

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: January 10th, 2022 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everyone. With me to my right is the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, another familiar face, the State's Epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan. Great to have you, Tina, as well. Guy to my left who needs no introduction as well, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have Parimal Garg, Alex Altman, Ruth Hartnett, and a cast of thousands here.

Before we jump in, just unspeakable tragedy in the same week in both Philadelphia and New York City, cities that are not a part of New Jersey but mean so much to New Jersey and especially the loss of life of these kids is just overwhelming. I was exchanging a note yesterday afternoon with newly inaugurated Eric Adams and just the tragedy is overwhelming, so we all keep each and every one of those victims – I think at least by my account, Pat, at least 31 between the two awful tragedies. 18 or 19 of them kids, so bless their hearts.

Let's jump right in onto the topic of why we're here into the numbers because we're in the thick of this latest fight against the Omicron tsunami washing across the state with the latest numbers from our hospitals – and you can see them. We've been showing it this way over the past number of weeks. We're seeing more of our residents hospitalized right now than at any point since in the end of April of 2020. April 29, 2020, to be exact was the last day that we had more than 6,000 folks in our hospitals. These numbers on screen cover, as you can see, only the past week, but over the past two weeks, well over 10,000 residents have entered our hospitals, many of them have since been discharged, thank God, but the increasing overnight numbers show that a growing number are having to stay.

Over the past week, this amounts to a roughly 20% increase. Today's total is nearly four times, Judy, that from one month ago today, which is extraordinary. 6,075 versus 1,531. Let that sink in for a minute. Over the past week alone, as you can see, both the ICU and ventilator numbers are up significantly and have roughly doubled since Christmas. These are the highest numbers we've seen since May of 2020. We're also recording more cases day to day – switching from hospitalizations to cases – at any point in the past 22 months. Again, let that sink in as we show the latest positive case totals, and you can see that we're clipping along anywhere from basically 25 to 35,000 on average a day.

Keep in mind, we know that the roughly 195,000 cases from the past week and about 380,000 since Christmas are likely a significant undercount that does not capture many at-home test results. Now for a complete list – speaking of testing, for a complete list of testing sites nearest where you live or work, please go to the main website covid19.nj.gov and click the link at the top for testing. Pat, Judy, and I were together on New Year's Eve Day at 90 Halstead Street in East Orange for that mega federal site, which remains open, but there are many, many other sites up and down the state.

Getting back to the numbers, keep this in mind as well. We're recording more deaths, tragically, now more than at any point in the past year. Remember one year ago we had only just begun our vaccination efforts. The vaccines have proven strong protection against illness that can land you in the hospital or worse, especially when you are boosted, so I shudder to think what all of these numbers, whether it's hospitalizations, cases, or loss of life would be if we did not have the vaccines. As you can see, roughly about 168,000 more New Jerseyans have gotten their boosters over the past week. That's good progress, and we continue to also see more of those who had put off getting their initial vaccine doses rolling up their sleeves, and that's also good progress. We are thankful to have them now in this fight, and we are now in strong – In a strong position to keep this process and progress going. These numbers are all good signs, but we need to still pick up the pace if we're going to put this virus behind us.

Now on the topic of vaccines, let's move on to the latest breakthrough data coming from the Communicable Disease Service. Here are the preliminary numbers for the week December 20 through December 26th, so just – this is just as the Omicron tsunami that we're in began to really gather itself. You'll see the percentage of infections among individuals who have at least completed their primary vaccination courses has been creeping up over the past several weeks. Dr. Ed Lifshitz, who you all know, and his team are going to be breaking this down further I hope sooner than later – and I believe sooner than later – into those who have received only their primary vaccinations and those who have also gotten their booster, and we hope to also start relaying that information to you very soon.

Regardless, the unvaccinated are still the ones testing positive by a rate of more than two to one. The unvaccinated are still overwhelmingly the ones going to the hospital, and even if every single one of the hospitalizations still under investigation by the Communicable Disease Service is a COVID-related one, the unvaccinated would still account for more than 92% of the week's total hospitalizations. The unvaccinated remain overwhelmingly those who are

accumulating to the virus. Let's also take a quick look – and this is a cumulative overall breakthrough totals, but again, more than half of those who are eligible for a booster have yet to get it, meaning that they are becoming more and more vulnerable to the virus as this protection from these shots months ago is now waning.

Let's now flip to school data. This is a little less relevant today given you'll see the column the week that we added is a week where we didn't have a whole lot of kids in school, put it that way, between the 28th and the 3rd, but it'll give you some sense of where we are. Since our schools have opened at the end of summer, we've recorded on the right column, as you can see, 384 total outbreaks impacting just under 1900 students and 342 staff. We take each and every one of these outbreaks and each and every one of these infections deadly seriously, but given that we have a total of 3500 schools across the state serving more than 1.4 million students, these numbers show how our layered approach to safety is helping to minimize the spread inside our schools.

I think, Judy, when we gather next Wednesday – we've got a holiday on Monday, so next Wednesday – and we look back at the first week back from the holidays, we're going to I'm sure see a significant upswing. This is important because among other things keeping our schools open is critically important. Our kids learn better when they're in their regular classrooms, and our educators are more effective when they are before a classroom. Virtual learning is no replacement for in-person education, and I don't believe there's any argument against this.

Because we must keep our kids learning in person, I want to be clear with – by the way, with no joy, with no joy – again, with no joy that the mask mandates in schools and daycare centers will continue at least for the foreseeable future. These requirements, again, give us no joy, but they're the only responsible course of action at this time. Meanwhile, if we look at the overall rates of infection among students and staff populations in general – the prior slide is in-school transmission. This includes infections which are taking place outside of school, and you can see what the incidences look like per 1,000 individuals. Again, this is why we need to be focused and stay focused on doing all we can to keep ourselves and our families safe. With all of that said, let's take a moment to recall as we always do several more of those who we have lost.

First up is on December 27th, only a couple weeks ago, our state's law enforcement community lost Hudson County Sheriff's Office lieutenant Matthew Vogel. He was just 50 years old. Lieutenant Vogel served the Hudson County community for over 22 years, including service with the North Bergen Emergency Medical Services. With the Sheriff's Office, he was the agency's SWAT commander and a member of the accident reconstruction and investigation unit. He also led the water rescue team and oversaw radio communications. I know this from the Sheriff himself and from many of his teammates, his loss leaves a huge void, both personal and professional. Matt is survived by his mom Wilma and her husband Robert, his girlfriend Janice, his brother Mark, with whom I've spoken on a number of occasions and texted over the past couple of weeks, nephews Luke and Jack, along with aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, and colleagues. We thank Matt for his service. May God bless and watch over his memory and the family and friends and colleagues he leaves behind.

Next up we remember this guy – and it won't surprise you in a minute when I tell you what his passion was in a minute, Pat – Point Pleasant's Thomas Gleason. He passed from COVID on December 28th, a day after Matt passed, at just 60 years old. Born in Venezuela and raised in Point Pleasant Beach, music was his life. He spent time as a recording engineer in Nashville before returning home to Point Pleasant Beach to continue in the music industry. He was a studio production manager. He kept performing. He taught children's songwriting classes, including online through the pandemic. Tom left behind a proud family. His wife, and I might add the Assistant Commissioner of the Department of Education, Lisa Gleason, with whom I had the honor of speaking last week, stepsons Jeffrey, John, and Matthew and their significant others, his brothers William and Jonathan, along with his mother and brothers-in-law, and numerous nieces and nephews.

He was a shining member of our New Jersey family. May God bless Tom and watch over him and his memory, and we already know that he's found a place to keep on rocking in heaven. I asked Lisa who was his – if he had to pick one musical hero, and it was serendipitous because I'd just finished with Tammy watching – it took us a month – over a month to watch the Beatles *Get Back* documentary. I suspect the two of you may be joining me in that endeavor, and John Lennon was the answer, so in the spirit of *Get Back* and the song, "I've Got a Feeling", I'll quote Mr. Lennon himself. "Everybody had a good time."

Finally, we remember one of those we lost early in the pandemic, Ewing Township's legend on the right, Willie May Williams, Miss May, and she was 81. Look at that smile, man. Born and raised in Walterboro, South Carolina, Willie May came north and made a 33-year career in public service at the Trenton Psychiatric Hospital. In her Ewing community, Willie May was a beloved institution unto herself, beloved by neighbors and especially their kids and a lot of young folks who she put under her wing. Willie May's husband on the left, by the way, passed away shortly after she did due to longstanding heart issues, but at the time he was also battling COVID. Carrying on Miss May's legacy are her daughters Sonya, with whom I had the great honor of speaking, and Melanie, sons Gary and Kelly, stepdaughter Sally, and their families including her four grandchildren, Jordan, Jared, Emmanuel, and Gabriel.

She also left three siblings and a whole host of nieces, nephews, cousins, and other extended family and many, many friends, and mention many folks who she took under her wing, and Sonya mentioned to me that one of them was our very own now president of Kean University Dr. Lamont Repollet. We are grateful to Willie May's selflessness and spirit. We know God has blessed her memory, and we know that he has blessed all who we have lost.

Next up I want to give a quick shoutout to another of the innovative companies helping to strengthen our state's economy, Hamilton's GeoGreens. GeoGreens is the brainchild of the guy on the right, Desmond Hayes, and is an indoor vertical hydroponics farm helping to revolutionize our state's agricultural industry. Additionally, Desmond is also focused on using GeoGreen's produce to help fight food insecurity, and GeoGreens was recently approved as a vendor through the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, otherwise known as SNAP. So much of this was made possible through a grant from the Economic Development Authority that helped Desmond keep GeoGreens going through the darkest days of the pandemic, and his partnership with the EDA continues as well as he looks to expand. I had the opportunity to chat with Desmond last week and thank him for all that he's doing through GeoGreens. Check them out, geogreens.org, geogreens.org, a really special organization.

Before I turn things over to Judy, a couple of quick programming notes and then a quick salute to some folks who are stepping off the stage today. First up, tomorrow afternoon I will release my state of the state address. Despite the pandemic's efforts to knock us down throughout 2021, we kept our state moving forward in so many ways, and we have a lot to look forward to for this year. We may – pardon me. We have not only made real progress to restoring our sense of normalcy even in the teeth of this pandemic, we've also made real progress in making our economy stronger and working for more of our families. We've also made real progress against some of our state's longstanding challenges. I hope you will watch. We'll be streaming the state of the state through our social media channels tomorrow at 5 p.m.

Finally, we won't have a briefing here next Monday due to the fact that it is the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, jr. Day, national holiday, but we'll be back here at this table next Wednesday, January 19th at our usual time of 1 o'clock, and I know we'll have lots to discuss. I wanted to give a shoutout to, I believe if I counted this up 17 legislators who are stepping off the stage at the end of the session, which ends today. Senator Dawn Addiego, Assemblyman John Armato, Senator Kip Bateman, Assemblyman John Burzichelli, Assemblyman Nicholas Chiaravalloti, Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCroce, Assemblywoman Serena DiMaso, Assemblywoman Joann Downey, Assemblyman Jamel Holley, Assemblyman Eric Houghtaling, Senator Tom Kean, jr., Assemblyman Vince Mazzeo, Assemblyman Ryan Peters, Assemblyman Adam Taliaferro, Assemblywoman Valeria Vainieri Huttie, the great Senator Loretta Weinberg who stepped off the stage technically on Friday, and I want to give a particular shoutout to a guy who has been a great leader in this state even when we didn't necessarily always agree, but we got a lot done together, Senate President Steve Sweeney.

With that, please help me welcome 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. As the highly contagious omicron variant has surged in recent weeks, we have seen increasing numbers of children hospitalized with COVID. While most children appear not to get sick enough to be hospitalized, the number of pediatric patients in our hospitals with confirmed COVID is currently at the highest level since the pandemic began. Sadly, two children in our state have recently died as a result of COVID. Nationally, 1,000 children have died from COVID making it one of the top ten causes of death in children between the ages of 5 and 11.

There's no question that hospitalization, admissions to ICU, and deaths are still highest among older individuals, specifically 65 years and older, but this highly contagious Omicron variant is especially a concern for children who are either unvaccinated or too young to be vaccinated. Data from the CDC indicates that unvaccinated adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 are 10 times more likely to be hospitalized than children who've been vaccinated. In New Jersey, more than 90% of the children who are currently hospitalized with COVID have not received a single shot. Less than 3% have been fully vaccinated. For those too young to be vaccinated, it's really important that they be surrounded with people who are vaccinated. Approximately 520,000 children under the age of five are not yet eligible for any COVID-19 vaccination. They are all at risk.

There is also a concern for children at risk for multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children or MISC, a condition that can result in widespread inflammation, including heart inflammation. There has been a total of 156 cases of MISC here in New Jersey. I urge all parents, children 5 and up, to please get your children vaccinated. The vaccines are safe and effective against hospitalization and death. It is still the best tool we have along with masking, physical distancing, testing, frequently washing your hands and staying home when you're sick and getting tested. There are more than 1,900 vaccination sites around the state administering vaccine. We are bringing vaccine to where people are. For example, more than 2,029 individuals were vaccinated at the Cherry Hill Mall over this past weekend.

To find a vaccine site nearest you, visit covid19.nj.gov and click Vaccine Information. We can't tell which child is going to be the one to get into more severe trouble, but we do know that over 1,000 children in the United States, as I have stated, have succumbed to COVID. I urge everyone to stay up-to-date with their vaccines. To date means that you have received all the COVID vaccine doses that you are eligible for.

Currently in New Jersey 3.24 million residents are now up-to-date on their vaccines, meaning they have received a booster dose or have completed a primary series but are not yet eligible for a booster dose; 5.23 million New Jersey residents are not up-to-date on their COVID-19 vaccinations. If you have received your primary series five months ago, you are eligible for a booster. Your primary series is the two-dose regimen of Pfizer or Moderna. For J&J, if you received a single shot of J&J two months ago, you are eligible for a booster right now.

Remember, children ages 5 to 17 are only eligible for Pfizer vaccines. Children ages 12 and older are eligible for a booster. We recommend that everyone remain up-to-date for their vaccines. It is more important now than ever as the state and the country fights back against this surge of highly transmissible virus.

For my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 6,075 hospitalizations. There has been one new case of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children since our last briefing and, as I've reported, one death. There are 156 cumulative cases in the state; none of the children are currently hospitalized. At the state's Veterans homes since our last briefing, there have been nine new cases among residents and one COVID related death at the Menlo Park Home, seven new cases among Paramus residents, and one new case among Vineland residents. At our state psychiatric hospitals there are 139 new cases among patients; 61 at Trenton, 45 at Ancora, 20 at Greystone, and 13 at Ann Klein.

In New Jersey, the daily percent positivity is 30.19%. The northern part of the state reports 28.79%, central 32.56, and the southern part of the state 30.39. That concludes my report. Please continue to stay safe. Let's get vaccinated, get boosted to protect ourselves, our family, our friends, and most importantly our children. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you for everything, as always. It's a sad moment when we're grateful that the spot positivity rate is down to 30%. My God, the levels of folks testing positive is through the roof. Thank you for everything. Pat, I know it's going to be bitterly cold tomorrow. I know that's one thing folks probably want to get a sense of anything they should be expecting. Secondly, anything you've got on manpower, hospital bed expansions, etc. Great to have you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Sure, thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. With regards to the weather, yes, arctic blast will be coming in overnight. It is going to be bitterly cold for the next few days.

I remind everybody NJ211.org is a good place to go to see warming centers in your region as well as any information with regards to Code Blue. Also, highlight the importance of having an emergency kit in your vehicle not only when it's icy and snowy, but also when it's going to be in the teens. 511nj.org is a great place to go to see what the traffic conditions are before you head out.

With regards to COVID response, Gov, we do still have our All-Hazards Incident Management Team assisting the Rapid Mobile Response Team mission with Judy's shop. We even have DOT, CDL truck drivers in the game as partners to make sure they're able to keep that rapid mobile response team out there. We are working with FEMA, health, the EMS task force, as well as with our hospital regional collaborators RWJ University, Cooper on the hospital expansion plan. St. Joe's up in Passaic will be getting 13 more beds tomorrow. That mission continues.

I don't know if the Commissioner mentioned it; we do have 150 National Guard out in 13 or 14 long-term care facilities. In addition to that mission, we also have 160 members of the National Guard operation assigned to support our vaccine mega sites in Burlington, Somerset. They're also building one out in Passaic and in Bergen. National Guard, Gov, just phenomenal partners with us. The battle wages on. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Amen to that. Cold weather tomorrow, but hopefully not as challenging a week as we had last week on the weather front. We had to deal with three different storms, two snow, one freezing rain, but very cold. Everyone take note of that. 211 for a warming center is the place to go.

With that, we'll start with Ruth. Catherine, is that you? We'll start with you. Again, just the programming note would be we won't be together a week from today due to the Martin Luther King Holiday. We'll be together a week from this Wednesday, January 19th. Obviously, we'll get you between now and then if there's noteworthy updates that we owe you. With that, Catherine, good afternoon.

Q&A Session

Katherine Landergan, Politico: Hi. A few questions; one, you said that the school mask mandate will stay in place, but it will expire tomorrow along with some of your emergency powers. How do you plan on keeping it in place as well as other executive orders that rely on your emergency powers? Do you plan on reinstating the public health emergency?

Then under the same vein, the legislator has chosen to not renew some of your emergency powers and the waivers, directors, and orders will only be renewed for 45 days. What's your reaction to that? Do you anticipate requesting another 45-day extension? Finally, the new abortion bill that's headed your way does not have explicit insurance requirements that the original Reproductive Freedom Act had. Are you satisfied with that?

Governor Phil Murphy: I want to underscore what I said in my remarks, and it gives me no joy. I think Judy joins me in this and the Department of Education. You heard Judy talking about the upswing of incidents of infections and hospitalizations and sadly, a couple of deaths of our precious little kids. The mandate is going to have to stay in place for some amount of time longer.

Parimal will correct me if I'm wrong; the whole range of directives and orders related to the public health emergency expire tomorrow night, you're absolutely right, at 11:59 on January 11th. I would just say that I don't have a specific construct for you. We're working very cooperatively with the legislative leadership to make sure we've got a good pathway forward, particularly given the overwhelming tsunami that we're dealing with.

I would just say on the last, reproductive freedom, we don't spend a lot of time talking about bills that are not on our desk. I know this is being deliberated on as we speak, I think. God willing, we'll get something that works. It's not just guaranteeing freedom, but also having a real pathway toward access. God willing, we'll have both of those accomplished. That's a huge priority, particularly what we think will be or almost certain to be an impairment, if not striking down completely sooner than later by the US Supreme Court of *Roe versus Wade*. Real quick.

Katherine Landergan, Politico: Sorry, I'm just confused. Are you currently right now negotiating with law makers to try to get the mask mandate and other things included? If that doesn't happen, what's your next step?

Governor Phil Murphy: I'll stand with what I said. We're in good conversation with them. Matt?

Matt Arco, NJ.com: Good afternoon. On Test to Stay, do schools need to apply with the state to implement the program? If so, how many have been approved and what assistance are they getting from the state other than just guidelines on how to do it? Commissioner, when do you expect Omicron to peak in New Jersey, and how often do you update your models? Also, can you give us the ages of the deaths of the kids that you mention? Do you know whether or not they were vaccinated or had any preexisting conditions? Finally from *NJ Monitor*, Governor, is there a chance you'll reinstate the early release COVID protocols in prisons?

Governor Phil Murphy: Matt, on the last one, nothing to report on that on the early release question. I may be wrong about this; on Test to Stay, we issue guidelines, but we're not asking schools to apply to us unless you're aware of something that I'm not.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: No, there's not.

Governor Phil Murphy: The constraint, however, is man power; nurses who are, as you can imagine, overwhelmed; and test supplies. The test supplies is not just a New Jersey challenge, it's a national, if not global challenge. I know the Biden administration has committed to getting hundreds and millions on the street this month. Those are the two constraints as opposed to applications, unless there's anything you want to add to that. Any color, Judy or Tina, on when you might expect peaking? Any update on modeling and tragically with these precious little kids? Any more color on age or preexisting or comorbidities that they may have had?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: We update the models on a weekly basis now. Before we talk about when the peak will occur, we need a good definition of peak. The peak is actually the highest point before a downturn. We expect increases in hospitalizations to reach about 8,000 probably by the end – I don't have it in front of me, so the dates are not specific – by the end of the 3rd week in January going into the 1st week in February. The peak could occur sometime in the first two weeks of February before there's a downturn.

We do believe we're going to have high levels for a couple of weeks. Again, it's a prediction based on assumptions. We're watching it really closely. The last two days we've seen a slight downturn in the number of new hospitalizations versus the discharges. That's the first time we've seen that in a couple of weeks. It may change.

We are preparing. Cases are basically under counted. We do expect cases to stay at 20 to 30,000 for the duration of January. You do know if it stays at a steady rate, for example, 20,000 a day, then the Rt goes down to 1, which is obviously where we want it to be.

Governor Phil Murphy: Cases are clearly peaking before hospitalizations.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Cases peak first. Seven to fourteen days later we see hospitalizations as a lagging indicator from cases, and then another seven to fourteen days later we see deaths occur. This is monitoring every day.

Governor Phil Murphy: There's a fair amount of national modeling that implies cases. This is nationally peaking sort of this week. I hope that's true.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: We do too. We've had two days of a slight downturn, so we're looking at a silver lining. That's why I keep telling everybody it's a prediction. Omicron is a funny variant that shoots way up. For example, in South Africa, came down just as quickly. We can only hope that that occurs.

Governor Phil Murphy: Any color on these precious little kids? Tina, how are you?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Good, how are you? I did want to add that the peaks will also vary based on the region. What we see here on the East Coast in this northeast area is going to be very different from what we're seeing in other parts of the country where it's probably likely that our region will peak a little bit earlier as opposed to other areas of the country. Again, we have to stay tuned. As the Commissioner had mentioned with hospitalizations being a lagging indicator, it depends on what you're looking at as far as impact on healthcare system versus overall impact on the population; hopefully, less severe illness.

With regard to the pediatric deaths, because of privacy considerations, we aren't disclosing a lot of information on these cases. Some of them have not had underlying issues. Again, we want to just emphasize that many of them are too young to get vaccinated. It's very important that we have to maintain our vaccine coverage among all of the populations that are eligible for getting vaccinated so we can cocoon these children.

Governor Phil Murphy: It's worth noting, tragically, we have had under the age of 17 since the onset of this pandemic, 10 losses of life. God bless them all. Thanks, Matt. Mike, is that you?

Mike Catalini, Associated Press: Yup, good afternoon, Governor, thanks. Commissioner Persichilli, some states are allowing or their Departments of Health have allowed asymptomatic infected people, healthcare workers to return to work. Has New Jersey done that and issued similar rules? Can you explain that if so?

Governor, I just wanted to ask about the hospitalizations. Do we know these people that are being hospitalized, are they hospitalized because they have COVID or are they hospitalized because of some other reason and it's discovered while they're there that they have COVID? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Mike, on the first one, I believe we're following the CDC guidance, which is five days masking, at least not yet requiring a test. Obviously, if you can get a test, that's even more insurance. Judy can add any color to that.

Secondly, I think we have a fair number of what I've started to call incidental COVID, meaning you broke your leg, but everyone is getting tested. It turns out you've COVID. You didn't even know it. My wife didn't know it and still she's not back in the game, but never had any symptoms. There is a significant amount of that. Judy, any color on either the requirement for folks to return and secondly, incidental COVID?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Today with about 6,000 individuals in our hospitals with confirmed COVID positive tests, about 2,963 of them are in with a principle diagnosis of COVID, which means it's the reason for the admission, the reason for the hospitalization. About 32% of them are fully vaccinated, 68 to 70% of them are either unvaccinated or are partially vaccinated.

Governor Phil Murphy: Anything to add on when healthcare workers could come back?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: We follow the CDC on healthcare workers, if Tina has the –

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Yes, the Department of Health had just recently updated our healthcare provider guidance, which basically aligns with the CDC guidance in healthcare facility settings. It's hard to just blanket say what the particular return to work involves because it also depends on what kind of status the facility might be in. There's conventional contingency and crisis status that certainly will also dictate whether or not – and depending on the staffing situations. There might be some flexibility in terms of the work restrictions. We are aligned with the CDC recommendations.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Tina. Thank you, Mike. Dustin, good afternoon.

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Good afternoon. Just a follow up on Katherine's question about the Reproductive Freedom Act; are you going to sign the scaled back version or will you veto it in hopes of getting a more expansion bill in the next legislative session? A couple of questions on education; why were there no representatives from the Education Department at the Senate hearing on the pandemic's impact on education last week? Shouldn't the education commissioner or representative have been in attendance?

Is your office working with the Education Department on a plan for schools to recover from learning losses and staff shortages? Do you see your office working to push Test to Stay in schools? If not, why not? It sounds like what you said before that testing material seems to be a barrier. One last question; is the Administration tracking people who have been vaccinated and hospitalized or died from the Omicron variant? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I will leave the last one to Judy and Tina. Again, as you all have heard me say before, commenting on a specific bill that's not yet on our desk is not something we would normally do. A bill that guarantees a woman's reproductive freedoms and has the sufficient amount of access provisions associated with it, those are two hugely important conceptual elements of something that we would support. I have no insight as to why someone from the Department of Education was not at the Senate hearing, but Alex, will you come back and follow up with Dustin?

Yeah, we have a lot in place as it relates to both monies, programs, energies around tackling learning loss and mental health challenges, which have been overwhelming since the beginning of this pandemic. I don't have anything new to report, but we put – we have put, and we put a – and we'll continue to put a tremendous amount of resources up against that. You look at the – now, we've got the data to prove that the learning loss is significant, not unique to New Jersey, but significant, and even more significant in so-called underserved communities.

Yeah, you're right on Test to Stay. We support it, we like it, but the constraining factors are nurses who are overwhelmed, and probably even more so in this case, testing supplies, which God willing we'll get corrected sooner than later.

Dustin's last question, I think, maybe Tina, goes to you, which is can we say for sure what the lethality and severity of Omicron is as compared to other variants of COVID.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Right now, what we know about Omicron based on some recent data that's been – we're going to know more and more about Omicron as the weeks go by. According to Dr. Fauci's briefing last week, we do know that Omicron disease tends to present with slightly less severe illness.

However, we do know that there are hospitalizations and deaths that are associated with Omicron. It's real important that we're not complacent with regard to recognizing that Omicron, while they may result in less-severe illnesses that result in less hospitalizations and less deaths in comparison to other variants, we have to still maintain our high level of vaccination to try to keep up protection in the community. We know that also, now, that Omicron has some level of evasion of immunity particularly related to more severe illnesses. That's why, again, it gets back to us just taking all of our preventive measures.

Governor Phil Murphy: Interestingly, Tina, the Omicron story has been crafted or framed by unbelievable transmissibility and just raw – sheer, raw numbers of people getting infected, getting hospitalized, but with a general sense that it's not as severe as Delta or other variants. While all that may be true, it does not mean that it still can't kill you, or still can't put you in the hospital. That's the part of the story that I think all of us collectively tell less often that we should, please.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Right because as you see the denominators increase, eventually you're going to see more hospitalizations, more deaths, as the Commissioner has highlighted. Unfortunately, we've seen more pediatric deaths recently.

Governor Phil Murphy: Sadly.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: That's because of the larger denominator.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that. Thank you, Dustin. Alex, good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Good afternoon. Commissioner, can you just clarify a little bit on incidental COVID. You just said that 2,963 people are in the hospital primarily because of COVID. Does that mean that half of the people in hospitals right now are incidental COVID, the folks with broken legs, the folks who were caught in car accidents? Is 2,963 now the real number of people who are hospitalized with COVID, the real picture of COVID in the state as opposed to this larger 6,000 number.

I would also like to ask you about the veterans' homes. You announced 17 new cases, one new death. Have your infection controls failed again at the veterans' homes? Governor, on the \$53 million settlement on the veterans' homes, I know you haven't spoken that much about it. I'd just like to ask you this. Are you open to a settlement with the families of the folks who passed away in long-term care facilities as well, and will you apologize to either the families of the folks in the veterans' homes, or the folks in the long-term care facilities, for your administration's failures?

Now, on the legislature today, it seems that Speaker Coughlin and Senate President Sweeney took a different message from the election than you did. Senate President Sweeney is leaving office tomorrow partially because he was defeated by a man who thought Senate President Sweeney did not stand up enough to you in your executive power.

Why are you taking a different message than those two legislative leaders and just – as a conceptual matter, as a conceptual matter, as you would say, why does it need to be you imposing the mask mandate? Why can't parents decide if their kids need to be masked? Why can't districts decide if kids need to be masked. There is nothing in the resolution the Senate and the Assembly could pass today that would prohibit a District from ordering mandatory indoor masking for kids. Why does it have to be you? What do you know that parents don't?

Governor Phil Murphy: I love your questions. I think the answer is yes on the first one, but that doesn't mean it's the true picture. The true picture is 6,000 – where is it, and 75 persons are in the hospital with COVID. That's the picture. I do think you're right that about half of them are, if I understood Judy's numbers right, about half of them are incidental versus primary.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Half of them have a principal – what they call the principal diagnosis so the main reason for being admitted. The other half, on the other hand, are testing positive for COVID. COVID then becomes a contributing or comorbid condition that could or could not worsen their principal diagnosis, their principal reason for being admitted. You can't really parse it out totally, half and half. If you're admitted to the hospital with cardiovascular problems, and you have a – you're COVID positive, that maybe adding to the problems that you have. It's not as clean cut as half and half.

Governor Phil Murphy: Our team, in fact, knows someone not on our team, but someone who is in a circle of friends who in fact died of a heart attack, I think, last week at the age of 40. It turns out he had COVID. The conclusion, at least according to the – our team member, is that it was a contributing factor to that. You can't parse it. The answer is yes, it's about 50/50, but that doesn't mean the other 50% are – to use an old phrase, hunky dory. These things feed on each other in terms of the conditions.

Listen, you're seeing an uptick in, sadly, in infections, hospitalizations, and fatalities across long-term care, across the United States, and around the world. We're not exempt from that. You could have the best – you could be putting the best protocols, the best team on the field. We know that older, more vulnerable people are more likely to get this.

God bless our veterans. No comments on the settlement. These things settle for a variety of different reasons, and I certainly – count me on the list of folks who hope that this allows some amount of step in the right direction for the blessed loved ones who are left behind. Nothing can ever literally replace the loss of a loved one. God willing it's a step in the direction of healing and resolution. We only operate those three facilities. Those are the only three that the state operates, so that's why it's different than just a question of long-term care, generally.

I'm not sure I understand your last question. Ruth's not coming back, so I apologize. I have no idea what that question means. I'll tell you what I took from the election. If we hadn't put the policies in place that we did, and if we hadn't built the coalition that we built, we might have been washed off the deck as well. My reaction is thank God we did what we did. We're going to continue to do more of the same. Thank you for that. I think the *State of the State*, see, look at the *State of the State* tomorrow when we next gather. I love your reaction to that because I think it lays out where we've been and where we want to go. Thank you. Joey.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Good afternoon, Governor, so speaking of the *State of the State*, why did you choose to make that address virtual when so many other events like this, like today's legislative session, like the swearing-in ceremonies, are still in person? Do you have any – you and Commissioner Persichilli, do you have any update on the continued difficulties at the Andover Subacute Nursing Home, which according to state data has witnessed hundreds of Omicron cases, but where zero staff have received booster shots? Finally, do you have any update into the status of the state police investigation into the events of December 2, or even just a timeline about when that might wrap up? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: No update on the last question unless Pat knows something that I don't know. On Andover Subacute, I was actually asked by someone the other day out on the road. I had forgotten to follow-up. Do you have any specific comments on Andover? I think we want to get back to you, Joey, if that's okay on that. I've been doing some swearings in, myself, over the past, excuse me, ten days, including some that I swore the person in. I just want to make sure you know that I've tested negative eight out of the past nine days, in case you're concerned, including this morning. The ninth day was not a positive, it was a day that I just didn't test. That requires a lot of people in a room together, so I think there's a question of scale, and some of these swearings in that I've done have been outdoors for that very reason. I'll pick Bergen County. I was up in Hackensack last week on a cold day. We were outside for that, and I think doing a state-of-the-state speech where you've got a lot of people having to sit there and listen to you speak for half an hour, or whatever it is, outdoors is a bridge, I think, too far. So I would love to do it in person. I was hoping to do it in person.

As a health protocol matter, I'll look to the two leaders to my right. I think they would want me to do what we're doing, which is to do it virtually, which is what we did last year. I please, God, hope that next year it will be in person. I hope for the budget speech by the way, six or seven weeks from now, whenever that is, that we're able to do that in person. Thank you. Dave, Happy New Year. Good to see you.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Happy New Year. Thank you. Omicron, as you have described, Governor, is crazy transmissible, we know. You pointed out the First Lady didn't even know she had COVID because she had no symptoms. With regard to mask wearing, you had said that Tammy wears a mask when there's any question about where she goes, and she got COVID, and it seems like a lot of other people have as well. Maybe the health folks, as well as you, Governor, could comment on the importance of wearing a mask and why it still is relevant. I would assume you feel it's essential for this to continue.

Commissioner, could you tell us how many New Jersey kids are in the hospital with COVID? I know you had mentioned that two have died recently. How many kids in total are in the hospital? New positive cases seem to be going down over the past four days it looked like when you flashed up the statistics. Is that possibly the start of a trend? It looked somewhat significant. I mean, I know that it's hard to change a model on four days of numbers, but it just looked like it was going down.

Finally, Governor, if you don't want to give details about the school mask mandate situation and the negotiations that are going on with the legislative leaders, can you at least offer some kind of assurance to parents that are scared to death, and there are a lot of them because we've heard from them, that somehow because this issue has not been raised that maybe the mask mandate is going to be dropped. What can you tell parents about this? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: They're scared that it will be dropped?

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay. Listen, get vaccinated. Get boosted. Wear a mask. Does what I've just said guarantee you with 1,000 percent certainty that you won't get COVID? No, it doesn't, but it does much more likely put you into the place that Tammy was, which is literally only testing because someone in our inner orbit said, "We just tested positive." That's the only reason. She just wouldn't have tested. So it doesn't guarantee, but the combination of vax, boost, wear a mask indoors overwhelmingly when you're with people in close quarters where you just can't determine their vaccine status. That combination we know is the best, gives you the best potential and defense.

I'm going to jump to the fourth one and ask Judy and Tiny to answer in a second, how many kids in the hospital with COVID, and are we seeing the beginning of a trend? I hope to heck we are. I'm just going to go back. This is the past seven days, and I'm going to start seven days ago. Some of these depend on whether or not it was a weekend versus a weekday. So these are in thousands: 20, 25, 31, 27, 33, 29, 26, 21 today. I hope that those last four days are

starting – the rate of infection, as Judy said, has started to started inch down. God willing that is the beginning of something, but I don't know that we know enough to be able to say that.

Let me just say this unequivocally: the mask mandate – and, again, not with joy, but unequivocally, the mask mandate in schools will continue for the foreseeable future. not forever and always, but we cannot responsibly in the teeth of the tsunami change gears on this. I think if you had asked me six weeks ago did I have some hope that on January 11th at midnight we might've been able to shift to a different reality, yeah, I did have that hope. I still – please God, we're going to get to that point sooner than later. We will not and cannot get there, and I say, unequivocally, we will not get there in the near-term. Again, it brings me no joy to say that.

Judy, the number of kids in the hospital with COVID, and any reaction from either you or Tina, to Dave's question, might we be seeing the early moments of the trend going in the right direction?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: On pediatrics, right now there's 82 pediatric patients in our hospitals with COVID-positive tests. Of that 27 are in with the principal diagnosis of COVID; the reason for the admission is COVID. I wish that two, or three, or four days make a trend, but we know that it doesn't. So we watch it every day.

Governor Phil Murphy: We still hope.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: We still hope. We still hope.

Governor Phil Murphy: Tina, you want to add? Give us some hope, Tina.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Yeah, I would agree with the Commissioner that we just need continue to watch our numbers. We're happy that the numbers are trending a certain way right now, and we're moving further away from the holidays. We had expected to see a surge a couple weeks out after the holidays, and so now we're moving away from that period of time. Also what we've seen with the experience with the Omicron in other parts of the world, that potentially, that we might be moving that direction. Again, we'll continue watching.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that. Pat, just as we break, particularly given bitter cold weather coming up tomorrow, could you repeat the 211 and 511, and why you'd access those?

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Yes, sir. Yes, for warming centers and code blue information, that's nj211.org. With regards to traffic and anytime of year before hitting the roadways, regardless of the weather, to see what conditions are, that's 511nj.org. Again, that emergency kit for your car is a great way to prepare.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that. Judy, Tina, Pat, Alex, Parimal, Ruth, everybody. Again, thank you for the millions out there who have done and continue to do the right thing. We're still in the teeth of this thing, but I'll tell you, better days are coming. There's just no question about that. That will allow us to – listen, we want to – we have to keep schools open at all costs. While that mask piece doesn't bring us any joy, we do know that it will get us to the day sooner than later, we can take – we can lift that and in the meantime could keep schools open in the interim.

Everybody stay safe. Again, we'll be with you back a week from Wednesday. We'll be on the road, I'm sure, in one place or another over the next 10 days, so we won't be missing in action. At least in terms of a formal gathering, a week from Wednesday at 1 p.m. here. God bless you, everybody.

Governor Phil Murphy

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