

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: October 18th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everyone. With me is the woman on my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, the Department of Health's Communicable Disease Service Medical Director, Dr. Ed Lifshitz. Great to have you both. The guy to my left who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We've got Parimal Garg, Chief Counsel and a cast of thousands.

A few things before we get to the latest numbers. First is if you venture out tomorrow, you'll notice that our flags will have been lowered to half staff. Today I ordered that they will be lowered tomorrow in honor of the late four-star US Army General Ray Odierno, a Rockaway native who passed away last weekend, a great soldier. Second, we are mourning the loss of another great soldier along with the nation, the death of former Secretary of State and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, who passed away from complications of COVID-19. As we learn more about his arrangements, we will be lowering the flags in his honor as well.


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Raised in the South Bronx, he was a rare top military leader, and he rose through the ranks after having joined the army in 1958 from the ROTC at The City College of New York instead of attending West Point. By the time he retired from the army in 1993, in addition he was 4 stars. He was also awarded two Purple Hearts, the Bronze Star, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, among numerous other honors. He was the first African-American to serve as National Security Advisor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Secretary of State. As a soldier, a diplomat, he gave his all to his nation, and we are forever grateful.

I was actually with the General on July 15th in The White House, ironically awaiting the return of our COVID test to allow us to go on and have dinner with Angela Merkel. He was in great form, as always. He and I had crossed paths over the years, particularly in my diplomatic life. He was a giant, so to his wife and widow, Alma, and the rest of the Powell family, our thoughts and prayers are with them.

Switching gears, this week marks utility assistance week. As many families across the state know, the economic fallout from the pandemic has left many unable to pay their utility bills. Through the Department of Community Affairs and the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities help is available. If you are behind in your utility payments, I strongly encourage to visit and apply for any state assistance programs available to you. We added \$215 million in federal funds to our relief program, so the help you need is there for you. Moreover, remember that the grace period for utility shutoffs related to non payments due to a COVID-related hardship only lasts until the end of this year, December 31st. If you owe money on your utilities, you have until December 31st to pay what you owe, arrange a payment plan or apply for assistance and not risk losing service.

For a one-stop page to learn more about the assistance plans in place, please visit the Board of Public Utilities' website, www.nj.gov/bpu (<http://www.nj.gov/bpu>). It's that website at the bottom of that slide, www.nj.gov/bpu (<http://www.nj.gov/bpu>). Then click on a link for assistance programs. The link is assistance programs. That page will give you eligibility information and help you fill out an application.

Eligibility for two assistance programs, the Universal Service Fund and the Fresh Start programs have been expanded to allow many more households to qualify. For example, the cut off for the Universal Service Fund for a family of 4 is income at or below \$106,000. You may be eligible for assistance even if you thought you were not. I cannot stress strongly enough the importance of applying for the assistance for which you are eligible. Again, time is of the essence, as the grace period for shutoffs only runs until December 31st. Again, the website is www.nj.gov/bpu (<http://www.nj.gov/bpu>).

Let's turn our attention, if we can, to today's numbers. We'll start as we usually do with the latest vaccination counts as of this morning. We'll be watching, and Judy and her team will certainly be watching both the FDA and the CDC processes over the coming days as final determinations are likely to be made regarding booster shots for those of you who have received either the Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccines. In both cases, we are preparing for the approval of boosters for you. We will be ready to provide those doses to you once the final approval is granted and guidance disseminated.

While we're on vaccines, here's the latest report on breakthrough infections among the fully vaccinated compiled by the Department of Health's Communicable Disease Service. These latest numbers take us through October 4th. As you can see here, the vaccines in our toolkit are continuing to perform exceptionally well with still more than 99% of the fully vaccinated remaining COVID-free and greater than 99.9% effective against COVID-related hospitalization and death.

Here's the preliminary data for the week of September 27th through October 3rd. Here I want to point your attention to the number of hospitalizations due to COVID-19 statewide among the fully vaccinated, 17. You can see that during the week our hospitals through the New Jersey Hospital Association's data portal reported 834 new admissions of COVID-positive individuals. I know Ed and Judy would warn us against comparing apples and oranges, as these are distinctive sets of data between the NJHA numbers on the one hand and the CDS numbers on the other hand. Accepting that for a minute, 834 reported COVID-positive hospitalizations on the one hand, and 17 among fully vaccinated on the other. These numbers speak for themselves.

I am certain that with General Powell's tragic passing, it's going to put a bright light on breakthrough infections and deaths. Keep in mind too that since January 19th, the day when the very first folks received a vaccine became fully vaccinated, Dr. Ed and his team have confirmed 6,508 losses of life due to complications from COVID. Of these, roughly 215 or 3%, have been fully vaccinated individuals. That includes both the spring surge as well as the Delta variance surge.

While I certainly understand that the death of a notable person, a hero like General Powell from a breakthrough infection will make headlines, it may make you question your vaccination. The reality is that the vaccinations are highly protective and getting your booster shot when it's available will only enhance that protection. Judy, I don't have any insights into the General's health, but I have read reports this morning that he had some other comorbidities. We know that always put you in a higher level of risk. God bless him, and God rest his soul.

Here are today's newly reported positive PCR and presumed positive antigen test results. Notably, both the rate of transmission and the test positivity rate are continuing to move in the right directions. Here are the cases that our hospitals were dealing with yesterday, and it is notable that yesterday was the 6th consecutive day with total hospitalizations remaining below 900. Here are today's newly confirmed COVID-related deaths; the number of probable deaths has been revised and currently stands, as you can see, at 2,810. God bless every single one of them. As we do every time we're together, let's honor three more of those we've lost.

We're going to begin down in Cherry Hill with Donald Agren, who proudly served in the United States Navy from 1958 to 1964. He was 79 years old. In the Navy, Don was assigned to the destroyer, USS Charles H. Roan. When his days at sea ended, he returned to New Jersey to become a union carpenter and a member of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, Local 393 in Camden.

Don left behind to carry his memory his beloved wife of 55 years, Jeanne; along with his son, Andrew, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last Wednesday; and his sons, Stephen and Paul, and their families, including his six grandchildren, Andrew, Matthew, Oliver, Isaac, Keira, and Brendan. He's also survived by sisters Doris and Martha. Everyone who knew Don will remember him for his kindness, his sense of nature, and his dedication to his faith. With that, we thank him for his service to our nation, and may God bless and watch over him and the family he leaves behind.

Next up we recall Bloomfield's Patricia Darata, who passed at the age of 66 when COVID provided grave complications for her ongoing treatment for cancer. A Bloomfield native, Patricia worked for the Bloomfield Board of Education, handling a myriad of jobs for the district's Special Education Department, from taking on the task of submitting required reports to the Department of Education to ensuring students had the access they needed when needed for home instruction. Her dedication to Bloomfield will live on in the town's community garden, to which she dedicated many hours.

Pat left behind to carry on her legacy her daughters, Jennifer, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last Wednesday, and Janine; and son, Drew and their spouses, respectively Jason, Mark, and Kerry. She also left behind six grandchildren, Peyton, Milana, Lila, Max, Tessa, and Andrew. She is also survived by her brothers and sisters, Richard, Doreen, Joan, Albert, Cynthia, Tom, Ron, and Ken and their families, including her dear friend and sister-in-law Nancy. We thank Patricia for her service to the children and community of Bloomfield, and may God bless and watch over her memory and the family she leaves behind.

Finally for today, we honor the life of this guy, Donald Codey, who passed away in late September after a long COVID-related illness. Don was the brother of former governor, state senator, dear friend to many, including Tammy and me, Dick Codey. Don dedicated much of his professional life to our state's horse racing industry, serving across his career as a presiding judge at the Meadowlands Racetrack, president of the Freehold Raceway, and assistant director of the New Jersey Racing Commission. In true Codey family fashion, he was also passionate about basketball. He was an assistant coach at Seton Hall under former and renowned coach and current broadcaster, Bill Raftery.

Don was active in numerous community Irish faith-based and sports organizations and gave generously of his time in support of countless scholarships and charities. He left behind his wife, Irma, and his children and their families; daughter, Melissa and son-in-law, Kyle; son, Donald III and his wife, Renee; and son, Sean; and a bench full of grandchildren: Angelina, Olivia, Gabriella, Michael, Matthew, Mia, Katey, Kyle, and Logan. Don is also survived by his sister, Pat Codey, who is another dear friend – she and I exchanged notes this morning; his sister, Colleen; as I mentioned, his brother, Dick; and his brother, Robert; and many beloved nieces, nephews, and dear friends and former colleagues. We thank Don for all that he did to protect our state's horse racing industry and for his commitment to so many worthy causes. May God bless and watch over him and the whole Codey family. They've had a rough run of late, so please keep team Codey in your prayers.

Now let's give a shout out, switching gears to another small business made stronger and more resilient through a partnership of the New Jersey Economic Development Authority. In Cape May Court House you will find Coho Brewing Company, founded in 2018 by that woman, Karen Buckingham. Coho carries a crime and justice theme throughout many of their brews, including beers such as Crime Scene, Hazeas Corpus, Chalk Outline, and a more recent addition to their taps, Back the Blue. This one's important because the proceeds from that one go to support the National Night Out program and local youth camps.

Karen also hosts corn hole tournaments at the brewery to benefit Cape May County's canine units. Pat, I think it's only a matter of time until you and I are competing in one of those corn hole tournaments down at Coho Brewing Company. Needless to say, we'll get a ride there and home. Working alongside the EDA, Coho received grants that were vital to protecting the jobs of Karen's ten employees, as well as keeping the rent and utilities paid up.

I connected with Karen last Wednesday to check in and see how everything was going in the brewery. She and her team are confident in a strong future. To Karen and everyone at Coho, thank you for keeping our craft brewing industry strong and for your role in making New Jersey a destination local for beer lovers from across the nation. Check them out, by the way. They're at 28 Indian Trail in Cape May Court House.

One last thing for today before we hand things over to Judy, last week our administration released New Jersey's first ever climate change resiliency strategy, a science-based blueprint for protecting New Jersey's vulnerable communities, environment, economy, and infrastructure from the impacts of climate change. This report is the culmination of 2 years of collaboration among 17 state departments of agents and agencies. It sets priorities to guide state and local climate action and includes over 100 recommendations for fighting

climate impacts, including sea level rise, chronic flooding, rising temperatures, and more frequent and intense storm events. With the floods most recently from tropical storm Ida and before that in fewer communities but still devastating from **[15:42]**, with all of that still fresh in our minds, this report takes on an added importance. I thank everyone who was involved in its creation.

To take a look for yourself, head over to the Department of Environmental Protection's homepage at that website at the bottom, www.nj.gov/dep (<http://www.nj.gov/dep>). Particular shout out to Commissioner Shawn LaTourette and his team; again, www.nj.gov/dep (<http://www.nj.gov/dep>). With that, I'll turn things over to the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor, and good afternoon. I would like to extend my condolences on the passing of General Colin Powell, true American hero. It is reported that the General was fully vaccinated. We do not know if he had received a booster. However, this shows that this virus is unrelenting.

This virus searches out vulnerable, elderly individuals, specifically those with underlying conditions. To boost protection, we have been encouraging those eligible for the Pfizer booster to receive it as soon as possible. Residents who are eligible for a Pfizer booster dose can now make an appointment through the New Jersey vaccine scheduling system known as NJ VSS. When you visit NJ VSS's scheduling system, the website www.covidvaccine.nj.gov (<http://www.covidvaccine.nj.gov/>), you will see a new button that reads Register and Schedule for Booster.

If you have preregistered in the NJ VSS system, you will need to verify your name, email address, phone number, and birth date. You will then receive an email inviting you to schedule an appointment for your Pfizer booster dose. Please ensure that you are using the same information you registered with initially. That is how the system will recognize you and search for your record. If you are new to NJ VSS, you will fill out the registration form and then directly proceed to scheduling your booster dose appointment online.

Many sites also accommodate individuals who walk in without booking appointments. The New Jersey Vaccine Call Center is available to assist individuals seeking dose appointments and can be reached at 1-855-568-0545; that's 1-855-568-0545. I would urge those who are eligible to get a booster shot as soon as possible so you have that extra protection as the holidays approach. More and more people will be eligible for the booster in the coming weeks, so please schedule your booster now.

To help clarify the timing of when individuals are eligible for a Pfizer booster, the Department has added a popup message to its homepage, www.nj.gov/health (<http://www.nj.gov/health>), that provides the date of when you would have had to receive your second Pfizer dose in order to be eligible. For example, today it says if you completed your second dose of Pfizer on or before April 18, 2021, you are now likely eligible for a booster dose. As we have shared previously, more than 1.1 million residents who received their primary Pfizer series through the end of March are already eligible to receive their booster dose. That includes those 65 years and older, those with underlying medical conditions at high risk for severe COVID, or individuals who work in a job that places them at higher risk, including 650,000 healthcare workers; grocery store workers; public transit workers; education staff, including teachers, support staff, and daycare workers; first responders, including fire fighters and police; transit workers; food; agricultural workers; and US Postal Service workers.

We recognize that not all of those who are eligible know they are eligible for a booster. In order to help raise awareness, the Department has advertisements on billboards, trains, buses, transit platform outlining eligibility. In regard to the Moderna and Johnson & Johnson boosters, the FDA's Vaccine and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee, VRBPAC, recommended last week that the FDA issue emergency use authorizations to provide for booster doses for certain Moderna recipients at six or more months after their primary series and for all J&J recipients at two or more months after the first dose. Like the currently authorized Pfizer booster, the FDA's advisory panel recommends that Moderna booster eligibility include individuals over 65 years of age, individuals 18 through 64 years of age with high risk of severe COVID, and individuals 18 through 64 years of age whose frequent institution or occupational exposure to SARS-CoV-2 puts them at high risk of serious complications. The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices will meet on October 20th and October 21st to offer further recommendations on use of the Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines.

In New Jersey, the Delta variant now represents 100% of variants circulating. Given how transmissible the Delta variant is, boosters are going to be vital in reducing the spread of COVID-19 virus in our state. The Governor went over the breakthrough cases collected by the Department's Communicable Disease Service through the New Jersey Hospital Association's portal. Hospitals are also sending in their real time data. As of October 17th, of the 545 adults hospitalized for COVID-19 in the state, 423 or 78% of them were not fully vaccinated. While no vaccine is 100%, COVID-19 vaccines continue to remain highly effective in protecting people against COVID-19 and hospitalization and death. It is also important that you get your second dose and a booster or third dose, if eligible.

Moving onto my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 890 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients or persons under investigation. We have no new reports of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children. At the state Veterans homes since our last press briefing, sadly there has been one new COVID-19 related death of a resident at the Vineland Home. At the state psychiatric hospitals, there are no new cases among patients at the hospitals.

The daily percent positivity as of October 14th in the state is 3.96%. The northern part of the state reports 3.18, the central part of the state 4.44, and the southern part of the state 5.01. That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe. Get vaccinated to protect ourselves, our family, friends, and our children. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you for all of that. I don't want to put you and Ed on the spot. It's far too early to claim victory, but the numbers feel like now they're moving slowly but surely in a better direction, right?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah.

Governor Phil Murphy: Rate of transmission has dropped, and the standard one-day snapshot is even lower. Hospitalizations, I mentioned, under 900 for 6 days in a row. It feels like the battle is the variant, perhaps, starting to crest; at the same time, living our lives much more inside. Obviously, vaccines and masking are two big weapons. Is that fair?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah.

Governor Phil Murphy: Ed, how are you feeling about things?

Department of Health Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Since I was born to worry and being someone who is pessimistic, I agree. We're clearly in a much better situation than we were last year. We are clearly moving slowly but correctly in the right direction. We have a lot of stuff going in our favor. We do have a vaccine increasing throughout the population.

We do have increasing immunity. We do have a population that knows the right things that they should be doing and for the most part goes ahead and follows those right things. Overall, look across the country. You see similar patterns, so that's also in our favor. Of course, what's going against it, as you mentioned, colder weather coming, holidays coming, people gathering more, COVID fatigue, other things that can impact us as well. Without a doubt, we're in much better shape than we were a year ago. Hopefully we continue in the right direction.

Governor Phil Murphy: Amen. I left holidays off the list, but that's a good reminder. It's not just that we're going inside. We're probably going to be gathering with others a lot more. Just do it smart, folks. Again, if you're inside and you're not – if you're with your family and you know what everyone's vaccination status is, I think you can have a pretty normal holiday.

If you're inside and you don't know that, particularly if you're packed in closely together, put one of these on or take the party outside. That almost sounded like let's take this outside, Pat, which I'm not going to do with you. I always look up and see a firearm there, so I'm not going to ever do that to you. Colonel Callahan, welcome. What do you got?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Glad to report that there's really not much to report from this side, still firing on all cylinders with FEMA from not only COVID but from Ida response. The week's weather ahead looks good. I'm even more happy to report in monitoring the tropics right now, there's nothing going on down there. That's all I have, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: Let's hope it stays that way, amen. Sam, is that you? We're going to start with Sam. Jamil's got the microphone. Before we do, I didn't say this on Wednesday because I wasn't 100% sure of the schedule.

We're going to be back together again Wednesday at 1:00, but it's going to be virtual. We'll be on the usual platforms when we're on virtual. We're moving around the state pretty good these days for a bunch of different reasons. Bear with us, Wednesday 1 o'clock virtual. With that, Sam, good afternoon.

Q&A Session

Sam Sutton, Politico: Afternoon, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm losing my voice, so if you could give me fewer asks than normal, if you could, Sam.

Sam Sutton, Politico: Fair enough. Your vaccine or test order for state employees takes effect today. Do you have any data on the percentage of state employees who are vaccinated? If not, why not? Then second, on the weekly testing for unvaccinated state workers, are those tests being provided by state agencies at the workplace or are workers expected to get tested on their own time?

Governor Phil Murphy: This is a good question for several reasons. Judy, you should weigh in as well. I think, Brent, you were asking about this separately. We had used October 18th as the date that we wanted to get folks back in. I think we made the right decision to do that in a phased manner, particularly somewhat related to your question, Sam, is to make sure that we could have a smooth testing rollout.

This is the right decision we decided with some of the bigger agencies, to focus on them first, particularly the ones that have a high customer-facing reality. Today you've got our front office, which you've basically been in. In addition to that, you've got Children and Families are in today. Department of Labor is in today. Motor Vehicles is in today. Other departments will get phased in over the coming weeks.

I think within Labor, the One Stops are not yet open. They will be phased in over the next number of weeks. I don't off the top of my head have a schedule, but the folks who work in all of those departments are aware of what their schedule is. I don't know, at least off the top of my head, what percentage are vaccinated. It's a very high percentage. Judy, do you happen to have that number?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I don't have it.

Governor Phil Murphy: We can get back to you on that and any other color on the testing. Part of the reason of testing is we wanted to make this as user friendly as possible. Whenever possible, we want the testing to be done such that there's no pain taken by the employees. We'll get back, Alyana, if there's any other color on either the rate or testing. I'll get back to Sam, if we could. Brent?

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: Did we miss an announcement on that being phased in? I thought when it was announced it was going to be October 18th is when everyone went back. That's certainly what we reported. Two, does the vaccine or testing requirement apply to those who haven't reported today, state workers who aren't in today? Can you give us a breakdown of breakthrough cases, how many had preexisting conditions, which conditions, and what is the age and race breakdown?

Governor Phil Murphy: Is that

Governor Phil Murphy: Is that breakthrough general?

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: Yeah.

Governor Phil Murphy: It's possible you missed an announcement, but this is the way we've been thinking about it for some time, so if it's on us, that's my bad, but we made the decision, particularly the testing because we still think it's right to have the testing option as opposed to going through other walls. That's the

area that has made it more complicated. I don't know that I can say definitively. Parimal, what if you're in a department that's not in person today?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Yeah, so the vaccination requirement applies to everyone starting today, but the testing opt out only applies if the workers are reporting to the worksite regularly, so if a worker is still working from home, they're required to be vaccinated, but the testing option just doesn't come into play for them.

Governor Phil Murphy: Did you agree with my list of who's in – so it's Motor Vehicles, Department of Labor, Children and Families, and the front office.

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: We will chop through that. Ed, breakthrough cases. Brent's question about any sense of – I think quite – triggered by other reasons but General Powell's passing, what percentage – do you have any more understanding of comorbidities?

Department of Health Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Yes, I have some of that here, and the other we can get for you. Let me just begin. In general, when we're talking about across age groups, yes, we follow that, and when you look at just the rate of breakthroughs across age group, your rates are relatively similar running between about .6% to .7%, .8% in that range or so, and again, I can get you those exact numbers. As would be expected when you talk about hospitalization and deaths, that begins to change with the older you get, the more susceptible you are and the more likely you are to go ahead and be hospitalized or die, although those numbers are also quite low. For example, hospitalizations, the 18 to 29-year-olds have a .004% chance of being hospitalized, whereas those over 80 have a .198%. A lot of numbers. I don't want to read through everything, but that's the general idea, and similarly when it comes to death. The younger you are, you're extremely unlikely to die. As you get older, you're just very unlikely to die in breakthrough cases, so that continues with that as well. Similarly, when we talk about the percentage of people who have underlying medical conditions, then yes, of the 17 – 1,718 total hospitalized breakthrough cases, 1,179 of them were known to have preexisting conditions. Similarly, as far as deaths go, of the 362 deaths, 262 of them were known to have preexisting conditions as well.

Governor Phil Murphy: About two thirds in both cases?

Department of Health Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Two thirds to three quarters of all, and a small percentage are unknown, so yes, basically – and those numbers are always going to change a little bit, but that's basically what we're seeing, which is what you would expect. In general, the older you are the more preexisting conditions you are, the more likely you're going to have a bad outcome should you get a breakthrough case.

Governor Phil Murphy: I would bet – and I don't know this, but of the 550 hospitalizations that did not have some comorbidities, I'd bet you that's an older demographic.

Department of Health Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: I don't have that exactly in front of me, but I expect you're right, and we don't always have tremendously detailed information on every single individual, but yes. To me – and I'm going to go very slightly out the lane for a second, and I'm sorry. People have asked about whether Colin Powell's death suggests that there's something wrong with the vaccination or some reason why people shouldn't get vaccinated, and my answer is really just the opposite. It shows that people need to get vaccinated because you can't protect every single person who's going to get the vaccine. The vaccine we've always said is not perfect. It's extremely good, but it is not armor that never lets anything in, and the way that you help protect those people who are most vulnerable is by not letting the virus get to them in the first place, and the best way to do that is to go out there and get vaccinated. It protects you and just as importantly and maybe more importantly, it protects those around you who are more vulnerable.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said. Thank you for that, Brent. Joey, let's go to you. Good afternoon.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Good afternoon. Two quick follow-up questions on the state worker return. One, can you give some kind of ballpark on what percentage of the total state employees are back full-time today? You're saying these certain departments, but what proportion is that? Then just to clarify on the vax versus testing requirement, do you mean that the requirements don't come into play yet at all for people who are still working mostly at home because you were saying that only the vax requirement and not the testing requirement comes into play. Can you clarify that point? Then one totally unrelated question. Governor Murphy, do you know how you plan on voting yet, mail ballot, early, in-person, election day?

Governor Phil Murphy: Hoping to vote for myself. Get that off my chest. Let me go back to the other ones I don't have a percentage, but we can come back to you. The two principles that are guiding the sequence are big operations and customer facing, but we'll come back to you. I think, Parimal, you may want to come in and add more color on this. I think to put a fine point on this, the testing piece if you're working from home is not enforced until you come into the office, but we do expect folks to be vaccinated, and when they come in if they're not vaccinated for whatever reason, then they're going to have to start doing the testing regime. Does that make sense?

No news yet on voting, but it's a good question, and it's a good opportunity for me to say something that has nothing to do with me that's just about voting. You've really got three options still left. You can still vote by mail, and we proved last year especially that we're good at that as a state. You can vote on election day, which is November 2nd – Tuesday, November 2nd, but this year the new great wrinkle is we have in-person early voting for nine straight days beginning on October 23rd, which is this Saturday through October 31st, which is Halloween Sunday, so nine straight days, Saturday, Sunday, Monday through Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Other states that have done it – by the way, in your county, there are a handful if not more locations in your county, and it's not every polling station that's open, but there are a significant amount of them that are open, and because of the investments we've made and the great work by our county clerks and boards of election and their staffs, it's not like election day where you have to go to your school that you vote in.

You can go to any one of these places that are available in your county. Other states that have done this have seen participation go up dramatically. You see a particular bump on weekends because there's a lot of folks who combine at least in their mind if not in their actions worship with voting, something called Souls to the Polls, which is a big tradition in a lot of other states, and my gut tells me we'll see that as an emerging tradition in New Jersey as well. No news yet, but we'll come back to you when we do. Let's go to Ken. Is that you, Ken?

Kenneth Burns, WHYY: Yes, sir.

Governor Phil Murphy: Nice to see you. How do I know it's Ken? Because I love that mask.

Kenneth Burns, WHYY: Your favorite mask. Just two questions. One, we've learned Friday that there was an issue with the vendor who were supposed to provide testing for teachers in schools, and they were on the deadline today as well. What is the status of that vendor, and how soon did they tell you – if they told you anything – that they'll be up and running in all the districts that opted in to have the state pay for testing? The second question involves New Jersey Parents for Virtual Choice. It was almost two months ago when I came here and ask if you had met with them yet, and they've informed me that they have yet to hear from anybody in your office. Do you still plan on meeting with them? Are you still interested in talking to them about their particular issue concerning the lack of a virtual choice in school?

Governor Phil Murphy: On the first one, Judy, tell me if I've got this right, we did have a vendor issue. My guess is it's going to take the next few weeks to sort that out and we're working with the districts that are impacted by that. Is that fair to say? That timing sounds right?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: We're pretty much settled with the opportunity for each district to identify the vendors that we have vetted through the procurement process. We have three regional vendors that are available to the schools, or the schools can contract on their own. We have over a thousand testing sites. Every county has a testing opportunity that can be used as well.

Governor Phil Murphy: It's like all these other big steps that we've taken. The first few weeks you have to – not everything's a straight line is it fair to say, so when we started testing originally – remember folks, it feels like a million years ago, the line of cars up in Bergen County and down in Holmdel, but we will get there, and this is going to be something that we think will ultimately be a very natural process. I don't know that I personally committed to meeting with them, but I said that we would certainly meet with them, and Parimal, help me follow up on that. If people are reasonable, we meet with them period, even in some case when they may be unreasonable. I completely respect their passion, but we're not – unless this virus takes a turn that is dramatic, we're not going down the virtual route.

We know now statistically the devastation on learning loss particularly in underserved communities, the mental health issues including with educators and staff, so assuming that we believe that we are within a reasonable range of that first objective, which is to keep everybody in our school community safe, we're going to stay in person. Again, every time you think you've got this figured out, this thing takes a turn you don't expect. God willing it won't take that kind of turn, but Parimal, you'll help me follow up. I don't know that it'll be me, but if people are reasonable and want to present a case, we are always willing to listen. Thank you. Good to see you. Alex, good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Good afternoon. Dr. Lifshitz, how does a breakthrough case happen? Can you simply explain in laymen's terms how a COVID-19 or a COVID-19 variant is able to penetrate the protection of a vaccine? Is it a breakthrough or more of a break around? For you commissioner, I know you've already talked about this a little bit, but can you just have a message to send out to people who are more skeptical about getting vaccinated after General Powell's death? I know that you folks have said that it's actually an argument for vaccination, but can you understand people who look at the situation who say he got vaccinated and died anyway. Why should I get vaccinated? I just wanted you to address that point.

For you, Governor, why is it taking so long for the One-Stop Career Centers to reopen? Motor Vehicles has been doing in-person services all throughout the pandemic for most of the pandemic, and though they've had their problems, they're open. Why is it taking so long for them to reopen, and when you say weeks, can you give us a timeframe or a date? Finally, I wanted to revisit something that we talked about on Wednesday. On Wednesday you said that you went to a political event, and you were not wearing a mask indoors because everyone there was fully vaccinated. Hours after you said that, you went to the Monmouth County Chairman's Dinner, and you didn't wear a mask. You were in front of a packed ballroom of people. Are you saying that you knew the vaccination status of every single person in that room? Can you understand folks who are questioning why your mask wearing depends on the audience, and in fact, here, why are we still wearing masks during this briefing? You're not wearing one. You're fully vaccinated. I'm fully vaccinated. I'd bet my bottom dollar everyone in this room's fully vaccinated. Are we just doing this for show here?

Governor Phil Murphy: I love the way you ask these. By the way, the questions about One-Stops put the Motor Vehicles Commission in positive light. That's the first time since we've been in the pandemic, so I want to make sure the motor vehicles folks are listening to that. I don't have a specific reason on One-Stops, but DOL is coming in in headquarters today and my guess is it's a matter of a few weeks. I don't have a specific date, but my guess is the next two or three weeks unless my colleagues see that differently. We have a requirement in the state – we walk into these – for viewers who don't see, we walk in wearing these. We leave wearing these. We take them off to speak. We're six feet apart from each other. We're in a state building, and that's still the requirement, so that's the specific answer to why we have them here, and I hope that won't last forever and always. Trust me. I don't like wearing them any more than you do.

I don't think anyone in the state wears a mask indoors more than I do, so when I speak, I take my mask off. I sat a table in that second event with people who I know were vaccinated. I knew who I was sitting with. I got up and spoke. I had it one when I came in, and I put it on when I left. These are folks – not you because I think you call balls and strikes, but folks are reaching for straws here in terms of the politics, and I'll leave it at that. I think your first two questions are really, really good, and I think – very simply, how does a breakthrough actually happen if you've been fully vaccinated, and secondly, one more time the rationale on why not withstanding the overwhelming tragedy of General Powell's death, it turns out the fact of the matter is you're a lot safer if you're vaccinated than if you're not vaccinated. Ed, do you want – with Judy's blessing, we'll get Ed to address both of those, please.

Department of Health Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: When you're vaccinated, several things happen. The thing that people hear about happening and one of the major things is that your body begins to make antibodies that protects you against the virus coming in. In the past, I've explained the antibodies as being like a glove covering to try to keep – over the hooks of the virus that's trying to grab onto you and the vaccine works extremely well by doing that. Almost everyone – again, not everyone, some people can't generate a good response, but almost everyone out there generates a very good response. They make these antibodies, and the antibodies work well at protecting those virus from invading the cells, but they're not perfect. They're not perfect for a couple of reasons. First off, it is possible to overwhelm that type of defense and to mix my analogies, we've also talked about how vaccine is kind of like wearing an umbrella in the rain. If it's pouring out there, if you're getting exposed by a virus all over the place, if people who are infected are coughing on you, you can overwhelm your body's response, and you can become infected.

In addition to that, the vaccines are developed to produce these antibodies. The antibodies for the most part are in your blood system. They're not for the most part up in your nasal passages and other places where the virus first often comes, so it is possible that the virus can come in, it can take hold, for example, in your nose, can begin to cause either no symptoms or mild symptoms and begin to replicate before your body's antibodies can get up there and really fight it off. That's also why over and over again we talk about how the vaccine is particularly effective at protecting against hospitalization and death, and that's really what we're

looking to do. If you got a mild cold from this, people would consider that to be a tremendous win, and that can happen because it can take a little while for the body's immune system to respond and get the antibodies and its response up to that area where it needs to be so you can still become ill from that.

That's basically why again the vaccine's not perfect, and of course, that's an oversimplification on how vaccine breakthrough occurs, and to come back to your question about do these cases and do these deaths and everything else suggest that there's something wrong with the vaccine and that we shouldn't get vaccinated. Again, I'm going to say absolutely not. To me, it's the opposite. To again try to come up with a quick analogy, imagine that you're in a dry forest and somebody throws a match into the middle of the forest. What's going to happen? It's going to take off. The fire's going to spread very rapidly all over the place, and you'll get a huge conflagration in no time at all. Now imagine instead that people are vaccinated, and by vaccinated in my analogy it's now rained. It's wet all over the place. Yes, I throw that match out there. I might find a dry spot. I might get some sparks. It might find a couple other places that it could spread to, but it's not going to spread anywhere near as widely or as quickly or as fast, and it won't be as serious because you have this protection out there, and the same thing happens with the virus as it's trying to spread from person to person.

Yes, the vaccines not perfect, and yes, it could spread occasionally from somebody who's vaccinated to somebody else who's vaccinated, but it's very difficult for it to do that, and it's not going to keep on doing that, and it's not going to keep on spreading widely, so by getting that wide ring of vaccination, it's like protecting that forest against that fire. You keep things from totally engulfing the place in flames, and you really make everything much more manageable, and the people who do get sick tend not to get as sick in general.

Governor Phil Murphy: Ed, thank you. Well done. Thank you, Alex. Sir?

Reporter, NJ Spotlight: Good afternoon, Governor. Thank you for your time. Question from John Mooney. With today's deadline for school personnel and state workers to be either vaccinated or subject to weekly testing, any update on statewide compliance numbers or issues, and do you worry about losing workers or teachers who don't wish to comply? Question from Leah Mishkin, earlier this month you said the state would get creative in getting aid to undocumented Ida victims who can't get FEMA aid. New York has set aside 27 million for this purpose. Is New Jersey going to create a similar fund? Question from Brenda Flanagan. Governor, what is your response to a lawsuit from 30 teachers and state workers saying the testing mandate for unvaccinated teachers and state workers is unconstitutional under the 4th and 14th amendments? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I don't have a – I think we've hit some of these to some extent already. I don't have a specific number for you statewide, but we'll get that back to you. Judy's got a bunch of districts that are now self-reporting. The numbers are high in terms of vaccination rights as we expected, but it's an incomplete list, so I don't want to give even any complete answer, but it's within the range of any expectations, Judy, I think we would have had. I'll tell you, when you've got a vaccination mandate with a testing option, I think that's a reasonable – and in school's everyone's required to wear a mask. Not happily, but that's the package. I don't think that's unreasonable. If people, sadly, look at that, and they view it unreasonable, then God bless them. That's the decision they're going to make, but I don't expect we're going to have a whole lot of those people. That to me is a reasonable place. Again, not wild about the masking. We know vaccines are our best weapon. We know masking is our second-best weapon, and testing gives us the information that we need, so nothing really – and that I think addresses my – I won't comment on any of these suits, but that's at least conceptually would be my answer about the group that you mentioned that was suing us.

I still hope that we can find more money for the undocumented. I stand by that. We were able to cobble together \$40 million, and I know there are a lot of legislators who want to work with us to find more of that, and I continue to be more than open minded on that, and if some legislation comes my way without getting – obviously, the devil's in the details, but conceptually, that's something that I would support, and I still expect that to happen. Thank you. I can't see who's that. Is that Trish back there? Okay, let's go back, and then we'll come, Dave, down to you to finish us off.

Trish Hartman, ABC: Hi. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon.

Trish Hartman, ABC: How many school districts were allowed to have extensions because of the testing vendor issue, and maybe Commissioner Persichilli, could you tell us more about what the issue was? Was it with all three of the regional testing vendors? Is it because of the overwhelming demand for testing, or is it something else? Then if a teacher or a state worker, for example, is not vaccinated and then does not comply with the testing requirement, what happens? What are the repercussions? Do they have a certain amount of tests they can miss before they have disciplinary action or termination? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. Before you answer that Judy, I should say that, as usual, Rob Asaro-Angelo is looking in, and he is in the category, I think, in this Department of Labor – I got a couple of questions over here. You asked about the One-Stops. I think he has been trying – which I think is a smart way to approach this – on something like this manage expectations and exceed the expectations, and he reminds me in fact that there are a lot of One-Stops that are open for appointments as we speak, so he is going around making some stops today to check on that, so it's in fact a better picture – assuming it's by appointment, it's a better picture than we were expecting, and that's a good thing. Judy, any comment on how many districts are impacted by this, and I'll ask Parimal to answer the question if you don't comply. I assume the non-compliance, Trish, is not the vaccine non-compliance but the testing piece, right?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah, I don't have the number. If we granted any extensions, I'm not aware of it.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay. Can we come back to you on that first one? Parimal, what happens if I am not vaccinated, which is a bad decision, but then I also don't comply with the testing requirement?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Yeah, so assuming that the teachers unionize, there's a process of discipline that's worked out between the union and the school district. That's part of their negotiations.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. Dave we're going to ask you to bring us home.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Thank you, Governor. I apologize in advance Ed. You're doing a lot of talking today, but I have some questions that maybe the Governor will throw over to you, and I know there may be some extra cash in that for you. With regard to the boosters, specifically, how effective is getting a booster shot? Do we have any sense? You talked about the whole picture of antibodies increasing and so forth, but specifically, how much more effective is getting a booster than not getting a booster after six months? Do we have any idea how long the booster shots are going to last? Because some people may have gotten the booster, and

now they're like well, do I get the other type of booster the next time it's due and when might that be? Is it going to be a matter of another variant perhaps showing up? On the better than last year outlook that you were talking about Governor and also Dr. Lifshitz, what is your message to people who think that the pandemic is probably winding down? They don't really need to be vaccinated. They're going to have a holiday dinner or a party, and this would not really present that much of a risk anymore. Do you think this is reasonable? Do you think this is selfish? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Let me start, Ed, and you and Judy may want to weigh in. We're good. Thank you. I think on the boosters, what I've read, Ed, it's multiples more effective. Ed can give you the numbers. It's not just like 20% more, but it's 3x, 5x, 10x more protection. Again, Ed will weigh in. I think the answer is we don't know yet on the boosters and how long they last. I don't think anyone has hung their hat on that one unless something's happened that I missed, and maybe more importantly on your last question, it's better. It feels like it's getting better, but this is not finished. You've still got 800 and some, 70 some people in the hospital. People are still passing. Literally, in the hospitals yesterday – this is not like we're comparing this overtime. Literally yesterday, there were 12 folks who died yet to be confirmed, and so this is significant. 83 people went into the hospital yesterday. We have a total of 890, pardon me, in the hospital.

I personally am of the opinion, but this thing's taken turns you don't expect. It's a sine curve that with each hump is less than the hump that proceeded it and probably there's some logarithmic relationship between the heights. I'm prepared with going inside and holidays that we're going to come off of this and then we're going to go – my prediction for what it's worth is that we then come back up again after those gatherings, but again, it's not – please God, not as lethal and not as high as it was in the prior runs. Ed, how effective are the boosters? How long do they last? I guess to you and Judy – Judy gets the last word here – what's our message to folks coming up over the next three months, colder weather, lots of holidays? Ed, do you want to start?

Department of Health Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Sure. As to exactly how much better the boosters are, I wish I could tell you exactly, and the problem is we don't know for sure. We know based upon studies – and there have been some big ones in Israel and other places, and we're continuing to gather that data. We know from the drug makers' own studies as to how much antibodies increase and what they've been seeing in the people who've been boosted as well, so we do know that clearly it boosts antibodies and clearly it adds protection. Now there are some people who maintain protection well and don't even need that, and there are other people particularly, again, the older people who tend to lose immunity faster who will benefit more, but exactly how much and how much does it protect you and how long is it going to last and what will happen down the road if there is a new variant, unfortunately, those are all things which only time will tell for sure.

Clearly, even with two doses, you are protected – more protected than if you got none, but we do strongly encourage for maximum protection that those who are eligible go ahead and get boosted. As to the general question as what would we say – what would I say to people about coming holidays and things, sitting here and hearing about Colin Powell, I'm just quickly reminded of another ex-Secretary of State who once said how do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake, and to me, that's my message back here. We have made so much progress. People have done so much good hard work. They know what they should be doing. They know that vaccines can help, and vaccines have been helping. How do you go ahead and slide back from that to the point where you have just unnecessary deaths happening, unnecessary illness happening? That would be my message to people out there. You don't want to be that person who down the road is just saying oh, I can't take it back now. It's too late. It's too important to take those chances.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said. Judy, anything you want to add?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I just think we all have to be aware that last December because of the gatherings, we did see significant increases, and it's just not one thing alone that will protect us. It's being aware that vaccination is number one, masking is important, social distancing, washing your hands frequently. A lot of the preventive – layered preventive strategies do work. I can tell you the Department of Health on the floor that I am on, we have been in every single day since March 4th of 2020, and no one has contracted COVID at work.

Governor Phil Murphy: That's incredible. Thank God.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: I think there's a commonsense element to this. I'll put these on as we round out here. It's vaccinations without question, and if you're eligible for the booster, get it. I think we wait and let's follow the guidance. That's one other thing. I think folks just making their own decision about which booster to get – let's follow the CDC guidance on when and what, and masking we know is the second most effective piece. The commonsense piece to me is what it comes back to so often. What's our setup like? The setup here is extremely preventative, right? We're all separated from each other. You could walk in here, and I have the confidence that I do and we do to take our masks off and speak without worrying. If you're in a bar and you're packed in and you just don't know everybody there, you just have no way of knowing what their status is, that's at the other end of the spectrum, and I think folks having a sense of where that spectrum looks like particularly during the holidays – and by the millions, folks have done the right thing in New Jersey, so we should wear that as a badge of honor. Judy and Ed, I echo Dave's comments. We got our money's worth out of Ed today. Judy, thank you. As always, Pat, Parimal, Jamil, Alyana. Again, we'll be with you virtually on Wednesday. Same time 1 o'clock but virtually. Everybody stay safe. God bless.

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