

Governor Phil Murphy

# TRANSCRIPT: December 20th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

12/20/2021



**Governor Phil Murphy:** Good afternoon, everyone. With me to my right is the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, another familiar face, the State’s Epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan. Great to have you back. Guy to my left who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have Parimal Garg, Alyana Post, and a cast of thousands here.

First a programming note that this will be – I counted these up, Judy, Pat. This will be our 94th briefing of the year 2021, and it will be our last. It also happens to be our 238th briefing overall since we started these in March of 2020. For the next two weeks, we will continue to report out the daily numbers on our COVID dashboard as well as post those numbers on our social media channels as we always do, and if circumstances require us to do this differently, we will be in touch with you.

With that, let’s dive into the numbers. Here are this morning’s latest vaccination counts, and we continue to see an increase in the number of folks we are now getting – who are now getting their boosters, but we are still at only 40 – just over – as you can see, just over 40% uptake among everyone who is eligible at this time, and we cannot say this strongly enough. We urge everyone if you are six months out from your last dose with either Pfizer or Moderna or two months out from your J&J dose to go out there and get your booster before Christmas. Give yourself that protection. The vaccines continue to show – and this is since the beginning of



the year – vaccines continue to show great strength against COVID-related hospitalizations and deaths as the latest breakthrough case counts show both in cumulative and in the short-term – there is the short-term for the period ending on December 5th.

To be sure, these are the most important outcomes. Just look at that for a second, folks. Zero deaths among the blessed 116 lives lost in that period and 24 hospitalizations out of a total of almost 1200. We cannot see our hospitals get to the capacity points we experienced in prior waves. So far through this wave as we see here, we continue to stay at hospitalization levels that are just a fraction of what they were at this time last year even as the recent case counts are going up with such speed. Even with this data, I know Judy and her team are planning for the worst and Pat right alongside them to make sure we are in the best situation if and when we do see a surge. This is only possible because the vaccines are keeping even those folks who have a breakthrough case of infection from developing a serious COVID-related illness that could either land them in the hospital or God forbid kill them. It's just that simple. Because we know the power of the initial two-shot shots wanes after six months or so, getting your booster is a matter of necessity. Quite frankly, with what we know now about the Omicron variant, if it is time for your booster, get it now, plain and simple.

Here are today's newly reported positive PCR and antigen tests. We also are giving this as we have been recently giving you the week look back. We are now seeing daily case counts hitting levels we haven't seen since mid-January of this year. Before I move on from here, and especially with families and friends preparing for this upcoming Christmas weekend and New Year's, the next week, the last thing anyone wants is for a holiday gathering to lead to more cases, so first and foremost, if you are feeling unwell, even if you just think you have a cold, please go get yourself tested and just stay home until that test comes back. I had a rapid test this morning. Happily, negative. Otherwise, I wouldn't be sitting with you.

Even if you aren't showing symptoms, we encourage you to go get tested before visiting with people outside of your household to give yourself that added level of knowledge that you are in the clear. We are significantly ramping up our rapid testing capacity throughout the state, and folks should go out to get a free rapid test if they are visiting others. To do that, we currently have over 100 free and public testing sites throughout the state. All of these sites and their hours are listed on that website, [covid19.nj.gov/freetest](https://covid19.nj.gov/freetest). As another option, I wish to reiterate the program Judy highlighted right here last week, and that's the Department of Health's partnership with Vault to provide free at-home saliva-based COVID tests to anyone who asks. I want to note that these tests are not rapid, but they can still provide you with the reassurance you need to gather with your friends and family safely. All you have to do in this case is to go to the Department of Health's website and [nj.gov/health](https://nj.gov/health), as you can see there, and click the link on the homepage to order your free at-home test kit. On the website, you can also read up on how the test works. If you are out at a gathering and are in a crowded place, especially indoors and especially if you don't know the vaccination status of those around you, please mask up.

Looking to the latest data from now schools, we have seen a spike in the last reporting period in the number of outbreaks traced to direct in-school transmission, but as we noted before with roughly 3500 schools statewide, these cases do remain somewhat rare, thanks in large part to the layered approach to student and staff safety that we have implemented along with our education communities. When we zoom out to look at the total reported cases among students and staff regardless of where and how these cases came about – in other words, this is not just in-school, but this is folks that we know are infected, the rates of infection are certainly climbing as they are across the population.

Now with the heaviest of hearts we present today's newly confirmed COVID-related deaths as well as updated number as it relates to the probable deaths. These are not deaths in hospitals. These are deaths confirmed on these days. Let's take a minute now to remember several more of those we have lost. We'll start with this guy and his blessed family, Passaic's Jose Valle who came to the United States at the age of 18 from his native Mexico to chase his American dream. When Jose arrived to the States, he quickly found work in New York City's restaurant scene. Within a few years he found his way across the Hudson to Passaic where he had some additional family, and in 1990 opened a restaurant of his own, Los Arcos, which has been a community staple ever since. Jose was just 57 years old when we lost him.

He left behind his wife Rosa with whom I had the great honor of speaking last week and their four daughters – and you can see them all there – Stephanie, Vivian, Valeria, and Alexa, along with one grandchild. Rosa continues to run, by the way, Los Arcos, and we wish her nothing but great success in carrying on Jose's

legacy for many years to come. May God bless Jose and we are honored that he chose to be part of our New Jersey family, and we are also proud he found his American dream right here.

Next up, we honor Ralph Mitchell who had called Lodi home for 60 years. He was 87 years old when he passed. A proud Army veteran, since his service during the Korean conflict, he spent his career with the Gold Seal Trucking Company in Paterson, but he loved his community and gave back as a crossing guard for the borough of Lodi, a coach in the Lodi little league team and as an usher at Saint Joseph Roman Catholic Church. Quite clearly, Pat, a New York Yankees fan. Ralph was predeceased by his grandson Richard. He is survived by his wife Fanny who you see with him, and his two daughters Denise and Jolene, and their respective spouses and grandchildren Mallory and Brianna. He also left behind eight surviving brothers and sisters. I had the honor of speaking with his daughter Denise last week.

Ralph passed, Judy, on April 6 of 2020 which by my math I think was Easter Monday probably in the one or two-week lowest point that we had as a state, and she described his end, which was awful. It was all of the unknowns, not being able to be with him, not being able to give the proper sendoff. Some real frustration in folks we lost in that March, April, May period and their stories are sadly all – I call it in some cases the triple whammy of losing a loved one, not being able to be with them at the end, and then not being able to give them a proper sendoff, so we thank Ralph for his service to our nation and his community and to a life of community service. May God bless and watch over his memory and his families.

Finally today, we also honor Magno Bustamante, another member of our proud immigrant family. He was born in Peru where he learned to cook in the restaurant his parents ran, a skill that took him to a French restaurant in Caracas, Venezuela and in 1994 would bring him to the United States as he followed his parents and settled in Englewood. Unfortunately, language barrier really short circuited his dreams of being a chef in America, and he instead became a carrier for the *Bergen Record* alongside of his brother. Rather than cooking for others as a career, he cooked for his family and friends as a sign of love. Those meals, by the way, educated by his Peruvian upbringing and influenced by French training, will stand as a legacy. Magno was 72 years old, and he left behind his daughter Roxana and countless friends, and I had the great honor of speaking with Roxana last week. We are honored that Magno too chose to make New Jersey his home. May his memory live on through those he touched, and may God bless his memory and Roxana and his friends he's left behind.

Finally for today, let's take a moment to acknowledge another of the New Jersey businesses playing a significant role in our economic comeback by hiring workers they need through their participation in the Department of Labor's Return & Earn program. We go to Flemington in Hunterdon County, and that's where you'll find Magna-Power, a second generation and award-winning company that has provided standardized design and programmable DC power supplies to the aerospace technology, electric vehicle manufacturing, semiconductor fabrication, and defense sectors as well as providing components for particle accelerators over the past 40 years. Magna-Power has also made components for spacecrafts. Most importantly, nearly all aspects of manufacturing are done right here in New Jersey in Magna-Power's custom 73,500-square-foot facility.

With the need for its products growing across the innovation economy to higher than pre-pandemic levels, CEO Adam Pitel, who's on the left, has been busy trying to find the trained staff Magna-Power needs to meet their clients needs. He's joined in that pursuit by the guy on the right, HR director Ryan Roberts. In partnering with the Department of Labor through the Return & Earn program, they're finding these employees. Through the program, they are receiving funds to offset the cost of training new employees – sorry – and their new hires are getting a 500-dollar signing bonus in their first paychecks. I had the great honor of speaking with both Adam and Ryan last week. By the way, this is how Return & Earn is designed to work. Our goal is nothing short of reasserting New Jersey's leadership in the global innovation economy. Companies like Magna-Power are proving that we not only have the ideas to make that happen, but we also have the workforce.

That's where we'll leave it for today. I wish anybody out there who's celebrating this upcoming weekend a merry, merry Christmas. Please celebrate it safely, responsibly. Get tested if you're in doubt. Please keep your family circle close, and if you're at a crowded party, especially indoors, please wear a mask. Go get boosted. If you have yet to start your vaccination journey, please do so now so you can begin the year 2022 on a stronger footing against this insidious virus. With that, it's my pleasure to introduce the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

**Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli:** Thank you, Governor, and good afternoon. As you know, the Department monitors several COVID data points daily: patients in the hospital, patients in intensive care and those that are on ventilators, new admissions, new PCR and antigen cases, as well as the rate of transmission. We are seeing significant increase in cases right now. Yesterday, we had the highest number of positive PCR cases, 6,533, that we have seen since January of 2021. This surge is most likely due to Delta and Omicron variants.

With cases rising and holiday gatherings and travel, we want everyone to protect themselves. Please this week before the holiday, stay home if you are sick and get tested before any holiday gatherings, especially if you've had any potential exposure. If you test positive, please stay home and isolate. Testing is currently available at more than 100 sites statewide, and we will be adding more by county this week. In addition, we have partnered with Vault on free at-home COVID saliva testing. Some 6,286 at-home tests have already been ordered. You can request a free test kit by visiting [learn.vaulthealth.com/nj/](https://learn.vaulthealth.com/nj/). According to Vault, results are available within 24 to 48 hours after the sample arrives at the lab. To find a testing location near you, please visit [covid19.nj.gov/testing](https://covid19.nj.gov/testing).

Cases are also increasing in school settings. Last week the Department updated the quarantine recommendations for school settings and for the general public. The revised recommendations align with guidance from the CDC. They do not apply to healthcare settings. The guidance continues to recommend optimal quarantine of 14 days for unvaccinated individuals who have been in close contact with someone who tested positive. The revision allows for shortened timeframes for students and staff to end quarantine after day seven with a negative COVID-19 test result collected between five and seven days of quarantine or after day 10 if testing has not been performed. The updated recommendations discontinue the use of regional transmission risk levels to determine the quarantine time frames.

Quarantine helps prevent the spread of disease that can occur before an individual knows that they have the virus. However, the optimal 14-day exclusion timeframe may pose challenges for individuals and decreasing the duration can reduce the burden on individuals and increase compliance. CDC has determined that these shortened time frames are acceptable options. In the school setting, during times of moderate and high community transmission levels, individuals with COVID symptoms and no known exposure to a case in the last 14 days regardless of their vaccination status may follow NJDOH school exclusion list to determine when they can return to school only if they have an alternative diagnosis such as strep throat, influenza, or allergies supported by an evaluation by a medical provider. We also have posted community setting guidance on our website which covers childcare settings.

Persons who have close contact of someone with COVID regardless of vaccination status should be tested five to seven days after the last exposure. Options for shortening quarantine only apply if no COVID-19 symptoms develop during the quarantine period. If symptoms develop, the individual should immediately self-isolate, contact a healthcare provider and/or the local health department, and be tested for COVID-19. Additionally, individuals should continue to self-monitor for symptoms for the full 14 days. Acceptable options to shorten quarantine include a seven-day quarantine with testing. Unvaccinated persons can end quarantine after day seven after receiving a negative COVID-19 test result collected between days five and day seven. Quarantine cannot be discontinued earlier than after day seven. 10-day quarantine without testing: unvaccinated persons can end quarantine after day 10 if they haven't been tested for COVID-19.

The Department of Health has been monitoring the vaccination status of residents and staff at our long-term care facilities. As you know, we have posted vaccination coverage data for these facilities on our website. The latest data shows that 90.8% of residents and 86.2% of staff have received their primary series. Today, we are releasing data on the percentage of long-term care residents and staff with booster vaccinations. Similar to the information for primary vaccination series, this data can be reviewed by county, municipality, or facility name. Statewide, these facilities are reporting 78.4% of vaccinated residents have received boosters and only 37.8% of staff are reported to have received boosters. Both of these numbers are too low.

The staff number is especially concerning. I have met with the long-term care administrators, medical directors, and industry associations to urge them to increase booster coverage among their residents and staff, and my team continues to conduct outreach at the facility level and ensure that all facilities have convenient access to vaccination for residents and staff. Vaccination continues to provide the best protection against COVID-19 and the variants. Just last week I addressed the issue of low booster rates

among staff with the long-term care industry and explained that booster vaccinations are essential because outbreaks are increasing in these facilities and there will be increased holiday visitation where such vulnerable individuals reside. Outbreaks have been on the rise again in these facilities. Currently today we are reporting 205 active outbreaks in our long-term care facilities.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 1,902 hospitalizations. This number has been increasing. There is one new case of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children since our last briefing. There are 152 cumulative cases in the state, and none of the children are hospitalized at this time. At the state veterans' homes since our last briefing there have been two new cases among residents at the Paramus home, and at our state psychiatric hospitals, there are 11 new cases among patients, seven in Trenton, three at Greystone, and one at Ann Klein. The percent positivity as of December 16th for the state is 12.11%. The northern part of the state reports 13.04%, the central part of the state 11.87%, and the southern part of the state 9.71%. That concludes my daily report.

I want to wish all of you happy holidays, happy and safe holidays. Please continue to stay safe during this holiday season. If you are in large, indoor settings where the vaccination status of those around you is unknown, please wear a mask. Stay physically distant and get tested if you think you've been exposed. Please stay home until your test results come back, and stay home if you are not feeling well. Let's spread cheer not COVID. Let's get vaccinated and boosted to protect ourselves, our family, friends, and our children. Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I like the let's spread cheer and not COVID. Well done as always, Judy. Thank you. Pat, good afternoon. Good to have you. I know you're standing at the ready the extent to which we need to amp up our capacities. Please, God, we don't have to, but looks like the weather's decent for the holiday, which is great. Anything you've got. Great to have you as always.

**State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan:** Thanks, Governor. Good afternoon. Yes, a great week of weather ahead from the report I got this morning, and as far to your point from a preparedness standpoint, we know that that preparedness is one of the pillars of emergency management. In the event of a potential surge, we have – our plans are being dusted off with all of our partners through the all-hazards incident management team, health, the National Guard, corrections in the event that we need to stand up those field medical stations and all that equipment that comes along with it. I've been on the phone several times today with regards to just that just, again, from a preparedness standpoint in the event that we need to support our healthcare systems. That's all I have, Gov.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Great to have you, Pat. Thank you for that and thanks for everything you're doing. Again, we will be together again unless you hear otherwise on Monday, January 3rd at 1 o'clock in this very room. Mark that down, and again, if we need to come back to you between now and then, we will.

### Q&A Session

I want to start – it gives me great joy to welcome Elise Young back, and Elise, it's great to see you. Great to have you back.. You're up to bat first.

**Elise Young, Bloomberg News:** Thanks. Very grateful to be back. Is there a number that the state has in mind where it would cut off elective surgeries? Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I can't say, Judy, unless you – please weigh in here. I don't think there's a number. Today, again, to reiterate hospitalizations at 1,902. Peak in April of '20 was 8,270. We have in the ICU – pardon me – 359. The peak in the ICU was 2,080, so we're nowhere near where we were, but remember, to your very good question, we were not allowing elective surgeries at that point. Judy, I'd say there's no specific number, but that's something – obviously, the one thing we cannot allow is our healthcare systems and capacities to be overrun. Anything you want to add to that?

**Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli:** We monitor the capacity every day and work with the regional coordinators, and we have triggers for capacity, so when hospitals reach 90% we call them personally and discuss their ability to handle more cases and what types of cases. We started that – we had that in place for quite a long period of time, and we started it again two weeks ago.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I also want to remind everybody personal experience, when people hear elective surgeries they think I'm getting my nose rebroken or something. I had a malignant tumor on my kidney, and I was told that if I had missed the window in early March of 2020 that that would've been deemed elective surgery, so the definition – it's a very good question because the definition is a lot broader than people think. Again, great to have you back. Down front to Dustin. Good afternoon, Dustin.

**Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record:** Good afternoon. What's the trend in demand for testing statewide, and does the state have plans for increasing capacity for testing? Home test kits seem to be in short supply. What's your best advice for people who want to test before a gathering or traveling, and how helpful is the saliva test given how long it takes just to get it and the turnaround for results? Are you considering requiring booster shots for all long-term care residents, and then off-topic, I'm wondering, Governor, if you support the concept of revising tax payments for casinos, particularly exempting online gambling and sports revenue – sports betting revenue from the calculations of what they pay in lieu of taxes.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** This is the PILOT bill? Right. Trend in testing is up. That's first part of your question. No question about that. We are getting more capacity to meet that demand as we speak. I mentioned earlier that we've got over 100 free testing sites in the state. Alyana, would you mind putting up the slide with the website? I think it's /freetest. There we go. That was it. That's covid19.nj.gov/freetest. I will ask Judy to obviously amplify any of this including your question about home test kits being in short supply. I think the Vault saliva test still has value even though it may take a little bit longer to turn around. Anything you want to add to any of those observations?

**Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli:** Sure. The Vault saliva test, at-home test, is the gold standard. It is a PCR test. When you go online and request the test, you will receive the test kit within 24 hours and within 24 to 48 hours after the specimen is received in the lab – so the turnaround – you get a UPS package to send it back right away, so the turnaround is 24 to 48 after received in the lab. If you're going to travel on the 24th or 25th or 26th and you need a confirmatory test, the Vault home test is the test – and you want to do it today – would be the test that you want. The quick home test, the Ag Rapid Tests, otherwise known as Binax, that is in short supply, and we have reached out to Abbott, and they expect their inventory to increase in the next two to three weeks.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** We've got a call with the White House, the National Governors' Association, tomorrow. This'll be a topic high on the agenda. I think Dustin asked are we considering requiring boosters at long-term care. We haven't required it. We haven't mandated the base vaccines, either, but strong, strong, strong urging, recommendation, pleading that folks, if they're eligible, get boosted. Is that fair?

**Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli:** And we do expect that CDC may change the definition of fully vaccinated and once that happens, that would go into our formula as well.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** If I had to bet a buck, that will happen and I'll bet you sooner than later. No comments on the specifics of the bill, but I've been in a number of very good conversations with folks in and around that, and I think it's, just as a general matter, the approach, the notion, the direction conceptually are all good by me but details to be determined. I won't comment on the specifics of the bill. Thank you for all that.

Mike, is that you?

**Mike Catalini, Associated Press:** Yes, thanks, Governor.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Hey, Mike.

**Mike Catalini, Associated Press:** Good afternoon. We're seeing reports that Omicron's in full force in New York City. The mayor there said that. A hospital in Houston is reporting that 82% of its symptomatic patients tested positive for Omicron. Curious if we know yet in New Jersey what percentage of cases are Omicron. It sounds like, based on what you all have been reporting, it's still few. Is there any reason to think that Omicron won't be the major variant in New Jersey? I think the White House said that last week. Are you all expecting that in New Jersey as well? Thanks.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Yeah, well, this is a good time to bring Tina into the mix. On the first one, Judy, you had some evidence earlier that – first of all, my guess is that whatever's being sequenced is lagging the reality, but I think you had some Hackensack data that was around 13%. Is that right?

**Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli:** Yeah, they're reporting from their lab presumptive, 13%. It becomes confirmatory when it gets to our lab and sequenced in our lab, so presumptive at Hackensack, out of the number of cases that they sequenced, it was 13%, which is what the CDC projected for us as well

**Governor Phil Murphy:** But layman observational – I'll tee Tina up with this. My guess is it's a curve that's looking like this, so it may well be out of date the minute we report it. Tina?

**State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan:** Yeah, just data from Europe does suggest that the doubling time and the rate of increase of Omicron taking more hold is definitely – weighs deeper than Delta. Right now, in our variant data, as of the week ending December 4<sup>th</sup>, about less than 1% of our variants that we've sequenced to date are Omicron but again, as the Commissioner had alluded, there is a lag to this because it does take time for the sequencing to occur. For example, the data that Hackensack is requesting – that will be reporting is presumptive. It doesn't mean that that's necessarily going to be the case. We also know from a national perspective that the estimates for Region 2, which includes us, New York, and Puerto Rico does take us a little bit over 10% but nationally, it's projected at about 3%, so it's increasing.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** It's only going up, Mike, would be my short answer. Good to see you.

Alex, good afternoon.

**Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey:** Good afternoon. Dr. Tan, just to follow up on that question, how do you know that a particular sample is Omicron versus Delta versus original? You mentioned less than 1%. How many people or cases are actually getting tested to find out which variant they are, so how much unknown is there here? For you, Commissioner, you mentioned a protocol where if a hospital reaches 90%, they call the Department of Health. Have any hospitals reached 90% in the past two weeks since that protocol was implemented or gone on divert? If the answer is no, are we overreacting to an uptick of about 200 hospitalizations over the last week in a state of 9 million people?

Governor, you said earlier that you are considering reimposing capacity limits. What's the red line for that for you? Why that specific measure as opposed to others? Are there other measures that are under consideration and why? On the gun bills, my question to you about the Safe Storage of Firearms Act, how would a person actually be caught not safely storing their firearm inside their home? Is this something where cops are going to be going door-to-door trying to find out if people are correctly storing their firearms; the same with re-registration, if someone moves here?

Colonel, can you talk a little bit more about the precautions that you were mentioning? Is it just to potentially set up field hospitals? Are there other measures that you're doing? Did you order the state troopers to the State House this morning to block lawmakers in the way that they did, or are you not going to talk about that, either, because it's already under investigation?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I think you got that last one about right, but the precautions I do want to come back to in a second. Tina, good question. What's the process by which folks can parse through is it Delta, is it Omicron, or some other version of this?

**State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan:** Well, first of all, just taking a step back that right now, what we're predominantly seeing in the United States is Delta. We anticipate that we're going to start seeing that mix of Delta and Omicron creeping up proportionally in the next few weeks. That said, regardless of whether it's Delta, whether it's Omicron, whether it's Alpha, Beta, whatever variant, the precautions are still going to be the same and the public health management are still going to be the same. Regarding how do we determine whether it's Delta versus Omicron, the confirmatory test is the sequencing. It's the actual sequencing of the specimens that we receive. Currently, just generally and broadly speaking not only here in New Jersey but in the US, about 5 to 10% of cases are sequenced. That level of sequencing is estimated to detect variants down to 100<sup>th</sup> of a percent of the total cases of Omicron. The sampling mechanism that's set up nationally as

well as in this state in New Jersey is really good at that. Again, Omicron, Delta, public health management is still going to be the same. Get vaccinated. Get the booster, layers of protection with the masking, stay home when you're sick. Get tested.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Yeah, that's a good note to end on. Regardless of which variant it may be or version it may be, the public health reaction is the same. Judy, to Alex's question, any hospitals at the 90%?

**Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli:** Yeah, we've had one hospital that triggered; I believe it was last week. Then we work with them to determine the cause of the trigger, because it could be bed – actual physical bed capacity or it could be staffing because it's really the staff beds that we're most concerned about, and we are seeing a lot of illnesses amongst our healthcare workforce. They could trigger on a Thursday, but then that could turn around on a Friday. That's why we do it every day.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I would – you asked as part of that question, Alex, another good question. Are you overreacting? A phrase that I've used is we're trying like heck to beat the moment and trying not to either overshoot or undershoot. I think typically if a life is at stake, we're going to be in the better be safe than sorry category. I think we're trying to call balls and strikes as best we see them here, and we'll continue to do that.

Capacity limits, I only mention that as one of – in terms of what weapons do you have that are available to you. I've intended that to be on a list of things, including getting vaxxed, getting boosted, wearing these when you're inside, and then somehow finding ways to increase the distance between people or among people. It's on the list. Nothing specific on that.

I think we'll leave out anything that relates to today. I do want to ask – Parimal, it's a good question. How do you – how does somebody gets caught if that bill passes through and becomes law?

**Chief Counsel Parimal Garg:** It would be an ordinary criminal law, so for instance, if a child was able to access that weapon and they were to give testimony or tell law enforcement that they obtained it because it wasn't locked away in a container, than that could be evidence that could be used against that person in a criminal case, just like any other criminal law.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thank you for that. Pat, anything to add on that? Then anything else on the precautions, the field hospitals that you asked about? Anything else on your...

**State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan:** Unfortunately, I'll just add as far as the Safe Storage, usually, Alex, that's with a tragedy, unfortunately, when that gets revealed, whether that's a suicide of a juvenile or someone else, or the use of it in a crime. With regard to your question, which is a good one, we are in the preparedness business in emergency management, and we just want to have an estimated timeline. There's a lot that's in those field medical – storage, beds, tables, chairs, the curtains. How are we delivering it? Is it urban search and rescue? Is it the National Guard? Is it private trucking? Who has the tents? Is it the FEMA tents? Do the hospitals have their own tents? Are they National Guard tents? If we're going to ramp up 750 to 1,000 beds, we want to have all those questions ready so that when a healthcare system says to Judy, or myself, or any of us, can you have X amount in X amount of days, we want to be able to make sure that that's in the quickest window possible. Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** There's no silver lining to this thing but I guess on the list of things that would otherwise qualify for that consideration. The good news is we've done this before. All of you have a playbook that we did not have 22 months ago. Thank you for those.

Daniel, good afternoon.

**Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ:** Good afternoon, Governor. You said last week you spoke with legislative leadership on potentially extending public health executive orders or powers that expire in January. Any update on that? Anti-smoking advocates are demanding that the casino pilot legislation be tethered to the passage of a bill eliminating indoor smoking at casinos. What do you think about pairing those two bills together? Senator Sarlo said he's leaning towards not posting a needle exchange bill in his committee that you support during the lame duck session or perhaps beyond. Have you spoken with him or legislative leadership about the bill? What do you say to those who are worried about eliminating municipal power and authorizing or terminating

these facilities? In the Senate, only one bill from your gun package has cleared committee. Do you think it is still possible to get this package passed in lame duck or would it need to be addressed in the next session? What's holding it up in the Senate? Lastly, lawmakers are again calling for a test-to-stay policy for schools now that the CDC has embraced the idea. Does your Administration plan to adopt a test-to-stay policy?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thank you for those. Nothing new on January 11; no update there. I have said – I won't get into the specifics of how it comes, so this is not going to address the specific question you're asking of linking ban on smoking with the pilot bill, but I have said as a standalone matter if a bill came to my desk that did ban it, I would sign it, subject, obviously, to the usual details. I've not spoken to Senator Sarlo about it, but our teams have spoken, and I continue to be a big believer in these harm reduction centers. They make a huge difference, and we need to have something in place here.

I continue to be optimistic on the gun package. We've gotten a lot of gun bills passed in our almost four years, and I'm optimistic on 3.0. Exactly when I won't hang my hat on but sooner than later and we need it. It's the right, smart thing to do. By the way, it was a good question Alex had asked about – that's a very good example where you – a requirement to separate storage of the weapon versus ammunition. That saves lives, to Pat's point. Sadly, you only find out about that in the overwhelming amount of cases after the fact, and the fact is usually a tragedy.

I would be open to piloting – Judy, you and I haven't talked about this since the weekend. I'd be open to piloting something on the test-to-stay, but how do you – anything you want to add to that?

**Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli:** Yeah, we're working with the school nurses. We have developed a proposal for a pilot. We're looking at that for the restart and for the holiday break.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** We were, I think, largely inching toward that pilot before the CDC's guidance, and I think that only bolsters our direction. Thank you for those.

Brent, good afternoon.

**Brent Johnson, NJ.com:** Afternoon. Will you mandate booster shots for state workers or others that you've already mandated vaccines for? Are you considering using some federal aid to help the state's business through this latest COVID surge and other problems such as the supply chain issues? Will you sign the casino pilot bill and the bill to enshrine gay marriage into law? From John Mooney, it's similar to what was asked before but I'll ask again. What is the threshold or trend line you're looking for before proposing additional mandates or restrictions?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Bear with me. I think on the – for state workers, my gut tells me, Judy, unless you see this otherwise, we would follow the CDC guidance as to what is a fully vaccinated person. If they change the definition to include boosters, I would assume we would immediately go along and do the same. Remember, unfortunately at great expense, we continue to have – you have the option to – if you're not vaccinated, to get tested up to multiple times a week. I wish we didn't have to have that, but we continue to have that in place. Would we consider using federal money to help out our small business community and put more on the street? Absolutely. I would've said the same thing even before we even knew about Omicron.

The pilot bill, are you asking will I sign it?

**Brent Johnson, NJ.com:** How [inaudible 45:00] gay marriage bill?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Yeah, I won't comment on the specifics of either but I think you could assume conceptually – I haven't been asked about the pilot bill in a long time. Conceptually, that's headed in the right direction, and it's pretty clear where we are on gay marriage. I won't get – I won't cross the line and talk about the specific bills.

I don't think to John's question, there's – again, there isn't one number or one specific trend that we hang our hat on. Judy, for instance, reminded us of that 90% capacity threshold. The one thing we cannot allow to happen is our healthcare systems' capacities to be overrun. One of the indirect tragedies of folks refusing to get vaccinated is they're the ones getting sick and hospitalized, and it's putting enormous pressure on

healthcare staffing. Judy mentioned this in response, again, I think it was to Alex's question. Sometimes it's not just the little amount of beds. Sometimes it's the bodies that you can have on deck. The one big thing we cannot ever come close to crossing the threshold on are healthcare capacities.

With that, I'm going to double-mask up just to make sure we're doing the right thing here. Thank you, Judy. Thank you, Tina. Thank you, Pat, Parimal, Sarah. Where'd you go? Sarah, back there, Alyana, to each and every one of you. If you're celebrating Christmas, we wish you a fantastic and Merry Christmas; New Year's, likewise if we don't see you between now and then. Please, please do so safely, responsibly. Use common sense, particularly if you're going to be gathering indoors with folks whose vaccination status are unknown. Getting tested, being smart about that, wearing a mask when you're inside or taking the event outside if the weather that Pat's going to produce will provide for that, which it may this week, at least, but have great holidays. Do it safely, responsibly. We'll be back again two weeks from today. My guess is we'll be updating the dashboards and social media on a regular basis but if we need to change that schedule between now and then if events suggest we need to, we will do so. Merry Christmas, everybody.

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