

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: May 24th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon. We have a lot of ground to cover today. Sitting alongside me to my right is the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli; to her right, the state's epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan; great to have you both; with us, as always, another guy who needs no introduction to my left, Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan.

Pat, I want to start, actually by giving thanks to you and your team at the New Jersey State Police and the New Jersey State Police Memorial Association on Saturday's 39th Annual New Jersey State Police 5K Chase. It was a warm day for tackling all of those hills that starts and ends at the headquarters in Ewing. It was also a tremendous and, no pun intended, well-run event. Tammy and I enjoyed running alongside you and our troopers and the more than 200 other runners, all to support the Memorial Association, which plays such a huge role in preserving the memories of our fallen troopers through the State Police Museum and Learning Center. That's the Colonel, myself, Tammy, and Derek Roseman who joined us, who, I believe, beat us by over ten minutes, which is a pretty humbling thing to say when you only took 30 minutes to do the race. We'll leave it at that.

Again, let's get to some business today. We've got several significant announcements. We are proud of the fact that we have always been guided by the science, the data, the facts. The actions that we're taking today are true to that. We've always targeted Memorial Day as when we hoped we would be able to take our strongest steps on the path back to a fully open New Jersey.

I looked up the first time I had mentioned the phrase or a version of the phrase, "I think you can hang your hat on Memorial Day," and it was at our briefing, Judy, in December 14th, which I believe was the day before we witnessed the first shots at University Hospital. That was in response to a question on what I hope the impact of the vaccines would be and our ability to reopen our state. We have always been cautiously optimistic, with an emphasis on the word cautiously. I knew that if we all did our parts, we could make it work.

Because of the tremendous progress we've made over the past several weeks in particular, today I'm signing an executive order that will lift the statewide indoor mask mandate this Friday, May 28th. However, even with this action, individual businesses and other entities which oversee indoor spaces may continue to require that their employees and customers or guests wear face masks. We ask that you be respectful in adhering to these requirements where they do apply. Indoor workplaces that are not open to the general public are to follow their existing health and safety protocols. That would be, for instance, a warehouse.

As recommended by the CDC, there are spaces where masking will continue to be required, including healthcare settings and long-term care facilities, correctional facilities, homeless shelters, to name a few. You must remain masked while you're on an airplane, a bus, a train, or other forms of public transportation and while in a transportation hub such as an airport or a train station. These requirements, by the way, will be strictly enforced. We also will be requiring that face masks continue to be worn indoors in public facing state offices such as when you're visiting the motor vehicle commission agency.

Additionally and also per our CDC guidance, this change will not extend to childcare centers and facilities, youth summer camps, public, private, or parochial preschool premises and elementary and secondary schools, including both charter and renaissance schools. In each of these cases, existing requirements for masking will be maintained. By the way, this is for a simple reason; children under the age of 12 are not yet eligible to be vaccinated. While we've made very good progress with the 12 to 15 year cohort, they've only been eligible, I think, for less than 2 weeks.

For these younger populations, we're just not there yet. I believe, I think Judy would agree, Tina, that we will get there, but we're not there yet. Yes, if you are not vaccinated, we encourage you in the strongest possible terms to first of all get vaccinated. If not or until, follow the CDC guidance to wear a face mask when you're in any indoor public setting, as I mentioned, or preferably immediately go out and get vaccinated.

We won't have law enforcement checking people's vaccination status, but we are asking people to be responsible and to do the right thing for your own safety and the safety of your community. To be sure, if you feel more comfortable wearing your face mask when shopping or waiting for your table at a restaurant, by all means, you may continue to do so. No one should mistake lifting the indoor mask mandate as meaning you cannot wear a mask indoors. You certainly may.

There is nothing wrong with being cautious when it comes to your own health and that of your family and community. To be equally sure, we will not tolerate anyone being demeaned or bullied or excluded for wanting to continue to mask up. We don't want to hear about, and there will be consequences, mask-free shopping hours and not allowing people in who do wear a mask. That will not be tolerated.

Also, this Friday we will be lifting the requirement for maintaining six feet of social distancing in all indoor and outdoor settings. This includes businesses such as restaurants and retail spaces, personal care businesses, gyms and recreational and entertainment businesses such as casinos. We will also be lifting the six-foot distancing

requirements for religious services, political activities, weddings, funerals, memorial services, and performances. Every business can continue to require social distancing, should they choose, and we fully expect that many will do so initially to ensure the comfort of their customers.

Again, per CDC guidelines, if you are not fully vaccinated, then we are strongly encouraging you to continue to practice in addition to masking, practice social distancing. Finally, for this Friday, dance floors at bars and restaurants may reopen as well. We will also lift the requirements that individuals remain seated while ordering and while eating or drinking at bars and restaurants.

Looking one week further ahead, on Friday, June 4th, so that's a week from this Friday, we will be moving forward by removing all indoor gathering limits. This includes the general 50-person gathering limit as well as the 250-person gathering limit that applies to things like political activities, wedding ceremonies and receptions, funerals, memorial services, performances, catered events, commercial gatherings. We will also on June 4th lift the 30% limit on large indoor venues with a fixed seating capacity of 1,000 or greater.

These steps, when all added together, are the clearest signs of our commitment to carefully and deliberately reopening our state after what has been a truly crushing almost 15-month period. We were the first state in the nation to put an indoor masking requirement in place. We did that last April 8th as the first wave was upending our life in our state. We didn't know much about this virus then, but the prevailing science now tells us this is a predominantly airborne virus.

The mask mandate was unquestionably the right call. We know this has saved lives. In this pandemic, we have learned the days and weeks matter. Last February and March, the federal government withheld information from state governments and the public on how this virus spreads. We shut down as rapidly as any American state, but I only wonder how many more lives we could have saved if the prior administration had been more forthcoming with its knowledge of the virus and if we could have used that to implement the mandate a week or two sooner.

That is why when the CDC took all of us by surprise and updated its masking guidance some 11 days ago at this point, which by the way, also caused confusion across the country, we did not act in a kneejerk fashion. I do not for one minute regret our taking these extra two weeks to ensure that the dramatic decreases we have begun seeing in both cases and hospitalizations would continue. I do not regret listening to a host of medical and scientific experts, including Dr. Tony Fauci, who spoke of a need to be more cautious to prevent a backslide. If these past two weeks have pushed one more person to get vaccinated or save one extra person from hospitalization or death, then we are all better off.

A couple of observations; on May 13th when the CDC dropped this on us unexpectedly, we had reported 966 confirmed COVID-positive patients and patients under investigation in our hospitals. Today, that number is under 700, a drop of nearly 28%. By the way, we fully expect that to continue to drop over the course of this week.

On May 13th, again, the day the CDC dropped the mask mandate, we were still consistently reporting over 1,000 positive COVID cases daily on weekdays. That number is down today, we're going to announce in a minute, to 300. On May 13th we were reporting weekday spot positivity between 3 and 4%. Today we're seeing 4 consecutive days of spot positivity plus or minus 2%. Every indicator, ICU beds, ventilator counts, our CALI scores, rate of transmission all continuing to trend in the right direction.

Our vaccination numbers have also gone up dramatically over the past couple of weeks. On May 13th, we knew that around 3.7 million New Jerseyans were fully vaccinated, as we'll address in a couple of minutes. That number is now well over 4 million. Many residents who have just become eligible for the vaccine on April 19th have been getting their second dose over the past couple of weeks. Those who have been getting their first shots over the past two weeks will be aligned for their second as we head into June.

We also need at this time to make sure that the areas of our state where vaccinations were lagging would pick up. Today we still have 20 municipalities across the state with populations of 10,000 or more where fewer than 50% of adult residents have received at least their first dose. These 20 cities account for more than 10% of our state's population.

More broadly, there are 61 municipalities in the state with a total combined population of more than 1.2 million where fewer than half of adults have received at least their first dose. That includes Warren County where, today, you and I were on Friday, I guess, and witnessed a very well-run vaccination site in Phillipsburg. Warren County has more than half of its towns, 12 of the 22 are on that list that are still not at half of their population getting vaccinated.

Regardless, we are not at a point where our in-house count for those who have received at least their first doses is well about our targeted 4.7 million. We know it will only grow over the next four days before the mask mandate expires. We feel very good taking this step. In every decision we have made, we have prioritized your health and that of your family and your community. Every step of the way we have carefully and safely reopened with an eye on ensuring that positive trends would not be reversed.

I am proud that we are the rare example of a state that didn't have to put our residents or businesses through a merry-go-round of lockdown to reopening to lockdown to reopening. We've never acted because of politics. We've never told any story other than the one our numbers told. We've only moved in one direction, forward. Because of the work of millions of you who continue to mask up and social distance and to get vaccinated in truly nation-leading numbers, we can now take these steps, which I think are by far the most significant.

Finally, I must once again caution that this pandemic is not over. This virus is on the run. There's no question about it. It is not defeated. We cannot let up in our efforts until we win this race and end this pandemic. Lifting the mask mandate is not a license to be a knucklehead. Lifting the mask mandate simply acknowledged how far we've come together and that together we will cross the finish line.

With that, let's hit some overnight numbers briefly. On the vaccine front, as I noted, we've exceeded 4.7 million first doses. That number today is 4,783,443 and 4,081,059 are fully vaccinated, which is great news. Operation Jersey Summer is in full swing.

As Judy will highlight, we had a successful Grateful for the Shot event yesterday in Lakewood. Tammy was at a similar event in Elizabeth. Our field canvassing teams are today in Camden, right here in Trenton, Bayonne, Passaic City, Jersey City, knocking on doors, the offensive bringing the shot to people as opposed to waiting for the people to come to the shot. That number of 4,081,059 includes the breakdown.

You can see between who's been vaccinated in state versus the now somewhat over 167,000 New Jerseyans who are vaccinated out of state. The number of cases we're reporting today is 300. As I mentioned, rate of transmission is 0.64 of the 28,873 PCR tests recorded last Thursday, positivity 2.13, 602 confirmed positive in our hospitals, 97 awaiting tests for a total of 699, 148 of whom in ICUs, 102 ventilators in use. Throughout Sunday 67 live patients were discharged, 55 went in. Our hospitals reported seven losses of life; again, not yet confirmed.

We are confirming with the heaviest of hearts another ten losses of life from COVID-related complications. This brings the total of confirmed deaths over the past 14-plus months to 23,440, with an additional 2,660 probable deaths. Every day we give you a lot of numbers, but behind every number is a name and a face. Let's take a couple of minutes now to remember the names and see the faces of three more New Jerseyans who we have lost.

We'll begin by honoring this woman, MaryAnn Delorme, a long-time native of right here, Trenton, New Jersey. Born, raised, and educated in our capital city, MaryAnn's early career was with some of the names that lived up to the words Trenton makes, the world takes. She helped manufacture light bulbs at the former Westinghouse factory, working alongside her mom, by the way. She was also a steel grinder at American Bridge, and she took special pride in being the only woman steel grinder in the entire place.

Her second career lead her through 17 years as a member of the Department of Environmental Protection. Then after partially retiring, she would give more time to the Sandbox Tech Nursery School right here in Trenton and Harmony Nursery School in Princeton. Her favorite job, she would say, was that of grandmother, or Meme, as she was called, to her nine grandchildren, Brandon, Avery, Tristin, Emily, Jack, Isabella, Sabrina, Gabriella, and Francesca.

In addition to them, and five great-grandchildren, by the way, Ethan, Liam, Owen, Violette, and Scarlett, MaryAnn is also survived by her daughters, Michele, Melissa, and Marcie and their spouses. I had the great honor of speaking with Michele and Marcie a week ago. She was predeceased, sadly, in January of 2020 at the very young age of 55 by her son, Philip. MaryAnn was 78 years old. We honor all MaryAnn did throughout her life. May God bless and watch over her memory and her family.

Next up we remember Beachwood's Stephen Gruver. Stephen was just 53 years old. He was born in Rahway, grew up in Edison, and then called the Iselin section of Woodbridge Township home before permanently moving to Beachwood in 1999. He was employed by several of the tech giants who have called New Jersey home, including IBM and Vonage, and was most recently a fiber customer service agent at Verizon. He was also a proud member of IBEW Local 827 based in nearby East Windsor.

While his work was serious to our state's economy, Stephen himself always kept a lighthearted sense about himself and was generous with his friends and family. He loved the boss, Bruce Springsteen, and he loved to cook. The Thanksgiving turkey was always his strength. Somehow despite his Jersey upbringing and much cajoling from his wife, he was and remained until the end an unapologetic Dallas Cowboys fan.

Stephen leaves behind his wife, Jennie, with whom I had the great honor of speaking a week ago, and his son, Anthony – I think Anthony is in his 30s – along with his dog, Molly, and one hedgehog named Luna. He's also survived by his six sisters and brothers, Nancy, Lawrence, JoAnn, Gregory, Patricia, and Debra and their families. His brother, Gregory, passed away last month. May God bless and watch over Stephen. We thank him for so finely representing our Jersey values.

Finally for today, we remember Walter Birbeck, Junior of Mauricetown in Cumberland County where Pat and I were this morning. Walter spent most of his life on the opposite side of the Delaware River, born and raised in Philadelphia and educated at St. Joseph's Prep and St. Joseph's College. Growing up along the Schuylkill River, he rode crew as a young man and would skipper larger boats on open water later in life.

He served our nation in the United States Marine Corp from 1965 until 1968, stationed at a Marine Air Station in Japan and rising to the rank of captain. He moved to Mauricetown in 2008 prior to his retirement as a social worker back in Philly. He was drawn to the area by the Maurice River and the community seafaring history and folklore. He would spend his days writing music, singing, as you can see, hiking, biking, or paddling his kayak along the river.

He immersed himself in his new home as a member of Citizens United to Protect the Maurice River, the Bayshore Discovery Project, and the Mauricetown Historical Society. Walter was 78 years old. I spoke with his partner, Ilene, in the memorial service for Walter, which was literally two days ago on Saturday. He leaves a South Jersey community grateful that he found to call home. We thank him for his service to our nation and may God bless and watch over him.

Three more faces from among the more than 26,000 who we have lost. We remember and honor them all. We also continue to honor the tremendous community organizations who have gone above and beyond over the past year to help provide hope for countless residents and families. One of these great organizations is right here, the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, or TASK, which has been fighting food, insecurity, and joblessness and providing a host of educational and social services across our capital region since 1982.

Over the past year under the leadership of that woman, Executive Director Joyce Campbell, TASK has seen the demand for their services expand dramatically, a more than 70% increase. To answer the call of the community, they added community meal sites and expanded their ability to provide meals to seniors. Joyce and her team turned to local restaurants to help them meet the unprecedented demand, putting funds donated by the community to work for the community.

Thanks to the New Jersey Economic Development Authority's Sustain & Serve NJ program, TASK has a new partner. Through Sustain & Serve NJ, TASK received a grant of more than \$200,000, funds which have allowed them to put more back into the community restaurants, who also needed a helping hand. TASK is one of our state's truly iconic community organizations. We thank Joyce and her team and the restaurants they partnered with for all that they do. I had a great conversation with Joyce a week ago. Check them out. Their website will not surprise you, trentonsoupkitchen.org.

Before I turn things over to Judy, I want to just revisit the words I said this morning in Bridgeton alongside Cumberland County Prosecutor Jennifer Webb-McRae, Attorney General Gurbir Grewal, and as I mentioned, Pat was with me as well. We will find and bring to justice those responsible for the horrific mass shooting Saturday night in Fairfield Township that has now left two dead and 12 others wounded, some severely. Anyone with information should step forward and either call the state police's Bridgeton Station, Pat, 856-451-0101 – you can see that on the screen – or reach out the Cumberland County Prosecutor's Office at njccpo.org/tips. You can see that on the screen as well. Any tips can be kept confidential, but they are all vital to make sure anyone involved in this heinous and cowardly crime is identified.

At the same time, we remain fully committed to ensuring that New Jersey has the strongest possible gun safety laws on the books, laws that will keep guns out of the wrong hands to prevent senseless acts like we saw Saturday night. That is not New Jersey. We keep the families of those killed or injured in our prayers, and we also keep in our thoughts those who will live with emotional scars as well, and help is being made available to them as well. Our New Jersey family is strong, and the more we are tested, the stronger we become. 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. Good afternoon. The COVID-19 vaccination has allowed vaccinated residents to get back to many activities we enjoyed before the pandemic. Fully vaccinated individuals can visit indoors without a mask at small, private gatherings. Fully vaccinated individuals do not need to quarantine after having close contact with someone with COVID-19 as long as they remain asymptomatic. They also do not need to quarantine or get tested before and after domestic travel unless otherwise required by their destination.

As the Governor shared, starting on Friday, vaccinated individuals won't need to wear a mask in many indoor spaces. In addition to the health protections vaccines provide, there are clearly other benefits, so we encourage those who haven't been vaccinated yet to visit covid19.nj.gov/vaccine and find a place to get vaccinated. If you have gotten your first dose, please ensure you go back and get your second dose so you can have full protection.

Every day we are working with partners to stand up more pop-up vaccination locations. On Friday, the Department of Health held a neighborhood vaccination clinic in partnership with Walgreens, the city of Trenton, the Trenton Health Department, Mercer County, the Trenton Health Team, and Capital Health. In advance of the clinic, the Department of Health staff and members of the COVID Community Corps canvassed neighborhoods and businesses near the vaccination site to raise awareness. We got to meet and talk with our neighbors here in town and help address any concerns about the vaccine. Some individuals brought their children to get vaccinated and were motivated to also get their vaccination. The Trenton event drew over 240 area residents who received their vaccinations including parents and children.

On Saturday, as part of the Shot campaign, the state, working with the New Jersey Pandemic Relief Fund, brought together local community organizers, faith leadership, and community-based health providers to meet the vaccination needs for the Latinx community in Lakewood. All Saints Episcopal Church along with La Casa de la Tia restaurant, which was the host site, Ocean Health Initiatives, Cosecha New Jersey, Ocean County Health Department, and New Labor joined forces to vaccinate 247 local residents, 42 of whom were youth, 12-17 years of age. These residents were thrilled actually to have the opportunity to receive their vaccinations. The Lakewood event was one of dozens of Grateful for the Shot events held over the weekend. These events provide vaccinations in a trusted, safe location to break down the barriers to accessing vaccine.

As more residents get vaccinated, we take another step forward to beating this virus. I'm happy to report that 87% of those 65 and older have received at least one dose of the vaccine, and 72% of those 50 to 64 years of age have received at least one dose of the vaccine. 58% of those 30 to 49 have received at least one dose. 46% of those 18 to 29, and 33% of those 16 and 17 have received at least one dose. Today, we're reporting that 12% of those ages 12 to 15 have received at least one dose of the vaccine.

Moving on to the daily report as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 699 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients and PUIs. This continues to trend in a very positive direction. There are currently 4,395 reports of CDC variants of concern in New Jersey. 4,059 of these reports are what is known as the UK variant or B.1.17. Additionally, we do have 164 reports of the Brazilian variant P.1, 11 reports of the South African variant B.1.351, and 161 reports of the two California variants. Since our last briefing, we have seen – we have received five new reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. There are now 126 cumulative cases in the state, and one of these children are currently hospitalized. The veteran's homes and the psychiatric hospitals are reporting no new cases among their residents and patients. The daily percent positivity as of May 20th in New Jersey is 2.13. Northern part of the state 2.11, central 2.12, southern 2.18%. That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe and let's get vaccinated. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you for all. It was great being with you on Friday. That was a really good setup. Thank you for that. Pat, again, we had a tough start to the day, a tough weekend on the shooting front. Compliance feels like it's staying in a good place. Thank you for the weather, but my Memorial Day forecast does not look as good as you had promised, so I've got to call you out. All of the above, please, take it away.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Since we last met, there have been no executive order violations reported to the Rock, which is a good thing. To your point with what happened early yesterday morning, it was not an easy phone call to take after midnight, but I won't run through all the details that I did earlier this morning from that press conference, but just to thank the federal, state, the county, and the local partners that was – it was a vast crime scene. There was a tremendous amount of ballistic evidence recovered.

Interviews are still being conducted. Search warrants are being executed and forensic evidence being analyzed, so I – just ask everybody to bear with us as this investigation is ongoing and unfolds, and I'm certain that more rests lie ahead as we continue to delve into this terrific – horrific tragedy that occurred yesterday. On a much lighter note, thanks to you, the first lady and Derek, for running with us for a 5k. It is one of the hillier ones in the state. Maybe I'll get Commissioner Scaccetti to do something about those hills next year. We can go on the flats.

Governor Phil Murphy: Get Commissioner Persichilli.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: That, too. Thanks, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Pat. It was for a good cause. That's the second time we've done it, and it was great both times. Probably not even worth asking us a lot of questions about what happened in Fairfield because we're not able to really answer because this is an investigation that's evolving pretty rapidly, and you saw us say that this morning, but it is worth nothing – and, Pat, if I get any of this wrong, correct the record. Fairfield, which is where this party took place, is one of the communities where the state police plays the local law enforcement role, and there are a hundred and something of those communities in the state. How many?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Almost a hundred. 89 but plus the part-time puts us right about 100.

Governor Phil Murphy: Not quite as many as I thought but still meaningful amount. When I got the word, obviously, we were communication with you and your team extensively. I spoke with the mayor of Fairfield, Joe Derella, who's the County Commission Director in Cumberland County and does a great job, but importantly – and this is a particular shoutout – Bridgeton came in and backed and filled with your colleagues, and I had the honor of speaking to Mayor Kelly but also the police chief and just about an hour ago with the PBA delegate from Bridgeton because they came into the void. Fairfield abuts Bridgeton, and so they were the next logical force to come in and help the surge that you guys were leading, and I wanted to make sure we gave them a proper shoutout. Is that all fair?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: I thank you, and I was remiss in not thanking as you did this morning the EMS workers and the staff at the local hospitals that just were flooded with victims in varying degrees of injury. They're all volunteers down there too. When that phone rings and the bell goes off, they come out, whether it's a car accident or a horrific shooting like this, so a special thanks to the EMS workers that responded so rapidly.

Governor Phil Murphy: We made the point this morning when they were – when your colleagues were getting there, when this first started to unfold, and then when the EMS folks were getting there, clearly, it's dark. It sounds like there were a lot of people, and they had no idea what they were walking into, and so they put themselves on the line, so bless them all, and thank you for that.

With that, I think – where's Marthelle? I lost you. Marthelle, I think we'll start over here with Dustin. I think we'll be in – I know Wednesday we were on the road last week. I think we're planning on being in the more regular rhythm this week. Mahen will correct the record otherwise. We'll be virtual with you tomorrow. We'll be here on Wednesday, and then we'll get back to the virtual piece. Big Memorial Day weekend, obviously, coming up. Not just the opening steps we announced today but what we normally have on Memorial Day, so summer is days away.

Q&A Section

With that, Marthelle, thank you. Dustin, good afternoon.

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Good afternoon. Is it fair to say that the decreases you just cited over the past week on some of the key metrics changed your mind on lifting the indoor mask mandate or was it your plan all along to do this for Memorial Day weekend? Do you foresee circumstances where you'd reinstate masking, and if so, what might it take for you to start thinking about that? Can you clarify whether lifting the social distancing requirement applies to everyone or just vaccinated people?

One of the reasons you gave last week why you didn't want to lift the masking requirement was because you didn't want workers to have to determine who's fully vaccinated and not. Is there some mechanism that will be put in place to address that or is that no longer such a concern? Can you also clarify on your plans for next week to lift the indoor capacity restrictions? That applies to casinos as well, right, so they can resume with conventions? Do you have any update on whether you'll allow smoking in casinos? Thanks.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'll knock the last one off first, Dustin, with your blessing. No update on smoke. Nothing there. I'll go up to the first one. I read some nice constructive prose, but let me say this in even more basic terms. When the CDC lifts – again, I want to roll the tape back. I had expected – I think we had expected that the CDC would

make the move on six feet before the move on masking, so that was – and that's something that we were expecting – expecting is probably too strong a word, but anticipating, and that would've been a step that we would've instantly followed.

When they did masking, particularly when you've got then – neighboring states have got the – all the states in the neighborhood between, I think, the 19th and the 31st of May are all following CDC guidance, you then have the reality where you run the risk that everybody who's going out to dinner who doesn't want to wear a mask or shopping, doesn't want to wear a mask, is going to be going across the Delaware or the Hudson. That reality then gets put into play, but as a public health matter – I defer to Judy and Tina on this, but we also knew immediately that with each passing day given the way the curves were headed, the CALI scores, rate of transmission, positivities, we would pick up – we haven't said this in a long time, but we were saying this last spring and summer. Any amount of days you can put on the clock allows you to further drive down the virus numbers, and at the same time, it allows us to drive up the vaccination numbers.

While I have been signaling – we've been signaling Memoria Day we thought was going to be an inflection point since December, the fact of the matter is the numbers merit that, they warrant that. These numbers we have not seen in a long, long time. I think it's our guess they're going to continue to stay good based on what you're seeing, Judy. What would it take to reinstate the mask mandate? First of all, again, I said this in some lofty prose, but we're the only state in America that has not lurched, that we went forward and then had to come back. It would take the health numbers and metrics that we follow a collection of them going in the wrong direction, and I think going meaningfully in the wrong direction, so that'd be the ones that you hear about every day, spot positivity, rate of transmission. Judy speaks more than I do about the CALI scores, but that would be something, if we saw the colors change in a systemic way, hospitalizations. We don't anticipate it.

Social distancing, I think I said in my remarks, if you're not vaccinated, we expect you to have a higher standard of care, both in wearing a mask and in social distancing. We're not going to put the workers in harm's way. You're absolutely right. That was a concern that we expressed immediately when the CDC made that move, and who are we to ask the retail store employee or you pick your example to be judge and jury on who's vaccinated, who's not, so what we're very clearly asking folks is for personal responsibility. If you're not vaccinated, we expect you to do the right thing. We're not going to put those workers into harm's way and have to be the one judging some form or fashion who's vaccinated, who isn't.

We're asking everybody as an individual, if you're not vaccinated, get vaccinated, and in the meantime, do the right thing. Wear masking, keep your distances. Indoor capacities does include casinos, so that's a week from Friday, June 4th. Indeed, it does. That means that we're back up full-bore. Anything you want to add to the Parimal?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: The six-foot distancing requirement will be lifted for casinos this Friday as of May 28th, but then the 250-person gathering limit, which applies to commercial gatherings such as the trade shows that you mentioned, that will be lifted Friday June 4th.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good point. Social distancing this Friday. The limit on indoor gatherings of 250 at any catered event or any service like that will be lifted a week from Friday. Thank you. Welcome back. How are you feeling?

Reporter: I'm feeling great, Governor. Thank you so much.

Governor Phil Murphy: Fully recovered?

Reporter: Fully recovered.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good stuff.

Reporter: I'm sure you missed me, though. Governor Murphy, you once told me – in regard to Fairfield, you once told me that you think fewer guns makes a safe society. Is your objective to reduce all gun ownership or merely possession of firearms by criminals?

Governor Phil Murphy: Is that it? We have never targeted responsible gun owners. It just is not – can be make the system smarter by data and other things? Yes, but our steps from moment one – and Pat, you tell me if you see this any differently – has been against crime guns, guns that are used in crimes. That has been and that will continue to be our objective. We don't have an issue – I know you and I have discussed this over the past several years. We don't have an issue with second amendment law-abiding responsible gun owners. We never have, but it's crime guns that – and tightening up the system so that it can limit them and limit awful events such as what happened on Saturday night from happening.

I didn't say this but it is worth repeating. I had this conversation back and forth with a whole lot of people since yesterday. We're not an island. We're not an island in a pandemic, and we're not an island as it relates to gun laws and gun safety. Pat, I know we're not commenting yet because we don't know where these guns came from, but that's a big part of the investigation is to track down their source. We've talked in the past about the iron pipeline coming up from states like Georgia up north into New Jersey. I say – why do I say that? Because we'll continue to, I think, have probably the strongest gun safety laws in America, but we need national steps taken and in the absence of that, we're still going to have the risk, at least, of bad actors and/or crime guns coming into our state. Thank you. Alex.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Good afternoon.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon. You're Alex, too, aren't you?

Alex: [Inaudible 0:45:25]

Governor Phil Murphy: What's that?

Alex: [Inaudible 0:45:26]

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, thank you.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Which Alex do you like better?

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm a fan of all.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Gotcha. You mentioned before and you mentioned a week ago –

Governor Phil Murphy: Can you get a little closer there?

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: You mentioned before and you mentioned a week ago the hypothetical store owner who has to choose or find out who's vaccinated and who's not vaccinated. Is your action today taking away the indoor mask mandate – does that make it more or less likely that you would support a vaccine passport in the future? You also said last week that your reason for keeping the indoor mask mandate in place was to get more vaccinations. By my count, 213,911 people had become fully vaccinated between last Monday and today. What number out of that 213,911 people was the line that you could relax the indoor mask mandate? Finally, you have talked about Memorial Day being a different reality for months now; that's true. You also said about a month and a half ago that you didn't think we'd be ditching masks by Memorial Day. Aren't your actions today a response to outrage from the public and questions from the legislature? Aren't you buckling under public pressure to make this move?

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, so I was going to be cute. If the number's 213,911, you asked where the line was, and I was going to say 213,910, but I won't. Let me go back to the first question. These were all good questions. The first one, let me say something which I did say in my remarks but I want to reiterate. If you are a business and you choose to keep a mask requirement in place, we have no issue with that. You may do that. What you can't do is make people who are wearing a mask to your place of business take their mask off as a price of admission. That is unacceptable, and we will enforce that.

Secondly, to repeat a little bit of a version of my answer to Dustin, we reject putting that store employee into the position of judge and jury. It's just not fair to them. They have no way of knowing. It's just not right, so we're going to ask folks, as we have really from the get-go in many other different challenges in this pandemic, to do the right thing and to take the personal responsibility to do the right thing.

I don't know that it impacts my view on vaccine passports. My biggest concern – and again, I'm where I've been the past couple of months. I'm open-minded to them, but there are huge equity challenges that we still are dealing with. We're making a good amount of progress, but we're not there yet. If you magically put a vaccine passport into place today, you would be – even if you weren't intending to, you'd be discriminating. I just don't want to – I don't sign up for – I'm not going to sign up for that. I think could we theoretically at some point get there? I hope we can. It's a reason why I listed the cities today that our campaign is not going to endorse – Camden, Trenton, Bayonne, Jersey City, Passiac, overwhelmingly communities of color, overwhelmingly black and brown communities. We still have work to do. Again, good progress but not there yet.

I'd say no particular magical line in the sand, but we have a pretty good sense at any moment in time based on what we can predict the daily take-up will be, particularly of first doses because that tells you – if it's a Moderna or Pfizer vaccine, then you could project out, given we've got a very high take-up on the second dose. You can project out where you're going to be in either three or four weeks respectively. Remember, while we're making this announcement today, it's effective Friday, so it'll be a total of 15 days. I take your word for the number, that number, 213,911. I'm not sure how much of those are firsts but my guess is, Judy, this week we should have 20 to 30,000 a day of firsts, you would hope. You would then add another plus or minus 100 or more thousand by Friday.

With all due respect to political pressure, there's no political pressure in this, and there hasn't been. I mean, there's some folks who have consistently been on the other side of us as it relates to what we've been doing throughout the pandemic, but that's of no interest to us, and it does not factor in. I am aware, though, if you're the only state in the entire neighborhood and everybody else is doing something differently, at a certain point it puts a significant amount of pressure on our business community. If you're – I'm just going to pick this. If you're in Jersey City and you don't want to put a mask on to go to dinner, you can hop on the path, drive across, and go to New York City and likewise, if you're in a community that's on the Delaware River, you can do the same into Pennsylvania.

We always knew masks weren't a forever and always. That was something we always knew, and we've said that many times. We think based on the numbers and based on the timing and frankly, the ability to get outside where the virus is a lot less lethal than it is inside, the combination of all of that tells us that this is the right time to make the move. Thank you.

Sir? Give us a sec.

Reporter: Afternoon.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon.

Reporter: I just have one for you today. Tomorrow marks the one-year anniversary of the killing of George Floyd. What lasting impact do you think the incident and its aftermath have had on the country in the year since and going forward?

Governor Phil Murphy: God rest his soul. First of all, he's a guy who should be alive today, most importantly. That's not just one guy's opinion; that is now the opinion of a jury of his peers or of the police officer's peers. Someone said well, justice was finally brought when the verdict came down, and I thought a very good and smart reaction to that was justice has not been served in the bigger picture. That's a step in the right direction, and I think many are gratified as they should be by that step. I'd say it has been a national moment of reflection, rightful anger, rightful peaceful protests, for the most part, in New Jersey. It's allowed us, Pat, I think to continue the steps deepening the engagement between law enforcement and the communities they serve. I think New Jersey has been a model in that respect. It's unfinished business. We're in the early years of the fifth century since slavery came to North America. We're digging out still from the war on drugs more recently than has impacted so many lives. We're making – the good news is we're making a lot of progress. The sobering news is we're not close to being finished with that journey, and I suspect that will be the case for a long time to come.

I hope within that context that New Jersey can stand out as a model, again, particularly community and law enforcement engagement and relations as a particular element of that, that we put the right laws on the books, that things are addressed properly, and that we find ways to close the inequities. We've said it many times: the pandemic did not create the inequities, but it laid them bare. Let's leave health inequities for a minute and think about net worth inequities and look at what a white family enjoys versus a brown or a black family today. That's been building up for centuries, literally. You can't flip a switch and turn that around overnight, but that does not mean that that is not a worthwhile journey that we must be on to address those, in some cases, again, built up for centuries of inequities. Thank you.

Katherine, is that you? Nice to see you. Can we go to you, and then we'll go to Brent and Daniel.

Katherine Landergan: Good to see you. In making today's announcement, do you have any concerns that unvaccinated residents will just still stop wearing masks indoors even though it's recommended? Does the change in social distancing also apply to classrooms? You've committed to working with lawmakers to decide how to spend the ARP money, but what does this actually mean in practice? Will lawmakers be giving input that your Administration will then decide what to do with or will you, the Senate President, and Assembly Speaker reach a joint agreement? Will any of these funds be decided and negotiated by June 30th? What would you like to see the money be spent on? Thanks.

Governor Phil Murphy: Do I expect that some people will do the wrong thing? In other words, you're not vaccinated and yet you go in and you don't wear your mask. Sadly, I suspect there'll be a minority of people who will do that. Again, I think we stand out as a state in our country on folks by the millions doing the right thing from moment one and taking personal responsibility. I would plead with folks to continue to do that.

Social distancing in the classroom, I thought it's – we're already down to three. Are we not?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: That's right.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, so it's already at three. I would suspect that stays there, although we – I haven't answered this in a week or so, but Judy, I think it was in June of last year the Department of Ed, with your team's input, put out the back-to-school guidance. I would suspect something like that, a manual, will be coming out similarly this year. Anything to add to that?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Today's announcement doesn't affect K through 12 settings but we'll certainly be closely following CDC guidance should they change their recommendations for that population.

Governor Phil Murphy: Catherine, I think too early to say specifically what this – I mean, they're a bucket – they're a big bucket state, local schools, small businesses, transit systems. There are large buckets such as that and then I think you mean more specifically underneath that. What does it mean in terms of working together? I think it's been

extremely constructive and it continues to be. Exactly what form that takes, too early to tell. I've signed a bunch of bills that were already directed at work – that were a result of working with legislators on deploying CARES Act money, Coronavirus Relief Fund money, CRF money. We've done that together in many cases. My guess is that's the model for what will happen. We're already having really good conversations.

I don't have a good answer for you yet on timing. There is – we mentioned this last week. There is one reality which does probably impact timing, at least on the margin, and that is the guidance we've gotten from the US Treasury is preliminary guidance subject to a two-month comment period and then there'll be final guidance. A lot of the areas are not controversial, and my guess is the final guidance is going to be very similar, if not exactly the same as the preliminary guidance, but we don't know that. One issue on timing is you could run the risk of spending money which you think is assumed to be part of the parameters and then find out later on you would have to withdraw that, which we don't want to get in to, obviously. I want to be – and I know the legislative leadership, the Senate President, the Speaker share this objective. We want to be responsible, smart, think of this over the period of those three years that we have the ability to do it, that it addresses the inequities, that this virus is unearthed and we do it in a way that both is responsible on the one hand and on the other hand does not begin obligations that when that federal money runs out that we're left holding the bag as a state. Getting that balance right is incredibly important. I'm sure I can speak for the Senate President, Speaker. I'm sure they share that exact same objective. The relations on this have been really, really good and I expect them to continue to be.

Marthelle, we're going to go to Brent, and then we'll come back to Daniel. Thank you.

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Would it be illegal for businesses to require people to show a vaccination card? All capacity and social distancing restrictions for entertainment venues of any size will be gone. That goes for Jets and Giants games, concerts, indoors, and is that June 4th and not May 28th as the Jets just announced on Twitter? Should the Senate filibuster be eliminated so Congress can pass gun reforms? Should Biden and Schumer push harder to pass a gun reform bill?

Governor Phil Murphy: Is it illegal for a business to require someone to show a vaccination card. Yeah, what's your answer to that, Parimal?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Our understanding is that it's not a HIPAA violation and that businesses could insist on proof of vaccination if they so choose.

Governor Phil Murphy: The answer is yes to your second question as of June 4th. MetLife as of June 4th can go to full capacity, correct, Parimal?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: [Inaudible 1:00:00].

Governor Phil Murphy: Indoor as well, yep. You good with that?

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Yeah, the outdoor portions of MetLife, they can return to full capacity as of this Friday once the six-foot distancing is lifted but for indoor large venues that have fixed seating capacity of over 1,000, the 30% limit is lifted as of Friday, June 4th.

Governor Phil Murphy: We looked at the calendar, though, and did not see any football games for the week.

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: The June 4th [inaudible 1:00:27].

Governor Phil Murphy: You're asking very specifically can the – if the Devils had a game on June 4th, could they sell it out, and the answer is yes.

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Okay, but they [inaudible 1:00:37].

Governor Phil Murphy: Yes, so the clarification which Parimal puts forward is a fair one. I think this is in response to one of the other questions earlier is the six-foot rule is the rule right now in an outdoor venue that is the cap on their capacities. We've already lifted the capacity for the outdoor venues. Eliminating the six-foot social distancing allows them to go up to full capacity. Indoors is still a 30% capacity on 1,000 seats or more. That goes away June 4th.

Yeah, I don't know I've got a crisp answer for you at the federal level, but something's got to give in terms of gun safety. The gun law, as I've said many times before, has been extraordinarily effective because it's managed to get in between on the one hand some steps that I think are in the high 80s percent of public support such as universal background checks on the one hand and no action inside of Congress on the other hand. I'm not sure I've got a good answer as to how but I sure know what the what is, and the what is let's put some common sense gun safety laws on the American books, not just at the state level. I hope we get there sooner than later.

Daniel?

Daniel Munoz, NJ BIZ: Hi, Governor, thanks for doing this. What restrictions are still left at this point? You've said that data determine dates, but these restrictions are all being lifted ahead of Memorial Day. Is it more fair to say that dates determine data? You said a week ago in explaining why you're still requiring masks that we're "not out of the woods yet" and that "we're not there." Given these announcements, are we to assume that we are now out of the woods? What changed in the past week? You said the reopening will look a lot less like a light switch and more like a dimmer, but it seems like a lot of these reopenings have been made in very rapid fire, a matter of just a number of weeks. What happened to the dimmer analogy now that it seems to look more like a light switch? Are you essentially blaming the CDC? Remarks today seemed rather pointed against them. You accuse them of throwing the nation into confusion and that it took everyone by surprise. If there is an outbreak at any place that lifts the mask mandates and does these other reopenings, should they be held liable? You signed a bill last year –

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm not sure I understood that one.

Daniel Munoz, NJ BIZ: If there's an outbreak at any place – oops, sorry, if there's an outbreak at anyplace that lifts the mask mandate or does any of these other reopening measures, should they be held liable for the outbreak? You signed a bill last year making essential employers liable for COVID outbreaks, but that doesn't seem to extend to nonessential businesses. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. Okay, Parimal, what's left?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: As the Governor mentioned, there are still masking and social distancing requirements in a host of settings where the CDC recommends these requirements stay in place, and that includes healthcare settings such as long-term care or correctional facilities, homeless shelters, places of public transportation, as well as areas involving children, so childcare facilities, K through 12 educational facilities, and youth summer camps, for instance. Those are, for instance, some requirements instead that still remain in place.

Governor Phil Murphy: Those are not likely – as we've said many times the phrase these are not forever and always. We'll continue to assess this. I mentioned a minute ago that I'm sure the Department of Education will be putting out their annual what's school look like in the Fall. Yeah, I am – I will part company with the premise I think of two of your questions, data determines dates and light switch versus a dimmer. I don't think – first of all, the data we've gone through and even the progress that we've made since May 13th has been meaningful, both virus numbers going down and vaccination numbers going up. That's based on the numbers, and that progress is significant and I would suspect, Judy, that the next four days, we'll see continued progress.

No state has been there, I would think, incremental, one foot in front of the other as we have. When you – Monday to Friday, this may look like it's a big step, but if you look at the overall span of this pandemic, it's been, I think, a very gradual, methodical based on the data. Listen, when you have the data that we've got right now, the numbers – at a certain point, we've got to open up, and this is the – we believe this is the right point to do that. Are we out of the woods? I think I said this pretty clearly. We're not, but we are in a meaningfully, dramatically different and better place. We had, Judy, by my math, 55 people walked into a hospital yesterday with COVID and 7 people died. With respect to those fellow New Jerseyans, they're not thinking we're out of the woods, and they're right. This is enormous progress. Again, you're constantly trying to balance things. We believe this is the responsible moment in time as we have predicted for now almost six months. This is the time we can take these next steps.

I'm not blaming the CDC. It just, first of all, caught us by surprise. We were not alone. I think it caught everybody by surprise. It's not a question of blame, but we didn't feel like this was the right moment in New Jersey to take that step. We now feel like we'll put another couple weeks on the clock. It'll be 15 days this Friday. You look at 20,000 first shots a day, just to pick a number. That's 300,000 more first shots that we feel like we had a much higher probability of hitting than otherwise. Would some of those people have gotten vaccinated? I'm sure, but not all of them. Viral numbers coming – I mentioned this earlier. Hospitalizations, you pick whichever ones – and by the way, in fairness to the CDC, they said states can choose to take a more restrictive set of steps, and I think we and Hawaii are the only two left that still required it.

I don't know about liability as much as if there's a willful violation and we're aware of it, we will take action. I'm not sure how that action gets taken. It could be an executive order violation that Pat reports. If there's – the thing that I'm – I mentioned this earlier. I'll just repeat it. This is the opposite direction. You can't come into my store if you've got a mask on. That's not on. That store is going to pay a price for that. I don't know what that price looks like, but that's unacceptable. We have to respect each other here. We also have to ask at the same time that people do the right thing. If they're not vaccinated that they have a plan to get vaccinated and in the interim, they put one of these on and when they're going into an indoor space. Thank you.

Judy, this would be the first press conference since we started that you didn't answer a question. I don't know if you heard that; Judy said she's very happy about that. Anything you want to add? Tina, we've got to make sure you get your money's worth for showing up here.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Could I just say for retail workers, we really do encourage that people that are essential workers that are out among people get vaccinated. That's the best way they can protect themselves from perhaps the few individual who won't mask up. I just want to encourage them.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said. Tina, how are you?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Good, thank you. Just to reiterate that the precautions for unvaccinated individuals, they're intended to help protect the unvaccinated people while they're thinking about – and we strongly encourage them to get vaccinated. Again, we go back to the basic principles about why – how to prevent disease. As long as you're unvaccinated, those precautions still remain in effect.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said. Thank you, Judy. Thank you, Tina. Pat, likewise, Parimal. I know Jared was on with us virtually today, Marthelle, Mahen, cast of thousands, thank you all. Again, we'll be with you virtually tomorrow, in person Wednesday at 1 o'clock unless you hear otherwise. Thanks to each and every one of you for doing the right thing from moment one. These are big steps but folks, it's because of what you've done that we're able to take these steps. Again, this Friday and then a week from Friday, our big milestone days in our fight against this pandemic.

I said this in my remarks. I think this is the right – I personally think this is the right way to think about it. We have the virus on the run, but it's not yet finished. Our work is not yet finished. For all the above, than y'all. God bless.

Governor Phil Murphy

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