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SCRIPT BELOW:

THERE COULD BE MORE DEATHS LINKED TO CORONAVIRUS IN NORTH CAROLINA, THAN REPORTS FROM THE NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES WOULD INDICATE.

A REVIEW OF THOUSANDS OF DEATH CERTIFICATES FILED IN COUNTIES ACROSS NORTH CAROLINA BY A COLLABORATIVE OF REPORTERS FROM SIX NEWSROOMS INCLUDING CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS RAISES THIS QUESTION.

THE DEATH CERTIFICATES FOR TWO GROUPS OF NORTH CAROLINA RESIDENTS WHO DIED IN LATE MARCH AND EARLY APRIL WITHIN DAYS OF EACH OTHER TESTIFY TO WHAT CLAIMED THEIR LIVES.

THEY SUFFERED FROM A RANGE OF CONDITIONS COMMONLY SEEN IN ELDERLY PATIENTS APPROACHING DEATH – CARDIOPULMONARY ARREST, ACUTE RESPIRATORY FAILURE, PNEUMONIA, CORONARY ARTERY DISEASE, COPD, ATRIAL FIBRILLATION, LUNG CANCER AND DIABETES MELLITUS.

BUT THE DEATH CERTIFICATES OF THE FIRST GROUP INDICATE AN ADDITIONAL AGGRAVATING HEALTH FACTOR, WHICH LIKELY PROVED FATAL FOR THEIR ALREADY STRUGGLING PHYSICAL SYSTEMS. THEY TESTED POSITIVE FOR COVID-19. THE OTHER GROUP OF DEATH CERTIFICATES GIVES NO INDICATION THAT THESE PEOPLE WERE EVER TESTED, DESPITE REMARKABLY SIMILAR SYMPTOMS. AFTER ALL, THESE CONDITIONS KILL PEOPLE EVERY DAY.

WITHOUT TEST RESULTS, WHETHER NEGATIVE OR POSITIVE, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO KNOW HOW MANY OF THESE PEOPLE HAD THE VIRUS. AND THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO DIED WITH COMPARABLE SYMPTOMS, BUT WITHOUT ANY TEST RESULTS RECORDED, IS MANY TIMES GREATER THAN THE NUMBER WHOSE DEATH CERTIFICATES SAY THEY TESTED POSITIVE.

IN SOME CASES, INCLUDING A COVID-19 DEATH IDENTIFIED IN CARTERET COUNTY, THE DEATH CERTIFICATES DON'T MENTION CORONAVIRUS EVEN WHEN THE STATE HAS CONFIRMED A PATIENT'S POSITIVE RESULTS AND IS COUNTING THE DEATH IN ITS TOTALS. IN WAYNE COUNTY, DESPITE AT LEAST SIX CORONAVIRUS-RELATED DEATHS, NO DEATH CERTIFICATES LISTED COVID-19 AS A CAUSE OR CONTRIBUTING FACTOR IN DEATH.

HOWEVER, THE STATE MEDICAL EXAMINER SAID IN LATE MARCH THAT CORONAVIRUS SHOULD BE INDICATED ON DEATH CERTIFICATES AS A CAUSE OF DEATH OR CONTRIBUTING FACTOR WHEN THE PERSON HAS HAD A POSITIVE TEST, DESPITE POTENTIAL UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE ROLE THE VIRUS PLAYED.

IN SOME COUNTIES, INCLUDING CUMBERLAND, DEATH CERTIFICATES ARE BEING AMENDED IF A POSITIVE RESULT COMES BACK AFTER THE PATIENT DIES. BUT IT'S NOT CLEAR WHETHER THAT'S HAPPENING CONSISTENTLY ACROSS THE STATE.

IN OTHER CASES, SUCH AS ONSLOW COUNTY, A DEATH CERTIFICATE MAY SAY COVID-19 BASED ON A PHYSICIAN'S OPINION, BUT WITHOUT A TEST CONFIRMING THIS THE DEATH HAS NOT BEEN INCLUDED IN THE STATE'S TOTALS.

ALTHOUGH DEATH CERTIFICATES ARE OPEN RECORDS THAT ARE MAINTAINED BY BOTH HEALTH DEPARTMENTS AND COUNTY REGISTERS OF DEEDS, SEVERAL LOCAL AND STATE AGENCIES OBJECTED TO PROVIDING THESE RECORDS UPON REQUEST. STATE OFFICIALS HAVE NOT YET RESPONDED TO WHY THEY ADVISED SOME COUNTIES NOT TO COMPLY WITH A LAWFUL OPEN RECORDS REQUEST DURING THIS INVESTIGATION.

YOU CAN FIND THIS STORY AND MORE INFORMATION RELATED TO THE CORONAVIRUS IN NORTH CAROLINA BY GOING TO CAROLINA-PUBLIC-PRESS-DOT-ORG.* THIS IS STEPHANIE CARSON REPORTING.

