

Governor Phil Murphy

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon. I'm joined by the woman on my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, another familiar face, the Department of Health's Communicable Disease Service Medical Director, Dr. Ed Lifshitz. Great to have you back, Ed. The guy to my left, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan, is not with us as he is in Pennsylvania spending time with his new grandchild Brooks Patrick, and we send all of them our very best.

Before we get to the numbers, a couple of quick announcements. First up, two weeks from today – by the way we also have Parimal Garg, Chief Counsel, Mahen Gunaratna, and a cast of thousands. Two weeks from today, that's Monday, February 8th, the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency will be opening registration on a new emergency rescue mortgage assistance program. This is being made possible through \$325 million from the Federal Homeowners' Assistance Fund that is part of the American Rescue Plan. Under this new program, eligible homeowners can receive up to \$35,000 to cover mortgage arrearages, delinquent property taxes, and other housing costs delinquencies for those who were negatively impacted by the pandemic. This can help protect thousands of homeowners from foreclosures and neighborhoods from being impacted.

Through the ERMA – so-called ERMA package – free housing counseling will also be available to assist homeowners in applying for assistance as well as guiding them through all available options and even working with their mortgage companies to get the best possible outcome. Again, the window for this program will be open in two weeks on February 8th, and you can get set up with updates on the website of the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency at njhousing.gov. That's njhousing.gov or – and, by the way, clicking on the link for homeowner assistance, or you can call 855-647-7700. That's 855-647-7700.

Second announcement. There is now only one week left in the open enrollment period for GetCoveredNJ our healthcare marketplace established through the federal Affordable Care Act. Individuals and families looking for affordable and high-quality healthcare coverage are strongly encouraged to visit getcovered.nj.gov to review available plans, and as a reminder, not only are there more plan options available this year, but so are record levels of financial help through both the American Rescue Plan and state subsidies. Roughly 99.0% of residents will find they qualify for financial support that can bring down the cost of coverage. In fact, the majority of people receiving financial help can access a plan for \$10 or less per month. Again, whether you are looking to renew a current GetCoveredNJ plan or are a first-time buyer, everything you need, again, is at one website, that one right there, getcovered.nj.gov, but you only have one week left for open enrollment.

With those announcements out of the way, let's get to the numbers. We'll start with the latest reported case data, which shows that the Omicron tsunami which had washed across the state is continuing at this point to pull back. Cases are down by roughly two thirds from two weeks ago. We are also optimistic about the rate of transmission, which has fallen below one and continues to drop, as well as the positivity rate, which if you recall was in the mid-30s a couple of weeks ago. It actually got up close to 40, Judy, as I recall. It's still an unacceptably high number, but it's down dramatically. However, again, we want to say no one should be complacent here. Even though these numbers are trending very positively – and they are – they're still higher than anything we had encountered even through last winter's surge and the Delta variant surge from last summer.

While yes, we believe we are on the backside of Omicron, we are not free of it. As we have discussed many times before, the metrics in our hospitals are among the most important ones which we watch as we cannot let our healthcare system get to its breaking point, and as with cases, we're seeing overall hospitalizations dropping significantly over the past week, but again, these numbers are still higher than anything we had seen in the prior two surges. In fact, these numbers have more in common with May 2020 than at any other time. We also remain concerned about the ICU and ventilator numbers, which are coming down more slowly, and we continue to register significant numbers of newly confirmed deaths, sadly, as you can see here. Again, these are – under the dates, those are the dates they were confirmed. That's different than what our hospitals report each day, Judy, as you know, which are unconfirmed. As you can see when you add up total confirmed and probables, we're now well over 30,000 staggering loss of life. We continue to encourage strongly everyone to mask up, especially when indoors and you're in the midst with folks whose vaccination status you can't vouch for, and also in addition to masking up, get vaccinated and get boosted.

Speaking of which, here are today's latest vaccination numbers, and along with these, we're happy to announce that two new vaccination megasites have opened in north Jersey. The first is located in Bergen County at the site of the former Lord & Taylor in the Fashion Center of Paramus, which is in 50 East Ridgewood Avenue. The site will be open Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays at the hours on your screen – on the screen there. The second site is in Passaic County and is located within the former Macy's department store at 1210 Hamburg Turnpike in Wayne, New Jersey. It is open Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday again at the hours you see here. These are but two of the more than 2,000 sites across the state where you can get vaccinated and boosted, and as always, you can find the site closest to your home or your school or your workplace by visiting covid19.nj.gov and clicking the link for vaccine info at the top of the page.

Here is why you want to go out and get vaccinated and boosted. The vaccines continue to prove their effectiveness, especially in preventing both COVID-related hospitalizations and deaths. Can you flip this over? Is that alright? In fact, look at the difference between those who have gotten boosted and those who are working with just their primary vaccination series. If you've gotten your booster, your chances of a case of COVID that would land you in the hospital or worse are three times lower than if your immune system is still operating with just the initial vaccination. Stay here if you could, Mahen. Please, this is – note the dates here. This is during the raging days of Omicron. Again, so keep that in mind that this entire period here covers – we were being inundated with that variant, so this gives us a very good picture of the importance of the boosters.

With that, we still urge you to get your booster shot. We still have roughly half of those eligible for their boosters who have not yet gotten it. As I said a few moments ago, even though our numbers are dropping, Omicron is still a threat and heaven forbid that a new variant is trying to establish itself that could upend everything as Omicron tried to do. Protect yourself and your family by getting boosted. The more we all do our parts, the sooner we get back to a true and lasting sense of normal.

Lastly, for the numbers, let's look at the updated figures from our schools. First up, this is the overall rates of infection among students, educators, and staff, which again, are coming off their peaks. This is per 1,000 individuals, and by the way, this is not with regard to where – that it was in-school transmission. This is for all cases regardless of where folks contracted the virus, and now we'll flip that to the numbers of outbreaks confirmed to have been through in-school transmission. Again, we take every single one of these outbreaks, every single one of these cases deadly seriously, but let's remember 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, including, yes, at least for the time being – it gives me no joy, but reminder that includes requiring all students and staff to remain masked up while they're in their schools, that that layered approach is helping to minimize the spread while everyone is in their school building. That's it for the numbers.

Let's move on as we always do to remember several more of the New Jerseyans we have lost to the pandemic. First up, this gentlemen, Timothy Helck. He lived in Cranbury. He was 64 years old when he passed on December 29th. A graduate of Summit High School and a Phi Beta Kappa and Summa Cum Laude graduate of Rutgers University, in his 30s he left his family's business and taught himself computer coding, and he would spend the last 15 years of his life as a software engineer for the *New York Times*. Even more impressive was his legacy of volunteerism, from serving as a museum docent to the creations he built for non-profit organizations, notably, for the group Families with Children from China, which was personal given his three youngest daughters who were adopted from the People's Republic.

Tim left behind his was of 38 years, Patricia, and I had the great honor of speaking with her a couple weeks ago, and their five daughters Emily, Miranda, Lizzie, Olivia, and Penelope and their spouses and his stepson Ethan. Emily is married to somebody who many in this room in which I'm speaking know well. He is also survived by his dad Jerry and stepmother Linda, his six siblings and their families. We are grateful to Tim for sharing his talents with so many. May God bless and watch over his memory and the family and friends he leaves behind.

We also remember 23-year Atlantic City firefighter, this guy, Anthony Michael Carfagno. He was just 58 years old and lived in Galloway Township. Judy, you and I were in Galloway last week. A proud firefighter, Anthony was often the guy carrying the boot for the Atlantic City Fire Department's annual muscular dystrophy Fill the Boot charitable campaign, but he was equally passionate about helping to maintain the Atlantic City Community Garden, offering his green thumb. He is survived by his wife Laurie, with whom I had the great honor of speaking, and his three children, daughters Rachel and Amber, and son Anthony, jr., and his three grandchildren Nicholas, Donovan, and Korben. He also leaves five surviving siblings. He was a God-fearing man who loved Jesus and shared his faith with all around him. We thank him for his years of service to residents and the community of Atlantic City. He leaves a strong legacy. May God bless and watch over his memory and his family that he leaves behind.

A little over a year ago, we lost this guy, Robert Doyle Huff, a long-time Morristown resident. Bob was born across the river in Pennsylvania, but graduated from Passaic Valley High in Little Falls and then received his undergraduate degree from Montclair State. He did a lot of things across his career from retail to real estate to tech support specialist for Verizon. That journey through life was characteristic as he had many hobbies and collections and tried his hand at many things. Even though he called Morristown home, his favorite place in New Jersey was down south in Cape May. Rejoined with his wife Jean who passed in 2014, Bob leaves his daughter Jeanne, with whom I had the great honor of speaking, along with his brother Don to carry his memory. May God bless and watch over his memory and those who left behind.

Finally today, we remember and honor the life of Jerald Harvey of Voorhees. Jerry was 77. He passed away on January 9th. He was raised in Camden where he was a noted high school athlete and would go on to graduate from Rutgers and start a career as a management consultant at a time when he was one of the very few African Americans in the field, but Jerry persevered and excelled and ended his career with a 13-year stint as the senior vice president of human resources for the Children's Television Workshop, which is now better known for its signature production, *Sesame Street*. Jerry was a car guy through and through, a long-time member of the historically black car club, the South Jersey Street Legends, and the proud owner of two award-winning models in particular, a 1940 Packard and a 1968 Chevrolet Camaro.

However, he took the most pride in his family. His wife Leslie to whom he was married for more than 31 years, and his three children Jamal, Raya, and Jerrel, who is a dear friend and was an invaluable member of our team in the Governor's office, worked on our campaign, and now works for Governor Kathy Hochul in New York state. He leaves behind his three grandchildren Sage, Jaylen, and Jordan. Even near the end of his life battling kidney issues, he always maintained his sense of humor. We know the smiles he brought to so many, his family and friends and the many people he met on *Sesame Street*, will bring comfort. May God bless and watch over him and all he leaves behind. We wish the same for every family touched by the pandemic and especially those hundreds of families if not now thousands who know the worst of Omicron.

Now let's continue recognizing small businesses partnering with the New Jersey Department of Labor through the Return & Earn program, which is pairing residents in need of a good career with the businesses looking to hire them. Today we recognize this gentleman, Dr. Anthony Sparano, who has headed up his Manasquan based facial and reconstructive surgery practice, Sparano Face and Nasal Institute, since 2010. With a successful and growing practice, Dr. Sparano knew he needed to bring on new staff, but meeting the challenges of the pandemic put that plan on the back burner. However, Return & Earn allowed him to put that plan in motion earlier than he had otherwise expected, and he has brought on his first new employee, and he's hoping to be able to utilize Return & Earn for another potential hire elsewhere in the practice group. I recently caught up with Dr. Sparano and his practice manager Laurinda Rapp to thank them for being part of this innovative program. This is just one new way we're going to get New Jersey working again. Check them out by the way, drsparano.com, that's drsparano.com.

Finally, Judy and Ed, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the passing of Maplewood's Edith Hodes Rose, who left us on January 11th at the age of 111. At the time of her passing, she was the oldest living New Jerseyan. She did not pass to the best of our knowledge by the way from COVID. Her life spanned so much history and change. She survived the 1918 flu pandemic. She witnessed two world wars. She was born before news traveled by radio and lived to see the digital age. She lived through the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the Great Society. Her life spanned 20 presidents. She was born during the administration of our 27th president, William Howard Taft, and lived to the administration of our 46th president, Joe Biden. She had told a friend about her amazing longevity, and I quote her now. "It's just a number, and if I wake up in the morning, it's another day to appreciate the fortunate life I enjoy." I think that's a wonderful lesson for all of us to put aside the division and the rancor and just appreciate the day that we're given. May God bless and watch over her, and may we all take a little of her spirit with us.

That is where we'll leave things for this Monday. A quick program note, and that is we'll be back here next Wednesday, February 2nd. I will be in Washington, D.C., actually at the White House, next Monday for the winter meeting of the National Governor's Association, and I look forward to spending time with my colleagues from across the country as we share experiences and ideas and best practices for battling the pandemic together and getting our nation moving forward together. 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. Three new CDC studies provide strong evidence that COVID-19 vaccination is effective in preventing against both the Delta and Omicron variant infections and a booster dose offers increased protection against moderate and severe COVID-19 illness and hospitalization. I know people are weary of repeated pandemic messages, and yes, there is good news that cases and hospitalizations likely peaked two weeks ago and continue to decline, but the number of critically ill patients in our hospitals remains high, and there have been four COVID-associated child deaths including three infants since Christmas, and on Friday, we received six reports of new cases of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children, the most reports we have ever received in a single day, and six of those children are currently hospitalized.

We must remain vigilant because as this pandemic has taught us, the virus continues to test our healthcare system and can cause severe consequences among children. A reminder that COVID-19 isn't always a benign illness in children. These three new CDC studies serve as a reminder that everyone should be up to date on their COVID-19 vaccinations, and that includes getting a booster shot when eligible. One study published in the CDC mortality and morbidity weekly review examined emergency room department and urgent care visits and hospitalizations in 10 states. It found that booster shots were 90% effective in preventing hospitalization during Omicron predominant periods and 94% effective during Delta predominant circulation.

Another study published in the *Journal of American Medical Association* found that a third dose of a COVID-19 mRNA vaccine – that is Pfizer or Moderna – provides significant added protection against symptomatic COVID-19 disease caused by Delta and the Omicron variants. A third study found that unvaccinated Americans 50 years and older were about 45 times more likely to be hospitalized than those who were vaccinated and had received a third shot. The study found booster doses provided much greater protection among people ages 65 and older.

Governor Murphy cited the effectiveness of the vaccine and booster shots when he signed an executive order last week requiring all staff across our healthcare system and in high-risk settings, including long-term care, psychiatric hospitals, state and county correctional facilities, to be up to date on their COVID-19 vaccinations. That means both their initial primary series and a booster shot. Hospital and long-term care industries have worked diligently to increase vaccination and booster rates, but the high transmissibility of Omicron has become problematic for healthcare workers who have fallen ill, and it has fueled new outbreaks in our nursing homes. 560 of our nursing homes reported COVID outbreaks last week with 10,500 resident cases and 12,800 cases among their staff. Nearly 81% of the residents in our nursing homes and assisted living facilities have received a booster, but only 44% of the staff have received a booster. Statewide, booster rates are unacceptably low at 49.4%.

We must do better. We know the rates of infection and hospitalization for those with boosters is more than three times lower than those who have only received their first two doses. It is also important that those who are five years of age and older get vaccinated to protect those who are too young to get vaccinated. As I said earlier, we have received reports of four COVID-19 associated pediatric deaths since Christmas. There are no reports of significant underlying conditions for any of those children. Of the four COVID-associated pediatric deaths, I have previously released information on a child under 10 in north Jersey who died of multisystem inflammatory syndrome and an infant in south Jersey. Today I'm reporting on two additional deaths of infants under 10 months of age who tested positive for COVID-19.

The total number of pediatric deaths in the state stands at 12 since the pandemic began, eight in the 0 to 4 age group, and four in the 5 to 17 age group. While it is difficult to know for sure if COVID-19 directly contributed to these deaths as opposed to being what is termed an incidental infection, I want to remind parents to take all necessary precautions to prevent infants from exposure to the virus. This includes making sure those around your infants are up to date on COVID-19 vaccines and avoid crowded gatherings.

As the Governor mentioned, a new megasite opened in Passaic Saturday, and a site in Bergen County opened on January 19th. That expands up to five the total number of megasites that provide increased access to COVID-19 vaccines and booster doses. Three other sites are in Burlington, Gloucester, and Somerset Counties. The Passaic site is a partnership between Passaic County, the Passaic County Department of Health Services, St. Joseph's University Medical Center, the New Jersey State Police, the National Guard, and the Department of Health. The Bergen County Site is a partnership between Hackensack Meridian Health, the Department of Health, and the New Jersey State Police, and we thank all of our partners for the good work that they are doing to help us get as many individuals in New Jersey vaccinated and boosted.

For my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 4,093 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients and persons under investigation. There have been 10 new cases of multisystem inflammatory syndrome since our last briefing. There are 166 cumulative cases in the state, and as I've stated, six of those children are currently hospitalized. At the state veterans' homes since our last briefing there have been 10 new cases among residents and three COVID-related deaths at the Menlo Park home, 38 new cases among Paramus residents, and four new cases among our Vineland residents. At our state psychiatric hospitals, we have 86 new cases among patients, 37 at Trenton, 28 at Ancora, 13 at Graystone, and 8 at Anne Klein. As of January 20th, in New Jersey, the percent positivity is 15.37%. The northern part of the state reports 13.61%, the central part of the state 16.62%, and the southern part of the state 17.66%. That concludes my daily 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 all. I will with great humility play for 30 seconds the role of Pat Callahan and just make three points. We may have some light snow, particularly in the northern counties tonight that will spill in to tomorrow with precipitation sort of rain and some very light flurries as best we can tell. The dividing line is interstate 195 going straight across the state. Keeping an eye on a storm later this week Friday into Saturday that looks like a coastal storm. Too early to give you any sense of the dimensions there. Judy, the last point that Pat wanted us to mention, the federal strike teams arrived at University Hospital, your former stomping grounds, over the weekend much to great excitement that they were there. Again, we wish Pat and his family well at this time of joy. Again, we'll be back together a week from Wednesday, February 2nd, 1 o'clock right here.

Q&A Session

Sophia's got the mic. Why don't we start with Brent down front? Brent, good afternoon.

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Good afternoon. About 2.7 million residents have been boosted. What are the obstacles to getting more people boosted and are there any plans to campaign to increase that number in addition to what we have now? Are there plans to renew the contract for the State Health Department's COVID call center? When will the state start paying out the 695 million from the American Rescue Plan earmarked for childcare centers? Rutgers ran up a 73-million-dollar deficit last year to fund its sports programs, covered in part by students' fees and loans. Is that an acceptable loss? Should the state's largest university review how it spends sports versus academic money? You've spoken a lot about lowering property taxes. A large portion of municipal budgets cover the cost of police. Should that be part of the conversation, and should the state regulate off-duty construction jobs that officers often work?

Governor Phil Murphy: Give me one second. Judy, I'd be curious to get your opinion on the – the booster rate – the booster take-up is still meaningfully lower than it needs to be, particularly given how strong the protection that the booster gives us. We've been going at this from a lot of different angles. I would not take anything off the table in terms of a campaign of some sort. The campaigns have to a greater or lesser extent, I think, in the experience of the past two years – I don't mean just in New Jersey but around the country – have been of mixed utility. I think the most impact we had was – is the grinding door to door, the game of inches, and I suspect that'll continue to be the case. A concern I have. I think it's probably human nature. The good news is the numbers are getting better. The bad news is probably makes it more difficult to get people to – to convince to get boosted because they think heck, we're getting out of the woods.

COVID call center contract, I have absolutely no insights on that, so I'll ask you to weigh in on there, Judy.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I think I want to start by saying that the call center has been one of our more successful ventures –

Governor Phil Murphy: You bet.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: – as we came into the pandemic with 10 to 12,000 calls almost daily, the majority of them being answered by individuals and the majority of the individuals that are serving as agents are from New Jersey. One of the things that we've learned is that a call center, whether it's during pandemic or during regular everyday public health issues that we have, is one of our most valuable resources. Will we continue the contract? We not only, I believe want to continue the contract but more importantly, we are exploring opportunities to continue and embed the call center as one of our strongest public health initiatives into the future.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said. The 695 million, can we get back to Brent on that one? Brent, do you mind if we get back to you? I don't have a number – a date off the top of my head. Had a good conversation – we do this at most quarterly. Lately it's been virtual. Had a very good conversation with President Jonathan Holloway, actually, on Friday. A big chunk of the reality with that number is pandemic no – basically no revenues or a dramatic drop-off in revenues. I don't want to put words in his mouth, but it is not an either/or reality if you're in the Big 10. It's not either you can be in a big sports profile or you can have great research and be a great research institution. Rutgers endeavors to be both. It obviously already is one of the great public university research institutions of higher education. It's got a budget – that annual budget I think into the 7 to \$800 million range, and I know Johnathan would like to see that number go up even more. At the same time, I know they want to be competitive in athletics but also do it at a price that the market will bear. I know that – again, I'm not putting words in his mouth or the board of governors' mouths, but I know that's the balance they want to strike.

Yeah, in terms of the property tax, first of all, this has been a really rough stretch for our brothers and sisters in law enforcement, not only in New York City but especially in New York City. I exchanged notes with Mayor Adams over the weekend. God bless these women and men. As it relates to the ongoing question of affordability and property tax relief, which we've been on and we'll continue to be on, the police reality has not been a part of that discussion, and my guess is it will not be. Thank you.

Let's jump over to Daniel, and then we'll come across to Joey and Alex. Good afternoon.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Good afternoon, Governor. Do you plan on renewing the public health emergency for another 30 days? Also, labor leaders for correction officers have been very critical of the booster and vaccine mandate. How do you respond to comments that this was a condition of employment made outside the collective bargaining process or that it could lead to an exodus of corrections officers? Also, you previously said you don't plan to expand the booster and vaccine mandates to other workforces like teachers or state workers. Why not? Do you want the legislature to revisit the no out of pocket costs for abortion measures that were nixed from the Freedom of Reproductive Act – Freedom of Reproductive Choice Act, and how do you envision the Dobie Provision within that legislation playing out? For the Commissioner, how many COVID hospitalizations right now have COVID as their principle diagnosis, and how does that compare to earlier in the pandemic, say Spring 2020?

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, from the top, no news to make on the public health emergency. This is something we extended on January 11th. We had no choice. I think that day, we had literally 30,000 positive cases, so no news to break there. This is something we want to do as best we can, I might add, in concert with the legislative leadership. I want to get to a better place as much as anybody, so we're going to continually try to meet the moment. One of the benefits of a 30-day window is you don't have to make decisions with, say, a year-long tail to it. It allows you to bite this off as it goes forward.

Let me just remind everybody on this – on these vaccine mandates in healthcare settings and congregate facilities. What has triggered this? We said that we would not pursue universal mandates, and we will not. Why not, you asked, in education and in other settings? Because we don't think we need to. We have the vaccine mandate or a test-out option there. We have focused – Judy and her team and we have focused on settings where, by definition, people have some vulnerability. In a hospital, you're there for a reason. In a long-term care facility, you're probably there for a reason related to age or some other profile element that we know makes you more vulnerable. If you're in a congregate setting, we know, sadly through history of this pandemic, that the infection runs wild in these places.

Our step has been taken. Why now? Because the United States Supreme Court – first and foremost, the United States Supreme Court upheld the Biden Administration's mandate on these locations. That's going to happen anyway. The only wrinkles that we've added are booster and secondly, expanding the definition, not by a lot, but expanding the definition of the communities in which we'd require them. We've put a runway in place that we think is a reasonable one, so it's not overnight. We are a proud labor state, so not surprisingly, we want to work with labor and labor leadership. By the way, importantly, it has been left – we mean – this is all seriousness with teeth, but the consequences of someone not being in compliance has been left to the relationship between the employer and the employee or the employer and the union representing an employee.

No news to make on the question about out of pocket and Dobie. There's a process that is prescribed in the bill that I signed for Dobie to go through that study and, under Commissioner Marlene McCready, they will do just that.

Judy, if I'm not mistaken, your question, the last one, is what – how many are incidental COVID?

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ Yeah, how many have COVID as a principle diagnosis versus incidental? How does that compare to, say, Spring of 2020?

Governor Phil Murphy: I don't have the Spring of 2020 but right now, 39% of hospitalization are principle COVID; 61% are incidental. Judy would want me to remind you that even though it's incidental, it could, particularly cardiovascular, pulmonary disease – it could still have an impact on your health. How'd I do? Good, thank you. Joey, good afternoon.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Afternoon, Governor. So now that the new legislature has convened, do you plan on renewing your push for this third gun control legislation package that faltered in the last lame duck session? Are there any changes or compromises you'd be willing to make to address some of the lawmakers' concerns? As an ex-officio member of the Princeton University board, do you think that Princeton University should release the names of donors to the Princeton Gerrymandering Project which serves as staff to the independent tiebreakers for both the legislative and congressional redistricting commissions? Do you support Hoboken's high school funding referendum that's on the ballot tomorrow? I know I've asked you similar questions like this in the past, but do you think it's a problem to have local elections take place at random times like in the middle of January when voter turnout is likely to be very low? Finally, there's a Republican seat on the Election Law Enforcement Commission that has been vacant for more than four years. Now that your new term has begun, do you intend to nominate anyone to fill that seat anytime soon? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, from the top, you bet you in terms of the so-called gun safety package 3.0. Got no news in terms of – obviously want to work with legislative leadership, but we're committed to that. We think it makes New Jersey a safer state, and we'll do anything we can to make New Jersey a safer state.

Joey, you'll be happy to know that I not only do I not have a Princeton gerrymandering question, I've never heard of it before. Parimal, can you help me get back to Joey? Unless you've got something that's rolling off your tongue? Yeah, no opinion of the high school referendum but as a general matter, not specific to their election, you want to try to get as many people voting as possible, right? We've done a lot in our four years to open democracy up wider and not close it down. Count me open-minded to any consideration about timing – any number of steps that we can do to open up democracy including timing of elections. No news to make on the open Republican seat, but if we do, we'll get back to you on that one but nothing, as I said here. Thank you.

Alex, good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Good afternoon, Governor. Dr. Lifshitz, since you were absent and Omicron was sweeping through the state, the Governor changed some of his metrics and said he was looking at the sky-high case numbers to determine the spread of COVID. Is that correct or incorrect? Shouldn't we be looking at hospitalizations and deaths as the metric as opposed to case numbers? For the Commissioner, I'd like to ask you again about the incidental COVID. Sixty-one percent is a pretty high number. Do you feel that, again, these numbers of hospitalizations are not accurate because only 39% of the people are in with COVID as a primary diagnosis? Again, when you bring up the unfortunate losses of life among children, aren't those also outliers? The numbers, while tragic, are very small. Are you bringing this up as a scare tactic to try to scare parents into vaccinating their children? For you, Governor, I'd like to ask you about the healthcare workers mandate. Do you worry, as some of the healthcare workers unions do, that this will cause staffing shortages to be exacerbated if healthcare are not willing to get boosted and have no test-out option? You've also said before that the school mask mandate is directly connected to the rate of vaccination among students. If you're going to try and bully parents into vaccinating their kids, will you at least tell us the rate, number, or level of kids vaccinated that it would require to lift the in-school mask mandate?

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, so let's – let me give a couple thoughts and then Ed, we got to get you in from the bullpen here. I don't think we've – we haven't changed the metrics at all. We've said we still report cases, but I think we've said cases matter less than hospital numbers, because we cannot allow our system to get overrun, but we still report both. I'll let in come in on the back of that. We had this conversation with the White House and with the federal leadership, the Fauci, Walensky, Jeff Zients, etc. I think there's a general view that the hard data around hospitals – all the data's important, but that's even more important.

Again, you asked this question before, and I continue to give my same answer but I'll let Judy or Ed – the 61% is not inaccurate. It is a mistake – I mentioned this a minute ago to Daniel's good question as well. It's a mistake to assume that that incidental COVID case can have no health impact when we know, in fact, they do. Again, we report. We're open about both.

I don't think it's a scare. You've got kids, sadly, Judy, zero to four who are not eligible for vaccines, bless their hearts. We have, sadly – if you'll give me one second here. We've lost eight precious kids in that range and they're not – there's no vaccine available for them. No, that's not how we view it.

Staffing shortages are a concern, clearly. It's not a step we take lightly, and it's another way to answer that it's quite surgical given all the other communities of workers in the state, and we want to work with our labor unions to do this in the best way possible.

There's no – the last question, before we go back to Ed and Judy, there's no one number in terms of masking, but I want to get that lifted, trust me. This is not – I was asked, I think on Thursday or Friday, could I see the mask mandate getting lifted in this school year, not calendar year but school year. I said there is a real shot at that, and I would repeat that today.

Ed, which data are you hanging your hat on, and Judy, any other observations about particularly incidental COVID and how you think about it?

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Thank you. Alex, thank you. Glad you missed me. Just to correct the record, though, I haven't really been absent during Omicron. I've been hard at work behind the scenes and doing my usual stuff as well. I think the Governor got it right, and I think you've gotten it right also, meaning it's not just one thing that we're looking at. We're looking at a multiple of things. As the numbers themselves become somewhat less accurate as things like home testing, for example, begin to take over, you need to begin looking even more at things like hospitalizations and deaths and in the end, if the virus continues to change, if it becomes more mild or if it becomes more like the cold like everybody talks about, then we'll care a whole lot less about how many people have been made sick in the first place.

To some extent, I think what New Jersey has done better than many of the other states, including the CDC, by the way, is we've always looked at severity in our numbers. For example, our CALI score looks at case rates as well as positivity but also at visits to emergency departments. It measures severity to get a sense for how that was affecting the state overall whereas the CDC just looks at case rates and positivity. We continue to look at all those things, and we will continue to look at all those things.

Very briefly, I know the Commissioner's going to talk about the deaths and the pediatric cases as well. Absolutely, I'm not an alarmist, either. Obviously any child dying is too many. These are relatively – well, I don't want to say it's relatively small. People always want to compare it to the flu, for example. In a typical flu season, since we've been keeping track, we've seen about two to three children die from the flu. We're seeing roughly three times that from Omicron. In the last two weeks to have that large number of children die, that's much worse than we've ever seen in a flu season since we've been keeping record. It is important, and it is particularly important, as the Governor said, because these young children unfortunately can't be vaccinated. It really is important that those people around them who can be vaccinated get vaccinated. Yes, the great silver lining of this pandemic has always been that the kids have done generally well, but it's that generally part. It's not always well, and we still do need to protect them.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, before you jump in, Ed, interesting in terms of the data that we talk about and look at in a – staying on the flu season – and Judy, it's rare you hear, even in a bad flu year, how many people had the flu, right? That's not a discussion you have. I mean, you know that anecdotally, but what you do hear is how many people are hospitalized, how many people pass. I think that's where we are on a journey, too, with this, would be my guess. Judy, anything you want to say about incidental?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah, we use – I first want to say we use the term incidental, which is kind of a misnomer because it's really comorbid condition. When COVID becomes a comorbid condition, like when you get admitted to the hospital and you're having a mild cardio infarction, a heart attack, and you have a comorbid condition of diabetes mellodis that is a contributing factor, it's a serious condition We've used nationally that terms incidental. We've had that discussion back at the Department of Health that that really is not the appropriate term. In fact, it's contributing factors. Last week, 50% of the individuals that were in our hospital with positive COVID were "incidental." This week, it's 61%, so we believe that the trend is improving overall with our cases, but I would not consider COVID-19 as just an incidental diagnosis. I would consider it more comorbid condition that could be a contributing factor to complicating your hospital stay and your outcome.

Governor Phil Murphy: I think we need a national re-branding of that.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah, it's a national term.

Governor Phil Murphy: It's not – we didn't come up with that one. Thank you. Alex. Welcome back. Haven't seen you in a while.

Reporter: Yes, sir, been a long time. Just one for you as a follow-up on the vaccine mandate. An organization representing homes and day programs for individuals with developmental disabilities says the mandate will lead to further loss of staff and what is your response to them specifically?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, nothing really new beyond what I've said already. That's – obviously staffing is a factor here, without question, and we take that very seriously. We take those homes very seriously, both residents and staff. It's why we expanded the definition, not in a meaningful way but in an important way, and we're going to continue to work with the unions that represent them and the folks who work in those settings, in all of these settings, to do this in a responsible way. Again, it's part of the reason we've got a longer runway, particularly in the expanded definition of the communities beyond healthcare and we will work closely with them. Thank you. Welcome back.

Hello, Dave.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. So Omicron is fading very quickly. Hospitalizations are down 2,000, slightly more, over the last two weeks. Do we expect this dramatic decrease to continue at this rate? Will we see less than a thousand people in the hospital, do we think? Is there any modeling by the end of February? Yes, hospitalizations are dropping, but do we think this is it for COVID? What's the likelihood of more variants? Any more spikes? Any more crises possibly in the Spring, Summer, next Fall? Do we know? Do we have an idea? Do you think it's true, Governor, like some have suggested, that not getting vaccinated and boosted is selfish because it continues to stress nurses and other healthcare workers? Commissioner, perhaps as a former nurse, you might want to comment on this as well. How are the nurses doing? Can you expand on the need to protect and be very careful with infants with regard to COVID? You had mentioned avoiding crowds, getting family members vaccinated. How much of an issue is this in terms of the vulnerability of very, very young children? That's it. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good to see you. I don't know that – I'm going to have a few comments, then hand it to both Ed and Judy before we wrap. The rate is precipitous, the rate of decline, happily, in this case. We are – we had a national governors call on Friday. By the way, it's quite striking. Judy, I don't know if you were on that or not, but it's quite striking that – just to pick three examples, I spoke, Kathy Hoken from New York spoke, Charlie Baker from Massachusetts. Massachusetts not quite at the same rate as New Jersey and New York, but we were experiencing one reality, and a lot of governors out there are still experiencing a very different reality like the one we were experiencing two to six weeks ago. It's quite striking in both red and blue states in different parts of the country. I said on this call that our reality is mimicking South Africa and the UK. I don't know – I'm the least qualified to answer this, but the rate is precipitous in the right direction. I'm not sure any of us could predict whether or not we hit that number by the end of February. I hope we do.

The sequencing of tests right now, Judy – Omicron right now, 94 or 96%?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Ninety-six.

Governor Phil Murphy: Ninety-six percent, but this is more of a question for you all when you're up to bat here. It is quite possible – in fact, it is likely, if not certain, that there are some – there are many people in the intensive care unit that may be there because of Delta and have been there for six weeks or longer, so there's that wrinkle, which is still a reality. I'd love to get Ed's answer on is this it. Please, God, I hope the answer's yes, but I unfortunately will almost predict with certainty that we're going to have to say we hope it is. The breadth of the transmission is a good thing in terms of the uninfected people left to infect, but never say never with this thing.

I think it is selfish. I think there are obviously some people who have a legitimate reason that they're not vaccinated or boosted, so I'm going to put that group aside. I think it's a shirking of our collective responsibility and not just – I do – it's clearly with nurses, obviously, and healthcare staff, but I do think it's akin to drunk driving. You're not only putting yourself at risk; you're putting other people at risk. I think that's not odd. I'll leave it to Judy to talk – and Ed, a little bit more about how do we deal with – how concerned are we and how do we deal with the vulnerability of the infants, particularly that birth to four-year age where there's no vaccine available to them.

Want to go to Ed first? How does the precipitous decline continue? Any predictions? Any shot of other variants? Any comments?

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: If I told you I knew exactly what was going to be happening, I'd be lying, and neither does anybody else is the straight truth of it. This much I do know: we are certainly in a whole lot better place now than we were two years ago. We know more about the virus. We have some excellent vaccines. We have a lot of immunity built up in the states. Hospitals have learned how to treat patients better. We have new therapeutics. All these things are good, and it's hard for me to see that we go back to where we were two years ago when this all started. Do I think the virus is going to go away completely? No, I don't think that's likely. I think there will be other variants that will come. How bad will they be? Again, anybody's guess. There is an upper limit as to how infectious something can become, and I hope that Omicron has hit it, although to be honest with you, I was surprised at how Omicron took out Delta. I thought that Delta was going to be here to stay for a while before something else. That's the long and the short of it.

No, don't know where we're going to be, but I'm certainly a whole lot more comfortable and happy about where we are now compared to two years ago, but neither am I complacent saying that this is over and it's not going to be a problem going forward and it's just going to be a cold or it's just going to be a flu because the answer is we still don't know that.

Governor Phil Murphy: Again, to repeat something, Judy, before you jump in, we're not managing this to zero. We're trying to meet the moment. We're not trying to overshoot it or under-shoot it. By the way, Ed, I assume it's no coincidence that I'm getting my flu shot every October, to your question Dave. Why? I'm not getting it in May. There's going to be this – I would suspect this annual notion of we're all going back inside with weather and then holidays. That timing exists for a reason. Judy, any comments on any of the above but also on the vulnerability of the previous little kids?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: First on the predictive modeling, the further you go out, the less reliable it is. We try to update the modeling every week, and as I've noted, I think it was, in last week's press conference, separating out, I hate to use the term, but incidental COVID from principle diagnosis is something that we're working on right now. I have to remind everyone, if we looked at our hospital census in November of COVID-positive cases, it was under a thousand for the whole month and prior. I just happen to have November in front of me. It was under a thousand, so can we get there again? I believe we can. I believe, again, with appropriate layered techniques, people being careful, washing their hands frequently, wearing a mask, staying away from crowds when you don't know the vaccination status, and most importantly, getting boosted, we certainly can get there again.

I do want to make a comment about nurses. My busiest – I was an intensive care nurse. My busiest night and worst night in intensive care on a Saturday night in the middle of an inner city does not even compare to what our nurses have gone through. We, out of respect for them, even over some of their own protestations about getting vaccinated and boosted – out of respect for them, we should do everything we can possibly do to stem the COVID-19 and the admissions to hospitals. What they have gone through is unimaginable, not just them; all of our front-line workers but particularly the nurses in critical care during the worst of this – and we've had three surges now, four surges, I guess – it's unimaginable to me. I've been there. Nothing compares to what they've been through.

Governor Phil Murphy: Any comment on the zero through four year old and how vulnerable –

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: They're not eligible for vaccinations. We know that they not now are getting what I would call severe disease, and we have to protect them as much as possible. They should not be around unvaccinated, unboosted individuals. They shouldn't be in very crowded, particularly indoor spaces. They should not be in crowds where you don't know who's vaccinated and who is not. They need to be protected. The fact that we have had significant deaths in the zero to four year olds is beyond me, beyond imagination at this point.

Governor Phil Murphy: A lot of the steps you just suggested are things you do –

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Anyhow.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm thinking back to when you have a baby, even in a non-pandemic time, you're not going to a restaurant with the baby that night, right? That's – I think it's – tell me if you disagree with this, Judy. We're not panicking over it, but we want people to be vigilant.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Take care of kids.

Governor Phil Murphy: Be vigilant. Be smart. With that, Judy, thank you. Ed, thank you. Parimal, Sophia, Mahen, to everybody out there, thank you for everything you're doing. Again, we'll be with you again a week from Wednesday, February 2nd, 1 o'clock right here. In the meantime, stay at it, folks. Get vaccinated. Get boosted. Do the right, smart things. God bless you all. Take care.

Governor Phil Murphy

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