](#) warning that DeSantis’s policies will have long-term effects on higher education in the state.

“Many of those folks will probably think twice or three times before taking a position in Florida,” said Wilson G. Bradshaw, one of the signatories, who was president of Florida Gulf Coast University from 2007 to 2017. “These aren’t just ‘political statements,’ these are actual

policies that can have a negative impact on what we're trying to do with our educational systems.”

Initial data from 2023 show the rate of faculty departures from Florida universities slowed during the first few months of this year compared with 2022's exodus. But dozens of faculty members are still leaving. Earlier this week, for example, *The New York Times* [reported](#) that the University of Florida's law school has seen 30-percent faculty turnover this year. And in interviews, departing faculty from across the state specifically cited DeSantis and a wave of laws targeting higher education as the reason.

“No one in a position of power and privilege was speaking out for marginalized faculty who were directly impacted by the laws that were incrementally taking our rights away as humans, let alone our rights as research and creative faculty,” said Kristy Lewis, who in July resigned from a tenure-track position teaching coastal ecology and oceanography at the University of Central Florida. The Lewis Lab, which was named for her, had brought in more than \$8 million in research grants during her five years at UCF. This fall, she began as an assistant professor at the University of Rhode Island.

“I can actually work, focus on the science, and I can focus on the students,” Lewis said. “And that to me is everything.”

Since being elected governor in 2018, DeSantis [has touted](#) the affordability of Florida's public universities, where average [in-state tuition](#) is the lowest in the country. DeSantis has also used the state's educational system as a [proving ground to test conservative policies](#), railing against the teaching of what he has called “critical race theory” — a term that originally referred to an academic theory about the way racial inequity can be embedded in race-neutral laws and is now used as a catchall by many conservative critics of higher ed — and *The New York Times*' “1619 Project.” Last year, he [signed the Stop WOKE Act](#) which, among other things, sought to limit discussions of race and gender in both K-12 and college classrooms.

“It flies in the face of everything we know about equal rights,” said State Rep. Yvonne Hinson, a Democrat who co-sponsored an unsuccessful attempt to reverse the legislation and whose Gainesville district includes the University of Florida. “It's having an effect on the research dollars that are going to leave the school.”

Even as businesses and educators challenged the law as a violation of First Amendment rights, Florida voters were largely unswayed: Last November, DeSantis was reelected by nearly 20 percentage points — the largest margin of victory in a Florida governor's race in 40 years.

And DeSantis's presidential run, launched in May, has only intensified fears among some faculty members that the state's higher-education system is a pawn in the governor's personal political program. Among his campaign pledges as he has sought the 2024 Republican presidential nomination are a prohibition of federal grants "to entities that engage in active discrimination through DEI or other unconstitutional initiatives," and a vow to "no longer incentivize useless degrees and courses with blanket government loans."

"DeSantis and his supporters are good at being wrecking balls, but they're nothing at being a construction crew," said Andrew Gothard, president of the United Faculty of Florida, which represents 25,000 higher-education professionals and graduate students across the state. "They don't know how to build anything that will keep Florida running for decades."

Faculty members also viewed a bill calling for mandatory post-tenure review, which DeSantis signed in April 2022, as an attack on academic freedom. Many professors saw the new law, which called for such a review every five years, as a turn toward political interference in their careers.

"There will come a point where the job isn't worth having," said Eric Scarffe, an assistant professor of philosophy at Florida International University, in Miami. Scarffe said he began considering a search for employment outside of the state following the tenure changes.

Tra Bouscaren, an art professor, abandoned his tenure-track position at Florida State in July for another at Arizona State. He wrestled with staying, drawn to FSU's affordability for students, but ultimately said the political climate drove him away.

"The people who lose the most in this environment are students," he said.

Bouscaren, an award-winning installation artist, considered doing a project with students in which they would project images of banned books onto the state capitol building, but decided not to. He worried about the response of administrators, who with the revised tenure law gained additional power over faculty.

"A part of me wanted to stay and fight the good fight," Bouscaren said. "But all you really do if you do that is risk losing your job."

Being openly hostile to academic work concerned with feminism, race, and sexuality has had predictable effects: At least 20 of the professors interviewed who resigned in 2022 and 2023 wrote and taught about those topics.

“As a queer educator, cultural and community organizer, it is immensely difficult to live within the current political climate of Florida,” Jessica Borusky wrote in their December 5, 2022, letter resigning as a lecturer and gallery director at the University of North Florida, in Jacksonville.

Borusky, who started at UNF in the fall of 2020, had deliberately sought out work at a small state college after seeing as a first-generation college student how the arts can benefit low-income students and those from other marginalized groups.

As the higher-education environment was turning more political, Borusky was teaching a class called “Art and Feminism.” While they initially hoped to stay at UNF, ultimately the anxiety over whether the coursework they oversaw would become a political target proved too much. “Students were crying in my office,” said Borusky, who accepted a position as executive director of the Pratt Fine Arts Center, in Seattle. “And I was crying with them.”

Among those students was Jordyn Bowen, who took Borusky’s curatorial practices class.

Borusky “brought a new vigor to our department,” said Bowen, who now works as an educator at a community-arts hub in Jacksonville. “I am a better artist and a better human being because of them.”

Sonia Arellano, a former professor of rhetoric and writing at the University of Central Florida, had been frustrated by a wave of legislation seemingly targeted at racial and sexual minorities. Arellano researched migrant deaths and took what she describes as a social-justice approach to her writing courses. For two years, she served on her department’s DEI committee. Then, last year, she said, her department chair told her that someone had filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the committee’s membership roster and meeting minutes. Frustrated and fearful, Arellano resigned in May, two months after having been granted tenure.

“I had the privilege to resign and to leave academia, but not everybody does,” said Arellano, who left for the private sector. “I was burned out. I was just so morally devastated.”

No institution has become more of a battleground in DeSantis’s efforts to reshape higher education in Florida than New College, a 700-student campus in Sarasota.

In January, DeSantis [appointed](#) six new members to New College's Board of Trustees — including Christopher Rufo, a conservative activist at the center of the national culture war over what can be taught in classrooms — who in turn fired the president and installed Richard Corcoran, a powerful former Republican state lawmaker and DeSantis's former education commissioner. In the months since, gender-neutral bathroom signs [were removed](#) from campus and the board [recommended the elimination](#) of the college's gender-studies program.

Faculty resignations and leaves of absence skyrocketed. Three dozen New College professors opted out of returning for the 2023-24 academic year. In 2022, 19 full-time professors resigned, up from 13 the year before, according to New College data. A spokesman for New College did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Matthew Lepinski, who has a doctorate in computer science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and was hired in the summer of 2015 to help grow New College's computer and data-science programs, [resigned his tenured position](#) during the April Board of Trustees meeting. He said the new leadership's targeting of certain humanities programs damaged the overall educational experience.

"Faculty departures signal that there are consequences for these types of attacks on higher education," Lepinski said. "You can say 'Oh, we'll just replace the faculty members who leave with ones who are more mission-aligned.' I think they are finding it harder to replace departing faculty than they originally imagined."

Caught in the middle are students like Jess Daigle, a 19-year-old from Tampa, who started at New College in 2022 to pursue a degree in marine biology, drawn to the campus for the quality of its professors and its social atmosphere, which she said shifted after the conservative takeover.

As she readied for her sophomore year, course cancellations captured a campus in flux. Five courses she needed to complete her degree were canceled over the summer. The Office of the Registrar emailed her on August 9 that conservation biology was gone: "But we are adding new courses daily so please keep checking back," the email read.

Daigle and her father, David, attended the next day's Board of Trustees meeting, and during the public-comment portion, David Daigle told board members he was disappointed over a number of issues for returning students, including the "mass exodus of distinguished professors." He said, "It's impossible to formulate decisions about the next steps in her education."

Police escorted both of them from the meeting after Jess Daigle shouted out from the audience during a discussion of the college's finances.

"There's no other way to say it, except they're bullies," her father said. "I'm proud that she stood up to the bullies."

Facing discipline for her outburst, Daigle withdrew from the college on September 8 and is applying elsewhere. Her younger sister, Ally, a high-school senior, refuses to attend college in Florida. Her father, a Florida native who said he has voted for Republican presidential candidates for most of his life, said the entire family may ultimately leave the state.

"We're done," he said. "I guess now I'm part of the 'woke' left because I'm resisting. Any objective observer can look and see that this style of governance is not sustainable."