

Governor Phil Murphy

# TRANSCRIPT: March 29th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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## Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



**Governor Phil Murphy:** Good afternoon. Joining me is the woman to my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, another familiar face, the Communicable Disease Service Medical Director, Dr. Ed Lifshitz. Good to have you both. To my left, the guy who needs to no introduction wearing very special attire today, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have Jared Maples, the Director of the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness with us, Chief Counsel Parimal Garg and a cast of thousands.

First up, today is National Vietnam War Veterans Day. We salute the service and sacrifices of the honored New Jerseyans who wore our nation's uniforms in service to our country and we remember the thousands who did not return home to their families.

On a happier or less solemn note, I should say, today also marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the New Jersey State Police. Later this afternoon, I will join Pat, Attorney General Gurbir Grewal, members of legislative leadership, state police leadership, and many others in honoring the first century of service by our troopers. To you, Pat, and the women and men of the New Jersey State Police, thank you for living the values of honor, duty and fidelity and here's to the next century. As honor, I've got the – not quite the right blue but the blue and gold here for you.

Next, let's dive into the – today's vaccination numbers. We have crossed another milestone with our 4 millionth dose having been administered and our dashboard is currently showing a total, Judy, of 4,030,061 shots in the arms. Remember, on December 15<sup>th</sup>, that number was zero. Additionally given the current pace of vaccinations, our six mega-sites in Rockaway Township, the Meadowlands, Edison, Moorestown, Gloucester County, and Atlantic City, and our community-based vaccination sites will this week collectively surpass the milestone just unto themselves of 1 million doses administered.

As that milestone nears, I have to give a shout-out to all of our healthcare system partners, the All Hazards Incident Management team, the New Jersey National Guard, the state police, and all of our local government and community partners. Now across the state, 1 million by my count, Judy, and 1,473,409 individuals are now fully vaccinated through the efforts of the staffs at our mega-sites and at hundreds and hundreds of other points of distribution up and down the state. Today, another group of New Jerseyans has become eligible for vaccination. You can see that list there. I'm not sure I need to read all of that, but you can see it yourselves That group is up to bat as of this morning.

Next up, additionally, the community vaccination center at the Namolla Family and Recreation Center on the campus of the New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark, which is being operated by our federal partners at FEMA, will officially open its doors on Wednesday although they've had a soft opening today and tomorrow. This site will be focused on vaccination of residents of vulnerable and medically under-served communities with up to 42,000 doses per week. Moreover, these doses are not counted as part of our state's weekly allocation. They are additive to our ongoing efforts. As a reminder, this week we are receiving more than 490,000 doses, which is a roughly 20% increase from last week.

On Wednesday morning, I'll visit this new site and meet some of those getting vaccinated alongside Newark Mayor Ras Baraka. I suspect, Judy, you may make an appearance. Pat, you're welcome. This is a big one. Once again, I want to thank President Joe Biden and his team for their leadership and partnership in opening this new point of distribution and in working with us to get the supplies we need to continue pushing forward toward our initial goal of vaccinating 4.7 million individuals who live, work, or study in the great state of New Jersey. I had a very good call Friday afternoon with the White House COVID coordinator, Jeff Zients. We went through vaccine supplies, especially, and I want to thank Jeff and his team for their great service and support.

Now before we get to the rest of the numbers, we have two announcements. First, I'm signing an executive order increasing the general outdoor gathering limit to 200 people effective at 6 a.m. this coming Friday. Religious services, political activities, weddings, funerals, and memorial service occurring outdoors will continue to be uncapped. The general indoor gathering limit will remain at 25 people. The reason we are increasing the outdoor limit is that as the weather gets warmer, we are urging everyone to engage in social activities outside whenever possible. We know this virus is many more times more transmissible indoors, and you've heard that from us, I think hundreds of times, that it is outdoors. Any type of larger gathering is safer for everyone if it can be held outside.

Additionally and also effective on this Friday, we are lowering the thresholds seating capacity for venues to be considered a large venue down to 2500 from 5,000. This is, in fact, an expansion even though it sounds like I'm contracting. The definition of a large venue is no longer going to be as of Friday 5,000 capacity and up but 2500 capacity and up. At those large venues, the capacities for indoor seating at these locations will be increased to 20% for indoor venues up from 10% and from 15% up to 30% for outdoor venues. That means if it's a 5,000-seat capacity,

they're now able to get a thousand people into those seats. Based on discussions with our larger venues, we know that at 20% capacity, our venues can still ensure that all groups remain six feet apart in all directions. This means we can safely take this step and welcome more fans into our arenas.

In both cases, to remind everybody, all public health protocols must be observed by all participants and spectators, especially for the wearing of face masks by all spectators indoors. Over the last month since we reopened large venues to the public, we have seen that they have the enforcement capacity to strictly enforce these protocols. Parimal, I want to make sure I say this and get it right. What I've just described supersedes the so-called mom and dad rule that we had in place over the past couple of months. This is going to allow folks to be able to get more fans assuming they do it responsibly, for instance, at high school baseball games.

This order will also clarify the banquet halls and similar venues can host indoor celebrations and other private events at 35% of the room's capacity or up to 150 persons. This will align all catered events with the capacity limitations for indoor wedding receptions. Again, we're removing the distinction of a wedding specifically. This is any indoor catered events, whether it's a bar mitzvah, a confirmation, a wedding, whatever it might be.

Also today, I'm pleased to announce that the special enrollment period I announced for individuals whose health coverage has been impacted by the pandemic to purchase a new policy through our state healthcare exchange, Get Covered NJ, which was to run through mid-May will now remain in place for the remainder of this year; that is until December 31, 2021. This extension is critical because the recently signed American Rescue Plan has instituted changes to the Affordable Care Act to significantly increase affordability of health insurance purchased through exchanges. Under the American Rescue Plan, more people than ever will qualify for financial help in purchasing a plan through Get Covered NJ. If you do not qualify for financial help before because your income was too high, you may now qualify under the federal changes. If you are already receiving financial help, you are likely eligible for additional premium reductions.

Additionally, there will be financial help available specifically for those who are unemployed, and this new financial help would be available to eligible residents who received unemployment benefits in 2021. We expect this new financial help to be available to consumers in the coming weeks. The Department of Banking and Insurance under Marlene Caride's great leadership will have more details available soon. Along with making information more widely available, the department will also notify current enrollees about any action they need to take to obtain the new benefits. In the meantime, I encourage all New Jerseyans who need healthcare to visit that website, [getcovered.nj.gov](http://getcovered.nj.gov), to review the plan options available to them and their families.

Now, Judy, let's look at the rest of the overnight numbers. Reporting an additional 3,834 positive PCR and presumed positive antigen test results for a cumulative statewide total of 900,273. Let's put that in perspective. With this report, 10% of our entire state population is estimated has tested positive for the coronavirus over the past year and Judy, I'm betting you that number, or Ed, at least double that folks who had it early on before we had the testing capabilities that we have, but it's still a stark reminder. The positivity rate for the 49,935 PCR tests recorded last Thursday was 9.4%. That's up a bit. The statewide rate of transmission is currently at 1.1. It's been at 1.1 five days in a row. In our hospitals, there were 2,225 total patients being treated, 2,099 of whom were known COVID positive, and 491 patients were in ICU, and there were 240 ventilators in use.

Throughout Sunday, 253 live patients were discharged from our hospitals while 276 new COVID-positive patients were admitted and our hospitals recorded 24 deaths yesterday. Those, again, are not confirmed I think one of the things we may do on Wednesday to get out ahead of ourselves – I know that we've been spending a lot of time on modeling lately, and I think we may want to spend a couple minutes, Mahan and Judy, just sort of looking at what the models are telling us particularly over the next couple of months where you've got the variants and the vaccines colliding almost on top of each other.

Having said that those deaths are not confirmed, these are. With the heaviest of hearts, we report another 16 newly confirmed deaths for a confirmed total of 21,869 with another 2,535 probable deaths. Let's take a couple minutes to remember three more proud New Jerseyans we have lost to this epidemic. We'll start today by remembering the guy on the left, Vincent Lancelotti, a member of our greatest generation who passed away at age 95. A Jersey City native, he was drafted into the United States Navy during World War II and served at the Panama Canal at California, Japan, and Pearl Harbor. He returned to New Jersey following his service, marrying his wife, Lee, and that's Lee with him, and settling in Wayne. Vincent found work in the school and office furniture supply industry, ultimately starting his own company, Lee Distributors, in 1976, and that company continues today.

Vincent was a man true to his Catholic faith, a past member of the board of Our Lady of Consolation Church in Wayne, and an active communicant at St. Francis de Sales Church in Vernon at the time of his passing. He also had a huge heart and was among the founders of Big Brothers of Passaic County. He is now reunited with his beloved Lee who passed away shortly before he did. They are survived by their children, Mary, Vincent, Joseph, and James, and their families, including his 11 grandchildren, Douglas, Lauren, Matthew, John, David, Danielle, Kara, Nicole, Jennifer, Melissa, and Gina, and three great-grandchildren, Dornan, Darren, and Aubry. I had the great honor to speak with his granddaughter Jennifer on Wednesday of last week. I believe he died, Judy at St. Joe's, and it is poignant that his granddaughter Jennifer is a nurse at St. Joe's and has been on duty throughout this entire pandemic. He also leaves – Vincent also leaves his sister, Marie. We pray for God to bless Vincent and we thank him for his service to our nation and to his community and may God bless and watch over him and his extraordinary family.

Next up, we honor the life of Deborah Johnston on the right there who was a lifelong resident of New Providence, and she was just 60 years old. Throughout her life, Debbie was connected to Our Lady of Peace Church in New Providence and especially to the academy at Our Lady of Peace at which she was a student in her youth, a parent when her own children were young, and is an employee and volunteer. She also chaired the church's county fair for the past three-plus decades. Debbie was a foundation stone of her family putting them along through life no matter what was tossed in their way, whether it be surviving cancer or merely dealing with life's day-to-day trials and tribulations. She leaves behind her husband Jimmy, her children – that's Jimmy on the left, by the way – of whom she was so proud, Jimmy, Nicole, Kimberly, Danielle, and their families, and the grandchildren who she so adored, Xavier, Connor, Aurora, and Wyatt. She also leaves her step-father John among many other relatives and friends. I had, I think, the largest conference call with the survivors of a loved one lost to COVID with her husband Jimmy and I think every one of their kids and at least two husbands of daughters. It was, as you can imagine, quite a call. May God bless you, Debbie, and watch over you. We similarly thank you for your lifelong commitment to your family and to your community

Finally, for this Monday, we recall Jane Marie Ceurvels. She lived in Forked River and was 76 years old. A native of Bayonne, Jane was a nurse educated at the St. Joseph's Nursing School in Patterson, Judy, one nurse to another. In all, she spent 33 years seeing to the health and wellness of others. After her retirement in 1997, she found her dream waterfront home in Forked River and spent the rest of her years along the Jersey shore. She leaves behind her daughter Diane, and that's Diane, I believe, on the left, son-in-law, Michael, as well as her son Frank on the right and grandsons Steve, and Cole, and Hunter. Diane, by the way, is a nurse at Southern Ocean Medical Center working our front lines against this pandemic, runs in the family. I had the great honor of speaking with Frank last Wednesday. She also – in this case, Jane leaves behind her constant companion and beloved dog Charlie who was so often seen by Jane's side. We thank Jane for a career spent protecting the health of others and may God bless her, her family, and her legacy.

So we remember Vincent, Debbie, and Jane because we all must remember that we are still in a battle to save lives from this virus. We all have our jobs to do to slow the spread and protect our families and communities, and that includes even after you are vaccinated. We have 4 million-plus shots in arms, but we have many millions to go. We cannot let our guards down. At least one in every ten New Jerseyans has been infected and that's just those that we know of. We have to keep up the fight and to push back against our pandemic fatigue for a little while longer until we reach our vaccination goals.

Before I turn things over to Judy, I want to give a shout-out to NAMI Mercer, the Hamilton-based affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization, and its executive director, that woman right there, Janet Hague. Throughout the pandemic, Janet and her team have stood resilient, giving residents somewhere to go for free and nonjudgmental support to cope with all the emotions of the past year. NAMI Mercer relies heavily on corporate and philanthropic donations to stay strong. I am proud that it also received a grant from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority to protect staff and volunteers and allow for support groups and education programs to move online. On May 22<sup>nd</sup>, NAMI Mercer will see the return of its annual community fundraiser, NAMI Walks Mercer, which will be held virtually and allow everyone to participate regardless of where they live. I encourage everyone to visit Janet and her team at that website, namimercer.org, for more information.

Additionally, support for any New Jerseyan feeling the enormous emotional and mental toll of the past year is available free of charge by calling 866-202-HELP. That's 866-202-4357 or texting Njhope to 51684 for free confidential support from NJ Mental Health Cares, a partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Mental Health Association of New Jersey. Free support from live trained specialists is available every day from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. And for the deaf and hard of hearing, help in American sign language is available through a partnership with Access at St. Joseph's Health in Patterson. You can reach them via video phone, 973-870-0677. That's 973-870-0677 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and again, support is free, confidential, and provided by live, trained specialists. We have gone through a lot together over the past year-plus, and no one should be left to fear they have no place to go or they have to go it alone. We are one New Jersey family.

Finally, late this morning, I was informed of the sudden passing of a friend, of a friend not just to me but of – to many thousands in our state, Middlesex County Commissioner and lifelong Pascataway resident Kenneth "Kenny" Armwood. Again, he was a close friend to many including yours truly. This one really hurts. The conversations I've had this morning with people who just completely shocked. Kenny was only 46 years old. Throughout his seven years as a county commissioner and for the decade before that as a member of the Pascataway council, he was a true champion for the arts and business communities in Middlesex County, for education and for ensuring that Middlesex lives up to the highest values of respect and inclusivity and all that it does every day.

He began his public service career – are you ready for this, Pat – at the age of 19 by getting elected to the Pascataway Board of Education. Kenny lived and breathed public service. He had so much still to do and to give back. His passing is a huge loss for Middlesex County, for our state, and his many thousands of friends. My thoughts and prayers are with his families, colleagues, friends. I spoke to his cousin, Valeria, about a half an hour ago. He had introduced me to her. She sang the National Anthem at an event we were at together, and we were talking about the good ol' days. I spoke to Democratic Chairman in Middlesex County, another dear friend, Kevin McCabe, Commissioner Director Ron Rios. Just people are absolutely stunned and staggered by Kenny's loss. God bless you, pal. We love you, we miss you, and we will live on in your memory.

With that, please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Thank you, Governor, and good afternoon. As the Governor shared, New Jersey hit a milestone today with more than 4 million doses administered; 2,638,138 first doses and for a number of individuals, their vaccine journey is completed with 1,391,403 second doses. Approximately 268,000 doses have gone to long-term care facilities. I want to thank those who live, work, and study in New Jersey for rolling up your sleeves to help protect themselves, their loved ones, their communities, and most importantly, our state.

We're also thankful for all of those who are working at the vaccination sites across the state; over 700 sites are active. This mass vaccination program is progressing because of their hard work and sacrifice. The Governor covered the new eligibility categories and we encourage frontline essential workers in several of these categories to get vaccinated. For example, those that are taking care of elder individuals in the home and their support, warehousing and logistics, social services support staff, election personnel, hospitality personnel, medical supply chain personnel, postal and shipping services, clergy, and the judicial system. Where there is much attention, however, focused on COVID-19 illness, there've been many other consequences and health challenges as a result of this pandemic.

Today we are announcing a new initiative to address a concerning disease in childhood – a concerning decrease, excuse me, in childhood lead testing. The number of New Jersey children tested for lead exposure declined 20% last year. This is consistent with a CDC study that found that COVID-19 adversely affected identification of children with elevated blood lead levels due to the closure of many medical offices, schools, and daycare centers. In addition to delayed well child visits, children spent significantly more time at home last year, increasing their change of exposure to lead paint and contaminated dust. This is worrisome because we know that even low levels of lead in blood can affect a child's health, their behaviors, their ability to pay attention, and their ability to achieve milestones at school.

Preliminary 2020 data indicates 144,000 children were tested of whom 3,348 or 2.8% had elevated blood lead levels. That is an increase of 29% over the prior year. It is critical that families reschedule any previously canceled pediatric visits so young children can be tested for lead exposure. The department will partner with the New Jersey chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics to improve screening rates by connecting with the medical community, preschool services, and families. State law mandates that all physicians, registered nurses, and licensed healthcare facilities that provide services to children less than 72 months of age perform blood lead screening for all children regardless of the potential risk or geographic location. I will also be sending a letter to the healthcare providers across the state urging them to contact parents to reschedule missed well visits. Blood lead screenings should be conducted according to the following schedule: all children should be screened for lead at ages 1 year and 2 years of age, or if not previously screened at these ages, at least once before their 6<sup>th</sup> birthday. I just want to remind parents of young children to get in contact with their healthcare provider and resume regular checkups for their children which includes lead screening and vital preventive care such as regular vaccinations.

Moving onto my daily report as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 2,225 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients and PUIs with 491 individuals in critical care, and 49% of those critical care patients are on ventilators. There are fortunately no new reports of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children, and there are a total of 575 reports of CDC variants of concern, the majority of them the UK variant, B.1.1.7. At the state veterans' homes, there are no new cases and at the state psychiatric hospitals, there have been three new positive cases among patients at Anne Kline.

The daily percent positivity as of March 25<sup>th</sup> in the state is 9.4%. The northern part of the state reports 9.87; central part of the state, 9.16; and the southern part of the state, 8.50. That concludes my daily report. Stay safe, continue to mask up, socially distance, stay home when you're sick, get tested, and please remember to celebrate the holidays safely. Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Judy, thank you for everything, including yet another reminder that life goes on. Lead paint exposure, lead pipe reality is hugely detrimental to our kids especially, so thank you for that and for all. Pat, had some nasty weather by me last night in Monmouth County. I was on the phone with the Highlands mayor this morning talking about power outages. I know you got some other post-storm reports, some compliance update, and happy one – you look great for a hundred years, by the way, so God bless you and all your colleagues. Happy 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

**Superintendent of the State Police Col. Pat Callahan:** Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. As it pertains to the executive order compliance, we had the TAC Zone Gym in Kenneworth in Union County was cited for having a large party of unmasked individuals. Also in the past few days, ABC went out and did compliance checks and right now, the following establishments were under review for apparent violations observed by the ABC. In Ocean County, Battle River Brewing in Tom's River; Eby's in Berkeley Township; Beachcomer Bar in Seaside Heights; Hemmingway's Cafe also in Seaside Heights; the Tower Tavern in Westville, which is in Gloucester

As far as that weather last night, yeah, we did – I know there was some speculation if it was a tornado or not. We are working with FEMA and the National Weather Service. It looks like it was 60 to 70 mile an hour straight line winds. A few businesses may have some video that may help the National Weather Service land on that as a confirmed tornado, Governor. We're working with Neptune OEM. That one, if you saw America's best value in, it's not habitable, so those 11 individuals have been relocated to a different hotel over in Wall Township.

As far as 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, yes, a hundred years ago today, the legislation was signed that created the New Jersey State Police. Part of the reason why I'm wearing this throwback uniform, a special thanks to Trooper Jeff Bowman who was one of our historians who went the extra mile and found online these vintage colonels insignias, which are World War I colonel insignias that Colonel Schwarzkopf wore, so pretty special day. I thank you for doing the proclamation in the legislature for the resolution this afternoon.

I'll close on a somber note. Last Friday, we lost Lieutenant Keith Young after a courageous battle with cancer. I was with him a few weeks ago. I had the opportunity to talk to him on Sunday. He was, in his own words, having a great day and just on early Friday morning lost his life to cancer. His family is obviously crushed, his wife, Jennifer. Just a humble, humble man with a servant's heart. This Saturday, we will send him off with a tribute like only the New Jersey State Police does, and I thank you, Governor, to reaching out to Jennifer and the family as well to offer your prayers and condolences

**Governor Phil Murphy:** God bless Keith. I spoke to Jennifer on Friday, as you know, and needless to say, she's torn to pieces. He sounds like he was a great guy. I never had the pleasure but God bless him and again, Happy Birthday. I hope when the bill arrived on the desk that it was signed immediately There was no negotiation back and forth associated with it a hundred years ago. I think we'll start over here.

Colleen, is that you? Before you jump in, I think we're in our regular rhythm this week, so we'll be with you virtually tomorrow and then we'll be back here on Wednesday. As I said, I think we're going to try to get to NJIT on Wednesday either before or after the press conference to see the FEMA site with our own eyes. This is a game-changer. I thought the only game-changer – I mean, supplies are clearly going to go up, and the sense we're getting – I got from Jeff Zients on Friday afternoon, there's going to a particular pop, Judy, and you've heard this as well, the Johnson & Johnson doses and the supply, all of which we will use and we will put to work. We've got – we're still at around 725 distribution points. Does that sound about right? We've got the ability to go up meaningfully from there. Let me just check to make sure I've got that right, 741. That number can go up, and it will go up once we get the supplies to fill the channels.

With that, Colleen, good to see you.

**Colleen O'Dea, NJ Spotlight:** Good to see you. Thank you, Governor. So I'm going to ask – we've asked this question several times. Why won't the state release vaccine allocations by county? We've asked several times at the briefing. We filed an OPRA request that has not been answered. We don't want any information about LTCs, pharmacies, just how much is the state giving to each county? Some counties are lagging behind. Hudson County, for instance, has the lowest rate of vaccination. How will the Newark site work? I understand people from some other counties or other zip codes are going to be allowed to go there. Will there be appointments made or will you be checking IDs? Are you reserving any of those numbers for Newark residents specifically?

With case numbers rising – I mean, I guess today we're not up but we've still been up kind of high. Can you just talk more about increasing indoor capacity? I mean, isn't ventilation continuing to be a problem indoors as you put more people inside? Are you making any changes in vaccine allocation to account for variants? It looks like Ocean County has the largest number of variants, and I don't know if you're taking that into account. Then these are a few from my colleague –

**Governor Phil Murphy:** A few? Colleen, let's pick your best one, please.

**Colleen O'Dea:** Alright, I'll give you one more. This is from Joanna Gagis. Jersey can release the results of a study showing that on average, one in four students is behind grade level.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Is behind what, sorry?

**Colleen O'Dea:** Hm?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Is what, sorry?

**Colleen O'Dea:** One in four students is behind one grade level. She asks is now the time for the state to adjust state standards? The study suggests Some Are Learning would be a good solution? Is the state going to look at that at all or putting other resources towards this? Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I'll start – Judy, I think I'm going to ask you to address the vaccinations – allocations by county. I don't think there's – there's no mystery associated with that, but Judy, we'll get – she went through this in great detail on Wednesday and the basis upon which those decisions get made. The Newark site is part of the overall fabric. It's the same website. It's the same phone number, and you're not restricted to being a citizen of Newark or of Essex County. However, there is hand-in-glove, an exerted push to reach into under-served communities to connect folks aggressively, proactively. I don't know, Judy, if – I know you said it on the pre-call and I was checking a message, but where we have made a conscious decision to reach into a certain demographic, it's borne fruit. The one that comes to mind is the 75 years and up where the numbers – did you mention it today or – it may be worth noting where we can really move the needle if we proactively go in, and that's a big part of – we want – it's in Newark for a reason. Again, we don't want to get overly bureaucratic and not continue to bat at the very high level of efficiency but at the same time, we think we can push in to the community, and we are.

Cases are rising. They're up. Hospitalizations are up two to 300 over the past week to ten days. We predicted this and expect it. We did not change the overall indoor capacities, so it's still the gathering limits are 25. The indoor dining and gyms and indoor entertainment are still at 50%, and I suspect they'll stay there. We did raise it on large venues because those venues are proving – explicitly, I'll give the Prudential Center a shout-out where a lot of this is taking place. If you look at large indoor venues, that's the big one in the state right now. They're doing an exceptional job and going to 20% does not anywhere come close to having people need to be within six feet of each other. It's a modern building. It's got great ventilation. We'll continue to monitor it. These variants are clearly –

And I think your next question was does the – do the variants dictate where you might deploy vaccines. Again, Judy, we'll come in to how we think about the county piece. We're assuming – I repeat this. Even though we are assiduous in telling you what we know about variants, we're assuming they're in the state all over the place. They just happen to be reported where Judy is reporting them. That doesn't mean we're assuming they're not in the other counties.

Yeah, I'm not sure what report she's referring to, but we know there's learning loss, and we are throwing everything but the kitchen sink at that. I was on today with another district and community, New Brunswick, just going through their plans where they're going to start bringing kids back in in a phased manner in April. We put a ton of money from the prior federal money not just at per capita but at learning loss and mental health. We're still getting guidance on the American Rescue Plan. Will that potentially include summer extra hours, tutoring, professional development for educators? All of the above is my guess, so watch that space.

Judy, you want to add to my answers and/or specifically allocations of vaccines by county.

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Sure, the allocation by county varies every week depending on how many doses we're getting and the allocation formula that we look at. That includes equity, looking at the percent of the population, particularly communities of color as represented in the administrations of the doses of vaccine. We look at disease burden, the deaths per hundred thousand, social vulnerability index, throughput, how quickly we can get – how quickly each site gets the vaccine into the arm of an individual, and then we look at inventory. If they're leaving more than three weeks' inventory on the shelf, the allocation will decrease the next week as they use up their inventory.

The Governor mentioned when we have a push for what we call specific or vulnerable populations, it's based first and foremost on the impact on morbidity and mortality. Our first goal with our vaccination program is to prevent morbidity and mortality, and the second goal is to support essential societal functioning. For example, we know 80% of individuals over the age of 65 account for the mortalities in the state. We know that about 45% of them are 75 and older, so we did a three-week push. It was a two-week push that turned into a three-week push to vaccinate and get at least one dose of vaccine into the arm of individuals 75 and older. When we started, we had 33% of those individuals having had one dose. As of the report this morning, 65% do. Last week, we pushed it, I guess you would say, down to 65 and over, and I'm pleased to report on 65 and older, we're at 67%. That's an indication of when we do a push, when we see a particular vulnerability that relates directly to morbidity and mortality.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Again, you're going to see a version of that in Newark with this site. Thank you for that. Matt, good afternoon.

**Matt:** Good afternoon, Governor. My colleagues and I have heard from a bunch of folks this morning that they didn't receive their \$300 supplemental unemployment. Is your administration aware of a problem and if so, what that problem is? Lawmakers in New York reached a deal on legal cannabis over the weekend. After so many delays in the legislation process here, it looks like New York could quickly catch up. Are you worried that New Jersey will lose its competitive advantage? Can health officials – I know we've asked this in the past, but I don't think we got a – ever got a clear answer. Are you folks able to say – give a better sense of just how many variant testing we're doing in the state per every positive PCR test? Just lastly, any speculation beyond maybe just these variants what's fueling the latest increase?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I do not have a crisp answer for you on the unemployment but I suspect if I know Rob Asaro Angelo, he's watching this and I will get an answer. In fact, here he is. There was an issue with the bank receiving the \$300 supplemental payment file, but it has been resubmitted and we fully expect everyone will be receiving the payment today albeit some hours later than normal. It'd be really good if somebody could fly in with the answer to all the questions you all ask me like Rob does, move things along much faster.

Listen, I saw the same development in New York as it relates to legalization. It took us longer than any of us wanted here, but we've gotten there. I'm glad we were able to get the notification bill and signed at the end of the week. I'm not making light of the so-called first mover advantage or the economic opportunity or the job creation, all of which I continue to believe are significant. Whether New York does it or not, or Pennsylvania does it or not, or if some other neighbor does it or not, I got to where I am because of social justice and addressing decades upon decades of the deleterious fallout from the war on drugs. That is inviolate. That is happening, and we will redress that as a result of what we're doing.

I'll certainly let Judy or Ed – we got to make sure we get our money's worth with Ed's appearance here to talk about variant testing. Why do I think it's increasing? All kidding aside, I'd love Ed and Judy's opinion on this as well. I think why are the numbers going up? I think there's some amount of fatigue, the variants, and we don't have the weather that we need yet to be doing – part of the reason why we're opening up outside gathering limits, we want to push people outdoors assuming they're not getting rained on. We just are not in the position where a lot of states in the South are right now that can conduct a lot of their lives outside and our density, which we've been saying all along. Densest state in America, densest region in America, something happens on one side of the Hudson, it invariably is on the other side of the Hudson in an instant, and I think we're living that as well.

Ed, do you mind, and any observations on the level and scope of variant testing and any particular insights you've got on why the numbers have been up of late?

**Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz:** Sure. As far as the numbers, I think the Governor said it excellently. I think those are all the issues as far as what's going on. It's the fatigue; it's our location; it's how densely populated we are; it's our neighborhood with New York City right across the river; and yes, I do think the variants are playing a role as well. We are looking to increase the total number of variant testing we're doing. At this point, I'd say we're testing somewhere in the neighborhood of roughly 2% of our positives. We'd like to get that higher. We are working to get higher and not only higher, we also want it to be more random because for example, the question that came up before as to whether Ocean really is having more variants or just being reported. At this point, I don't have an exact answer because our testing isn't random enough to get a good sense of that. We are hoping within the next couple of weeks to be able to have a more widespread network that will give us better answers as far as some of those things go.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Ed, thank you. Matt, thank you. Alex, good afternoon.

**Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey:** Good afternoon. Just to follow up with Dr. Lifshitz, can you just go through the actual process by which you test for a variant? I assume that you're saying that the PCR and antigen tests can't detect it, so could there be a great deal of the variant in the state that we don't know about? For the commissioner, I wanted to ask you about community spread. The CDC says it's continuing. Why and what can we do about it? To follow up on Colleen's question, are you saying that the vaccine allotment for certain counties is partially determinant by the racial makeup of those counties? Lastly for the Governor, I know you just had your reaction to the little uptick that we have even though today's numbers are slightly down. Isn't now the time for public disclosure, for the administration to separate the positive cases that've occurred weeks or months ago from ones that've occurred over the past 24 to 48 hours? You've done it with deaths. Why are you not doing that with positive cases to provide an accurate picture of the spread?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I'm not sure I understood the last question.

**Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey:** When you make your announcement about the daily positive test results in New Jersey, some of those test results are 48 hours old. Some of them are 48 weeks old. Why not separate the test that have come back positive from, say, before last week from the larger total?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I think the positives as I – again, it's possible I'm not understanding you, but the positives that we announce are positives from a day that we refer back to when the – when I refer to the positivity rate, so that refers to the recent.

**Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey:** It's all from Thursday.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Yes.

**Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey:** That's not what Dr. Tan said last month.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Matt? Councilman, excuse me.

**Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey:** Councilman, I mean, Dr. Tan and I talked about this maybe a month or two months ago and she says that taking these positive results from last July or last March are necessary to gauge the epi-curve. That's the way she put it, and that's perfectly understandable For the residents of the state to figure out

exactly how many people tested positive on Thursday, why separate the older tests from the newer positive tests?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Yeah, again, it's possibly me, but the tests that I announce, that we announce that we put up on the slides are in the here and now. I'm sure Dr. Tan, who's forgot more about this than I know, as if I have to say that – I'm sure there's also a reason why you're reflecting forward and backwards to get the epidemiological curves and understanding Ed, am I right on this?

**Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz:** No, you're absolutely right. When we reported out today, what, 3,174 confirmed cases, those 3,174 were – hit the system by 10 p.m. last night, which is when our cutoff was. Every day we are reporting out those cases that get confirmed within that 24-hour period.

**Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey:** On Sunday.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Rob Asaro Angelo did not give me this answer, but Judy Persichilli did. In our dashboard, it says the following footnote: "The number of new PCR positive cases represents individuals with a positive PCR tests reported within the past 24 hours. In rare instances," and it says less than 3% of those cases, "this number may include cases previously reported as new antigen-positive cases if subsequent positive PCR cases are received in the previous 24 hours." For instance, if you had – thank you, Judy. If you test positive in an antigen – I just got tested this morning as part of a regular routine. It was negative, thank God, but if it had been positive, first of all, I wouldn't be here but secondly, Judy would've had somebody give me an immediate PCR test, which would've been in a different rhythm.

You asked Ed, which I'll come back to in a second, on the variant testing process. Community spread, yeah, I think there is community spread. I mean, there has been all along and there continues to be. Judy, you can jump in on that. Then also you mentioned – the question was when you make the determinants based on county allocations, to what extent do race and other factors weigh in? Do you want to start, Judy, and then go to Ed or vice-versa?

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Sure, I can talk about community spread. We rely on the CALI score, and that's posted on our website, and you can actually see that we'll have the state in the colors, green, yellow, orange, and red. You can see that about a month ago, we were increasing the yellow. Things were looking pretty positive. If you look now, you will see it's flipping and we're seeing more orange, so we are seeing increased community spread. The most important thing we can do is remember our – all of our mitigation safeguarding; wearing a mask, watching – staying home if you're sick, socially distancing, even if you're vaccinated, being careful. There seems to be people are pivoting in their mind I'm vaccinated; boom, I can go. That's really not so. You really need to still safeguard particularly when you're outside your primary household because the transmission is pretty rampant right now. There is community spread. I don't know, Ed, if you have anything you want to add to that. The CALI score tells it all, by the way.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** One unfinished item. Is any more – I think your first question was any more color on the variant testing. How's that currently being done?

**Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz:** Sure. Let me just quickly give a background on testing and how we get to variant testing and what that means. When we're looking for the virus, the fastest, easiest, quickest way that can be done in almost any doctors' office is the antigen test, and we know there are issues and problems with that. The more exact way that takes longer can be done in fewer specialized labs but still dozens throughout the state is typically the PCR test. That's more accurate but takes more time, the more time being you can get a result in anywhere from one to three days from when the sample is done.

A step up from that is the sequencing. That's when they take the actual virus, and they break it down, and they look at all the nucleotides that go into it, hundreds, thousands of them, and come out with exactly what's going into that virus. That is more complex yet, and that is done at relatively few places, some larger commercial labs, a few academic centers, and our state public health laboratory in New Jersey, so relatively few do them and it is a much slower process. It does take anywhere from the time the sample is collected, anywhere between one to three weeks to get a result depending on a number of factors. You don't get those results very rapidly.

In New Jersey – oh, and so we get results from all three of those areas. We get some results from the CDC, which collects some of these things and does testing often outside of New Jersey, and they give us some results. We get some results from commercial labs. We get some results from those academic labs, and we get other results from our public health laboratory. Obviously we have the greatest control over what our public health laboratory is doing as to knowing what they are analyzing. What they do analyze is a combination of two different types. One is what we call targeted testing. That's when we see something that catches our attention. Is there something going on here? Were there cases that had unusual clinical outcomes? Was there an unusually large outbreak? Was there breakthrough of the vaccine where somebody got the vaccine and yet they still got sick? Do we want to take a close look at those? We do those here at our public health laboratory. The other group and the one that I mentioned earlier that we're looking to really expand is more randomized testing because unless you randomly select samples from throughout the state, you don't have a good sense of exactly what the percentage of the variants that are in the state.

I can tell you quite comfortably that the two common variants that we are seeing in the state are the UK variant and the so-called New York City variant, and those are both common in New Jersey. If you ask me what common means, unfortunately my answer is pretty vague because I can tell you between the two of them together, we're probably seeing somewhere between 10 and 40% or so in New Jersey are related to that, but I can't give you an exact number.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** That's another way to answer the question that Colleen started with on counties. Because we don't have enough random testing, you don't have the information that you would need to then target into – for instance, impact your vaccine supply. Thank you for all that. Let's go to the back and then we'll come to Dave to finish it out. How are you, sir?

**Bryan Bossler, Channel 6:** Good afternoon, Bryan Bossler with Channel 6. How are you?

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

**Bryan Bossler, Channel 6:** Just a couple quick questions. The first, just with the stubborn caseload and the fact that – excuse me, just your thoughts on whether there's a certain threshold for case level that you would then roll back some of the openings. Number two, just with the warm weather events coming up for families and children, I know I think you mentioned summer camps can resume. Dr. Fauci had mentioned that unvaccinated children could go to summer camp this year. What kind of guidelines are you looking at for that? Then graduations for families, is there any guidance yet with that?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** All good. On the first one, I'm hoping we don't roll back. It would continue to be a series of data that we look at, as we've been saying from day one. Our hospitals are the most specific pieces of data that we have to pay attention to because we know exactly how many beds are filled with COVID patients, what our capacities are. Thank God we – we came near those capacities last spring; we're not near them now even though the numbers are up. Remember, we've got 2,200-something hospitalizations and 2,225 in January; it was double that. It's up, but it's still meaningfully below where it was a couple of months ago. We're going to continue to watch this stuff like a hawk and as Ed said, the more of a sense we get on the variants, the better informed we will be. It's going to be the collection of data, hospitalizations, number of tests, positivity, rate of transmission.

Guidance on summer camps, we are allowing overnight summer camps. Guidance will be forthcoming. We don't have it. We wanted to make sure people had the – could press the go button, and we do not have guidance yet on graduations We increased our outdoor gathering limits to 200 today. That should indicate – first of all, that will

already encompass some amount of schools, but that's also, I hope, giving people the signal that that number, assuming the variants stay within control, that number will only go up. We will – the guidance, I suspect, will be very simple. It'll be what's our outdoor capacity and all public health protocols being observed, so six feet, face coverings, etc. We'll get more specific over – I hope sooner than later.

In fact, I will tell you I have a real-life experience. Our son's high school graduation, the school has said this is what we're going to do assuming we're in a good public health place and this is Plan B if we're not. I suspect that's what a lot of schools are doing right now. Thank you. Dave?

**David Matthau, NJ 101.5:** Thanks, Governor. You guys have specifically listed the reasons why we're seeing the significant increase in positive cases. At the same time, you've just indicated there is a slight uptick in hospitalizations but really not nearly the same kind of quantum – or maybe not quantum but significant leap up in caseloads. Some people are saying well, if this is the case, it's probably younger people that are getting infected as opposed to older people, and many older people have gotten vaccinated to this point. Why not just more significantly begin the reopening process? I know you mentioned several things today, Governor, but you've got a group of people, and maybe it's growing, that say well, what's the big deal? Let's get moving on this already. Why can't we increase the speed with which we're reopening our state? Businesses continue to fold.

Rutgers is requiring, as you know, all students to be vaccinated this fall. Should other colleges and universities follow suit? What is your feeling about this? Would there be any disadvantage, do you think, Governor and health folks? Lastly, Commissioner, you mentioned the lead testing is down but what about the normal childhood vaccinations? My understanding is they had dropped in 2020 but is that still the case? Maybe you could talk a little bit about how important it is for parents to take their kids to get vaccinated for these normal vaccines that are required Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Judy, I'll start, and place some in. I think we're going to continue to be incremental. I mean, we just don't have the – you heard Ed's answers in terms of the fact that – and this is not a New Jersey matter only. This is an American reality of under-investing in public health for decades. We're learning that lesson painfully, all of us, now. We just want to make sure we're not lurching to the question that Bryan asked. At what point would you pull back? We don't want to pull back. Does that mean that we are perhaps on the margin more? When you combine both of those realities, are we more incremental than now? I think we are, and that's – we're comfortable with that. We went only on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, so that's only ten days ago. We already increased to 50% capacity in indoors for restaurants, etc. We today increased capacities for large venues, outdoor gatherings. We want to open; there's no question about that. We want to make sure it's a one-way street and that we don't go back. With the variants in our state and the level of transmission right now, which is about as high as it is anywhere in the country, we are in the better to be safe than sorry category. Nobody wants to open this place up more than I do, and I think all of us would also collectively say we would and we are trying to save every single life we can as we do that.

I would love Judy or Ed's opinion on should other colleges or universities do it. I was very impressed, as I have been from day one, by Rutgers's decision under President Holloway and with the board, the great board giving him input and his team. We are just thinking through to make sure there are no unintended consequences, there are no equity issues associated with that. I'm not sure I'm in the position of mandating it that other colleges or universities have to do it. I think the more people that are vaccinated the better off we will be and how we get there, I'm more open-minded than I am let's make sure we get there.

Judy, other – anything on that or other vaccines that kids historically should be getting? Where are we on that? Where are we on reminding folks that those still matter?

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Sure, on the immunizations overall, we do know that they're down because well child visits are down. I don't have the exact percent, but part of our push for lead testing includes a push to get children back into their regular visit schedule so that they can get vaccinated. It's really extremely important, and we've lost some time over the past year, significant time around lead, and we just have to assume that other vaccinations, other immunizations have followed.

As far as kids on college campuses, we really want to push testing. We think that's really the first step in any mitigation activities because many of them will be returning to what we would call some congregate settings. We also do know that they do not get as sick as older individuals. We want to catch it before, make sure that the students are taken care of appropriately. It starts with testing.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thank you. With that, may I mask up? Judy, Ed, as always. Ed, we managed to get you out of the bullpen. I'm very happy about that. Great to have you. I assume we will have Eddy Bresnitz with us on Wednesday. Am I right? We will, right? Eddy will be here in that seat. Again, thanks to each of you. Pat, Happy 100<sup>th</sup> to you and your colleagues. I'm very honored and looking forward to standing with you. Jared, Parimal, Mahan, rest of the team. No mystery as to what the advice here right now is because it's the same advice we've been giving you for going on 13 months: keep doing the basic stuff. If you're up to bat, sign up to get a vaccination. The numbers in terms of supplies are going to be going up dramatically in the next couple weeks, I think especially on the J&J front, and that helps us. We didn't really say it today but we've said it before. That helps us in a big way on the equity front because it's a one-dose, regular refrigeration dose, and that allows us a lot more flexibility and ability to be nimble with than than we can with the two-dose, ultra cold storage.

Continued blessed days in Passover. Please continue to observe the holiday responsibly. Again, we'll be with you virtually tomorrow, and we'll be back here at 1 o'clock on Wednesday. Many thanks, everyone.

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