

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: September 1st, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



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

Let's start on a really sad, sad note, and that is to remember this guy, Keith Pinto, the 19-year-old lifeguard who lost his life on Monday when he was struck by lightning on the 21st Avenue Beach on South Seaside Park, which is part of Berkeley Township's White Sands Beach where he was working, and that's a beach, and that's an area that we know very, very well. Keith was a 2020 graduate of Toms River High School North. Our prayers are with his family, his mom and dad. I reached out and left a message for her today. I've not yet had the honor of speaking. His brother, his twin brother, I believe, his sister, as well as with his friends and fellow lifeguards. We also pray for the continued recovery of the seven other individuals injured by Monday's lightning strike, including three other lifeguards. Keith was the second young lifeguard in as many weeks to lose his life on duty. I'm signing an executive order today, which lowers the flags in Keith's honor this Friday. He worked to keep our state safe and our shore safe, and we will not forget that.

I don't have a picture, but I also just spoke a short while ago with Charlotte Trout, who is the widow of, Pat, Middlesex County Hazmat Lieutenant Donald Trout who died on a call last Friday. He was a member of IAFF local 345. He leaves behind his wife Charlotte. You can imagine how she's holding up. Please keep her and their kids in your prayers, their daughter Gabriella who's 11 and their son Gianni who's only 4, so God bless Lieutenant Donald Trout and his family.

Next up, we're going to switch gears. We will have more on this and Pat will have the bulk of it, but the remains of Hurricane Ida will impact our state really today through the early morning hours of tomorrow, Pat, if my math is right. Many areas should expect between two to four inches of rainfall, potentially up to six in parts of central and north Jersey. I think you're particularly worried and our team is worried. By the way, Pat has a minor in meteorology because the

of Emergency Management reports to Pat, which is why that's one of his areas of expertise, but I think northeast New Jersey is where your particular concern is. Many communities are still waterlogged from last week's storm, so Ida is going to be dropping water on already saturated ground, heightening the threat of flash flooding.

I've just been shooting out notes and have exchanged notes already with Helmetta mayor, Chris Slavicek, Mike Ferrante, the Cranbury mayor. I've sent a note out to the Jamesburg and Monroe mayors as well. Again, this is a situation where you've already got soggy water. The winds, I think, you think may gust in some places up to 30 or 35. Please God, they don't get too high because when you combine a lot of rain, soggy ground, trees are then going to be looser. There could be significant tree and powerline damage. I hope not. If you're out and about and you come across high waters, do not go into them. Turn around. Don't drown. As always ready.nj.gov I think is the best place to go for the latest information. On the other end of this system – and I guess this is a silver lining – the weekend looks like it will allow us to begin drying out, so it looks like the weather for Labor Day Weekend is decent, so please just stay in if you can over the next – really importantly over the next 12 to 15 hours and let this storm pass.

Now again, shifting gears, on Monday we discussed some of our ongoing plans for fully vaccinated residents to receive their booster shots once the CDC provides their guidance as to when they should be received, and in some of these discussions you may here us speak of boosters, and you may also hear us speak about third doses. We had a little bit of that discussion on Monday. To ensure there's no confusion, these terms are not interchangeable. I just want to give a quick differentiation. Judy or Ed, if I get this wrong, please don't hesitate to correct the record. A booster shot is just that. It is an additional dose for individuals who are not immunocompromised that will allow the immune system to boost up its defenses against the coronavirus. We are learning from the research that while still robust, the level of protection offered by the initial two-shot regimen of the Pfizer or Modern vaccines or the single dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine slowly wanes. This booster gets us back to that 90+% level of full protection. Many of us may think back to when we were kids and received other vaccine booster shots to ensure that our bodies were well prepared to fight off potential infection. No difference here. A COVID vaccine booster ensures that the immune system remains in a strong and aggressive defensive position against the coronavirus should it find its way in.

Now a third dose or a third shot is not a booster. It is a necessary additional dose of vaccine for individuals living with an immune system deficiency for whom the initial two-dose regimen may not simply provide enough of an immune system response to provide the level of protection that the rest of us are provided. When we say third dose or third shot, we are speaking directly to individuals with immune system deficiencies who need this to achieve a benchmark level of protection because it is harder for their immune system to reach that level of protection after the primary series without that third dose. New Jerseyans with immune system deficiencies have been eligible to receive that third dose since August 14th, and as of this morning, a total of 41,872 third doses have been administered to those needing them. Again, this is separate and apart from all the work that Judy and Ed and team and Pat are putting in to getting us ready to administer those booster shots for the rest of us while we're eligible, and that'll begin the week of September 20th.

Again, if you're immunocompromised and are in need of your third shot, your time to get in line is now. On the other hand, if you're preparing to receive a booster shot, we're awaiting the final recommendations from the CDC. We'll have more information regarding that when you can get your next dose as soon as we can. Again, we discussed this, Judy, on Monday, and Ed, this is another big question we're awaiting guidance on is do you get it eight months after you completed your vaccine regimen or six months after. The amount of folks who would be eligible on day one you can imagine is a much larger crowd, and therefore, it has real infrastructure and planning implications for us if it's six months and not eight months.

With that, let's move on. Schools are reopening and our students and faculty are returning for in-person instruction. Certainly, masking by all individuals within our school buildings is important to safely kicking off our school year, but masking is part of a package of a layered approach to safety that is being put in place including staying home when sick, just like the old days, vaccinations, physical distancing, handwashing, among other steps. Another strategy schools can employ is routine testing to detect the virus even among asymptomatic students and staff to prevent further spread in the school community. To better support districts that are adding testing to their toolkit, the Department of Health under Judy's leadership and Department of Education under Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan's leadership will release details on the \$267 million we have set aside to support schools to implement K-12 screening and testing programs. Districts will have a choice between using state contracted vendors to provide end to end testing services on site at schools or districts can request funding to support an in-house testing program, which may already be in place so long as it is consistent with the Department of Health's guidelines. This program can also be used to support testing of unvaccinated staff pursuant to our executive order.

Given that we don't yet know the extent to which these programs may be utilized, we don't know at this point how far this \$267 million will ultimately go as we provide these tests at no cost to district students or staff. Our program will supplement the federal operation expanded testing program, which also provides testing through federally contracted vendors at no cost to schools. We strongly encourage districts to work with their local health department to develop a

testing strategy and consider participating in this program. We further hope all parents and guardians ensure their child participates in testing when the opportunity arises, but we are ready for the start of the school year. We want everyone to be as safe as possible in their schools and classrooms. We expect everyone to be wearing their facemasks, and we will continue to work with district and educational leaders.

With that, let's move on to all of today's numbers. First, here are the vaccination totals for today. In addition to these numbers, we can report that we are now over the threshold of 80% of all eligible individuals who live, work, or study in our state having received a first dose. An additional 673,000 folks above and beyond the total you see on the screen here have gotten their first doses of either Pfizer or Moderna vaccines. That's another huge milestone on our path forward, and we need to make sure that they remember to go and get that second dose. Here are today's case numbers along with the positivity rate and rate of transmission. Positivity rate jumped – it's a weekend date, Judy and Ed, and that's back to the usual pattern we had for so long. The rate of transmission, good news is it's – bad news, it's above one, but the good news, it's continuing to float down. Here are the numbers from our hospitals, and here you can see – take a minute and look at those. Here are the numbers of confirmed and probable losses of life. As you can see, we're confirming 20 new losses of life today. As we always do, let's honor the lives of three more of those folks who we have lost.

We'll start today in Haddonfield, which was the home of this guy, Edward "Eddie" Corbett who passed away on March 10th at the young age of 58. He contracted COVID twice, and it was the second fight against the virus which so grievously impacted his health. He was a Camden native and a graduate of Camden Catholic High who went on to earn a degree in theater arts from St. Leo's University in Florida. From there he embarked on a career in the theater, which took him to the Louisville Repertoire Theater, summer theater in upstate New York and various stage, television and movie roles in New York and Los Angeles. He moved back to South Jersey in 2001 and volunteered his time at his alma mater helping the Camden Catholic arts department and preparing students for regional Shakespeare competitions. In fact, Camden Catholic is naming its theater room in Ed's honor. Ed was predeceased by his parents Patrick and Dorothy and by his older brother James. He left behind his sisters Tish – with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Monday, and Mary, brother Tom and their families including his eight nieces and nephews and four great nieces and great nephews. We know Ed has found another stage on which to lead. May God bless and watch over his memory and his family.

Next up, we remember this guy, Jose Luis Nogales Salazar. He lived in Rahway. We lost him on February 19th due to pulmonary fibrosis caused by his bout with COVID. Jose was part of our state's proud Bolivian community, an immigrant who came here from his native city of La Paz to complete his studies in computer engineering, and with that degree, he had a 20-year career with the Xerox corporation before moving into the medical field as a member of the Hackensack Meridian Health family in Edison. Jose was a devout Catholic and in staying true to the tenets of his faith was always ready to provide a helping hand to anyone who needed his assistance, no questions asked.

He is survived by his wife Madeline, with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Monday, and to whom he was married for 24 years, along with his son Andres who is 26, his daughter Sophia, 22. He also left five brothers, Miguel, Patrick, Rory, Grover, and Rossi, and numerous nephews. By the way, his daughter Sophia, 22 years old, sadly graduated this spring from Monmouth University. I shouldn't say sadly, but she graduated this spring from Monmouth University but sadly without her dad by her side. We mentioned last week a young lady moving into college without her dad. This is a young lady graduating from college without her dad. Like so many, Jose came to New Jersey in search of his American dream, and we hope he found it. We know he did in his tremendous family May God bless and watch over him.

Finally, for this Wednesday, we remember Toms River's Jeanette Raby. COVID took Jeanette on February 26th at the age of just 57 years old. By the way, each of the losses of life, Judy and Ed, today are in their 50s. I think it's probably by coincidence that they're all being spoken about today, but we have to remind people this is far and away no longer a virus and pandemic of elderly. These are folks who were in the prime of their lives. Again, Jeanette was 57. She had worked as a radiation protection supervisor at the Oyster Creek power generation facility in Forked River since 2008, a span of years that went from the facility's life as a powerplant all the way through its decommissioning in 2018 and into its safe dismantling. She was one of the folks making sure the workers and community remain safe throughout. Given that she as from Toms River, Jeanette had a special love for the beach and enjoyed traveling. You can see her standing on the shore.

She left behind her husband Michael, with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Monday. He's now in North Carolina By the way, they would've celebrated 29 years of marriage last month. She also leaves her sons Ezra and Cortland, along with Cortland's wife Ashley and a stepson Daniel. She also leaves her parents – please keep them in your prayers – Jeanette and Raymond, her sisters Cynthia and Ruth, brothers Tim and Ray, and numerous other family and friends. We thank Jeanette for her focus on keeping the families and communities of Ocean County safe and may God

bliss and watch over her memory and the family she leaves behind. This is, by the way, I say to my colleagues – we counted it up – the 217th time we have been together for a briefing, and in all but a handful we have remembered some of those we lost to this pandemic. Folks, please go get vaccinated to protect yourself and your family.

I want to switch gears a couple more times briefly. I want to turn our focus to Terina Nicole Hill, that woman on the left, a veteran of New York's fashion industry and the founder of the Fashion Design Center of South Jersey, a maker space that seeks to empower tomorrow's fashion leaders. Through the Fashion Design Center, Terina has provided emerging designers with courses, resources, opportunities, and mentorship. To keep the dream and vision of Fashion Design Center alive, Terina partnered with the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, which came through with not one, not two, but three grants that has allowed her to keep providing needed services and resources, and she was also able to launch a paid internship program with a local high school to reach even deeper into her community. I had the great honor of speaking with Terina on Monday. We had a great chat. New Jersey's always been ahead of the curve in so many things, and through her leadership, the Fashion Design Center will keep us ahead. Check them out, [fashiondesigncentersj](http://fashiondesigncentersj.com), as in South Jersey, .com.

Before we leave, a quick sports report. First, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the New Jersey athletes representing our nation at the Paralympic games in Tokyo, which will wrap up this Sunday. They are Gianfranco Iannotta of Garfield in track and field, Pennington's John Tanguay in rowing – and by the way, John is bringing a silver medal home to Mercer County – goalball team member and six-time Paralympian Lisa Czechowski from Boonton, Ray Hennagir of Deptford who won a silver medal with the wheelchair rugby team. By the way, Ray served our nation with the United States Marine Corps in Iraq where he was injured by an improvised explosive device otherwise known as IED. A recreational therapist recommended he find a sport to aid in his recovery, and now he's a Paralympic silver medalist. Jersey City's Raymond Martin, who is also bringing home two silver medals in the 400 and 1500 meters at track and field, and last but not least, Robert Griswold of Freehold in Monmouth County, my county, who's bringing home a gold medal in the 100-meter backstroke. We are so proud of them and every athlete who's been wearing the red, white, and blue in competition over the past week just as we were of their fellow Olympians a few weeks ago. Congratulations to all, and we can't wait to welcome them home.

Finally, staying with sports, this is New Jersey football week, and there you can see the proclamation that says as teams across the state are preparing for the start of their seasons, I will be in attendance at sold out SHI Stadium in Piscataway tomorrow night as the Rutgers Scarlet Knights open their season against Temple. Again, sold out. Over 53,000 people and among them Pat Callahan and many members of the state police will be on the field for the national anthem thanks to an invitation by Coach Greg Schiano. They are celebrating the 100th anniversary and birthday of the New Jersey State Police. I'll be looking for you, Pat. Over the weekend, if that weren't enough, Rutgers New Brunswick – the Rutgers New Brunswick campus will be the epicenter of high school football as SHI Stadium will host 12 games over three days, the so-called Rumble On The Raritan. To them and to all of our college, high school, and youth league players and coaches, I wish you a safe, healthy, and fabulous season. I must give special shoutouts to New Jersey Interscholastic Athletic Association executive director Colleen Maguire, commissioner and coach John Jacob of the New Jersey Football Coach's Association and our dear friend Senator – State Senator Paul Sarlo and Mayor Paul Sarlo for all their efforts in launching this season's – this year's season.

Finally, tomorrow, I will be at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst alongside various members of our cabinet including the two immediately to my left and right for a briefing on the arrivals of Afghan refugee families. We'll have more for you coming out of that visit. That is all I've got for today. I hope you all enjoy the long Labor Day Weekend. Please be safe, especially if you're preparing to head back to school. Watch the rain and flash flooding from now until the wee hours of tomorrow morning especially. We will be back with you as I mentioned on Monday a week from today right here unless you hear otherwise at 1 p.m. Please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction, the commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Commissioner of the Department of Health Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. As the governor mentioned, 267 million in federal grants are available to assist local educational agencies and non-public schools with implementing COVID-19 screening testing for students and staff in K-12 schools. We all want the safest return to school for children and staff, and this funding will help schools open safely by providing access to testing resources such as test kits, diagnostic lab services, PPE, and full testing services. Districts can choose to use one of several state designated vendors, or they can receive funding for testing programs that the districts already have in place. To qualify for the funding, chief school administrators were advised in mid-July that they must develop a testing plan in consultation with their local health department and based on the screening testing guidelines that the Department issued last month.

I want to give a brief overview of the guidance for parents and school districts and staff. First, I want to emphasize that school-based testing should not be used alone but as part of a layered prevention approach that includes masking, frequent handwashing, physical distancing, and staying home when you're sick. When schools implement testing

combined with prevention strategies, they can detect new cases to prevent outbreaks, reduce the risk of further transmission, and protect students, teachers, and staff. All K-12 schools are strongly encouraged to develop a screening testing program to identify asymptomatic infections to prevent further transmission in schools. Those who are fully vaccinated do not need to participate in routine screening testing. Currently, 55% of our children ages 12 to 17 have received at least one dose of vaccine and 44% are fully vaccinated. Those that are fully vaccinated do not need to participate in routine screening testing.

Additionally, those who tested positive for COVID [24:38] since test results may remain positive for up to three months even though the individual's no longer infectious, testing should be offered on a voluntary basis, and schools should have a procedure in place to obtain parental consent for minor students. School-based testing should never be conducted without consent from a parent or a legal guardian. Testing strategies can be broadly divided into diagnostic testing, which evaluates primarily symptomatic individuals or those who have been exposed to COVID-19, and then screening testing, in which entire groups of asymptomatic individuals are tested. The screening testing matrix in the Department of Health's guidance provides recommended testing strategies based on the region's COVID-19 activity level or CALI score.

Screening testing of teachers and staff across all levels who are not fully vaccinated should be at least once a week. Student screening may not be necessary in areas of low transmission but in regions with moderate, high, or very high virus activity, screening testing of students who are not fully vaccinated or random samples of 10% of students should be completed at least once a week. Students and staff who are not fully vaccinated will undergo testing based on the screening testing matrix found in the public health recommendations. Individuals who test positive should be immediately excluded from school, and school-based close contact should be identified and excluded from school for 10 days in regions with low or moderate risk or 14 days in regions with high or very high risk. Anyone who tests positive by rapid antigen test and is asymptomatic should be additionally referred for confirmatory testing by a PCR test within two days of the initial test. Asymptomatic exposed close contacts who are fully vaccinated do not have to quarantine, and they should just be tested in three to five days following the exposure. Additional health and safety information provided by the Department of Health and the Department of Education for school reopenings can be found in *The Road Forward*.

Moving on to my daily report as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 1,065 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients and persons under investigation with 211 individuals in ICU and 51% of those individuals are on ventilators. Fortunately, there are no new cases of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children. At the state veteran's homes, there are no new cases among residents of the homes, and at the psychiatric hospitals, no new cases among the patients. The positivity statewide on August 28th is 6.98%. The northern part of the state is 5.60%, central 8.18%, southern part of the state 8.84%. That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe. Let's get vaccinated to protect ourselves, our family, our friends, and most importantly, our children. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, before we go to Pat, I asked you earlier an open-ended question. Would love to ask it in this forum. How are you feeling about this right now? Lots of moving parts, right? You've got on the one hand – this is largely in the good news category where Delta has raged around the world it looks like it loses steam after a couple of months and it comes down and in some cases it stays down. In other cases, it bumps up, but that may well have to do with whether or not that country was opening up at that point. On the other hand, you mentioned there's yet another mutation here, another variant of concern. Positivity rate remains high, uncomfortably so, especially on the weekends. Rate of transmission above 1 but coming down pretty steadily. How do you – that's on all sides of this, and maybe Ed may want to weigh in as well. How are you feeling about things right now?

Commissioner of the Department of Health Judith Persichilli: I'll start with the vaccination rate. We all remember last year when we did not have vaccines, and we didn't have testing in the beginning either, so I think with our rate of testing and the number of individuals we have vaccinated, if there is a lid to be put on this virus, we put the lid on as much as possible. We see some leveling off of cases and hospitalizations, although over the last two weeks it's about 22% increase in hospitalizations, so we're watching that carefully.

Governor Phil Murphy: The rate of the curve has started to slow, even though it's still going up.

Commissioner of the Department of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, it slightly seems to be moderating a bit. When we compare ourselves to other states, we're in much better shape. Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey are all clustered at the lower end of the increase in cases. On the other hand, the big unknown are variants. There's a variant of interest called Mu that we're watching carefully, and Lambda, which followed Delta in a lot of our other states; we're watching that carefully. Internationally, we see the Delta variant rise and fall within a 10 and 12-week period. That's where we're hoping we'll see the downswing of Delta, but I'd love to hear what Ed has to say.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, and Ed, I may throw onto that. Judy added vaccination and testing, and we're among the leaders on that and that's a good thing. Folks have done the right thing overwhelmingly. Add into the fact as the weather cools, we're going to be inside, and we all know the lethality of this thing goes up when we're inside. Ed, any thoughts?

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: We're in a whole lot better situation than we were last year. As you mentioned, the vaccines, the natural immunity, the somewhat better therapeutics, the better understanding about how the virus transmits, all those sorts of things are working in our favor. We're certainly a whole lot better than we were a year ago. Also unfortunately, we're in a whole lot worse situation than a lot of people think we are in, meaning that when I look around the state, I almost see two different states. I see many people out there acting as if COVID has been completely defeated and completely gone away. It's partly those activities which are keeping the virus again that is making it harder for us. Yes, we're in pretty good shape, much better shape than going into the last school year, as both people have mentioned. We are seeing flattening out. We are seeing decreases. I think if we were not going into the beginning of a school year right now, both for the K through 12 and also the college students that we probably would see us dropping off in the next several weeks. With people going back to school, it would not surprise me certainly towards the middle and end of this month we began to see an increase again.

Governor Phil Murphy: To your very fair point about caution, let's remember we just announced a short while ago or showed on the screen that ten people died in our hospitals in the past 24 hours from COVID. Per the people we memorialized, again, they were not in the past 24 hours; they were some time ago. They were all in their 50s and in speaking with their families, their loved ones, I can't say in every case but they were not in that most susceptible categories. Thank you both for riffing a little bit on that.

Pat, obviously weather and again, to repeat again, the Office of Emergency Management reports up directly to Pat, so this is why among, in addition to public safety and law enforcement and community engagement and a few other balls that you have in the air, weather, natural disasters, etc., are on your card. We'd love to get an update on our team in Alabama. I know they're coming back. How are they doing? When are they getting here? I worry a lot right now about really soggy grounds to begin with with somewhere – 2 to 6 inches of rain, depending on where you are coming in on top of it, which is why I – again, we mentioned earlier the winds and whether or not – because if you've got a soggy ground, the tree doesn't have the foundation it needs, more likely to hit over into power lines or houses. For all of the above, welcome and give us what you got.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor. This morning, to the Governor's point about the weather, we did host a call with our county OEM coordinators and all of our state Emergency Management partners, primary ones being Board of Public Utilities and DOT amongst others. There is some concern from National Weather Service about the potential for severe thunderstorms that may spin into tornadoes in the southern part of the state, but the water probably is going to be our greatest concern. They even mentioned could be possibly the worst they've seen in more than a decade. If you can remember, right out of this building in '05 what Route 29 looked like in the city of Trenton.

I'll just quickly go through where we're expecting major flooding: the Saddle River in Lodi, Passiac River in both Little Falls and Pinebrook, the Raritan River at Manville, and the North Branch Raritan River near Raritan. The Delaware is also expecting some moderate flooding basically from Phillipsburg all the way down to Lambertville and those towns, Riegelsville, Frenchtown, Stockton, those in between. We're expecting some moderate flooding. So certainly working with National Weather Service and the River Forecast Center who keep updating those river gauge models as we go.

As far as preparation, we activated the State Emergency Operations Center today at noon. That is staffed to monitor this throughout. I've been on with both President Fiordalio and in contact with Commissioner Gutierrez-Scaccetti on DOT from clearing drainage areas, making sure that their tree service vendors are lined up, making sure that their pump stations' generators are working, and they're even going to extend their emergency service patrols to make sure that they're out there because they can help us not only with stranded motorists but blocking ramps and roadways that are not able to be driven through.

Our team, NJ Task Force 1 is on their way back from Alabama. They went down. They never got deployed into New Orleans. We are bringing them back. We do have two urban search and rescue teams ready for either flooding and/or tornadoes, any structural collapses. There's two teams are ready to roll, and the NJ Task Force team of 45 should be back by tomorrow afternoon, Governor. A lot going on, a lot of balls in the air, as you said, and the wind, to your point – those gusts with the ground just saturated, especially up in the northeast – the water just doesn't have anywhere to go, especially in those urban areas.

Governor Phil Murphy: You're getting into Newark in a fast rain storm, you can see it on streets. Hoboken is famous for this, which is why we got to continue in our infrastructure and just – we just got to stay out ahead of this. I've focused mostly on flooding, but it does need to be underscored that there is a potential for severe thunderstorms and tornado warning, right?

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Yes, so we're – again, like – as always, our partners are from BPU, DOT, DEP, Health, with just making sure that we don't miss anything there, human services with mask care if we need to open up centers. It is that team effort that we've witnessed for the last two years, for sure, not only with COVID but with everything else that comes our way. It's a phenomenal group to be a part of.

Governor Phil Murphy: Amen to that. It's a good time to reiterate these things are happening with more frequency and more intensity. There's no question about that. We just have to – it's incumbent on all of us to do everything we can to stay out ahead of this, and the whole of government approach is exactly what the doctor ordered in terms of the here and now. Thank you for all of the above.

We'll start over here. Brendan's got the mic. Again, we're going to be – because of Labor Day on Monday, we won't be with you, but we'll be with you again a week from today unless you hear otherwise from Dan or team at 1 p.m. right here, right now.

Q&A Session

Mike, is that you?

Mike Catalini, Associated Press: Yes, good afternoon, Governor. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Nice to see you.

Mike Catalini, Associated Press: Likewise. The \$267 million, is that – have you all calculated – is that the cost of the testing program or is that just the money that's available from federal funds? If it does cost more, will school districts and local governments be expected to come up with the cost, or can they tap federal funds either from the CARES Act or ARP for that money? Second question, Governor, unrelated to the pandemic, it's been reported that at least or up to 100 Americans are still in Afghanistan that were left behind. Do you know – has your office been contacted at all whether any of those that are still there are from New Jersey? If so, what details can you share? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Michael, and Parimal or Dan will follow up with you if I misspeak or there's more color. The 267 is what's available and not necessarily the cost. In fact, I mentioned in my remarks, it's – there is a potential that it is going to cost more. Unless you hear otherwise from my colleagues or me, we will find federal money, either money that was directed towards schools or toward the state at the state level to make up the balance if it goes over. I think you guys would agree with that.

It's a good question on your second one. I do not know the answer to that as I sit here. We took a lot of incomings beginning, I'm going to say, around the 13th of August. Clearly, it intensified on the 15th when Kabul went over to the bad guys, and we took a lot of incomings on people asking for help, particularly in my case, knowing that we had a foreign service background. To the best of my knowledge, the people we were contacted on got out, but I do not know the specific answer. I'm not sure it's knowable in terms of whether or not there are Jerseyans still in Afghanistan. You've got, as I understand it, at least, a significant amount of dual nationality individuals. In some cases, they chose to stay. In other cases, they initially chose to stay and saw what was happening and reversed course. If we get any more information on that, I promise you we will let you know. It's a very good question. I'm not sure, frankly, how – I'm not sure what system would have that information other than anecdotal. If I hear anything anecdotally, I'll make sure we get to you. Thank you.

Matt, good afternoon.

Matt Arco, NJ.com: Good afternoon, Governor. Just as we edge closer to September 20th, any update on which megasites will reopen? I don't know if you touched on this on Monday, but if you don't have an update today, do you have a timeline of when you'll announce that stuff? How serious are you willing to consider remote learning option if things do get worse? Were any of today's 20 confirmed deaths breakthrough cases? Lastly, is the Administration concerned at all that you're making – I guess giving districts too much to juggle in terms of the rules that they have to follow with testing? The Commissioner just laid them all out; they seem pretty lengthy. Is there any concern that that just might be too much for them to juggle? Thanks.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm going to go out of order, Matt, if you permit me. Breakthrough among the ten that either passed yesterday or the 20 we confirmed, Ed, do you happen to know?

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: I know that I don't know is the short answer. The problem is it takes a while once we get – a death gets reported to us until the investigation is done that we know they've been vaccinated. When that death is first reported, we often do not know if they were vaccinated. No, I couldn't tell you for sure if any of these were vaccine breakthroughs or not.

Governor Phil Murphy: Again, to repeat the broad statement – and we've said this many times – thank God the vaccinations are exceedingly effective, as Judy has pointed out many times, as has Ed, against hospitalizations, severe illness or death. We'll come back to you if we have more color on that.

Which megasites and when will we announce the plan? I think we're probably going to be either sometimes – my guess either a week from today or a week from Monday unless someone suggests otherwise. I'd be pointing, Matt, to either the 9th or the 14th when we'll have the full plan.

Remote learning, if we need to, we need to be, I think, at a district level. I do not envision doing what we did in March of 2020 and shutting the whole state down. That's just not in the cards. You never say never with this virus, as I've said many times. It's very humbling trying to stay out ahead of this thing, but I don't anticipate that to happen. It would have to be a dramatic outbreak of some sort at the local level. It would be done, I would bet, overwhelmingly on the district basis unless Judy or Ed see otherwise.

Listen, the districts have been fantastic partners and I give a shoutout to the superintendents and their teams, principals, boards of education, educators, support staff, moms, dads, kids. Everyone's been extraordinary for now a year and a half. I would say that we've given them a lot to handle. I say we; the virus has given all of us a lot to handle. I think overwhelmingly, they've done an exceptional job. I think is it possible in the early days? There's working the kinks out and bumps in the road. I'm sure there will be, and not every district will have the same uniform experience. They have shown time and again an incredible ability to adapt and to do the job. I fully expect that'll be the case here as well. Thank you for that.

Alex, good afternoon. How are you?

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Good afternoon, Governor. For Dr. Lifshitz, you just mentioned people that are participating in activities that are keeping the virus around. Can you elaborate? If it's shopping without a mask, there's no indoor mask mandate. If it's indoor dining, indoor dining is allowed. What particular thing are people doing that's keeping this virus around? Commissioner, can you elaborate a little bit on the decrease in cases that you were talking about? Is this Delta variant doing what the Governor said it did in India and potentially suddenly hitting a wall and falling down in a good way with decreasing cases? Are we seeing the end of this peak? Governor, you mentioned people left behind in Afghanistan. I can tell you for a fact that at least three New Jersey residents are stranded in Afghanistan because I've been talking to their son: a mother, a father, and a 12 year old girl.

Governor Phil Murphy: Can you get us their information?

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Sure. Just wanted to know what you're going to be doing in that particular instance. Congressman Kim yesterday indicated to us there might be more New Jersey residents that he's been dealing with.

Governor Phil Murphy: I missed the first part of your comment. Are they expressing a – they want to leave?

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Hell yes, absolutely.

Governor Phil Murphy: I guess who wouldn't? Understood, okay. I want to follow – can we get Dan to follow up and get the coordinates?

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: A separate political question, Vince Palestina has been selected to fill the state of the resigned Senator Chris Brown. Your Secretary of State Tahesha Way certified his selection, but Senate President Sweeney is not going to put together a quorum to swear the Senator in. Is Vince Palestina a senator? Did Tahesha Way err in certifying him? Do you believe he should be able to serve the residents who he represents now? Finally just a very broad question; we've talked about this before. When – you used to talk about masks and other measures to combat the virus – you used to say the phrase, this is not forever and for always. You haven't used that phrase lately. Has there been a change? When do you see the pandemic as ending, especially if it's something that we're going to have to have boosters for that may be around for a while? Is this ever going to end, and what's your personal metric for ending the pandemic? Does it have to be zero hospitalizations, deaths, or cases? If so, we could be here for a long time.

Governor Phil Murphy: Got it, all good questions. Ed, it seems to me the behavior that is the most concerning is packed-in inside with people who are not masked and whose vaccination status is not knowable. Is that a fair...

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Absolutely.

Governor Phil Murphy: I don't think it's sitting at a table for dinner. I don't see it – pardon me, Ed. I also don't know that – I mean, we were in a restaurant last night. We wear the masks to the table, have dinner with two unvaccinated people. We took it off when we left the table. We put it back on again. Ed, please.

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: No, that's correct, and you're absolutely right when you talk about the mask mandate being relaxed or back in May but the second part of that, which a lot of people didn't hear, is that while the mandate, meaning requirement for people to wear masks indoors, was removed, the recommendation that those who are unvaccinated wear masks regularly indoors has never gone away. The recommendation has consistently been there, that those who are unvaccinated indoors wear masks. More recently with the spread of the Delta variant, that has been somewhat strengthened to say even those who've been vaccinated who are going to be, as the Governor said, in close indoor quarters with people's vaccination status that you don't know should wear masks as well.

Certainly as I go to places, whether it be stores or restaurants or walk through a bar or other places as well and look around, typically what I'm seeing now compared to what I was seeing three, six months ago is an awful lot of people who aren't taking those extra precautions including often a lot of people that can't be masked based upon their general size and age, how they look, and that people overall are being more relaxed when they do things. Yes, the vaccines have helped and yes, we are in a better situation and all those things are important, but that doesn't mean we can go back and forget basic infection control, forgetting basically how the virus works, that the virus has not gone away, and just completely relaxing our standards.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Ed. Judy, I'm not sure you're comfortable yet saying that you're seeing a decrease. The rate of increase has come down, but we're still going up. I guess the very good question is whether or not – I guess there's no way of knowing. Are we going to live through what India lived through where it falls off the table? We hope it does; that's for sure.

Department of Health Commissioner Judy Persichelli: We look at cases per hundred thousand on a seven-day rolling average. We've seen a slight flattening of the trajectory going up, and we're hoping that that means that the Delta variant is coming through our state and will leave us. It won't happen overnight. Also, the CDC does a forecast that you can go on their site. They do a forecast on – I guess it's for research entities. It's a pretty wide variation, but it shows a slight flattening as well. We can hope that that's what we're going to see.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, please, please. By the way, you and I were doing some looking at modeling and not just across different sources but across moderate versus high. You can drive trucks through the gaps here, so it really is an open-ended –

On the Afghanistan question, two parts to that. One is, again, we want to get the information from you, and thank you for that. Secondly, one of the side benefits of having been an ambassador, we've got pretty deep connections into the State Department, so we've used those in the cases that have come to us since August 10th, and I would bet that that's how we'll continue to go at it.

The question about the senator, is he a senator or not, is above my pay grade, so I'll refer to Chief Counsel Parimal Garg here.

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: When Mr. Palistina's sworn in, it's a matter for the legislature, and we don't have any comment on that.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, thank you, Parimal. I don't – I would repeat again – I haven't said it in a while; you're absolutely right. It is not forever and always, but I think we've also said for a while – and I'd ask Judy and Ed to disagree if they see it differently. I think at the end of the day, when it settles into a static state, it's going to be in our midst like the flu is in our midst. My gut, based on any – again, I'm not an expert here but based on all the conversation with experts, it's going to be around and we're going to learn to live with it as we are doing already. Sadly, I think you said, Ed, a few months ago a bad flu season in New Jersey takes about 1,000 lives a year, and a bad season at that point where we did not have the Delta variant, we were running at 2,000 but it was coming down. I'm guessing it's something like that. I think the open-ended questions are how many other variants come on top – how many other variants come back on the back of the Delta variant and how far does that extend this current phase. I think the other open big one for me is the booster shots. Are these – does this become an annual event like the flu shot I got the other day, or is it a every five years, every ten years, no more? To be determined; I don't think anyone knows that answer to that. That's where I would be right now. Thank you.

Sir?

Is that fair? Would you guys – you all good with that?

Reporter, NJ Spotlight: Good afternoon, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon.

Reporter, NJ Spotlight: Question from Brenda Flanagan, a New Jersey woman was charged with selling fake COVID vax cards online, and some of her customers worked in healthcare settings. How common is this, and what are your concerns, and what is the state doing to combat it? How is the Docket app used by the state designed to prevent this type of fraud? On another subject, with Texas's restrictive abortion ban going into effect as the US Supreme Court refused to block it, are you concerned about the threat to Roe v. Wade and will you prioritize getting the Reproductive Freedom Act passed, which could codify the right to abortion in state law? Governor, do you support the following legislation sponsored by the Senate Majority Leader aimed at addressing sexual harassment in the workplace and in campaigns, S-3389, which requires adoption of and training on anti-discrimination by certain campaign committees? S-

3077, which requires revision of state legislature's anti-harassment policy? S-3079, which codifies state workplace anti-harassment and discrimination policy? A question from Colleen O'Day, will you be adding data on third doses and eventually boosters to the dashboard? If so, how soon? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I find that you're talking a lot faster than you used to be, squeezing more questions in. I don't think – to Brenda – please give Brenda my best and Colleen, as well. I think on this knucklehead who's selling the fake vaccination cards – I do not think that is widespread at all. We will come down on anybody who does that with the full force of law enforcement and prosecution to the fullest extent. It's completely unacceptable and obviously undermines public safety and undermines confidence in public safety.

I'll switch to Colleen. The answer is I would say absolutely certainly we'll be adding the data on the dashboard for the third – both the third doses as well the boosters. Third doses is already on there, I believe, for the immunocompromised and we'll do for the boosters, as well.

I'm out of order here. Texas ban does concern me very much so. It's what we had anticipated could happen, and remember, the reproductive freedoms – I don't want to get into politics or – but the fact of the matter is protecting women's health here, reproductive freedom in our state is built on case law. All of that case law is in turn built on the Supreme Court's decision on Roe v. Wade. If the foundation of that series of case laws is impacted, impaired, taken away, the entire reality in our state falls like a house of cards, which is why we need to, as soon as possible, put this protection into statute. I'm strongly supportive of that and want that to happen sooner than later.

I won't comment on the specifics of the bills, but the conceptual direction of all those bills are completely consistent with steps that we've taken in our current campaign. I think it's literally best in class in all the things that you talked about, harassment, discrimination, training, systems that are put in place for folks to raise their hand if they see something that is not right, as well as steps we've taken inside of government. If those – again, I'm not commenting on the specific bills, which I would not, but if those statutes strengthen steps that we've already taken or expand steps in a way that makes sense conceptually, I'd say I'm all in enthusiastically and again, I think we're doing a lot of what those bills, I believe, envision. If there's more in those bills that are consistent with what we're doing, sign me up. Thank you. Anything you would add to that or you good? Okay.

Dustin, nice to see you. Hold on one sec.

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Good afternoon.

Governor Phil Murphy: I haven't seen – by the way, Dave usually sits in this seat. I haven't seen Dave. Is he – I assume he's okay? Hopefully taking a little time off?

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Oh, maybe I should start with good afternoon, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: You're the Dave Matthau memorial seat here.

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Could you clarify on this 267 million for school testing? Is that new money and if so, can you specify where exactly that's coming from? Has that money been allocated, or do the districts still need to apply? I believe you've already said what you don't plan to use in American Rescue Plan funds for such as replenishing unemployment fund or extending on plan benefits, but I don't think you've specified what you plan to use that money for. When will you detail your plans for those funds? Has New Jersey spent any of that money? Do you have any thoughts on the Ciattarelli campaign using Katie Brennan in election ads against you? Do you have any response to the list of issues his campaign is highlighting to show voters your “abysmal record” with women? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: On the 267, is that ARP or CARES? If not – if I don't – we don't know the answer to this right now. We'll come back to you.

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: We expect all of that money to be reimbursable through federal funds, whether it's going to the state, whether it's going to county or school districts directly, but we can get you more details.

Governor Phil Murphy: We'll get you more detail on that, Dustin. By the way, you asked a good question because you said apply for it or not. The fact of the matter is there's money – there's a bunch of different roads you can go down here, essentially, right? You've got also districts which I think you mentioned in your remarks and I believe I did, that have set up their own shop. It's consistent with your required minimum standards, and they need reimbursement as opposed to they need us to do the actual process. Anything you want to add to that?

Department of Health Commissioner Judy Persichelli: Yeah, the money, the actual funds, the 267, are coming through CDC through their ELC funds. The allocation has – they've not been allocated yet. It's ready to go as soon as the school districts identify their testing plans and choose whether they'll do it on their own or through the vendors that we've selected.

Governor Phil Murphy: We'll come back to you on any other color on that, if you guys can help me out. Thank you, Judy, on that. On the ARP money at the state level, again, Parimal or Dan will correct me if I'm wrong. We got plus or minus \$6.2 billion and I would say somewhere between 2 and 2.5 has been spoken for. There is about \$4-ish billion. Had very good conversations with the Senate President and the Speaker. We want to do this responsibly. We want to do this in a responsible and lasting manner. We want to do it with the legislature. We have until the end of 2023 to deploy this money. We have got – I think we've developed a good process with the legislature in terms of stuff we have to do now that comes up. For instance, we've got one that we expect that will come up that we need money to administer a program, that we'll be able to do that for a while with the monies we have. At a certain point, we're going to need something before – sooner than later, and there's a process set up for that, which is a good one with the legislature. We've had good conversations around that. More to come on that. Again, it's, Dustin, for lack of a better range, plus or minus \$4 billion. Again, we want to spend it and spend it right.

I'd rather not get into any of the politics here. This is really not [29:40]. I would just say Katie's experience is one that impacted all of us deeply. It's led to a lot of the changes and steps we've taken on behalf of survivors, whether it's in official government, whether it's in general society in New Jersey, or to your first – the first one of those bills inside of campaigns, and those are lessons that have been – that will stay with us, steps that have been taken, laws that have been passed and signed. If there's more we can and should do, we will do that. We want to be, as I've said, not for a while, but we want to be – if the awful thing befalls you as a survivor as it did Katie or others out there that we want New Jersey to be the role model Americans state of being there for you.

With that, grab a quick swig here and mask up. Judy and Ed, thank you, as always, Pat, likewise, and again, Judy, Pat, and I will spend a good chunk of our day tomorrow at the joint base. We'll probably – my guess is at latest next Wednesday but my guess is before then, we'll have some means of reporting out information that folks are curious about. We have a lot of organizations and a lot of individuals in this state who've raised their hand to help in any way possible, whether it's in the healthcare arena, whether it's – on with NJEA this morning. What can educators do? On with a group of community leaders and faith leaders in the Jewish community along with Senator Weinberg, Senator Singer earlier today, folks raising their hand. We want to help. It's great Jersey spirit, not surprising. We'll have a better – the feds have been really driving this. We've been their partner. We're going to learn a lot more about what those needs may be.

In the meantime, please stay safe in this weather. Particularly watch out for flash flooding, the potential for severe thunderstorms and God forbid, I hope not, tornadoes. That's a today reality. That'll go into the rain – at least we'll go into the early hours of tomorrow. Wish you a great – I think the weather's going to be decent – a great Labor Day weekend. Please be careful. Celebrate our brothers and sisters in labor and the great heritage of labor but do it responsibly To everybody who's going back to school, we wish them an incredible school year. Please, folks, continue to do the right thing, including please, please get vaccinated. God bless.

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