

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: March 22nd, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

03/22/2021

Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everybody, Happy Spring. I am 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 State's Epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan. Tina, great to have you here as well. The guy to my left who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police Colonel Pat Callahan; we have Jared Maples, the Director of the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, Chief Counsel Parimal Garg and a cast of thousands. I'm a couple minutes behind because I had to wait for halftime, the Rutgers Women are up 30-to-24 over Brigham Young at halftime. So we have a very quick press conference today, Judy, so we get back to see the end of this. More on Rutgers and more on the women and men in a few minutes. But it's a good game so far and we are up by six, as I said, at half.

So, Judy will have more to say on this but today the Department of Health will be releasing an executive directive related to visitations at our long-term care centers. This new guidance is in line with the guidance recently released by the Federal Center for Medicare Services and the CDC. As we have noted several times over the past weeks, our long-term care facilities should be working with families to allow for in-person visitation with their loved ones. We know that some residents are suffering from the impact of social isolation. I say some, I think we can safely say many, if not most, and being apart from their families for so long. And it's tough on everybody, certainly on the residents but also on their families.

Under this new guidance, long-term care centers in regions with a low or moderate COVID-19 activity level index, otherwise known and you've heard it many times from Judy and team, as CALI, should be allowing for direct in person visits for residents regardless of vaccination status. In regions where the CALI is high, or very high, and less than 70% of the facilities residents have been vaccinated, only those residents who have been fully vaccinated should be receiving visitors indoors. And remember, you've been allowing, Judy, outdoor visitations for quite many months here. That wasn't so relevant when it was in the middle of the winter but with a day like today that is increasingly relevant, so we want to underscore I think in several dimensions today, doing stuff outdoors is safer, period, whether it's long-term care, or other experiences.

The visitation options for essential caregivers, compassionate care, and outdoor visits, as I mentioned, will also continue to be available. And in all cases, everyone, residents and visitors, must properly wear face masks, especially while indoors. Remember, even those who are vaccinated can still spread the virus to those who have yet to be vaccinated and I will return to that point in a couple of minutes. I'll ask Judy to provide more detail on her directive but the overriding principle that we are working under is that we recognize that families need to be able to be together, especially when so many have been kept apart for so long. With both Passover and Easter coming up, we know especially that this is a time of year when families gather.

We expect all of our long-term care facilities to work with us; with not just with us but with their residents and the families of those residents to allow for visitations under these new guidelines. And should families be having unwarranted roadblocks put in their way, we encourage them to contact the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman at 877-582-6995, or online at a website that does not exactly roll off your tongue, nj.gov/OOIE. And again, we thank everyone in advance for their cooperation.

Next, a quick update pertaining to the upcoming June 8th primary election. We are pleased to announce today that the June primaries will be conducted primarily in person with all of our regular operated polling places open for all voters who wish to cast their ballots on the voting machines. We could take this step because our numbers, while up a bit over the past week, are holding steady and we are expecting to be in a much better place two-and-a-half months from now.

Next, a quick update from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority that they are extending the application period for small businesses to join their PPE discount program through May 28th or until all the funds are exhausted, whichever comes first. The small and micro business PPE Access Program provides participating businesses with discounts of up to 70% on personal protective equipment for employees and customers. Over 10,000 small businesses have collectively saved more than \$9 million and I encourage every small business owner to visit covid19.nj.gov/PPEAccess.

And while we're on the topic of the EDA's support programs, let's highlight one of the community organizations which has received funding through the Sustain and Serve Program to purchase meals for families in need from local restaurants.

When the pandemic hit, Asbury Park residents Julie Andreola, my friend Giuseppe "Joe" Grillo, Allison Kolarik, and Kathy Kelly founded the Asbury Park Dinner Table and I believe they founded it on March 19th, 2020, meaning last Thursday was their – was it Thursday or Friday? Last Friday, I guess. How about Saturday? No, Friday, it's the 19th. Friday was their first anniversary. So much for that correspondence math course I took. They founded this to both combat rising food insecurity and to help local restaurants stay active. Over the past year, they have raised more

than \$400,000 and they used that to buy and more than 100,000. Across the year, Asbury Park Dinner Table has provided on average between 300 and 350 meals a day. The APDT, as it is known, is serving typically, as I say, 300 to 350 dinner meals per day for more than a dozen local eateries. Through the Sustain and Serve Program, Asbury Park Dinner Table has received more than \$100,000 to augment its fundraising and to do even more good.

So to the team at Asbury Park Dinner Table and their volunteers, and to all the participating restaurants and chefs, thank you for helping to keep Asbury Park fed throughout the crisis. And we are honored to be your partner in helping the families of Asbury Park. I had a great call last Wednesday with Julie and Joe, check them out. Their website, not surprisingly, is asburyparkdinnertable.org.

And with today's announcements out of the way, let's get to some numbers. We'll start with the latest vaccination update. First the mega sites in Atlantic City and the Meadowlands have now each both crossed the 100,000 shot threshold. We are incredibly grateful to everybody associated with that achievement, especially our healthcare partners at each of these sites, AtlanticCare in Atlantic City and Hackensack Meridian Health in the Meadowlands for all that they're doing.

And in the Meadowlands I want to give an additional shout out to the team from NJSOS vets stakeholder group, Bergen County Veteran Services, and Catholic Charities Veteran Services who visited the Meadowlands mega site on Friday to drop off three carloads of snacks for the members of the great New Jersey National Guard on duty there. I want to thank my friend, Dave Pearson, for bringing this to our attention. He's the co-founder, among other hats he wears, of NJ SOS Vets.

So our dashboard is showing a current total of 3,510,311 doses. We've gotten another half-a-million shots into arms in just one week. And importantly, there have been a total of more than 2.3 million first doses administered by either the Pfizer or Moderna two-step vaccines or of the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine. That means that we are roughly halfway to our goal of – initial goal – of vaccinating 4.7 million individuals. And by the way, more than 1.2 million of those who live, work and study in New Jersey are now fully vaccinated.

And yet, we have to remember that while we may finally have COVID on the run, the mere presence of vaccines does not mean we are out of the woods, and here's your proof. Today, we're announcing another 3,305 cumulative positive PCR and presumed positive rapid tests. On Thursday, a total of 45,099 PCR tests were recorded with a positivity rate of 8.48%, and the rate of viral transmission today remains over one, 1.09. And Judy, you've said it as recently as Wednesday when we were here, I suspect you'd say it again today. Our gut tells us that that's going to go up again from there.

We are back to leading the nation in the spread of this virus. There is no magic wand that Judy, Tina Pat or I can wave to stop the spread. Only you all, by the millions, can stop the spread of this virus. As I have said and we have said repeatedly, the presence of vaccines – which is great, and we're among the nation's leaders in getting the shots into arms – it does not mean the pandemic is over. We still have work to do together.

Please remember that even if you are vaccinated, the vaccine only protects you from developing severe COVID. It does not make you bulletproof and you are still capable of spreading the virus to those around you who have not yet been vaccinated. And even if you are fully vaccinated, you have to keep wearing your face mask or masks. As we've discussed numerous times here, a face mask helps trap the potentially contagious droplets you are exhaling from infecting others. And even if you are vaccinated, you still need to wash your hands regularly with soap and water and to maintain social distances from others.

Being vaccinated does not mean that you become incapable of spreading the virus. Until we reach our vaccination goal. We all have to continue wearing our face masks, taking precautions and using common sense. And the vaccine is a measure of protection for you against developing severe COVID and requiring hospitalization. That is true, but it is not, in and of itself, a magic wand.

And speaking of hospitalizations, in our hospitals last night, 1,992 of whom 1,873 were COVID-positive confirmed. Our intensive care units had 428 of those patients, and there were 217 ventilators in use. Throughout the day on Sunday, 190 live COVID patients were discharged statewide, while another 207 were admitted, and our hospitals reported, at the risk of comparing apples and oranges, 26 not-yet-to-be-confirmed fatalities.

We are reporting, however, with the heaviest of hearts, another 28 confirmed losses of life due to COVID complications. This brings the statewide total to 21,666 confirmed losses of life. The number of probable deaths remains at 2,515, and that total will be updated, as usual, on Wednesday. Let's take a couple of minutes to remember three more of those who we have recently lost.

We're going to begin this week by remembering Garfield's Luis Herrera, and Luis was just 47 years old. A native of Lima, Peru, Luis was a trained auto mechanic and technician and also a small business owner. Over the years he owned his own towing business and had ownership stakes throughout the restaurant and construction industries as well. Luis was a man who held his Catholic faith close and he was a proud member of the Cino de los Milagros Brotherhood, the Peruvian tradition, which is one of the oldest and continuously held processions.

In his spare time, he loved to travel and to spend his time enjoying the natural world and all that it offered. He leaves his longtime companion Annie Delgado and his children, Chelsey, Bertha, Pedro, Christine and Brittany. He also leaves his brother Romi, who serves, by the way, on the Garfield City Council, as well as many friends and family both here in New Jersey and back in Peru.

I spoke with Romi on Wednesday. He was also COVID positive, he's now doing better, but he told me – Judy, this is one of those families that it just takes your breath away – seven members of their family, either living in Garfield or in Paterson, had been lost to COVID. Extraordinary.

We know there is no one American dream. For everyone who comes to our nation and our state, those words mean something different but we are proud that Luis found his American Dream right here in New Jersey and may God bless him and watch over him and all the other members of the Herrera family who have been lost to COVID-19.

Next, let's honor the life of Anthony Tabish. A native of Livingston and a former resident of Newark, Anthony had spent the last 30 years in Cranford. He was a Rutgers graduate who began his professional life as a lab technician at Robert Wood Johnson Hospital in New Brunswick, but he soon dedicated his life to music. He owned First Kiss Entertainment and The Anthony Tabish Orchestra, and was a founding member of the 3 Po' Tenors Singers.

Those endeavors aside, he always said his day job was as the music director at Queen of Peace Church in North Arlington, a post he held for the past 22 years. Before going to Queen of Peace, he spent 17 years as the music director at Saint Mary of the Assumption Church in Elizabeth. In both houses of worship, he brought music to the youth ministry.

In addition to his church duties, Anthony was a proud member of the Polish Falcons, the Bellmawr Fishing Club, and the Chopin Singing Society. Anthony is survived by his son Jonathan and his daughter Jessica, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last Wednesday, and son-in-law Daniel and his four grandchildren. And that, I believe, is the lineup right there: Olivia, Emily, Sophia, and Luke Anthony.

Anthony, their grandfather, was only 62 years old. For years Anthony inspired the faithful through music, and that is a tremendous legacy. We know it will be carried forward and may God bless Anthony and watch over him and his family as they do just that.

And finally, we remember Ann Marie Panzarelli right there in the middle. Born and raised in Hudson County and Jersey City and Bayonne, Anne Marie moved to Keyport with her husband Russell in 1993 to raise their family. In Keyport, Ann Marie became a recognized community member and leader. She drove a bus for the Matawan Aberdeen Regional School District, and served as a volunteer for the Keyport Indians Cub Scout Pack 364 and Boy

Scout Troop 364. For the past 10 years, she represented her neighbors as an elected member of the Keyport Board of Education, serving stints as both President and Vice President. In fact, she was reelected just this past November and was the high vote getter.

And even with all she did, Ann Marie always had the ability to put together a party at the drop of a hat, or to be on scene to provide a child with a band aid after a fall. And for her, every day was a good day to jump into a swimming pool. Ann Marie now leaves behind her team there, Russell, you can see up in the upper right, with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Wednesday. He too was COVID positive and he sounded like he had improved. Ann Maria in the lower right, who is at Rutgers; Vincent on the left, I believe also at Rutgers, he's got the "R" on that cap; and Connie, who on the left is the fifth grader. Ann Marie is also survived by her parents Albert and Ann Marie, her siblings Mary, Albert and Danielle, and numerous nieces, nephews, extended family members and friends. She also leaves a grateful Keyport. We thank Ann Marie for her decade of public service. That too was a legacy worth honoring and may God bless and watch over her, her memory and her family.

So we remember Luis, Anthony and Ann Marie, as we do all who we have lost. We will always recall their names. We will not let any of them become a mere number.

And finally, for today, the past couple of days have been huge in the sports realm for New Jersey's collegiate athletes, whether they wear our colors, or call our state home. First, let's recap the remarkable story of the Scarlet Knights Men's Basketball Team. On Friday, they upset Clemson; last night they battled hard throughout before ultimately falling in a heartbreaker -- Judy, you watched every minute of it -- to second-seeded Houston. I noticed your Villanova team won again last night, Sweet 16 again, so hats off to them.

This tournament, by the way, for the men marked the Scarlet Knights first turn at the big dance in 30 years. Their victory on Friday was their first tournament win since 1983. So to Coach Steve Pikiell and team, congratulations on a great season. Last night was hard, but no one should be hanging their heads today. We know that a new era in Scarlet Men's Basketball is just getting started.

Before I move on to the women, I must also acknowledge the passing yesterday -- you can't make this up -- of the longtime radio voice of the Scarlet Knights, on the left, Joe Boylan at age 82. He had suffered a stroke last Wednesday. He was a coach with the Scarlet Knights for 12 years in the '70s and '80s and was there for their Final Four run in 1976. He had been behind the mic for games since 2010. He will be missed, and we send our thoughts and prayers to his family and the Scarlet Knights family.

So as I mentioned earlier, and we'll get you an update on the score here after Judy and Pat speak, the Scarlet Knights Women are playing right now as we speak under the leadership of a great coach, C. Vivian Stringer. They're playing BYU, as I mentioned, in the first round of the women's tournament and we will give you a score update as soon as we can. They've had another extraordinary season. They are seeded sixth and richly deserving of that. Among, if not the best, defense in the Big 10, I believe the best defense of any women's team.

So if basketball weren't enough, Rutgers also excelled on the mat as well. At the NCAA Wrestling Championships in St. Louis, the Scarlet Knights landed three All-American selections for the first time in school history. From left to right, Sebastian Rivera at 141 pounds, Jackson Turley at 174 pounds, and John Posnanski at 184 pounds. And, Rivera and Posnanski from Toms River and Colonia respectively, each made it to their national semi-final matches. We send our congratulations to the three of those guys, to the team and to head coach who's one of the greats in the business, Scott Goodell, on a tremendous season.

Rider University made some history in St. Louis as well as the Bronx's Jesse Della Vecchia became the first wrestler in school history to make it to a national final match at 157 pounds, pinning the top ranked wrestler in the nation in the process. Congratulations to Jesse. I had the great honor of speaking to him just as before I came over here and to Rider wrestling coach John Hangey. I also wanted to say, Pat, they photoshopped my arms there onto Jesse's body. I just want to make sure I made that point.

And finally, we have a national champion from New Jersey. Westwood's Shane Griffith was a three-time state champion at Bergen Catholic. He was the state runner-up, by the way, the other year he was at Bergen Catholic, and on Saturday night, wrestling for Stanford, he won the national title at 165 pounds. He was also named the outstanding wrestler for the entire NCAA Tournament. We send our congratulations to Shane, but it's bittersweet because Stanford, kind of unfathomably, has cut out wrestling. So it's an extraordinary moment, the last wrestling match, perhaps in the history of Stanford University, was won for a national title by Shane Griffith of New Jersey. Unbelievable.

There is no doubt, by the way, we said this last week, New Jersey is home to some of the nation's best student athletes and we've proved it time and time again over the past several days. So hats off to each and every one of them. We'll update you on the Rutgers Women in a few minutes. With that, please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor and good afternoon. While we certainly understand how eager individuals are to visit loved ones who reside in long-term care and congregate facilities, with increasing numbers of long-term care residents vaccinated and outbreaks declining in these facilities, the department is revising its long-term care visitation guidance in line with CMS and CDC. As the Governor stated, New Jersey is adopting the new federal visitation guidance, which allows for responsible indoor visitation at all times and for all residents, except for a few circumstances where visitation should be limited due to a high risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Long-term care facilities in regions with low or moderate COVID-19 activity level index CALI scores should be allowing for in-person visits for residents regardless of vaccination status. In regions where the CALI score is high or very high, and less than 70% of the facility residents have been vaccinated, only those residents who have been fully vaccinated should be receiving visitors indoors.

Indoor visitation should be limited to residents with confirmed COVID-19 infection, whether vaccinated or unvaccinated, until they have met the criteria to discontinue precautions. Indoor visitation should be limited for residents also that are under quarantine, whether vaccinated or unvaccinated, until they have met criteria for release from quarantine. In the case of an outbreak at a facility, indoor visitation is still possible, as long as the COVID-19 transmission is contained to a single area of the facility.

Fully vaccinated residents can choose to have close contact, including touching and hugs with a visitor, as long as the resident and visitor are wearing tight, well-fitted face masks. As we have shared before compassionate care, essential caregiver, end-of-life visitation and outdoor visitation can be permitted even when indoor visitation is otherwise restricted because of the facility's status. The department continues to work to balance expanding visitation while working to safeguard these vulnerable residents.

Long-term care facility residents and staff were vaccinated as part of the federal Pharmacy Partnership for long term care programs. CVS and Walgreens are finishing their third clinics at over 1,200 long-term care and congregate facilities in New Jersey. Now we are transitioning to Phase 2 of the Federal Pharmacy Partnership for long-term care and congregate living programs, focused on ensuring sustained access to vaccination for residents and staff.

Starting this week, two group purchasing organizations with affiliates in New Jersey, Managed Health Care Associates and Innovatech's will receive a proportion of vaccine through the program to distribute to their member long-term care pharmacies. New Jersey has also set aside 700 doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine to supplement this effort. This initiative will provide direct access to COVID-19 vaccine for staff and residents who were not vaccinated during their three on-site clinics, as well as newly admitted residents and new staff. Long-term

care facilities will coordinate with their usual pharmacies to receive vaccine over the coming weeks. As the program rolls out, we ask for your patience as the pharmacies in the program receive the doses that they need and then contact their clients.

In addition, long-term care staff and residents are eligible statewide and can access vaccines on their own anywhere where appointments in the state are available.

As you know, New Jersey worked to include as many high-risk congregate settings into the Federal Pharmacy Partnership for long-term care program, as many as possible. Through this program, 270,421 doses have been administered to residents and staff of long-term care facilities and other high-risk congregate settings. Given their risk level, we were able to include residents and staff at our five state developmental centers and some group homes that serve individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Through this partnership, 2,058 doses have been administered to residents and 2,749 doses to staff at those facilities.

Through a supplemental federal partnership, Walmart conducted closed vaccination clinics for residents and staff members of the intellectual and development disability group homes that were not included in the initial Federal Pharmacy Partnership. Through this effort, a total of 5,594 residents and staff have been fully vaccinated.

So the number of doses administered in our state continues to increase to close to 3.5 million. At the six mega sites, as of last night, nearly 800,000 doses have been administered. The community-based vaccination sites, which ensure equitable access to underserved communities, have administered nearly 30,000 doses.

So moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 1,992 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients and persons under investigation. There are 428 individuals in critical care, and 217 of those individuals are on ventilators.

We are reporting two new reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. There are now 110 cumulative cases in our state.

There are a total of 400 reports of CDC variants of concern in our state. Variants of concern have been shown to be more transmissible and able to cause more severe disease. We have 389 cases of B-117, otherwise known as the UK variant. We have three P1 variants that emanated in Brazil. We have one South African variant, B.1.3.5.1 and we have seven total of two different California variants. There have also been reports of 65 variants known as the New York variant; that is considered a variant of interest associated with reduced efficacy. We have no variants considered of high consequences.

Since the last press briefing, at the state veteran homes, there's been two new cases among residents, one in Menlo Park, and one in Paramus. The state's veteran homes have vaccinated between 88% and 95% of their residents. At the state psychiatric hospitals, there are no new cases among residents.

As of March 18th, our positivity in the state is 8.48, the Northern part of the state 8.3, Central 8.49, and the southern 9.01. So that concludes my daily report. Stay safe, continue to mask up, socially distance, stay home when you're sick and get tested. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. Rutgers Women up 49-37 with 2 to go in the third quarter. May I ask you one question and then just underscore a point which folks need to hear, because it's your leadership? The veterans homes with 88% to 95% of the residents vaccinated, relative to other long-term care that's at the high end, presumably, right? So that's an important point to make.

And secondly, if my numbers are right, we now have 725 points of distribution for the vaccine. A couple of dozen of them are closed, like the NJ Transit that you and I visited, but about 700 are open. And again, remember, we're now rolling the tape back to November/December. We made the decision even in the face of hearing that the federal supply would be a lot lower than we were originally expecting, that we built and under Judy's leadership built out the distribution points. And we said all along while that was at 300 for a couple of months, you had the ability to literally turn the key and crank that up. And that's happening. And I think we are about -- we don't have guidance on next week yet, it's fair to say, but the subjective guidance is we're going up, beginning to go up meaningfully soon. And I think maybe even as early as next week. More on that, I suspect, on Wednesday when we gather.

Thank you for everything. Pat, the weather's good so we can take that off the list. Good to see you. That graduation was really special and very emotional, obviously, with Luke Homeijer's mom and dad there, and brother and uncle. God rest his soul, but it was incredible. On so many levels, an incredible night. Thank you for having us and over to you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Thank you, Governor, good afternoon. And those new troopers all reported to their respective troop headquarters at eight o'clock this morning, 144 men and women, certainly ready to serve New Jersey.

Since we last met, with regards to Executive Order compliance, ABC on Friday night conducted 73 compliance inspections, along with Bayonne Police Department, three licensed establishments in Bayonne were cited. Those were Buttarro's Mediterranean Restaurant as well as 990 Bar and Lounge; and in Hoboken, these three establishments were cited: The Black Bear Bar and Grill, A Street Tavern and the Wilton House. And on Thursday night, the 18th, ABC responded to three complaints, and cited those establishments, two were in Trenton which were Logira Bar in Trenton, Cooper's Riverview in Trenton, as well as Ivy Tavern Bar Restaurant, which is in Hamilton, Gov. That's all I got.

Governor Phil Murphy: So the ABC, as we've said before, Pat, typically does this by county.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: That's correct.

Governor Phil Murphy: So they did -- this is reflective of a Hudson and Mercer County?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: That's correct. Yes, sir.

Governor Phil Murphy: And I think as I recall, they've done two counties a pop when they do it, obviously unannounced, but they tend to do them --

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Unannounced, and the compliance is I would still say compliance is phenomenal. To visit 73 and only site six --

Governor Phil Murphy: It's not only phenomenal. I'd say if anything, it's gotten better.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: That's right.

Governor Phil Murphy: So that's a real testament to the establishments, many of whom are suffering enormously, so they're not only trying to comply but they're desperate to keep afloat and keep business in the right direction.

Getting a little uncomfortably tighter before we go to questions, we'll start with Elise. Rutgers Women up 50 to 43 at the end of the third, so let's keep an eye on that. So with that, before Elise jumps in, we will be, as we have been I think the past couple of weeks, we will be virtual tomorrow. We'll be back here Wednesday at one o'clock unless you hear otherwise. And then I suspect we'll be on the road again, if I had to predict, on Friday. And hopefully, given the time of day that that occurs, we'll hopefully have COVID numbers to report to you.

So with that, Elise, good afternoon. And there's a big crowd here today so if you all could be economical that would help us out a lot. Thank you.

[Q&A Session](#)

Elise Young, Bloomberg: Good afternoon. State Republicans are trying to link Andrew Cuomo's nursing home deaths and New Jersey's. They say that your order to accept COVID-positive patients directly followed his, and that in New Jersey, this was akin to your quote, "signing a death warrant". Are you concerned about nursing home misinformation, or outright falsehoods as you run for reelection? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, I don't have any insight on the New York side but I've got searing insights on the New Jersey side and we've said this many times, so I will say it in brief again. Judy's directives, my directives, were crystal clear. Remember, again, let's step back and say we were clobbered. We lost thousands of people and we mourn the loss of every single one of those lives, and we weren't alone. Every American state, as far as I can tell, every country in the world lived with an awful reality in their long-term care facilities, period. The orders and directives that came from those of us up here were black and white as to what folks should be doing.

Remember, these are the folks' residences. Judy reminded us of that in early April of last year. This is not like we were taking people out of hospitals to try to find a place for them that had no connection or there was abstract. These are their residences, this is where they live. And the directives were crystal clear about separating different floors, different wings, different buildings, including for staff.

If that weren't enough, Judy had the courage -- and I give her credit, again, for this -- to hire an outside firm completely independent of us, to hold a mirror up on our whole process. What can we -- not just even in the pandemic, but as a general matter in long-term care, Executive Orders that were needed? Laws that needed to be passed and signed, much of which has occurred?

We began listing probable deaths in June. That's nine months ago. So there's no denying we were clobbered. There's no denying the losses of life and the tragedy associated with it. There is also no denying the black-and-white nature of the directives and as early as we could, posting any of the potential probable deaths. Most of these probables are from last spring and early summer when folks largely died without getting tested, so it's an arduous process. We haven't had Ed Lifshitz here in a while; Ed's been overseeing that process and needless to say, it's not an easy one.

Last comment, does this mean that there were operators who ignored the directives and may have screwed up? It's quite possible that there were.

Let me make one other point that we've made and again, we've made all these points many times but it is worth reiterating. Judy went one step further and said to all the operators, "If you can't do this, if you can't abide by the directives, call me, call us and we will help you find a safe solution." And that happened. And so that's all I got on that. Dustin, Good afternoon.

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Good afternoon. You said on CNN this morning that you would pause rolling back restrictions because of the high case counts. Can you give any indication how long that could last and what you'd be looking forward to loosen restrictions again? Do you have any misgivings about expanding capacity limits and the recent spike? And is there any evidence of a link between the reopenings and these new numbers?

For the Health Commissioner, have you been vaccinated yet? And if so, can you discuss what you've been able to do now that you couldn't do before?

And then finally, Governor, a new group called Abolish The Drug War is pushing for you and lawmakers to consider following Oregon's lead and decriminalizing all drugs. They say the war on drugs is rooted in racism and has been a failure for decades, and the point is to decriminalize use in possession of small amounts. Where do you stand on this idea of decriminalizing all drugs? Is that possible in New Jersey? Thanks.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. No, I don't have any misgivings. But I will tell you, I can't give you a specific timeframe but we're sort of in a very much of a balancing moment and I think Judy could comment on this, or Tina. We know we have variants. We know therefore that there's more transmissible versions of this virus in the state. We've been very cautious in our reopenings. We've probably taken a lot more heat about being too cautious as opposed to too liberal, I think that's for sure. But that's been for a reason, because we know we're not out of this thing yet. Weather getting better helps us. Again, repeat, anything you can do outdoors, folks, do it outdoors as opposed to indoors.

The vaccination proliferation is undeniable in our state, notwithstanding what some Oregonians wrote even a couple of weeks ago, we're consistently in the top five American states in terms of shots in arms relative to shots that have been shipped to the state. That's a good fact. Folks generally, to Pat's point on compliance, generally -- there are exceptions, a few too many high school parties we're hearing about, but for the most part, folks are complying and wearing their face coverings.

So I just would say, I think six or eight weeks ago we started saying but for the variants we would be taking more steps, more aggressively, sooner and I think you're seeing that play out. I'll get to Judy to amplify that and or on her own vaccination.

I don't think we've seen links specific to openings. I don't think we've got any evidence of that. But we do know this: if you conduct your activities, if you compare Judy's habits to my habits and I have more indoor habits than Judy does, whether that's dining, gyms, indoor entertainment, whatever it might be, you run a higher risk of getting COVID as opposed to someone who has less indoor part of their lives.

Am I open-minded to decriminalizations, further decriminalization? I suppose so, but I think we've taken the biggest step, and that is marijuana, and that's done for social justice. And that's the overriding reason. If you look at why we inherited the widest non-white gap of persons incarcerated in America, it was overwhelmingly due to low end and overwhelmingly in that respect, marijuana offenses. So I'm open-minded to hear their arguments but I think we are -- I think we've taken a big step and I want to get that step embedded. That's my personal opinion, and get this right before we consider taking further steps.

Judy, any comment about your own vaccination experience?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: I have been vaccinated, I got Moderna and it was a two-dose regimen. After the first dose, a little pain in my arm, nothing serious. After the second dose, I felt a little funky the next day and then felt fine.

Governor Phil Murphy: And among other things, we know that you're able to come to the press conference, so thank you.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: And I was eligible. I want to make it clear. I didn't jump the line, I was eligible.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, yeah. Rutgers Women 54-45, 8:49 left in the fourth. With that, Brent, let's hit you next if that's okay. Thank you.

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: First of all, I want to give my condolences to Joe Boylan's family. They are longtime family friends and my dad and mom wish the family nothing but the best.

Governor Phil Murphy: Brent, let me ask you. He had literally a stroke on Wednesday, is that right?

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: Yeah, yeah.

Governor Phil Murphy: Was he in okay health up until then?

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: Yeah, as far as we could tell, no, and, you know, it was kind of sudden. But he was a great guy. And so when will New Jersey make everyone eligible for the vaccine, now that a few states have taken that step? And lastly, how are you counting the J&J doses on the dashboard? We've heard some concern that the wording suggests you are now counting it twice. Once in the first dose section and again in the fully vaccinated section.

Governor Phil Murphy: Is that it? I can't give you a specific date on when everyone's going to be eligible, but it's not going to be a long time from now. I think what we need to see is the actual proof of what we get when we've talked about that quantum step up in supply and that we then have certainty that that's going to stay at that level, if not even get better; but it's not going to be – the President has asked that everyone in the country be able to at least register for an appointment by May 1st and I think we have every comfort that we can do that in New Jersey, but beyond that, I don't have a specific date for you. J&J count, I know we're not counting them twice, but any comments on how J&J is counted on the dashboard?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: It's counted separately. I have to look at it. It's counted separately, though. I know, all our internal reports, it's counted separately.

Governor Phil Murphy: The game has tightened, 54-51 with 7:12 left in the fourth. Charlie, good afternoon.

Charlie Kratovil, New Brunswick Today: Good afternoon, Governor. Regarding the April 20th school elections, when you signed Executive Order 216, was it your intent to have all the normal voting locations, open considering mail-in ballots will not automatically be sent to all active voters like was done last year? And do you support the proposal to eliminate six of New Brunswick's 14 voting locations for that election? Or, would you like to see the full complement of locations to prevent the spread of COVID and ensure voters can participate?

And finally, demolition began today on the Lincoln Annex School in New Brunswick. What is your message to community members there who are losing their neighborhood school and also some of them now stand to lose their voting locations to exercise their franchise?

Governor Phil Murphy: I will let Parimal address your first question, Charlie, on the April 20th school elections. I've got no opinion on the New Brunswick polling locations other than I'm hearing it for the first time, and I've got nothing new to add on Lincoln Avenue School; we should be able to find ways to have world-class cancer centers and great schools, and so far as a state we've done pretty well. Parimal, on the April 20th – by the way, the announcement I made today about in person, I assume you know this that was on the June 8th primary specific, not to the April school elections.

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: The April and May school and municipal nonpartisan elections were designed to be conducted primarily in person, but I can't speak to any decision an individual municipality makes with respect to its polling locations.

Governor Phil Murphy: We'll come back to you on anything we've got as follow up. Good to see you. You're good? We've got one here, please.

Reporter: Governor, should the Legislature get a say on whether you continue to extend emergency powers? Should the Emergency Health Powers Act be revisited based on lessons learned during the pandemic? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: You know, I got asked this question and it was about the health – extension of the health emergency and I realize only now that I forgot to answer it at the last press conference. Let me say this: we want to end the state of emergency and the health emergency as much as anybody else does. This has become our lives and we want to, all of us, including the four of us and our colleagues, we want to move on. We had very constructive conversations with leadership. In fact, we had a conversation about this within the past week or so, I can't remember the day, with the Senate President and Speaker. The Legislature we had a legislative update that Judy and I did end of the week, I think last week, as a general matter.

For the most part, the cooperation has been outstanding. Again, a huge shout out to the Senate President the speaker, but even across the aisle for the most part we've had, you know, the right sort of spirit, attitude, teamwork that we all need. It takes all of us to do this. So again, I don't have any news or updates on that other than, you know, we do what we do for a reason. So the health emergency, which is the one that has to be renewed every 30 days, has direct, explicit, unequivocal impact on our ability to do what we're doing with vaccines, as an example.

One of many examples: We're not top five in the nation by happenstance: we are because we have all of the organs of government, private sector volunteers, healthcare providers, moving as one whether it be mega sites, community sites, closed pods, pharmacy, chains, etc. The Health Emergency Orders allow us to do a lot of what I just described, and that are desperately needed. That's going to be correlated to how many vaccines we can get in people's arms, and God willing, how many people we can keep alive. Thank you. Sir.

Reporter: Good afternoon, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon.

Reporter: You say you're watching the spread of variants closely, but health experts have said the state has a very limited capacity to test for variant strains. How can you know for sure what is happening with these variants without a robust system to do genomic sequencing across New Jersey to detect those cases?

And, in what situations do you envision people needing to show their vaccination cards as a passport?

A question from Joanna Gagis. What is your plan to adjust DOE's guidelines to match the updated CDC guidelines, reducing six feet of distance to three feet between students? And will you approve district plans if they propose to make these changes ahead of updated DOE guidance?

And lastly, from Colleen O'Dea, it has been more than two months since the assault at Edna Mahan and now eight prison guards have been charged. You have said you're waiting for Matt Boxer's report to pass judgment on Corrections Commissioner Hicks, but lawmakers are critical of other decisions he has made, including the management of COVID-19, few furloughs under your EO, and no information on the implementation of Earn Your Way Out. Given his full record, how do you rate the job Hicks is doing? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'll come back if I could to Tina and Judy on the genomic sequencing. Pat and I will cede that ground to the experts on the right. But I will say this: what we don't – and they are the experts. Here's what we don't need further information on, and that is how many positives a day, what our positivity rate is, what our hospitalizations look like. We're just assuming, as a public health matter, that these variants are all in the state, they're more transmissible and we're managing on that basis, but they'll come in in a sec.

I was asked about the vaccination passport, if I was open-minded to it. At one point I said, yeah, that's something that I'd be open-minded to. I don't want anyone to think that we're up here pounding the table, that this is something we unquestionably support. The CDC is the place that discussion and that guidance, I think, Judy, has to come from. I think we're going to come back on Wednesday, we're still digesting with the Department of Education and Judy and team on CDC guidance. I think we're planning on talking to that on Wednesday, and that includes approving guidance on school district plans.

And listen, I'm going to repeat what I've said so forgive me, the Edna Mohan incident in January is reprehensible; completely, utterly unacceptable. The Attorney General has an active, ongoing investigation and as you rightfully point out, I believe now eight persons have been charged, I believe all of them with official misconduct, among other

charges. We need to be independent investigation going on, led by Matt Boxer, one of the smartest, toughest guys I know. And that's where it has been and that's where it will be. We need to bring both of those to a head and they will be brought to a head.

With that, Tina, how do we track the variants and how do we know they're here and how lethal they are and all that stuff? Good to have you.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Well, we know that the variants are here and just want to take a step back and just kind of mentioned that it's really important to keep in mind that it is absolutely critical at the point that you identify that you're positive case, that you're positive for SARS COV-2, that is the point that you take the intervention. That you isolate, that you do quarantine, that you do the contact tracing, because it's very important for people to know that the turnaround time for the actual sequencing to get data on variant data does lag about a week from the time that you get the samples. So regardless, you know, the most important time for the intervention is when you identify that you've got the positive case so that you don't perpetuate the spread and the transmission.

But that said, we have a lot of work to do, not only here in New Jersey, but also nationally as far as identification of variants. And, you know, we're constantly learning about these variants. As the Commissioner had alluded, you know, there are different categories of variants. We have variants of concern, we have variants of interest where we don't have as much information about those variants. But, you know, that's what the constant surveillance that we do nationally as well as here in New Jersey are going to help better characterize what the impact is on the spread of disease.

And here in New Jersey, we are taking a lot of steps to ramp up our sequencing in general, to have a better sense of the characterization of these variants. But again, just to reiterate is that the point that you take that public health intervention begins with the positive case, not with the variants because we know it exists out there. But you know, with the fact that when you identify the case and to take those preventive measures, the layers of prevention, the masking, the social distancing, the staying home when you're sick, the washing the hands and the like.

Governor Phil Murphy: Tina, well said. One takeaway for me, this is one example of a broader takeaway from COVID is as a country, we have dramatically under invested in public health. And that includes in things like sequencing. Where you compare us to other countries right now and it's an embarrassment. We are not where we need to be on a global scale. That's not unique to our state. That's a national reality.

I hesitate to ask for the score anymore because every time I asked for it, it goes the wrong direction. BYU is now winning with 4:20 to go, 55-54. So I hope we don't see a repeat of what happened last night with the men. Let's go to Dave, and then we'll go back behind you. Hey, Dave.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. The alarm has sounded about the start of what some are calling the fourth wave. I don't know if it's here. It's the third wave, it may be another wave. But I'd like to ask your take on the trends that we're starting to see. I know, Governor, you had mentioned you expect the RT to go up a little bit, at least and it's now over one. And how is all of the information that we're getting going to impact decisions that are made about graduations, proms, outdoor activities, you know, where people could wear masks and stuff?

We have not seen a big surge in hospitalizations, it seems to be kind of bubbling around the same spot for the last couple of weeks, maybe a little bit up.

But and finally, with regard to this question, you've talked about trying to approach increases in COVID cases surgically, Governor, instead of just a blanket lockdown situation similar to what we saw in the spring. Could you remind us, how's that going to play out if we do start to see an uptick in cases here? And does it depend on whether it's just in one area? Or, if not, if it's just a general increase in hospitalizations, for instance, how are we going to be able to do anything surgically about that? Because it does seem, at least suggested that, you know, this increase in the variants in New Jersey is causing a sharp – not, I'm sorry, not a sharp, a slight rise in cases overall. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'll give you my best answers and ask Judy and Tina if they want to weigh in on this. Again, Rutgers continues to be down by one with 2:23 to go. I wouldn't say alarm. That's a word I would not use and I would count this – if it is a wave and I'm not sure that it is a wave, but it's certainly a plateauing. So we, you know, if you look back, I don't have the numbers in front of me. You know, two months ago in January, we were bumping at either high 3000s or low 4000s hospitalizations, that's up about a hundred over the past week, but it's still under 2,000. And spot positivity rate is better, it's still not acceptable. So it's sort of if you think of it, it's come down from January, and it's sort of going sideways, frankly, at the moment.

So I wouldn't necessarily say it's an alarm, there is a bunch of different things coming together at the same time, and we're trying to balance all those sort of mega trends. One is the variants. Two is the weather will get warmer. And we know from experience that when we're outdoors, it's less lethal than indoors. Thirdly, vaccinations are now meaningfully into the state and will continue to be even more so in the weeks and month or two ahead.

And so getting that balance right is not easy. So we're therefore using caution. So even though we opened up indoor capacities, gathering limits indoors and outdoors, we did it, I would say, we would all agree fairly modestly, 10 people up to 25 indoors, up to 50 outdoors; those are not huge leaps. We are desperately asking folks to still wear face coverings, especially, obviously, when they're indoors or they're outdoors with others.

Graduations and proms, we know that that's something that's out there and we clearly need to give some guidance on that and we will. And again, I would repeat if they're outdoors, which is more likely for graduation, my guess is that a prom? That's going to be an easier one to get our arms around. Hospitalizations I've already addressed. In the surgical question, and again, I'm going to turn this to the experts here on all this.

Yeah, I think making blanket moves in reaction to numbers that have plateaued is not the way forward here. The most important things I think we can do right now are do the basics, all of us, by the millions. Have the proprietors that Pat referred to earlier continue to overwhelmingly do the right thing. Get our vaccinations as aggressively as we can into arms. And let some time on the clock go by here in terms of warmer weather. And I think that combination is the winning formula.

I don't think there's a, you know, shut everything over here down or everything over there down. We have used the regional approach. Judy's use it on hospitalizations. We use it now on long-term care. We use it as well by definition on schools. So to a certain extent, that's being done. I continue to be on the side of the state is among the smallest in the country, the densest in the country.

You know, my fear would be if you did something on, say restaurants in one region over here, you'd have an unintended consequence of something else popping up over here. I continue to believe that's the right mindset. But, Judy, Tina, any other thoughts on that?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: I think the one thing we've learned through all of this is we can't trust this virus to act in any way that's predictable so we have not let our guard down at all. We meet daily, we review hospital census, we meet weekly with the hospital collaborators, the regional hospital collaborators. We go over every hospital. We look at our PPE stockpile. We have both operational stockpiles that we look at daily, and what we call strategic stockpiles so we will not be caught without protective equipment if we need it. The collaborators are ready to manage as they did. so effectively, during the worst surge in March and April, moving patients to get the right level of care when they needed it. We are acting as if a surge could happen tomorrow and we will be ready, as compared to how we got hit by this virus in the beginning of 2020.

Governor Phil Murphy: That is a very fair thematic point to make. We're going to, we have since day one committed to preparing for the worst, that is for sure, and hope that we don't see it. Thank you. Ma'am, good afternoon.

Reporter: Hi, good afternoon. I have two questions regarding vaccinations. The first one, Connecticut is lowering the eligibility age to 16. New York just announced it's lowering it to 50. So how come New Jersey is still stuck at eligibility with 65 years and older?

The second question is, supply issues aside, it seems like the state's online registry system isn't that effective. We've been talking to a lot of people who are eligible that are scrambling, spending hours online just to get an appointment. CVS, for instance, says the vaccine isn't available in the entire state and most hospitals don't have any appointments. So why is it so difficult? Why is it an issue to get an appointment here when it does seem to be going smoothly in neighboring areas?

Governor Phil Murphy: You're going to forgive me for -- I'm going to take exception to the premise of the second question. And I'm not suggesting there aren't people who are frustrated, because there are. And increasingly, we break down into two groups of people, largely. I'm frustrated, I'm anxious over here, I can't get an appointment. Or, my date is not as soon as I'd like it. And over here, by the millions now, people who say that was like one of the best healthcare experiences in their lives.

As of at least Thursday, we were number four in the country on vaccines in the arms relative to what was shipped to us. And the three states that were ahead of us were smaller, Minnesota, New Mexico, and one of the Dakotas, North Dakota, I believe. So I would just say -- and that's not to make anyone feel less frustrated but that is a fact. The biggest challenge we have is we don't have enough doses. So we are proving the top four states in the country, you give us the doses, we'll get it into arms. We're really good at that. We clearly need more doses. That's the reason why that frustration exists. And again, I'm not making light of it. If you have not been able to get an appointment and you're anxious about that, we have nothing but sympathy and I promise you you're going to get it. And it may not be as soon as you'd like, but that's because we don't have the supplies that we'd like. As I mentioned earlier, we now as of this morning have 725 locations in the state.

As it relates to other states, you know, we're taking the approach we're taking. I had heard New York was dropping their -- I think you mentioned Connecticut and New York -- are dropping their eligibility tomorrow. We've taken an approach that right now, if you're 65 and older, you're automatically eligible. If you're under 65 and you have a chronic condition, you've been eligible since January. That continues to be the case. And then we announced a week ago today, a group of communities largely defined by workforces, and there'll be another group coming on: essential workers, longshoreman and others, a week from today. And we're going to, you know, we're trying again, part of the answer to that question is, there is a big still supply-demand imbalance, which is better than it was, but still an imbalance and so we're trying to as methodically and doggedly get to as good a place as we can. Again, we're really good in New Jersey getting your shot into the arm if we get the dose. We need more doses. Thank you.

Nikita. By the way, the Rutgers Women were down by one with 34 seconds to go. I feel like we're seeing the same movie as last night. I hope that someone can give me an update. Dan is going to do that. Nikita.

Nikita Biryukov, New Jersey Globe: So New York is again exploring congestion pricing. I know you opposed this back in 2019 and probably even earlier. I'm wondering if there's been any changes in your thinking since?

Next, five members of Hoboken Council and Mayor Ravi Bhalla want the Attorney General to expand his investigation into a racist 2017 campaign flyer in Edison to also include another offensive mailer sent in Hoboken around the same time. I'm wondering if you support that?

And then from David Wildstein, he's wondering if you have any comment on an offensive photo caption that appeared in the Asbury Park Press website Sunday.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, we're down by four with 24 seconds to go. Judy, I need you to put some prayers to work over there for the next 24 seconds. I've got no real updating, Nikita, on congestion pricing. We need to be -- I think the two explicit precepts that we had, or probably three: one is we need to be at the table. Two, at least in the original discussion a couple of years ago, there was an inequity between folks who came through a tunnel versus the George Washington Bridge, which cannot stand. And thirdly, given the amount of commuters that go into New York City every day, or at least they do in a normal time, thirdly we would like some of the proceeds to go into New Jersey projects. So that's where we were and that continues to be where I would be today.

How do I react? I've not seen Ravi and the five members of council with that request, but the Edison thing was incredibly offensive. I believe if I'm remembering this properly, so was the Hoboken incident. And if you're asking me conceptually would I'd be supportive of running that to ground, absolutely. But again, that's something I have to defer to the Attorney General on.

I saw, I literally was told about this caption. I frankly didn't believe it. I then read it with my own eyes and it is unfathomable that someone could have written that, even privately, never mind that it was published. So, I mean, someone has to pay. I would think with all due respect, someone has to pay a price for that. That's completely, incredibly offensive. Even the apology missed the point, as I understood the apology. So I don't have any comment further on that but completely, utterly unacceptable. Really offensive -- offensive, by the way, at many levels. And I just can't believe that in this day and age that would get not just written in someone's like diary, but it would be published online.

So I hate to check this before we go here. We're down two with 3.8 seconds to go. Can we stay in for the 3.8 seconds here to round this thing out? I apologize. I hope we have the ball, Judy. I will, all kidding aside, start to mask up here. But thank you. I want to thank Judy and Tina. As always, thank you for being here. Pat, Jared, Parimal, Dan, cast of thousands. Again, we will be virtual tomorrow and live Wednesday here at one o'clock.

I would just say not a lot of news to add in terms of any advice we've gotten. You all have done the right thing by the millions, by the tens of thousands of establishments. We just need you to keep it up, particularly given we're sort of in this foot race. The vaccine news while it's frustrating for some who don't have an appointment, overall is really good news. The variants is not so good, Tina, but you know, the weather getting better and doing the basic stuff, Pat, still works. And I've got no updates here. I don't think we can keep people after class much longer. Thank you all. God bless you all.

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