

Governor Phil Murphy



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TRANSCRIPT: March 13th, 2020 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy and Health Commissioner Persichilli Hold Coronavirus Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Hello, everybody. Hello folks. Good to see you all. Dr. Tan, how are you? Good afternoon, everybody. It feels good to be back I have to say.

I want to say something I've said several times over the past ten days. The outpouring of support and sympathy toward me and my family – Tammy is here with me today and our kids – has been overwhelming. It's been incredibly humbling. And while at one level I started texting in the recovery room against the advice of almost everybody, it's another thing to actually be physically in the seat with you all today. So again, to everybody who has kept us in their thoughts and their prayers we'll never forget it and deep, deep appreciation.

I want to thank a lot of people but I want to begin by thanking the woman to my left, who is about five and a half feet from me, so I think that's within engineering distance of being acceptable. But I want to thank Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver for not just leading these briefings over the past week, and this has not been an easy time to be doing that, but also to have run government while I was out of commission. And I can't thank you enough, Sheila, as always. So, thank you, thank you.

I'm joined by an august cavalcade of stars here with me both at the dais as well as around the room, but I want to give a particular shoutout to New Jersey Hospital Association President and St. Joseph's Health President and CEO, to Sheila's left Kevin Slavin, one of the good guys. Kevin, great to have you here, not just representing St. Joe's but also on behalf of the



hospitals up and down the state. Again, Col. Superintendent Pat Callahan, thanks for hosting us. Commissioner Judy Perischilli and your extraordinary team, both Dr. Tan and Chris Neuwirth; and then, at the far end Commissioner of Education – thank you, Dr. Lamont Repollet.

Let me start with a statement of principal, and this will not be new but I want to make sure. It bears repeating and I want to say it. We are taking every appropriate step to reduce the spread of coronavirus, limit the harm and care for the sick. We are following the facts on the ground so we can ensure our response is fully directed by medical expertise and sound science.

Events here at home, nationwide and around the world are changing quickly. I know that for many in this state, this is an anxious time and we completely understand that. I am proud as I've said before that New Jersey has been ahead of curve in our preparations, and we will continue to be so if we follow our North Star: to be smart and measured, to take steps that are appropriate, to be guided by the facts and by science. This is how we will get through this crisis together, and let me say unequivocally we will get through this crisis together

We have received 21 new presumptive positive test results since yesterday. That brings the statewide total to 50. Judy will provide details on those cases shortly.

Yesterday as you all likely know, I took the step of recommending the cancellation of all public gatherings statewide of 250 people or more. I hope somebody's done a nose count in this room. I reiterate this recommendation and if necessary, while it's a recommendation if necessary we will mandate this step. We must be aggressive in mitigating the potential for exposure and further spread, and social distancing represents our best chance to so-called flatten the curve as you can see behind me to slow the spread and allow our public health workers the ability to stay focused and ahead of the curve as well.

With regard to our public schools, and Lamont will speak to this in a little bit, we have been and are now actively working with districts on extended closure plans to prepare for a potential statewide closure. For some districts, for many in fact, that time is now. For others, we are working around the clock to ensure that when that time comes – and it is a when and not an if. It is a when and not an if – they will be prepared to provide all critical services for our communities. We continue to make every decision based on the facts as they are on the ground, and we are proactively working toward the inevitability that every district will be closed for a prolonged period of time.

Each district and each community has their own set of challenges and realities, and we will be guided not just by public health needs but also ensuring the individual needs of those districts are being met. We must take into account the significant educational and socioeconomic impacts that occur when schools are closed for extended periods. We need to ensure solutions to mitigate the impacts of a statewide closure before such a declaration. And I promise you, we are working around the clock as we speak in that preparation.

We must ensure that we have plans for a child's well-being, food security and remote learning as we close down our schools. In too many cases in our state the best if not only meal too many of our kids have is provided through the school. We cannot take that lightly and we will not.

At the Motor Vehicle Commission, switching gears – no pun intended – all residents who have their driver's licenses, auto registration or vehicle inspection due for a renewal by May 31st will receive an automatic two-month extension. This is being done to reduce the number of customers needing to visit MVC during this emergency. So anyone, for instance, facing a March 31st expiration will have until May 31st. Those with an April 30th expiration date as I have, by the way, will have until June 30th. And those whose materials expire in May will have until July 31st and so on.

Additionally, today I am writing the federal government requesting a nationwide extension of the Real ID deadline. I've got no more color on that, other than that is a strong plea and I think a very fair request on our behalf, on behalf of the nation's governors. And we will keep you posted with any progress there.

Thirdly, the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities has confirmed that in cooperation with our utility companies, all utility shut-off orders have been voluntarily and universally suspended for the time being.

Additionally, our administration has applied to the Federal Department of Transportation for the necessary waiver to allow our trucking industry the flexibility it needs to keep supplies rolling to market. We know that cleaning supplies, water, groceries and many other essentials including baby formula need immediate restock both here in New Jersey and throughout our region. Many of these warehouses in fact are in New Jersey and we must do all that we can to ensure an uninterrupted supply chain.

The Department of Human Services, whose Commissioner Carole Johnson is here with us somewhere, has also been in contact with the federal government to seek a waiver that would allow SNAP recipients or food stamps as we used to call them an additional one-half months' worth of benefits so families can stock up on food and other supplies. We are currently working to receive federal waivers to ensure that schoolchildren in districts impacted by closures, as I mentioned earlier, retain access to a healthy lunch. This is of paramount importance.

Finally, we received word last night from the federal Department of Human Services that in the coming days a shipment of medical supplies will be arriving in New Jersey for our frontline public health responders, including more than 84,000 n95 respirators, 200,000 surgical facemasks, and 38,000 face shields among other needed items. As this is not remotely the

entirety of our ask of the federal government we hope this is the first of what will be several deliveries. We will continue as we have to engage with the federal government, and we will not be shy to push as needed to make sure we have the ability to meet the needs of New Jersey.

It also cannot be understated that given the broader economic uncertainty caused by global concerns, the steps we have taken to protect our residents have taken on even greater importance. New Jersey has, thank God, some of the nation's strongest laws as they pertain to things like mandatory paid sick leave and expanded paid family leave. These were smart policies before the emergency, and they are absolutely necessary today. And the steps we are taking to stabilize our state's financial health, a stronger surplus and hundreds of millions of dollars in our rainy day fund are more essential than ever before.

We continue to urge everyone to continue doing the seemingly little things they can to help mitigate this emergency, especially as we have said time and again washing your hands for 20 seconds at least with soap and water, practicing safe respiratory hygiene, coughing or sneezing into your sleeve, and keeping a safe six-foot distance from others – especially those who may be ill. And by the way, if you don't feel well, let's state the obvious again – stay home. Stay home from school, stay home from work.

And please, this is a particular special plea: make a phone call to older neighbors or family members during this time. I know and we all know that this is a time of heightened anxiety for all of us but particularly for the elderly. (https://twitter.com/GovMurphy) got everything that they need to be safe.

Finally, we must recognize the tremendous efforts of every public health worker who is putting the rest of his or her life on hold to help us respond to this emergency. I also thank the janitorial and custodial staff (https://www.facebook.com/governorphilmurphy) (https://www.facebook.com/njgov) (https://www.facebook.com/njgov) office buildings, who are doing all they can to keep the places where people go clean. We cannot thank these people enough.

I said the other day that we need to take this public health emergency as one New Jersey family and I mean that. If we all stay focused, if we all do our parts we can better protect our families and our state and help our leaders win the fight against the coronavirus. And let me say in conclusion, unequivocally the anxiety is real. We understand that. We not only appreciate it, we deeply respect it. But let me just say as unequivocally, we will get through this crisis as one New Jersey family. We will not be unscathed as we've already had a fatality and Judy will go through some more presumptive positives. We get that, we understand that. But if we all, each of us, including yours truly, my colleagues and every single one of the 9 million members of our great New Jersey family, we will get through this unequivocally. And when we do, we will have learned many lessons and we will be stronger than ever before.

With that, please help me welcome the Lieutenant Governor of the great state of New Jersey. And again, I want to reiterate my deepest appreciation for her leadership of our state and my partnership with her in leading this state. Please help us welcome Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver.

Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver: Thank you, Governor Murphy. I know that I speak for my fellow New Jerseyans when I say that we are all grateful to have you in good health and here with us today. And you look phenomenal. Your steadfast leadership has and will continue to be a reminder that no matter what obstacles we face and difficult decisions we have to make, we are resilient and we will get through this together in New Jersey.

I want to take a moment to thank Judy and her team for their diligence and professionalism in an unimaginably difficult situation. The Department of Health has been working tirelessly to make certain that they are helping to mitigate the spread of coronavirus and save lives. And they are doing that 24 hours a day.

I also want people to remember our medical workers who are on the frontlines. From one end of the state to the other, the medical profession has stepped up in a big way. And we all owe the medical workers of New Jersey a big debt of gratitude as well. You know, the medical professionals, they can't work from home so they've got to be there. And we should keep them in our thoughts and provide them the additional support that they need.

And to the members of the press, you've been here with us every day providing New Jerseyans factual lifesaving information. What you do is critical and believe me, we really do respect you.

Now, I'm going to turn it over to Commissioner Persichilli and she'll give you an update.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Good afternoon, and thank you, Governor, and thank you, Lieutenant Governor.

I'm especially pleased that Kevin Slavin, the president and CEO of St. Joseph's Healthcare System is with us today, because he can provide an important perspective on what it's like to be on the frontlines. The hospitals are the front lines. They are treating patients who have tested positive, while at the same time dealing with community concerns. They are prepared to respond to cases at their hospitals but we are concerned right now about the availability of personal protective equipment for their workers. It's running slim; the stockpiles are dwindling.

It was great to hear that we expect a shipment next week – I think we can hold it together until then. But I know there are several institutions that have called us with significant concerns. So, we've been in touch with our federal partners about receiving this allotment, and I'm sure Chris will be able to tell you a little bit more about accessing the strategic national stockpile.

Today we're issuing guidance to all our long-term care facilities, to restrict visitors to those facilities with only one exception. And that exception is visiting for individuals that are in the last phase of their life, end of life and hospice. These facilities will also be required to screen their staff and their medical professional visitors, such as physicians, nurses, physical therapists and hospice workers for symptoms and any contact with COVID-19 cases. They'll also be screened to determine if they've travelled to any impacted countries or areas where community-based spread is occurring.

Additionally, we have advised all of our pediatric residential facilities to discontinue moving their patients out of their facilities for external activities or education. The tragic circumstances at the nursing home in Washington State have demonstrated just how vulnerable our nursing home population is. Many nursing homes are already restricting visitors and the federal government is making similar recommendations.

As the Governor said, we're taking steps to flatten the curve, with the goal of a more gradual rate of infection over a longer period of time. Mitigation steps aim to interrupt the natural flow of outbreaks, decompress the peak burden and diminish the overall impact on health, and protect healthcare resources. These steps include isolating patients who have illness, quarantining their household partners; and for individuals with mild symptoms, isolating at home. Additionally, quarantine is used to separate and restrict the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease if they become sick.

The recommendations for social distancing and cancelling mass gatherings are another mitigation tool. Mass gatherings bring people together from multiple communities into close contact with each other, and have the potential to increase the spread of COVID-19.

Workplace closures are another option. Of course this is up to individual businesses. We've had calls with the business community and we have shared guidance with them. School closings are a very difficult decision to make, and usually follow identification of a specific community spread or an exposure in a specific school. What we're seeing in this novel coronavirus situation is that, out of an abundance of caution, some schools on their own are closing. Our goal is to make sure that those children receive the services that they deserve.

I know many individuals are asking questions and are concerned about testing. As Dr. Anthony Fauci, the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease has said, those who need testing not only should but must get tested. Those who want testing should get it when widescale testing is available. We're not prepared as a nation or a state to do mass testing at this moment but we certainly are making preparations. And just as a reminder, if you don't have symptoms testing is not recommended. If your symptoms are mild and your healthcare provider tells you to stay home, follow the guidance of your healthcare provider.

Now moving on, I'll give you an update and it will be a summary because the volume of activity is so high, and we're getting this a lot of times as we speak. Today we have 21 new positive cases. Today at our labs there are 80 persons under investigation. These are individuals that will be tested at our lab. As I have shared with you in the past, we are not aware of the numbers of the commercial labs. We now have two commercial labs online and we now have two hospital labs online. We only get notified when they discover a positive case. Due to the increase in the number of labs now doing more tests, we will update our website on a daily basis, and we encourage you to access that Department of Health website for that information.

To give you in a very broad context where we are seeing the 21 cases from: Monmouth, Essex, Ocean, Mercer, Burlington, Morris, Bergen, Hudson, Passaic, and Middlesex. And there are five that we are still looking at. I know you're all concerned about Bergen; we did find two more additional cases in Bergen. That brings Bergen to a total of 15. As you know, the County Executive in Bergen has stepped up significantly his mitigation interventions and that is definitely encouraged.

So, with that I encourage all of you wash your hands frequently during the day for at least 20 seconds. Use soap and water or an antibacterial scrub. Soap and water, by the way, is better. If you're going to use an antibacterial scrub get one with 60% alcohol. Be aware of your own symptoms. Take care of your own health. If you're sick stay home. If someone in your household is sick stay six feet away if you can. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. Before I introduce our next speaker I want to again add to Sheila's thanks for Judy's leadership. Dr. Christina Tan to her right, our State Epidemiologist; Chris Neuwirth who is Deputy Commissioner just have done an extraordinary job and their team members along with them. So, thank you for your continued great work.

We have three cabinet members by my count who are not speaking although they're welcome to. Commissioner of Labor Rob Asaro-Angelo is with us. Rob, great to have you. Director of the Department of Homeland Security Jared Maples is with us. The Adjutant General of the New Jersey National Guard General Jemal Beale is with us.

With that I'd like to turn things over. Please help me welcome the Commissioner of the Department of Education Dr. Lamont Repollet.

Commissioner of Department of Education Lamont Repollet: New Jersey Department of Education continues to partner with our sister agencies while addressing issues related to the novel coronavirus COVID-19 in our school communities.

As of this morning, a total of 354 total school districts have made the decision to close: 215 districts have closed or are closing for professional development related to COVID-19; 44 districts have closed or are closing for precautionary cleaning; 90 districts have closed or are closing due to concerns about potential exposure to COVID-19 in the school community; 4

districts have closed or are closing because of a confirmed exposure to COVID-19 in a school community; and 1 district has closed due to presumptive or confirmed positive COVID-19 test case within the district. In the interest of transparency, we designed these categories in consultation with the Department of Health.

My team and I have been proactively working with our district leaders to help keep the community informed and prepare in the event of widespread school closures. We hope to issue supplemental guidance today regarding requirements for public health-related school closures, and provide FAQs and a checklist for emergency preparedness plans as resources to our school leaders. We have collected emergency plans from 307 school districts detailing the plans they have in place to continue providing education for our students. May districts have taken professional development days to prepare for school closures.

Our School Safety Officer has a staff seated here at the ROIC as part of our emergency support function. We also have DOE staff responding to education-related inquiries at the Department of Education at their command center. We have surveyed our school districts and 85% of them have a plan in place to address food security. Our field service team is working with the remaining 15% to connect them to opportunities. We continue to work with the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, exploring every flexible availability from the US Department of Agriculture for schools to continue providing meals.

We are working closely with DCF and DHS to coordinate childcare options. We received guidance from the US Department of Education regarding federal assessments and accountability requirements in light of the potential for COVID-19 in schools. We are carefully reviewing this guidance and will provide districts with additional information as soon as possible. In order to provide swift communication with the field regarding closures, we will update the New Jersey Department of Education website with district and school closures twice daily. Our website is www.nj.gov/education (<http://www.nj.gov/education>). I repeat, that's www.nj.gov/education (<http://www.nj.gov/education>).

We understand the significant impact that COVID-19 has on our school communities and districts and communities as we combat the spread of the virus and strive to keep our families and our students safe. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Lamont, thank you. I mentioned this earlier in my remarks and we'll hear from Kevin Slavin in a second here. Long-term school closures are inevitable. Many districts have taken that decision and we've worked with them, and we'll continue to work with others who are grappling with that decision. But we have to do it responsibly. We have to do it so that every kid and every family is taken care of and we don't leave families behind.

And Lamont will correct me, we have about 1,400,000 kids in public schools in New Jersey, not to mention the private and religious schools. But just in the public schools sector for a minute, if you do the math and you take 15% of that number, which is where Lamont said 85% of the districts have a satisfactory plan as it relates to food security but 15% were working on it, that's over 200,000 kids. I believe your folks did a survey of not food but remote learning and the ability to remote learn, and how many kids have a device? We all assume everybody's got a device. Guess what? The survey came back, of 1.4 million kids, 259,000 of them don't have devices.

So, when we talk about taking a step like this it's not that we don't think it's a smart thing to do but you've got to do it responsibly. You've got to do it right. So, thank you for your leadership.

It's a real treat to have somebody who is in the seat, not that we all aren't but in the seat from the hospital's perspective every single day dealing with this. You know, we've got a seat which is rated the safest and in many cases the best hospital system in America, which outs us therefore as a competitor for the best system in the world. And it begins with leadership, so please help me welcome the President of the New Jersey Hospital Association and the President and CEO of St. Joe's, our friend Kevin Slavin. Kevin?

President New Jersey Hospital Association Kevin Slavin: Thank you, Governor. I want to thank the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, Commissioner of Health, other members of the cabinet for inviting me here and for your strong leadership.

Those of us who have devoted our lives to the healthcare of others know and understand the challenge COVID-19 represents. As was said before, the 150,000 employees of our hospitals throughout the state put themselves on the frontlines of risk every day.

On March 6th, 2020, our own Medical Director of Emergency Preparedness Dr. James Pruden was admitted to our hospital with upper respiratory and cold-like symptoms. He was tested according to the New Jersey Department of Health protocols for coronavirus and at this time is presumptive positive. Dr. Pruden is currently under isolation at the hospital and receiving the best possible care.

A few words on Dr. Pruden, and I'm sure he's well known to people in this room. Jim's a longtime, beloved member of our medical staff and revered throughout the Paterson community. He's also a leader on EMS and emergency preparedness and response at the state and national levels. He was a first responder at 9-11 and travelled to Houston, Texas to assist in recovery efforts after Hurricane Harvey. Dr. Pruden is the person always on the frontlines and we are closely monitoring his condition and praying for his full recovery.

Although HIPAA law prevents us from releasing personal health information about patients, Jim was willing to let us identify him today because he recognizes by sharing his name and condition it may encourage others to come forward and get tested. The point we want to make is we are all at risk for this. Moreover, Dr. Pruden's case is indicative of what's happening or will happen at every hospital and medical facility across New Jersey.

St. Joseph's response followed all state and CDC guidelines to contain the further spread of the virus. The hospital and county public health officials with city public health officials from Paterson immediately initiated contact tracing steps to identify and inform anyone who may have been infected. I'm relieved to share that out of all those individuals including hospital staff and patients, none at this time – none – have tested presumptive positive for the virus. Should there be any individual we did not identify we ask that you please call your physician or call the state hotline to ensure that you are seen and if necessary tested.

As the Chair of the New Jersey Hospital Association Board of Trustees I want to emphasize that even with this kind of aggressive action, it's very clear to us that responding to the spread of COVID-19 will stress our state's healthcare system. The pandemic is impacting the capacity of our hospitals to care for the sick, for those who contract the virus as well as those who come to the hospital for other medical needs. I can tell you that the hospitals across the state are coordinating daily at a very high level on care and other protocols and policies.

As the Governor and Lieutenant Governor and Commissioner of Health said, this is an emergency that requires a coordinated response and a response that includes everyone's participation. We're counting on the help of (https://www.twitter.com/GovMurphy) themselves and their loved ones as well as the healthcare professionals we all count on by following the hygiene, respiratory care and social distancing guidelines discussed today, by avoiding large gatherings and above all following the directives of state healthcare professionals.

I want to conclude by praising the tremendous work being done by the New Jersey Hospital Association under the leadership of Cathy Bennet who's here today, and by every New Jersey hospital across the state to prepare for an integrated response (https://www.instagram.com/njgovmurphy/) to this pandemic. I'm incredibly proud of our commitment and dedication shown by the hospital physicians, nurses, staff and administrators across the state, and on behalf of us all I want to express our deep appreciation to the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Commissioner of Health for your strong and decisive actions as you continue to keep New Jersey safe. New Jersey hospitals could not have a better partnership. Their leadership, response and coordination and communication was spot-on and should be considered a model for the rest of the country. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Kevin. Before we take a few questions I want to again, thank Kevin for your remarks and leadership, and please give Jim our best and know that he's in our prayers. He's one of the really good guys and one of the best professionals in this state.

Judy referenced testing and that's something I would like to put a hard underscore if I can, Judy. We are exploring any and all avenues to dramatically expand access to testing and that is literally a 24-hour endeavor. Dr. Fauci's guidelines remain at the moment at least the operative guidelines, so if you really need it you've got to get testing and so far so good on that front. If you're not in the really need it category please bear with us a little bit.

But we are, just know that broadening access to testing – and when I say broadening access to testing, I not only mean the Department of Health, I not only mean hospital systems but the private sector lab players as well, including... We're looking at everything as you can imagine including in-home testing, which is not rolling off a log, easy to do. But just rest assured that dramatically expanding testing access is high on our list of priorities. And as we have more details on that front we will get them to you, I promise you the minute we know.

Again, one last thing before we take questions. We will, as was done I think beginning last Sunday, we will each day this weekend, we will have a telephonic press update. Those will each be on Saturday and Sunday at 2:00 PM each. It'll be by telephone only, will not be in person. And we will and Judy will be the main spokesperson. I'll obviously be involved but Judy will be the main spokesperson in particular with bring folks up to speed on anything, any of the data points that come through overnight. Again, those are 2:00 each Saturday and Sunday.

With that, let's take a few questions.

Q&A Session:

David Levinsky, Burlington County Times: It's great to see you and you're looking well, so thank you. My question is regarding testing. Commissioner and others on the health team, as you pointed out, Commissioner, testing is very limited right now. We don't have that many tests and the protocol is basically to only test if you're symptomatic. There is a belief I believe that we have asymptomatic people as well as those with minor and moderate symptoms walking around that may not even think about getting tested at this point 'cause they're not that sick. So, we really it would seem don't have that good of a sense about how many people are actually COVID-19 positive. That being said, even if we had as many tests as we wanted it sounds like... I mean yesterday you had a group that was going to get tested that was under investigation; now all of a sudden we've come way back – it's much higher than it's been every day. It's going to get more and more, the numbers are going to increase. My question is what is the value? I understand for the hospital workers who are dealing with these sick individuals, obviously they need to know who's positive. Beyond that what value if any is widespread testing going to accomplish?

Governor Phil Murphy: Before Judy jumps in I want to say one housekeeping matter. Aswan has got the microphone and he's asking you with that blue glove of his to let him hold the mic. Let me also say this is a... Aswan is also a new father so he also looks like he just walked out of the maternity ward with that glove on. Let me say this, I'm going to pick a day next week – that's arbitrary so forgive me for that. A week from today I'm just going to say predict that the testing reality in this state is going to be in a very meaningfully, incrementally different place than it is today. And so, I just want to make sure that you know this is highly iterative and the curve, the steepness of the curve is quite steep. Judy, sorry.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: You make some very good comments. What is the value of widespread testing? And you've heard me say this before and I'm going to reiterate it. The testing does not change the treatment. There is no specific vaccine at this point in time for COVID-19. All of the treatment is geared towards symptomatic relief. For those that are mild or moderately ill, they can stay home similar as you would if you had a bad cold or flu symptoms. Take fever reducing medication, keep yourself hydrated and you will get past it. The value of widespread testing is more probably in epidemiological value. And I'll let Dr. Tan talk to that.

State Epidemiologist Christina Tan: Yeah, and again just to emphasize the importance of the focus right now on those individuals who we really need to focus the testing on, where actually knowing that information of the result of the positive test will help direct and inform public health or potentially just be aware for clinical management. So, for example, if you have an individual who is in the healthcare system, you confirm that that individual is a positive case; that again, you really then examine, make sure that the appropriate infection control processes are continued to be followed. That said, you know, as we move into our later stages of examining how COVID-19 evolves here in New Jersey as well as nationally – because we've got to look at ourselves in the context of the national picture, too – that type of information on when widespread testing is going to be more available, that type of information helps inform how we better understand and COVID-19 as an illness, just like how we characterize influenza. We don't test everybody for example who might have influenza because we know. We know from all of our years of data, all of the data that we have to date what the value is of looking at other types of viruses in the community. Similarly, as we get this information on the COVID-19 with widespread testing that will help inform our better understanding of the spectrum of COVID-19 illness.

Governor Phil Murphy: This is above my pay grade. There's a psychological factor here as well that I think we can't ignore. We acknowledge the anxiety that folks have, and a lot of that anxiety stems from unknown unknowns. And I think like a lot of things in life, the more we know the better prepared any of us would be to be able to deal with the reality in front of us.

Brenda Flanagan, NJTV: Welcome back. To the unknown unknowns, parents who are going to have to start planning on their kids being out of school. Do you have any kind of timeframe as to when you're going to basically pull the trigger on a statewide shutdown and how long that might last?

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for the good words by the way. Remember what Lamont has already said. We've got over 600 districts in the state and 354 of them have already made a decision to shutter, and that's public schools. That's in addition to steps that dioceses and other private and religious schools are taking. Again, the watchword, Brenda, is do this responsibly. You mentioned daycare, food security, ability to actually execute a game plan of remote learning. I can't give you an exact date but this is now I would say my best guess a matter of days. And when we know information explicitly that we're comfortable that we've got a game plan preemptively. Again, we don't want to do this and then have to, "Oh my gosh, we've got to react to unintended consequences." We want to make sure that we're prepared going into that. But I think it's a matter of days.

Brenda Flanagan: Will you stay shut down for a week, two weeks?

Governor Phil Murphy: I think to be determined. Lamont, do you want to add anything to that?

Commissioner of Department of Education Lamont Repollet: Yes, I think the Governor makes a great point. When we're looking at the whole child as well, food security is very important. And when we're talking about a strong and fair educational system we need to also make sure we also have those social and emotional aspects of our students and make sure for their mental health that we're providing services for them that they additionally receive in school. So, right now our team is proactively working with the school district leaders to ensure that their emergency preparedness plans incorporate all of those services to ensure that our kids get the best services possible. And every day we're assessing. We're doing a threat assessment on school closures and the recommendation thus far is that we give the governor the information. And I think we assess based off of the number of school closures, and the Governor said the districts are doing individually what they need to do for their district. And I think our guidelines give them the flexibility to be able to do that.

Governor Phil Murphy: I think the obvious one would be in Bergen County where you've got a particular reality that may be different from some other county. Let's go this way so I'll go to Matt.

Reporter: Governor, as a matter of communication, and Commissioner, too, between the state Department of Health and local officials, something came up where I was inquiring about the condition of two patients and was told to check with local health officials who are not really returning phone calls. So, I'm just curious, does the state... What is the level of communication and is the state working hand-in-glove with local officials or is there some sort of gap? Because from where we're sitting, and I don't know if other reporters are asking, there seems to be a gap.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: I think I've said in the past we have over 100 certified health officers. Some municipalities are in shared services so they're covering perhaps two municipalities. The reason I bring that up if they're not returning phone calls, I can assure you that the local health officials at this point are overwhelmed. We're doing an inventory of the staff that they have, we're reaching out to additional resources for them. The contact tracing exercise is, as I've explained in the past, it's an investigation. And you go step by step, and sometimes you think you have it finished and new information comes out. It is not something that's done in an hour; in many instances it takes days. At the Department of Health I do not get contact tracing. I do not get that information. I don't need it – I don't need it at all. The communicable disease service, the epidemiologists need to see the contact tracing to be able to determine the connections between individuals in the state and the health officers are in I would say daily contact with you or more than daily. The level of activity is quite high right now. We expect it to even get higher so we're looking at the resource constraints and trying to bolster them up.

Reporter: I'm sort of confused. So, you're saying you don't need it. Can you expand on that? The common assumption would be that we would want the people who are addressing us and updating us...

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: I don't need it as the Commissioner of Health. The epidemiologists need it to be able to trace the spread of disease throughout the state.

Reporter: And is that information that's being shared between local officials?

State Epidemiologist Christina Tan: Just as a reminder that the local health departments are the lead of their investigations, and they share information with us when they have it. And sometimes because they're in the throes of their investigation, they're not necessarily sharing the most updated information. This is why the state Health Department will always refer individuals back to the local Health Departments for more up to date information. From a news perspective, because we're not the ones who are actually on the ground doing those interviews, it's really important that we let them do the job that they need to do to get the investigations done. And if they have any concerns or need consultation, we'll try to get that information needed.

Governor Phil Murphy: And just one other reality is in the testing reality. Again, we've been as proactive as any American state on the testing side and we'll continue to be. But I think Judy would agree with me and her team, that over the coming days and weeks, as testing becomes – however we do it becomes more accessible, it's going to be the private sector lab players that will have the hyper-speed testing and the numbers will be exploding there; as opposed to realistic capacity constraints say within the Department of Health or at Hackensack or Robert Wood Johnson is another provider right now. So, I think that's just something we all have to prepare for. Again, we've been as proactive as anybody but as that sort of takes off over the coming days and weeks, that'll be another sort of not state, local synching up of information; but also with officials inside the government versus private sector. Let's keep going. We're going to go right to left here.

Reporter: Commissioner, do you have any information about community spread? Have you found out whether that is taking place in New Jersey? And just to confirm, there haven't been any new deaths related to the disease.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: There's been no new deaths of a confirmed case. There is one that we're tracking at this point in time but we have not gotten the results back. On community spread, we've talked about Bergen and the connection, the nexus with New Rochelle. We are looking at another case in North Jersey that may be connected to cases in South Jersey. We haven't established that deliberately yet but I expect it will come.

Reporter: To follow up on that, can you give us a breakdown by county of these new cases? I know you just get the information right now. Do you have a county-by-county breakdown? And then you talked about the North Jersey connection to the South Jersey cases. Does that make you less concerned that there could be community spread in the state?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: On the concern, these are things that we expect. We have expected a surge. We have expected actually at this point more numbers than we actually have. I've been saying for a week now expect this to increase; it will increase substantially. That's just something. This is the way we're seeing it throughout the nation. The breakdown that I have so far, there's 3 cases in Monmouth, 2 in Essex, 1 in Ocean, 1 in Mercer, 1 in Burlington, 2 in Morris, 2 in Bergen, 2 in Hudson, 1 in Passaic, 2 in Middlesex.

Reporter: Those are the new cases, right?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, and it doesn't add up to 21 'cause I don't have the rest of the information before you ask me.

Reporter: Commissioner Persichilli, when we're talking about extended closures, school closures being all but inevitable and days away, are we talking days of closures, weeks of closures? Are we talking longer-term, even a month or more from your experience with this if there is one?

Governor Phil Murphy: This is an interesting discussion point. I want to warn you ahead of time, and Judy and Christina can comment on it from an epidemiological standpoint – easy for me to say. But the answer is as we sit here today to be determined. So, we don't have a specific number for you in terms of days or weeks. So, bear with us on that front. And anything you want to add, Dr. Tan from your perspective? You're good? Okay.

Reporter: Governor, you mentioned the rainy day fund and potentially having to dip into that. Is that something you're worried you're going to have to do for end of 2020 or some into 2021? Are you also worried that that tax revenue projections are going to have to be scaled back because of consumer habits that are changing? And also the last question is if the millionaires' tax will be able to plug the holes in this in any way like it was intended?

Governor Phil Murphy: So, these are all good questions and the answer is it's too early to tell. We had a meeting yesterday with the Treasurer and her whole team going over these very questions. This is probably something that we would normally get a better handle on come late April, this is post-April 15th tax filing. There's some discussion that that filing deadline may be extended by the federal government. We've made no decisions if they were to do that but my guess is that a lot of states including ours would likely go along with that. So, it's too early to give you a hard answer. There's no question, there's no question about the economic impact, particularly small businesses. And so, we're going to continually do everything we can to stay on top of this, to get out of the data as best we can. Any amount of recurring revenues is a good thing. So, the millionaires' tax is a good example of that. And there's no question as well that the federal government is going to need to play a role here. I heard Governor Cuomo say that New York State could never possibly hope to have the resources that would be needed to compensate the business community for the impact of this. And so, New Jersey is certainly no different than that. So, we'll do everything we can within our four walls. We've had a good, constructive relationship with the federal government. I hope and anticipate it will stay that way but certainly in terms of economic we're going to need federal help without question. And New Jersey's not unique to that.



(<https://twitter.com/GovMurphy>)

Reporter: Governor, can you address the state's casinos? There are a lot of touchpoints. What's being done to sanitize or clean and is there a chance that the casinos may be shut down for a period of time?



(<https://www.facebook.com/governorphilmurphy>)

(<https://www.youtube.com/njgovernorsoffice>)

Governor Phil Murphy: There's no plan that I'm aware of that the casinos are going to be shut down, number one. Number two as you probably saw, as of yesterday I and we limited the maximum gathering capacity to 250 people so that impacts Atlantic City without question because of the concert community and the calendar that they have. I'll let Judy answer this but assuming... Again, listen, this assumes everybody does what they should do – stand six feet apart, cough into your sleeve, wash your hands with soap, don't go if you don't feel well, particularly if you have a temperature. Assuming you do all those things it has been deemed at least so far, and I'll let Judy come in and agree or disagree, that when you have that amount of people spread over that wide a space on these floors that that doesn't trip your capacity limits. But Judy, I'd love you to weigh in on that.



(<https://www.instagram.com/govmurphy/>)



(<https://www.snapchat.com/add/philmurphy>)

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: We've talked a lot about casinos, and not only casinos but similar types of venues and whether they should be restricted in any way. At this point South Jersey seems to be a lot less hit than North Jersey. We do realize that people come in from all over the state before you ask the question. We do realize that. But we're keeping a close eye on it and so far we've had no contact issues there but it's something we look at every day.

Governor Phil Murphy: We've got to use our common sense there like we've got to use it in this room and any other room around this state, so thank you.

Elise Young, Bloomberg: I've talked to some local officials who said that they were disappointed that the state hasn't given anything beyond guidance so much. They said that they've been left to come up with policy themselves. They have other mayors calling them and saying, "Well, I guess we're going to have to do this, too," even though they might lack any cases in their towns or whatever. How difficult was it a decision for you to say we're going to leave this up to towns or counties?

Governor Phil Murphy: Is this specific to schools or more generally?




Elise Young, Bloomberg: No, it's specific to for instance what the mayor in Jersey City did, Hoboken declaring a state of emergency and the reactions that that's having in towns around them.

Governor Phil Murphy: I would say and again, I'll ask my colleagues to weigh in here – and Pat Callahan is along with Judy, based on the state of emergency that Sheila and I announced earlier this week are at the helm of this. First of all, let's all remember – we are the ultimate home rule state. No state in America, by example, has more school districts than they have communities but welcome to New Jersey. 565 communities, over 600 school districts, 21 counties. When they say it takes a village they have New Jersey's picture right beside that phrase. I think our guidance has been crystal clear, has been proactive and has I think struck the right balance. And I'm not patting ourselves on the back. We wake up every day trying to get this as right as we can. But we have struck the balance between stuff that we cared deeply about and we are unequivocal about, like 250 people or less, that people don't have to pay out of their copays for testing, that they're not going to be impaired on accumulated sick days if they have to stay home and take care of a kid; the restrictions that Judy referred to earlier about restrictions on visitations to long-term care facilities, the aggressive testing that we have done, the public campaign that we have pursued. I don't think any state in America, and again, I'm not patting myself on the back or ourselves on the back – that's just a fact. What we haven't done is said you've got to close your bars at 10:00. I'm not sure that's a decision... Judy made this point to me earlier, she kind of alluded to it – the reality in Hoboken is real different than Bergen County and that's different than Cumberland County, and we have to accept that. And so, our job is to get that balance as right as we can. We're not perfect and we'll continue to try to do just that.



Reporter: I just have two questions. So, the first one, in terms of the economic uncertainty is your administration working on any new policies through legislation or potentially executive order that could benefit workers or businesses at this point? And the other one is I just wanted to clarify, so the gas and electric utilities have agreed to suspend the shutoff orders, but does that include water utilities as well?

Governor Murphy: On the water I assume the answer's yes.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: We had Jim Giuliano on this morning on the call. It is gas, electric and water.

Governor Phil Murphy: We're looking, Katherine, on your first point at a lot of stuff now. We've had good conversations. Legislators to their credit have been raising their hand, "Put me in, coach, what do you need?" Great relations. We did a big legislative call a couple of hours ago. I actually got on that call for a very brief amount of time to thank the legislators for their help, so I've got nothing specific to say. But I do want to repeat something I said in my remarks, is that we put a lot of good housekeeping in place in my humble opinion when there was no emergency that is now going to come home to bear fruit – things like earned sick leave, paid sick leave, paid vacation leave. The steps we took the other day just after declaring with Sheila the state of emergency the copay question on getting testing. We're a proud union state – that's holding us in very good stead right now, because unions by their nature have very specific channels, avenues, structures which in a time of crisis you need. But inevitably, we'll be with legislature and perhaps through the EDA and other avenues.  (<https://twitter.com/GovSteps>) I also will say this. I was on with a member of our federal delegation earlier. I expect I'll be on with more today. I can't emphasize enough the federal government's role here cannot be underestimated. Not just in the health response where it is indispensable, but on the economic recovery side as well. And we'll continue to work with our federal delegation.  (<https://www.facebook.com/governorphilmurphy>)  (<https://www.youtube.com/njgovernorsoffice>)

Reporter: What would you like to see the federal government do?

Governor Phil Murphy: Well, I think right now the doctor would order a massive stimulus program which would include a lot of specific steps for the most needy among us – so, that's SNAP, it's federal paid family leave, the part of paid family leave that we have in New Jersey that we take for granted a lot of states don't have.  (<https://www.instagram.com/govmurphy/>)  (<https://www.snap.com/paidfamilyleave>) It would be I think an enormous amount of stimulus focused first and foremost on the neediest among us.

Reporter: Two questions. First on health, any indication that the contact tracing might be overwhelmed and you'd move off of that to focus on mitigation? And the second, is there any positive case, any testing done in the prison population, in county detention centers? And would you consider limiting visits to the prisons and county detention centers?

Governor Phil Murphy: Good questions. Judy, do you want to jump in?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, the contact tracing is an epidemiological tool. It is not considered a mitigation intervention; it feeds into it. So, that will continue until the epidemiologists have a pretty full picture of how this novel virus behaves throughout the state. And the Corrections, we're working closely with Commissioner Hicks. I think we've already sent out some guidance for Corrections that's looking at the movement into the correctional facilities and the protection of the forensic. At this point, if someone shows symptoms and they fulfill the criteria of a person under investigation they would then be queued up for testing.

Reporter: Are there persons under investigation incarcerated?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Not that I know of.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'd say this is a good question and I would just add one. We're going to have to wrap this up at some point. We're going to try to do these every single day. But at a certain point we're also going to have to acknowledge that the amount of time, forget me but the talent that's at this table in not doing the work we're going to need to be doing to push back on this will come at a cost. So, I would just say this. Some of this stuff feels really intoxicating and for good reason, right? So, shutting down access completely to nursing homes, shutting down schools immediately, limiting access to folks in the Correctional system, all of that comes with a cost. You think about the lifelines, the only spirit and hope that folks in the criminal justice system have are their visitations that they get; the spark that a visit to a nursing home gives to someone who's there. Again, I don't want to beat a dead horse but when you shut the schools, when the only meal that the kid can rely on that day is at the school what do you do? So, it's a very good question. We're considering all of the above but we've got to be careful and acknowledge that things like that come with an expense as well. Real quick and then we're going to wrap.

Reporter: Two related questions if I may. One is if you could offer any sort of updated guidance or straight talk to the small business community. A lot of small business owners in New Jersey right now are under extreme pressure from their own employees, especially service-related businesses, to close much like we're seeing many of the school districts do. I wonder if you can offer them some direct guidance. And then, the second question is the supply chain. You mentioned this in your remarks but there's such a run right now especially in Bergen County and it's trickling down, south through the state obviously at the grocery stores for water, paper goods and other things. And we can hear staff members concerned about when their next delivery is coming in. If you can expand on what you mentioned with that.

Governor Phil Murphy: On the former we just would say this, so this is a general answer on the small business front – we get it. I'll give you an example, the one that we were talking about a couple of days ago. Rutgers decides to go to virtual learning for the balance of the semester – how's that bodega in New Brunswick doing as one example, and there are examples like that

all over the state. And it's going to be in part steps that we take that are not yet determined, but it's going to be in big part the federal government. We're going to need the feds to be along with us, whether it's compensation for lost revenue, for support of individuals at the business level or individual level. But I would say this. Small businesses are the backbone of the state. They employ 60% of the people in this state. So, as much as we talk about the big players the small business community is our lifeline. So, bear with us, we get it. It's among many moving parts here that we're trying to, as best we can, get out ahead of. I mentioned the trucking industry in my comments earlier. I would say if you step back for a second, there is still... The anxiety is real. We get it, we understand that. It's justified because there are a lot of unknown unknowns out there. But this is not a time to panic. There is a system and a process in place here, and I would just reiterate to folks here watching or reading or listening that exercise common sense. Know that we're going to get through this period, and then while that's happening and folks hopefully get as Zen as they can get about this – this is hard stuff and I accept that – we'll be able to free up some of the trucking realities and other transportation and supply line challenges. Again, it's something that we're aggressively focused on; easier said than done. The good news is we have a disproportionate warehouse presence in New Jersey almost unlike any American state. Rob Angelo, our Labor Commissioner can back me up – I'll bet you we have a higher percentage of warehouse employees of any American state, meaning the good news is the stuff is here and our job is to make sure that we get it to folks who need it.

David Levinsky, Burlington County Times: Governor and Commissioner, a week ago if we had been hearing what we're hearing today, a lot of people would have been shocked. So, bearing that in mind, I would like to ask you (https://www.youtube.com/njgovernorsoffice) idea of – and I've heard this mentioned – what if we just had everybody shelter in place for 14 days? Commissioner, would that solve the issue of letting coronavirus run its course? And Governor, what if we had everybody shelter in place for 14 days? (https://www.facebook.com/governorphilmurphy) limiting so many things already it's like piecemeal and every day it seems to get more significant.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, I would just say as a general matter, first of all these folks are essentially sheltering in place (https://www.youtube.com/njgovernorsoffice) and it's at work for the past 14 days, so they're actually living it. And I can't thank the (https://www.instagram.com/governorphil/) colleagues in this room and beyond. I'll let Judy answer the health perspective of that 'cause frankly that's far more important. I don't want to feed any amount of panic, any amount of hysteria to add to the anxiety. That's the last thing we want to do. We want to lessen that. But Judy, jump in if you could.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: And I'm going to ask Dr. Tan to also jump in. You know, 14 days is the incubation period; at least that's our presumed incubation period for similar viruses. If you were exposed within that time period, you may have to extend for 14 days. There's no start and finish to the 14 days; there's no magic to the 14 days either when you're looking at the total population. I would bet if anyone up here, Dr. Tan included, said "If we put everybody on home isolation or quarantine for 14 days and that would do it," we would do it tomorrow. But the prevalence and the incidence of the disease and the prevalence of it doesn't follow something as sure, certain as 14 days.

State Epidemiologist Christina Tan: We have to remember that we're lucky that we are living in a global community. New Jersey, we have neighbors to the north; we have a lot of international travel that comes into our state all the time. Again, I just want to put in the plug that we have to remember that we're no stranger to imported illnesses. By just focusing on shutting down everything for 14 days it could potentially give a false sense of security because what happens after that, particularly if there's still a lot of activity in our surrounding states? So, that's why we monitor what happens over time. That's why we monitor that curve, and we don't know where we are right now in that particular curve and we don't know necessarily where we are in the context of the national picture as well. So, again, that's why we continue to watch.

Governor Phil Murphy: We do know this. We know social distancing works. We know that it flattens that curve. So, we know that limiting large gatherings, making sure we stay six feet apart as best we can and we do the basic hygiene stuff, we know for sure that does work. And I think if we, and I don't want to speak for Judy or Dr. Tan or Chris or any of the other health experts, but if we know that something works, to reiterate what Judy said, we will not hesitate to execute on that.




Reporter: Commissioner, just our organization have spoken to a local healthcare worker who told us there's been a lack of communication with other folks. And this man told us, "I don't know what's going on in the next town or over across the river." So, I'm curious how would you respond to that? Is the state doing anything to get information to local officials about what's happening around them? And also just one last other thing, is it wise for New Jersey Transit to continue the same schedule with so few riders, Governor?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Okay, let's talk about first the information. You always have to question how much information is valuable enough so people can internalize that and use it to the benefit of their own health and the benefit of the health of their families and their friends. I would just direct everyone to go to the website www.doh.nj.gov (<http://www.doh.nj.gov>) and you will find a full report that we update daily, that also has a heat map that shows anyone who accesses this exactly where the cases are. And it will also identify the cases by county. So, that should give somebody the information that they need to say where am I in the middle of this and what about the surrounding area?


Governor Phil Murphy: Just to repeat, we should have said this earlier, that was on my back to say – I apologize. www.nj.gov/health (<http://www.nj.gov/health>), 1-800-222-1222. Those are two really good places to go. We'll do one more.

Reporter: On the social distancing and the gatherings of 250, with the weekend coming up should I go to the mall? Do I go out to dinner? People are really not sure what to do.

Governor Phil Murphy: I realize I didn't answer Matt's second question. NJ Transit's looking at this on an iterative basis. So just assume, not surprisingly I think that every transit system in America has lower ridership than they had two weeks ago. And so, their focus right now is to right size their service and they're looking at that as you can imagine; and also make sure all the surfaces and everything else is as clean and hygiene as possible. Listen, I think at one level my advice, and we'll conclude with this, is to a certain extent, assuming you're in the broad guidelines it ought to smell of business as usual. So, if you can go out to a restaurant and stay six feet away from the next table, if you can walk a mall, those are things assuming you're doing the basic stuff – that you're not sick, you don't have a temperature. I put my hand to my face, by the way – you should know I was facing that way and I thought you were going to yell at me. Folks shouldn't do that, that they wash their hands aggressively with soap, they do all the basic stuff. To a large degree, and I don't want to violate the health advice here, you should be able to do those things. Do you disagree? You're good with that? But just, you know, do I want to be... We said this the other day before Sheila and I had made the decision on the 250 persons or more gathering, Judy had made the comment about St. Patrick's Day to Sheila and me that it wasn't the parade that was the issue – you're outdoors. It was the parties where you're jammed into rooms like this with 500 people before and after the parade. The fact of the matter is we're now taking that next step and the fact that we can't even run that risk of the parade. But I would just say use your common sense. Don't get caught in a place or a situation where you know it's counter to what we're preaching. Again, I want to conclude by thanking the extraordinary team on the dais and around this room with me. Their work is extraordinary. I cannot thank them enough, beginning with the Lieutenant Governor again, the Commissioner of Health and my colleagues. Secondly, to say as unequivocally as I can we will get through this. There is no question in my mind, we will get through this. We won't be unscathed; it won't be without learning some tough lessons. But if we each do our part, all 9 million of us including yours truly, we will flatten that curve, we will put one foot in front of the other and we will emerge from this as one New Jersey family stronger than ever. Thank you, all.

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