

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: February 16th, 2022 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everyone. Seated alongside me, first of all the woman on my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, another familiar face, the State's Epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan. Great to have you back, both of you. To my left, another guy who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan, we have Parimal Garg, Alyana Post, Dante Colucci for his last time with the microphone before he moves on to other challenges in life. Thank you for that.

Before we get to the numbers, the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency will be enhancing its ability to assist homeowners facing foreclosure due to a hardship caused by the pandemic. HMFA is investing an additional \$10 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funds into its current foreclosure protection programs to bolster its implementation of the Foreclosure Prevention Act that I signed last year. These programs focus first and foremost on families facing foreclosure and working with them to keep them in their homes. However, HMFA also looked for opportunities to rehabilitate abandoned foreclosed properties so they can be put back on the marketplace, which not only helps families looking for an affordable home but also helps prevent homes from being bought up by predatory investors and helps communities from being negatively impacted by the presence of an abandoned home. If you are facing a possible foreclosure and need more information on the programs offered by the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency, please visit that website, njhousing.gov. Again, that's njhousing.gov.

Now let's jump into the numbers for this Wednesday. We'll start with a look at how our hospitals have been fairing since our last briefing, and a note as you can see – just for the aggregate numbers on the upper right of that chart, the total is purposefully being left blank, Judy, as we believe that one hospital, if not more than one – I think we actually have one actually incorrect and one not yet reporting overnight, so this will be updated when we have the correct numbers, but as you can see – I think, Judy, you think the number is in the total line 1360 something. Is that about right? You see each and every day an inexorable reduction in all the numbers that we want to see going down, and this is since last Monday. This is happening, I think, for two reasons. One, the new case count is continuing its swift decline. There you can see the cases on the screen, and again, we point you to the rate of transmission, which is right in the middle of the screen, and then the positivity rate, which is at the lower part of the screen, as two really good barometers of where we are, frankly, as compared to maybe just the day-to-day numbers.

Secondly, our vaccination count continues its sure and steady continued increase. However, while more than 40,000 New Jerseyans have gotten their boosters since last Monday, we still need to pick up this pace to make sure everyone is fully up to date on their vaccinations. I know, Judy, you and your team are scrubbing arduously the vaccination numbers to make sure that we've got these numbers accounted for in the right buckets, etcetera. As we look at the breakdown of breakthrough cases, it becomes obvious that having your booster not only increases your ability to stop the virus, but it also dramatically decreases your odds of landing in the hospital or worse if you do contract the virus. Stay on this Alyana if you could for a second. Left column is you've just done either your single J&J or your double Moderna and Pfizer. The middle column is you've done that plus you've received your booster. The column on the right is either you're unvaccinated completely or you are incomplete, and you can see the numbers per 100,000 are stark gaps across those categories.

Through Judy and the Department of Health, we are declaring Boost NJ 2 week for next Wednesday, February 23rd through March 1st. For the roughly 49% of you who are eligible for your booster but have yet to receive it, your dose is on reserve for you. All you have to do is go to that website covid19.nj.gov and click the link for vaccine info at the top of the page to find the vaccination site closest to where you live or you work or go to school. Omicron is still among us. It may have fewer targets, but it is still out among us, and the numbers are clearly headed dramatically in the right direction. While we may have gotten a taste of spring last weekend – and Pat, you'll tell us what the weather is going to be like tomorrow. I think it's going to be pretty warm before it gets stormy. We're not yet at that point when the warming temperatures will take us outdoors for more and more of our regular activities, which we know also makes us less susceptible to infection, so please make sure you're protected for the rest of the winter and get boosted. Again, covid19.nj.gov.

Now let's take a quick look at the latest reports on schools and educational communities. These are all cases regardless of whether it was in-school transmission or not, and you can see the overall infection rates continue their downward trend and are now back roughly to where they were pre-Omicron. Looking specifically at incidences of in-school transmission, while we take every single one of these cases with the utmost seriousness, we feel equally good about these overall numbers, especially as we begin gaming out the lifting of the in-school mask mandate, which is now less than three weeks away on March 7th.

Finally, with the heaviest of hearts, we must report another 61 confirmed deaths, which the Communicable Disease Service under our friend Ed Lifshitz has determined were from COVID-related causes. Again, these are confirmed cases by the day, not what our hospitals report for having taken place on that day. By the way, included in these numbers for the week are two infants, Judy, I believe under the age of one. Thank God there have not been many of those deaths, but each and every one of them are a loss of a precious, precious young life. That said, let's take a moment to remember three New Jerseyans we have lost to Omicron.

We'll start honoring the life of this guy, Clifton's Anthony Cianicullo, who many called simply Big A. He was just 50 years old. Sadly, even though he was fully vaccinated and boosted, he was immunocompromised, and he passed away on January 29th. For nearly 25 years, Anthony worked as an aerospace technician for Piscataway-based Thales Avionics. He left behind his wife Carol Ann, with whom I spoke last week and had the honor of connecting with her, sons Vincent who's 18, Noah who's 11. He's also survived by his mom Diana and brother Christopher. May God bless and watch over his memory and the family he leaves behind.

Next up we remember Jackson's Lucrecia Morrow who was lost on January 31st at the age of 76. She spent a career in secretarial work, including 10 years working for the state of New Jersey and was working right up to the end of her life. Lucrecia left behind her children Joann, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last week, and son Joseph, along with her grandchildren Sandra and Joseph. She's also survived by her siblings Lawrence and Annette, nieces Annette and Brie, and nephew William as well as four stepsons and numerous cousins and friends. Though born and raised in Hoboken, she was a proud member of the Central Jersey Italian American Club, Judy. Aside from her family, two of her greatest loves were in order horses and country music, and she went to as many country music concerts as possible. May God bless Lucretia and her memory and the family she leaves behind.

Finally for today, this one is especially tough. We remember this woman, Michelle Stani. She was just 37 years old and passed away after giving birth to her son Jayden who she never had the opportunity to hold. Michelle had worked in childcare since the age of 18. It was her love. While working, she simultaneously earned her associate's degree in early childhood education from Raritan Valley Community College, her bachelor's degree in education and English from Caldwell University, and to top it off recently received her master's in education degree from Rutgers University. Michelle is survived by her children Samantha, Noah, Jordan, and the blessed Jayden, her parents John and Susan, her brothers Sean and Jack, and her partner Frank. I had the great honor of speaking with her mom last week, and you can only imagine. We've had some brutal conversations over the past couple of years, but this one was right up there, so please keep the mom and dad, her kids, her siblings, her partner in your prayers. This one is – they're all tragic. This one was overwhelmingly so. A life of tremendous promise cut short by this virus. May God bless her memory and those who she leaves behind.

Now, on a happier note, I want to give a quick shoutout to one of the businesses partnering with the Department of Labor through the innovative Return & Earn program that is in turn partnering New Jerseyans looking for new employment opportunities with the companies looking to expand their teams as they prepare for their own post-pandemic future. Livingston's FCC Products, Inc. has supplied raw materials and bulk products to companies in the food, nutritional, cosmetic, and pharmaceutical industries across the eastern United States since 1978. Needing to add a bilingual sales representative to his team, FCC president and CEO, this guy Gerard Woods, turned to the Return & Earn program knowing the Department of Labor could help him not only find the person but also provide the funding he'd need for their on-the-job training. The Department delivered, and that new employee also received a 500-dollar signing bonus. I spoke to Gerard last week to thank him for not only FCC's partnership with us through Return & Earn but for keeping New Jersey the home of an innovative company. Check this company out – it's a good one – fccproducts.com, fccproducts.com.

Finally today, before I hand things over to Judy, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the recent passings of two individuals who played vital roles in our state. First up, last Thursday, this guy, Tom Gallagher, the chief financial officer of our Department of Banking and Insurance, passed away suddenly, and suddenly doesn't do it justice. He was in the car driving with his wife and literally had a heart attack and passed. Tom was a Pennington resident, Judy, and had a career in public service that – both of these are close to the bone for you, I know – a career in public service that spanned 49 years starting with the Treasury Department in 1973. I mentioned to his widow Anne that I was a sophomore in high school when he started working for the state, and I'm 64. He continued his service with the Civil Service Commission. He had been at DOBI since 1997. He leaves behind his wife Anne and his children Patrick and Maureen.

We thank Tom for his service to our state. Our condolences are with his family and with his DOBI family. Marlene Caride and I went back and forth yesterday as well. I had the incredible honor yesterday of speaking with Anne and his children Patrick and Maureen. You can only imagine how they're doing, and Maureen, very emotionally – and Judy, this again is something that you and Tina in particular will appreciate. She was recounting a story when she was with her dad and somebody was talking about how they had not been before able to access healthcare but thanks to getcoverednj.gov, our healthcare exchange, this person or persons in front of them in a line finally had healthcare. She said – his daughter was through tears said this that he turned to her and said of all the things that he did in his career, that was the one that he was the most proud of, and that was the one that would change the most lives and, indeed, save the most lives, so God bless you Tom and thank you for all.

Then last week, this has been a little bit because we haven't been together – we also mourned the passing of a giant, Bob Mulcahy at the age of 85. He was a dear friend of Judy's as was his late wife Terry and their family. Bob was best known as the Rutgers University athletic director who not only paved the way for Rutgers's entrance to the Big 10 conference but also brought Greg Schiano in our lives. The coach and I were back and forth over the past couple of days. Bob had also headed the New Jersey Sports and Exhibition Convention, chaired the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, served as chief of staff to Governor Brendan Byrne, was our state's first commissioner of corrections, and was a councilman in Mendham Borough. You talk about a life of service, huh? Unbelievable. Bigger than life guy.

He did a lot throughout his career and accomplished much more. We are grateful for his many years of public service. One of the last times I spoke to Bob – and I feel like, Judy, it was yesterday. I called him when he lost his wife Terry, and I reached out to him toward the end of his life, and he was unable to communicate with me, but his daughter did. He leaves behind seven children, a whole lot of grandchildren, and literally thousands of friends and admirers, so God bless you, Bob, and thank you for all your service.

We will be with you a week from today, which I believe is the 23rd of February at 1 o'clock right here. With that, please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Governor Murphy and I sent a letter to the state's vaccination partners yesterday calling on them to join us for Boost NJ 2 week beginning Wednesday, February 23rd and continuing to Tuesday, March 1st. The first Boost NJ Day as you may recall was December 15, 2021, and that marked the one-year anniversary of the first vaccine being administered to healthcare workers in the state. That day, vaccination partners across the state such as retail pharmacies, county and local health departments, pop-up clinics, federally qualified health centers, vaccinated nearly 45,000 individuals.

Based on Walmart's success in vaccination around 7500 individuals during the first Boost New Jersey event, Walmart approached the Department with the suggestion of a second Boost NJ initiative. So far, 177 vaccination locations, including 42 Walmart locations, have joined our upcoming Boost NJ 2 week, including pop-up clinics in schools and churches, megasites, hospitals, universities, health departments, churches, independent pharmacies, and mobile units in Paterson. To kick off the week, members of the Department's senior staff will attend vaccination clinics sponsored by Walmart, the CURE Arena here in Trenton, CHEMED in Lakewood, and the Passaic County megasite in Wayne. Other FQHCs that are participating include the Jewish Renaissance Foundation Community Health Center in Edison and Zufall Health Center in Somerville. You can find a list of the specific sites participating in Boost NJ 2 week at covid19.nj.gov/boostnj as well as a full list of vaccination sites at covid19.nj.gov/finder.

Currently 77% of eligible residents are fully vaccinated, 51% have received their booster shot. We are grateful to the dedication of hundreds of New Jersey's vaccination sites who've been partners with us for more than a year, including hospitals, pharmacies, FQHCs, primary care practices, pediatricians, urgent care, county and local health departments. I hope everyone who is not yet up to date on their vaccinations will join us between February 23rd and March 1st to get vaccinated. I especially want to encourage all parents of children ages 5 and up to please visit one of our hundreds of vaccination locations and get your children vaccinated. Although Pfizer has delayed its application to the US Food and Drug Administration for a vaccine for children between the ages of six months through four years of age, the Department continues to prepare for the rollout of that effort. Outreach efforts are ongoing to physicians and other partners to join that vaccination effort when it is available. Right now, there's 475,000 children in our state in that age group.

On to the daily report, there have been two new cases of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children since our last briefing. There are now 184 cumulative cases in the state, and none of the children right now are currently hospitalized. In the veterans' homes since our last briefing are reporting seven new cases among residents at the Menlo Park home, and there are no new cases among patients at our psychiatric hospitals. The daily percent positivity as of February 12th is 6.97%. The northern part of the state is 6.41%, the central part of the state 7.27%, and the southern part of the state 8.05%. That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe. Let's get vaccinated and boosted to protect ourselves, our family, friends, and our children. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Excellent, Judy. Thank you for that, and let's hope by shining a light on the booster reality, we can get those numbers continually going up in a meaningful way. Thank you, and thank you for all. Pat, we got a little bit of – welcome. Good to be with you. Got some weather and we got some other updates, I know, so please, fire away.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. With regards to the weather, yes, we are expecting some heavy winds and rain tomorrow night, upwards of 45 mile an hour gusts, which hopefully diminish tomorrow afternoon. We will have a call tomorrow with our state and county OEM partners just to make sure that we're prepared for that. Although rain and wind not expecting any flooding, but certainly monitoring that, Governor. To both the Commissioner and Governor's point about Boost NJ week, which starts a week from today and ends March 1st, State Police and OEM will be echoing that and increasing the messaging on that with social media along with our Department of Health partners.

Hospital expansion I think we mentioned a week or two ago. Again, under the pillar of preparedness, University Hospital, that work is currently underway for expansion, and we've just wrapped up the scope of work with Robert Wood Johnson in New Brunswick and are meeting within the next week with the US Army Corp of Engineers. Just a quick thank you and continued shoutout to our partners with the National Guard. Right now, we have over 500 members of the National Guard assisting with veterans' homes, long-term care, vaccine megasites, temporary morgues, as well as our OEM logistics, so just a phenomenal team effort there. Lastly, that acute care medical strike team that the Department of Defense set out to us to University, those 23 members are due to wrap things up on February 20th, and they, too, have been a phenomenal resource for University Hospital. Thanks, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Pat. Amen to all. We had a good call to the White House administration yesterday, the CDC director Dr. Fauci, others. One topic that came up is that FEMA 100% reimbursement expires on April 1st, so there's a lot of interest in seeing that extend beyond then. The discussions continue to be – this is among governors with the White House. I think the White House, in fairness – and the governors are different than this, and we're trying to rely on each other, and that is this transition from pandemic, Judy, to endemic. You and I were talking about a new normal – the three of us were earlier on our call. I think we're all finding our way forward on that front, so I suspect that we'll see more on that in terms of what markers to be looking for. The CDC gave no indication yesterday of changing any of their mandates, but there's a lot of noise that that could happen and probably likely will happen at some point.

Again, you've got a dispersion – I want to say this. I've said it before, but I want to say it in this venue. The CDC has to put guidance out in their defense for the entirety of the United States. Dr. Walensky yesterday said I've got to factor in New York City, Montana, native communities, wherever it might be, and the fact of the matter is, unlike Tina, I think you would – I would hope you'd agree here. The other waves had slow, long build ups and slow, long diminutions. Omicron goes up like it's going to the moon, and then it falls just as fast, so the dispersion of experience across states that got hit early like ours versus the average American experience in this particular wave can be quite meaningfully different, so that's something. They've got a complexity that we just don't have.

Q&A Session

With that, again, let's kick it off. Mike, we'll start with you. If you guys can keep it fairly economical, you'd be doing me a huge favor. There's a lot of you here today. Go ahead.

Mike Catalini, Associated Press: Good afternoon, Governor. Thank you. Do you have data on whether and how many people have gotten religious exemptions to the vaccine mandate for healthcare workers? Is the state collecting that data? If not, why not? Why was it necessary to delay the budget address for two weeks? I know you had mentioned wanting to do it in person. Is doing it in person in the assembly chamber more important than

putting forward your budget for the year? Finally, an unrelated question about the 501c4 and PAC that was announced last week that the First Lady is chairing. As you know, 501c4s are not required to disclose donors, but they can. Should those organizations disclose their donors? Will they, and if not, why not?

Governor Phil Murphy: On the first one, I don't have the religious exemption number off the top of my head. Judy, I'm not sure if you've got it, but that's something I think we can track down for you. I think the second part of your question is do we care about that number. I think we care about any of our data around vaccinations, so the answer's yes, we care about it. I just don't have the number. Alyana, if you could help me follow up.

The budget date, Mike, is for several reasons. Number one, you start the budget process – I've said October. I think that's charitable towards the process that starts, frankly – if Liz Muoio were here, our treasurer, it starts well before that, but we had an election, so as it relates to my – me personally and the folks in my immediate vicinity, we had not one but two big events in January, state of the state plus an inauguration. Thirdly, you're absolutely right, the more time on the clock allows us to have a higher likelihood that we can do it in person, and lastly, we've got a really good budget process as a state. I've said this before. I haven't said it in a while. I now know enough to be dangerous about other state's practices, and New Jersey has a really good setup in terms of how they do the budget. Why do I say that? You've got from March 8th to June 30th to basically conduct all the hearings, to head the discussions, to go out and talk about the budget, so for all those reasons, this is the right, responsible thing – step to take.

Listen, I'll let – I was asked about this when I was running out of an event the other day by one of your colleagues. I'll let that organization which is barely been stood up address the question on donors, but I'm very happy that they – that that organization – those organizations are being stood up because we've done a lot, proud of a lot of the stuff we've done, but there's still more work to do, and so when they've got news, I'm sure they will make it. Thank you.

Let's go across to Brent, stay in the front row. Brent, good afternoon.

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Good afternoon. Can you tell us more about the two infant deaths that you announced today? Why didn't we get an update on breakthrough numbers today?

Governor Phil Murphy: Sorry, two deaths –

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Two infant deaths that you mentioned.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yep. What was the second one?

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Why didn't we get an update on breakthrough numbers today? Did I mishear you? We still have temporary morgues. Why do we have those? We've noticed there's an Omicron stealth variant listed in the variant report. What is the concern level over that, and when will you announce a nominee to replace Justice Fernandez-Vina on the Supreme Court?

Governor Phil Murphy: Your fourth and fifth questions sound like they had nothing to do with each other, right? Okay, just checking, yeah. I'll give a couple of thoughts, and then I'll turn it over I think, respectively, to Judy and Pat. Judy can give – I don't know if you've got the color, but Judy can address two blessed infants. Breakthrough numbers we did cover. Alyana can follow up with you on that. I know I was going fast. She can follow up with you on that. The important point there is the breakthrough numbers make the case that overwhelmingly if you're boosted, your risks are dramatically lower. Pat can address morgues. Judy and Tina – Tina, let's make sure we get our – your money's worth from coming today – on stealth variants, and no news to report on the justice, but I did have a very good conversation with him, wishing him both a happy birthday and thanking him for his outstanding service in the judiciary and explicitly on the Supreme Court. Pat, any color on the morgues, please?

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Sure, I think we – I want to say it was about three of our weeks ago, Brent, that we did stand up to temporary morgue sites. One is that University Hospital in Newark. As of today, there are ten decedents being held there. We also have one at Trenton Central Reception and Assignment facility where there's currently seven decedents on site. I think that was a combination of staffing from a medical examiner's standpoint and again, supporting those locations to decompress, which were – using the word overwhelmed would be an exaggeration but certainly just as a supportive effort for our funeral homes and hospitals.

Governor Phil Murphy: I mentioned a couple minutes ago this thing went straight up, and now it's come straight down, and we're spending most of our time talking about how it's coming straight down, but it was only five or six weeks ago when this thing still looked like it was going to the moon and that we needed all hands on deck. Judy, any more color on the infants and Judy or Tina, any insight on the so-called Stealth variant?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Related to the Stealth variant, this is actually a sub-lineage or it's related to – derived from the Omicron variant. It's called BA2, and there've been something like about 36 states that've so far identified Stealth variant through the routine variant surveillance. Significance of Stealth variant is unknown at this time in terms of whether it causes different presentation of disease. It's a bit of a misnomer calling it a Stealth variant. We can actually pick up this particular variant through our routine testing. It's a little bit different from its parent Omicron in the sense that it doesn't have the same type of mutation that gives you this – what they call the S-gene dropout, but the important news is that we still can pick up this variant. We are detecting this. Only time will tell in terms of what the characteristics of BA2 illness is.

Governor Phil Murphy: Anything on the infants, Judy?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I don't have the case reports on the infants yet. We can get back to you, Brent.

Governor Phil Murphy: We'll get back to you, Bret. Alyana, can you – thank you. Joey, good afternoon.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Good afternoon, Governor. One quick follow-up to one of Brent's questions. For previous Supreme Court nomination processes, you've announced your nominee pretty far in advance of when you know the justice is going to retire. That didn't happen this time. Do you have any explanation for why that is? Then there's a lot of movement in Congress right now to ban legislators from trading stocks. I know you personally put your stocks in a blind trust before becoming governor, but do you think New Jersey should consider pursuing barring governors, cabinet members, legislators, any category from stock trading? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: On the first one, no news to report, but when we have news, we'll come to you. There's no good – there's no reason one way or the other. We want to make sure we get this right. Again, I thank the judge for an extraordinary service. I was honored to extend him, actually. It was richly deserved.

It's a good question on banning stocks. I know what we've had to go through. I haven't really given it thought as it relates to other positions. It seems to me like Congress is going in the right direction. It feels like that's the right thing to do. I had a little similar reality in levels of disclosure, etc., when I was US Ambassador. It's a good question. I

don't have a stock firm answer for you, but would I be open-minded to something like that? I think the answer's probably yes. Thank you.

Good afternoon. I understand you're up from Philly. Is that right?

Jillian, ABC Philadelphia: Yes, I'm Jillian from ABC Philadelphia. Thank you, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hello, Jillian. Welcome.

Jillian, ABC Philadelphia: Hello, thank you. Okay, so my question is pertaining to some workers in high-risk settings including corrections officers, are potentially at risk of maybe losing their jobs tonight if they don't show proof of first vaccination. If that number in the state were to be in the thousands, are there enough workers to perform these jobs without any disruption? Why isn't the weekly COVID testing the right way to go anymore for these particular jobs?

Governor Phil Murphy: Is that it? Again, welcome. Yeah, in terms of the consequences – and Parimal will correct me if I'm wrong – the consequences if you don't follow the mandate are going to depend on what organization you're working for, probably what union you belong to. Leave that as a specific – in terms of what specifically would happen to you. This is a step you don't take lightly so again, to roll the tape back, we took this step largely on the back of the US Supreme Court upholding President Biden's healthcare setting vaccination mandate, and we tweaked it in two respects. One is that we added that you need to be boosted and then secondly, we broadened, to your question, the definition of the settings to include congregate, high-risk communities of one sort or another including corrections.

I think the answer to the first question is do we have enough workers? We believe the answer's yes, and we wouldn't have taken this step unless we felt we had a responsible plan to make sure we could continue to man these communities. Parimal will correct me if he sees that differently.

The other part of your questions is why, and the answer is we know that in certain communities – and Judy and Tina should weigh in here if they see this differently. There is a much higher risk of contagion and potential sickness and potentially severe sickness, or God forbid, death. While we have believed all along that in an education setting, the combination of the masks and vaccinate mandate or the testing option was the right – that met the moment inside of an education community. That doesn't meet the moment, particularly with the strength of the US Supreme Court's decision to rely on, in a healthcare setting or in a congregate community including corrections, and that's the rationale. You good with that, ladies? Okay, thank you.

Daniel? Alex, I know you're thinking I'm ignoring you, but I promise you we'll get to you.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Good afternoon, Governor. New York Mayor Ras Baraka recently suggested COVID vaccines be required for schoolchildren next fall. Should the state require COVID immunizations next fall on top of already required vaccines for schoolchildren? Also going off of corrections workers, on your vaccine mandate for corrections workers, PBA President Pat Colligan recently said that it could "throw away dedicated public employees with the trash tomorrow." I believe DOC internal management memos penalties do include removal. What are your thoughts on those comments and the policing and criticisms of that mandate in general since they've so adamantly fought it? You announced a school mask mandate would be lifted over a week ago, and there's no updated guidance on DOH or DOE on contact tracing, social distancing, and quarantine. When can we expect this guidance?

Governor Phil Murphy: Is that it? Very briefly, huge regard for Mayor Baraka. We think what we're doing at the moment meets the moment. Let's see where we go from here. I think I'm predicting the future on this, including what we've said many times. No one on the planet knows whether this is an annual booster you need every six months, every five years, never again. Those questions are to be determined, but I can't say enough good things about his leadership.

Nothing more to add on the corrections officers other than Pat Colligan is a great guy and a great leader. I have enormous respect for him.

The school guidance, I think probably next week is what we're looking at, Tina. That sound right, Judy?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah.

Governor Phil Murphy: So probably, Daniel, next week, certainly well enough before March 7 so that folks have a sufficient runway. By the way, I'll go back to Jillian's question, which a little bit gets back to yours, Daniel's. We also felt like we needed to give a proper runway for these workers in those communities and settings. In other words, it couldn't be overnight and I think we've done that. We've given folks a fair amount of runway in order to get their vaccination process either started or completed. Thank you.

Alex, good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Good afternoon. Commissioner, can you comment on whether there's been a case dump out of Union County of about a thousand cases? Can you comment on whether or not that's true and the amount of cases? For you, Colonel, you talked about the temporary mortuary facilities. Why is the one in Newark at a hospital and the one in Trenton at a Department of Corrections facility? Is inmate labor being used at the Department of Corrections facility to dispose of bodies? Governor, why do you continue in your efforts – persist in your efforts to shut down the Waterfront Commission of New York despite opposition by Governor Kathy Hochul? Why shouldn't there be an organization that monitors corruption at the waterfront? Last week, your deputy press secretary tweeted that it's completely false that New Jersey's ports are controlled by the mob. Are you comfortable enough pronouncing the mafia dead like your advisors have? I'd also like to ask about Chris Neuwirth's lawsuit. You're probably not going to comment on it, but do you find it interesting that he removed a reference to your new acting attorney general, Matt Platkin, from his lawsuit, alleging that Platkin and others announced a politically motivated corruption probe against him and his removing Platkin's name from the filing, essentially an admission that Platkin was the one that ordered a corruption probe against an opponent of yours?

You've also commented in the past about Senator Nia Gill's bill to authorize an investigation into nursing homes. You say we're going to do it. You've been saying that for almost two years. What are you waiting for? At what point will you announce, authorize, or support an inquiry into the deaths at nursing homes? Similarly, finally, as these COVID numbers so dramatically improve, what are you waiting for in terms of either bumping up the date to lift the school mandate or in general, finally striking down COVID restrictions like vaccination mandates and masks at state buildings, including at this briefing?

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, your first – stay close, Dante, to Alex. The first question was a case dump, did you say?

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Yes, we got a –

Governor Phil Murphy: Of COVID cases?

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: In a hospital setting?

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Union County Health Department.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I think Union County has had some reporting difficulties. I can clarify that and get back to you on specifics.

Governor Phil Murphy: So we'll get back to you, Alex. Alyana, can you help us.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: It was Union County, right? A lab reporting issue, Dr. Tan has a little bit more color.

Governor Phil Murphy: Pat, any more color on the morgues?

Superintendent of State Police Col. Pat Callahan: I would just – the university, we had that set up there previously, Alex, so that partnership was existing. For operational feasibility, it made sense. The Department of Corrections site is one that is secure and that's something we also looked at. These are basically a trailer, like a tractor-trailer, and it's a secure site. Inmates are not being used in any way, shape, or form as far as labor for them.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm going to go quickly through these ones, but they're all good ones. Waterfront Commission, 1953, Marlon Brando, absolutely the right response for what was going on, as far as I'm told, at least, four years before my birth at the time for the ports in Elizabeth, Newark, and New York. We're in a completely different world. Does it mean that crime has gone to zero? Absolutely not, but we're not meeting the moment with the Waterfront Commission. Among other things, it is a bi-state agency, but 90% of the shipping activity is in New Jersey. We want to put a new – this is an area of commonality between Governor Christie and myself, his Administration and mine. We think there's a better way to deal with this, including potentially using, in a very robust manner, almost certainly in fact, the State Police to help us with contracts, obviously law enforcement, vetting hires. There's an enormous amount of frustration with the commission among other things with a backlog of – and the inability to get the proper manpower in place. That's a frustration that's shared by both the labor side as well as the management side and I've heard over the past number of years. The time for this – it made sense then; it does not now. That does not mean that we're not going to have – whether it's New Jersey State Police or maybe New York on their side, whatever it might be, that we will take law enforcement very, very seriously.

Had a really good sit-down. Parimal and team were with me end of last week with Governor Hochul. We covered a whole range of topics; this was one of them. I made sure I gave her the courtesy of walking through exactly why we are taking the action we are taking. She walked through her position on this. This is a very, very strong partnership. I can't say enough good things about her even when we don't see things the same way, but that's the background.

Nothing to add on the question about the lawsuit, so we don't discuss lawsuits or personnel matters, but I appreciate your asking.

I did get – you and I were in Willingboro the other day and I got asked the question about a post-mortem, so I'll reiterate what I said then, but I actually left off – I was in a rush or something, and I didn't give the full answer. The first part of it is we will do a full post-mortem, and we're still in the game. We're still fighting this thing. It's dramatically better, thank God, but we announced 87 losses of life today, so we're still getting through this. Again, no question, dramatically better. My colleagues reminded me, we commissioned – and Judy did this and I give her a lot of credit because it took a lot of courage – the Manatt firm to come in from the outside in May of 2020 and do a brutally honest assessment of our long-term care realities both in terms of executive actions that she – that they suggested Judy and I take as well as laws that needed to be moved in the legislature and signed by me above – much of which has happened. We're still in this thing. I won't get into the details again. It's illegal, but you've seen the Department of Health under Judy's leadership go – landing pretty hard on this place that used to be called Andover Subacute that's now called Woodland, I think. We take this stuff deadly seriously, and I promise you complete mirrors will be held up on this.

I've kind of already answered this, Alex. We're getting there. There's just no question about it. March 7th is less than three weeks away for the school mask mandate. We need to put guidance out; the guidance is complicated, so it's not like you just flip a light switch, I think it's fair to say. We want to make sure we've got guidance that meets the health realities but is also operational. We just think we're proceeding at the pace that this merits. We are going from that pandemic to endemic. We are going to, as Judy was talking with us earlier about a new normal. We got to make sure we get there responsibly, and we're doing everything we can to do that. Thank you.

Sir, do you have anything? Thank you.

Reporter: Clean energy advocates are concerned by a New Jersey Transit revised plans for a powerful plant in Kearny because they say it still relies on natural gas and also plans to sell power to Amtrak through the PJ Empower Grid. You want NJ to cut emission by 50% by 2030. How was that compatible with New Jersey Transit's plan in Kearny. Secondly, how come your nomination, Rachel Wainer-Apter, has not gotten a confirmation hearing as of yet?

Governor Phil Murphy: On the latter, nothing to add or no color other than I continue to believe she will be an outstanding – assuming she's confirmed by the Senate, an outstanding justice on the Supreme Court. You couldn't have a better talent.

I would put our clean energy agenda up against any other American state, and I would have an enormous amount of confidence that we'd come in first place. Let me just say that unequivocally. The plant you're referring to, I think it's the same one. In fact, they came forward with plans and several months ago, I said to them, "Listen, NJ Transit, you need to go back and make this thing as green as it can be." We are as committed to a clean energy environment as any state in America. We have to get there responsibly. You can't necessarily get there overnight, but we're going to get there responsibly and we'll continue to take steps, absolutely, in that direction. Thank you.

Let's do Dustin and then Dave. Dustin, good afternoon.

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Good afternoon. Just want to jump on a – follow up on a couple things here. That dynamic that you described earlier about the CDC having to balance all these other states. That's always existed, but virtually every big decision you've made besides the one on school masks – that has followed the CDC's guidance, so what's different now for you to get ahead of them? We've been periods like the beginning of this school year and the end of the last one when key metrics like cases and hospitalizations were far lower than they are now. Why didn't we lift the mask mandates then? Connected to that, can you tell us who ran the focus groups that guided

your decision or at least had input on it? Was it your decision? Was it your campaign or administration that hired them? Are you willing to disclose the findings? Just to tweak Alex's question there on the post-mortem, do you oppose the legislature conducting a more independent investigation with public hearings? Lastly, have you learned any more about the incident at the Bridgewater Mall with looks like two apparent teenagers, specifically whether the white kid who was involved – whether he was arrested? Thanks.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. Dustin, on the first one – and we continue to – I think there's no state in America that is more closely adhered to the CDC guidance than New Jersey. There are two facts that have led us to where we are. Number one, to remind everybody that we have invariably been, along with New York City, the first places hit by each of the waves. That was in March of 2020, all the waves in between including Omicron. Dustin, the other waves had long, sloping ups and long, sloping downs in terms of case count, hospitalizations, etc. This thing went straight up and it's coming straight down, so our experience when we took this step – and continues to be the case today, nine days ago I guess at this point – is as wide from the American norm as we have been in any wave. We felt responsibly that we could take this step, and that's the reason. We have nothing but respect for the CDC, and there's a whole range of other areas where we continue to adhere overwhelmingly to their guidance.

I think why we didn't take the masks off earlier – I think the overwhelming science and medical assessment from New Jersey, as well as nationally if not the world, was that there was still an enormous sense of uncertainty, that folks just were almost completely uncertain about what was around the corner. Lo and behold, they turn out to be right and we got Omicron, among other things. There is, I'd say, overwhelming developing scientific and medical consensus that we have a much better sense of where this is going.

Focus groups, I frankly don't even know who conducted them. We can come back and get you that information. I don't want folks to conflate two facts. You don't need a focus group, although it certainly was – it jumps out at you in a focus group. You don't need a focus group to conclude people are sick and tired of this thing. It's everywhere. We all are, including the four of us. Overwhelmingly, we want to get this thing behind us. That's a fact. We know that. Those discussions did nothing to disavow us. It's the facts over here where you have to, Judy, Tina, colleagues, all of us have to make our decisions on. Notwithstanding whatever fatigue there might be, which is a fact, you got to make decisions based on the data. I want to make sure folks get that completely.

I don't – don't be mad at me, but I don't come out, as you know, to opine on legislation that is not yet on our desk which we haven't made a decision on. On the Bridgewater Mall, I said something to the effect – although the investigation is still gathering facts – that I am – and I want to reiterate I'm deeply disturbed by what appears to be a racially disparate treatment in the video and I know Pat would join me in saying that we are underscore with emphasis committed to increasing the trust of law enforcement on the one hand and the communities they serve on the other. I'd go further to say that's been a hallmark of our administration from day one, to deepen that trust, to walk in the other guy's shoes. Pat has led by example. The attorneys general that have led, beginning with Gurbir Grewal through Andrew Bruck and now Matt Platkin, all believed that deeply in their bones. I think we made an enormous amount of progress. We talked about the pride that we had post the murder of George Floyd. We had thousands of demonstrations and very, very few incidents. I think that's overwhelmingly due – even though there was enormous rightful anger and passion, folks had gotten a sense of a rhythm with each other. We have to let the investigation play out. The appearance of what is racially disparate treatment is deeply, deeply disturbing and it's just another reminder that the progress we've made on the relationships between law enforcement and the communities they serve led by great leaders like Pat that our work is not done and we need to continue that. You good with that?

Dave, we're going to ask you to take us home.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. So March 7th, school mask mandate statewide ends but in the interim, there's already been some districts that've said they were going to keep the masks. Most say they are not. This is causing some problems on the local level. Case in point, in Hillsborough, my understanding is that meeting lasted 16 minutes after parents, some of them refused to put masks on. I think it was last night. They were told that you got to wait until March 7th when the mask mandate is lifted. Are you concerned about that? What would your message be to people who may agree or disagree with whatever policy? In the future, if there's a new variant, a new outbreak, a new problem and the mask mandate is reinstated, the fact that it's going to be left up to the individual districts – could that potentially be an issue, a problem?

Dr. Tan, maybe you want to weigh in on this as well. Any information at all on how long the booster shots are staying effective? Have there been studies about this? I know Israel usually leads the way in this regard and some of them – already some of their population's already gotten a fourth booster shot. Do we know anything at all?

Why are we plugging the NJ – Boost NJ2 sites where people can get boosters? Can't you get a booster shot wherever they're giving out vaccination shots in New Jersey? Finally, you had mentioned, Commissioner, the state is getting ready for vaccinations for kids between 6 months and 4 years once this is approved by the FDA. What steps are being taken? How complicated is this? Is it a big deal to get ready? Can you remind us? They're not going to get as much vaccine in their shots as even the kids 5 to 12, I believe. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'll start and maybe ask Tina and Judy to weigh in respectively. Masks were allowed to be politicized. For the life of me, I guess it started with Donald Trump and that whole period, but they've become politicized. That doesn't mean that I don't care or others don't care deeply about what parents feel because we do, obviously I'm a parent myself and their opinion matters. Whether we lift the mask mandate or not, this has been politicized for reasons that are at odds with public health, for sure, since moment one. I'm not familiar with the Hillsboro situation. I do think where we're headed – the other states have done it backward, which I don't support banning any mandate and then asking the individual or the district to sue to allow to continue to mandate masks. I think that's backwards. We're saying listen, this is a responsible plan, a responsibly time to do this. If locally, based on your local health realities or if you individually, a student or an educator or staff member, want to continue to wear a mask, you should be allowed to and not stigmatized.

We have to leave as an option on the table – although please, God, we don't have to ever exercise it – the right to reinstate this if we get clobbered again. I would say we wouldn't be taken this state if we – we wouldn't be taking this step, rather, if we felt we weren't on that please, God, pandemic to endemic journey. You hope that just doesn't have to come back.

I will then turn to my colleagues to the right. Tina, anything on booster effectiveness and waning and then Judy, anything on that or anything related to NJ2 booster sites, or how complicated is it to get ready for the under 5 vaccines?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: There is evidence that there is waning immunity over time even after getting a booster shot. We know the longer you go out, there's potentially less immunity. Unfortunately we still don't have enough data to really know what the impact is at this point.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, anything for the key – signal the locations for the booster when you can get it in lots of locations? Maybe even more importantly, the question about the under 5, how complicated is it to get ready for that?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Sure, let's just start with the vaccination sites. You're absolutely correct. David, you can go anywhere to get a vaccine. We're joining with a number of partners to put out a big push. There'll be some activities involved, perhaps a few more giveaways, a focus both on children and adults, just a way to generate some excitement and motivate people to get vaccinated.

Governor Phil Murphy: Plus you get – sorry, Judy – the muscle of an organization like Walmart, which has so much muscle to partner with us gives you an edge that is more that just the day in, day out.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I mean, the last time Walmart did this – and they really came to us and said, "Let's do another one." They got 6500 individuals vaccinated in a day in their locations. As far as pediatrics, there's a couple of logistical issues that we want to address. For example, tomorrow we will be – Dr. Margaret Fischer and myself will be on a call with over 500 individuals from pediatricians, primary care, and individuals of advanced practice nurses to talk about the logistical issues. The majority of the immunizations in the smaller individuals, the youngest individuals, are in FQHCs and doctors' offices. Pharmacies don't really do six months I think to three years. We want to make sure that the – we give support to the pediatricians to be able to immunize as many kids as possible.

If you've been to a pediatric office recently, they're not huge offices. There's not a lot of parking. What we are going to do is determine with our pediatricians, particularly how they can join with us to go to a megasite to provide the broad supervision that we feel will provide confidence in parents to bring their children to something other than that office that they're used to, so a lot of issues that we're dealing with that we expect we're going to work all of them out and we want to make sure that parents feel really confident that the oversight – when the vaccinations are given that the oversight will be available I'm pretty sure that our pediatricians and our pediatric nurse practitioners and individual nurses in our pediatric offices and FQHCs will join with us in that effort.

Governor Phil Murphy: Couple things, just – it's the last frontier, right? This is the last group that's eligible, and the bad news is that approval got a little bit delayed. I would say the silver lining is it gives you and colleagues a longer runway to get pediatricians comfortable, parents comfortable. Also I think it probably gives everybody a sense, especially parents, that this is being taken very, very seriously. The bad news is it's delayed. The good news is that that's more scrutiny and when they get to an approval, God willing, it'll be one that has even more conviction behind it.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Just on your comment about – your question about the Pfizer vaccine will be a big dose, a small dose. We're still waiting for all that information They pulled back their request to the FDA. It may, in fact, be three doses, not two doses. We're still waiting.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that. Judy, Tina, thank you, as always, Pat, Parimal, Alyana, Dante for your last hurrah, to each and every one of you, deep appreciation. Again, we'll be back here – because of the President's Day on Monday, we'll be back here on Wednesday at 1 o'clock. Folks, keep doing what you been doing by the millions. If you haven't been vaccinated, get vaccinated. If you haven't been boosted, take advantage of Judy's plans, giving away cars – sorry, that's not true. Anything you can do to get out there and get boosted, your defenses go way up against this virus. Keep well, everybody. God bless.

Governor Phil Murphy

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