

Governor Phil Murphy

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon. Joining me to my right is the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, another familiar face, the State's Epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan. Great to have you back, Tina. Judy, as always. To my left, another guy who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have chief counsel, Parimal Garg, Alex Altman is with us, and a cast of thousands.

Judy, this is National Public Health Thank You Day, so to you and Tina and all the other public health officials up and down our state, we wish you a great day. We say thank you.

Separately, Pat, you may not have seen yesterday, Salem's Jonathan Taylor of the Indianapolis Colts made history, scored four rushing touchdowns, another through the air, one of only a handful of people ever to have done that in the NFL's history. Not a Colts fan, but I'm a big Jonathan Taylor fan, so hats off to him, again, Salem High's own, Jonathan Taylor.

As we start today with the latest vaccination numbers, I want to emphasize that everybody over the age of 18 who is six months removed from their second dose of Pfizer or Moderna vaccines is now eligible for a booster, period. This adds to the prior approval of everyone aged 18 and over who received the J&J vaccine that they can get a booster two months after they got their vaccine. Simply put, every New Jerseyan over the

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age of 18 and up can now receive a booster. There's no longer any other consideration other than those time frames that you need to give. Now here is why – we want to show you why getting this added shot is important.

As we look at the latest breakthrough case numbers, both in the aggregate, which is first up – that's from January 19th through November 8th, and then if we flip, this is the weekly preliminary numbers from November 1 through November 7. The vaccines continue to be showing tremendous power. Greater than 99% of those vaccinated overall remain virus free, but as we know from the ongoing research, the vaccines do begin to lose some effectiveness in some people over time. Breakthroughs continue to be relatively rare, but they do happen, so to protect against a possible breakthrough infection, all of us up here strongly encourage you to go out and get that boost of protection as soon as possible.

Looking to the latest report on new cases, what stands out here is over the past week, the rate of transmission has increased R from last Monday 1.04 as we see to 1.23 today. Most if not overwhelmingly [transmission interrupted] to vaccinated individuals whose initial courses may now be providing a slightly less aggressive level of protection. Again, go out and get that booster, especially as the holiday season is now here, and many of us will be gathering with families this year much more like prior to the pandemic. We do not want to see cases spike.

One last note, R , on cases. Today under your leadership, the Department of Health is going live on the dashboard with reports on the total numbers of positive cases tracked among all students and staff at our pre-K-12 schools and districts and in our colleges and universities. This data goes beyond the numbers currently reported weekly and which are related solely to instances of in-school transmission. This dashboard breaks down the data by county, and the department is continuing its outreach with school districts to ensure as robust a report as possible, and R , you'll be able to give a complete walk-through of this data in a couple of minutes.

We are also seeing an increase in hospitalizations over the past week. Last Sunday night, the total number of hospitalized individuals was 690 with 626 of them confirmed with COVID. Last night, that 690 and 626 has grown as you can see to 816, 768 of whom are confirmed. The number of those in our ICUs also spiked, and that's up 24% over last Sunday, and the number of folks requiring a ventilator has gone up by 24% as well. Again, these numbers are being driven overwhelmingly by unvaccinated individuals, and we know by now there is very little we can say up here that will lead many of them to get vaccinated, but for those of you who are vaccinated, this is another reason to get your booster. Here are today's newly confirmed, sadly, deaths – again, these numbers are being fueled in the here and now by the unvaccinated. That's just a fact of the matter, and the updated number as you can see of probable deaths.

Let's take a couple of minutes to remember the lives of three more of the New Jerseyans we've lost over the course of this pandemic, and today in particular we remember three who passed in the very early days of the pandemic, in the spring of 2020. First up, this woman, Paterson's Lula Oliver. She was 74. A native of Hartsville, South Carolina, she boarded a greyhound bus bound for Paterson after her high school graduation and never looked back. She spent 35 years at the Memorial Day Nursery in Paterson teaching kindergarten and first grade enrichment courses, worked and inspired her daughter Paula, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last week, to similarly follow a career in public education. Lula left behind Paula to carry on her legacy. We are honored that Lula chose to make New Jersey her home, and may God bless and watch over her memory.

Next up, we'll move a couple of communities over to Nutley which was home to this gentleman, Michael Pyrich. Michael was 95 years old. Born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania and a proud US Army veteran who serviced aircraft as a mechanic during World War II, he moved to Bellville post war when the job opportunities in his hometown proved scarce. He got a job with PSE&G where he would spend the rest of his career, retiring in his 70s. Michael and his late wife Lois, who passed sadly in 1978, they had four children, Michael, James, Elaine, and John, and I had the great honor of speaking with Elaine a week ago today. He left them and their families, including ten grandchildren. We thank Michael for his service to our nation and to the community he loved, and may God bless him and watch over his memory and the family he leaves behind.

Finally, for this Monday, we honor Paterson native and Hawthorne resident Ronald Fletcher, Sr. Ronald served the US Navy and then embarked on a career as a machinist back in Paterson after his days in uniform came to a close. An avid fly fisherman, Ronald was a member – I want to make sure Judy and Tina are with me on this – of the Joan Wulff Fly Fishers Club, which is dedicated to bringing more women into the family of fly fishers. How cool is that? He left behind his wife Carol and his two children Ronald, jr., and Elaine, and I had a great honor of speaking with Elaine a week ago today, and their families, including his three beloved grandchildren Alex, Aaron, and Jessica. He also left behind his brother Harry. Ronald was 83 years old. We thank Ronald for his service to our nation, and we hope he's found a place where the water is calm and the fish are biting. May God bless and watch over him and the family he leaves behind. As we enter Thanksgiving week, we honor and remember every family who has lost a loved one to this virus, and we are especially mindful of those families whose tables this year have an empty space at them both physically and spiritually, and may God bless them all.

Before we close, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the great work of the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development at setting up their new Return & Earn jobs program. We announced this back in September, and as you recall, Return & Earn helps pair folks looking for work with companies looking for new employees. In this match, the Department is stepping up with funding for businesses to train these employees as well as a signing bonus for those returning to the workforce. Our goal is not just to get folks into a good job but into a successful career. In less than two months, more than 3700 New Jersey businesses have reached out to the Department expressing interest in becoming part of Return & Earn, and to date, more than 60 contracts have been signed and nearly half a million dollars committed.

One of the early signees is this company, Toms River's Max Flight Corporation, founded and owned by former US Army helicopter pilot, that guy, Frank McClintic. Max Flight is the only company, Pat, in the world that produces a fully interactive 360-degree flight simulator. Not only is this simulator invaluable for flight training, especially in its simulation of real-world emergency situations and responses, it has also provided the feeling of flying to thousands of regular folks on the boardwalk and at entertainment venues worldwide. With 80 employees and his business continuing expanding, Frank knew he would need to bring on additional talent. Through Return & Earn he found that match, and not only is he receiving funding to provide the necessary training for that new employee, but his new hire has also received a bonus that is helping them get back on their feet. I had the opportunity last week to talk with Frank – I think it was last Monday – and to thank him for being one of the first employers in our state to see the value in Return & Earn, especially in the potential to train a new employee for a strong career in a growing company. Check them out, maxflight.com, maxflight.com.

That, I think, is a great place for us to end for today. To everybody out there preparing for Thanksgiving, I wish you a happy and healthy gathering with your loved ones and let's make sure it can be even safer. Before you take the turkey out of the freezer or you last minute planners go out to buy one, go get your booster shot. With that, please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Following CDC action on Friday, all Pfizer and Moderna vaccine recipients 18 and older are now eligible for a booster dose six months after completing their primary two-dose series. All those who received J&J vaccine continue to be eligible to receive a booster dose. [Transmission interrupted] vaccines, as you know, are safe and effective, but all show the need for boosters over time. We continue to work with all of our vaccination sites to ensure availability and accessibility to vaccinations and continue to receive ongoing weekly shipments directly from the federal government. We have extensive ongoing outreach through the state's vaccine call center, canvassing efforts in high-priority communities, and a public awareness campaign to provide education on the importance of booster doses. COVID-19 remains a virulent adversary. For those who have not yet received their first dose or completed their series, we encourage you to get vaccinated ahead of the holiday gatherings and travel to avoid putting anyone including yourself at risk and to follow up, then, with your booster.

As the Governor mentioned, today we are posting surveillance data from both K-12 schools and institutions of higher education. The Department of Health collects information from K-12 schools and institutions of higher education each week to monitor how COVID-19 is impacting the school communities. We are enrolling

more schools each week. However, at this time, reporting is not yet 100%. The most recent data is from 2,081 K-12 schools, nearly 60% of schools in the state, and 45 colleges and universities, more than 40% of those institutions in our state. This new data provides a weekly snapshot of current COVID-19 activity in these settings based on reports from staff, parents, and test results from testing conducted by the schools. This additional information provides new and cumulative case rates among students and staff and shows trends over time and current activity by county.

K-12 schools additionally report staff vaccination rates and the number of students learning remotely for reasons attributed to COVID-19 exclusion, including those with COVID-19 who are isolating or unvaccinated students who need to quarantine because they have had close contact with someone who has the virus. Colleges and universities additionally report the number of students in isolation or quarantine, staff and student vaccination rates, and the number of COVID-19 clusters on campus defined as two or more individuals linked to a common activity associated with the school community. A total of 18,747 student cases and 4,095 teacher/staff cases have been reported since the beginning of the year in the K-12 schools. In our colleges and universities, a total of 1,921 student cases and 483 teacher and staff cases were reported since the beginning of the year.

We are seeing increases in case rates recently among students and staff in both K-12 and the institutions of higher ed. Rates are higher among staff compared to students in both settings. Case rates in K-12 schools were highest in early October and had begun to steadily decline until the second week of November when they began to increase again. In the last reporting period, schools reported 85.2% of staff were fully vaccinated. Staff vaccination rates were highest in Somerset and Bergen Counties, lowest in Ocean County. The highest case rates among students and staff are in Sussex, Gloucester, and Monmouth Counties and lowest in Essex County. Statewide, 3.5% of students were excluded from school due to COVID-19, and Sussex County also had the highest percentage of students learning remotely for reasons attributed to COVID-19 exclusion.

Case rates at colleges and universities peaked in mid-September and similar to the K-12 schools declined until the second week of November when they also began to increase. The highest case rates among students and staff were in Morris and Monmouth Counties. Institutions of higher education reported that 86.7% of staff and 82.5% of students were fully vaccinated. In the last reporting period, there were 137 college and university students in isolation and 154 quarantining. This new information can help school administrators, teachers, students, and parents track case rates over time, see how their county is fairing compared to surrounding areas, monitor the number of students learning remotely in K-12 due to COVID-19, and track the number of college and university students in isolation or quarantine at both the county and the regional level.

We are concerned about cases in students and staff among the general public – and among the general public increasing with gatherings for Thanksgiving and the upcoming holidays. The Department encourages all residents to take precautions, get vaccinated, get a booster, stay home if you're feeling ill, mask up in crowded indoor areas or when you are around high-risk individuals. If you have any symptoms, please get tested, and as always, practice good hand hygiene such as washing your hands frequently.

Onto my daily report. As the Governor shared, our hospitals report 811 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients and persons under investigation. Since our last press briefing, there has been one new report of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children. There are 142 cumulative cases in our state. None of the children are currently hospitalized. At the state veterans' homes, no new cases among our residents, and at the psychiatric hospitals, no new cases among patients at the hospitals. The positivity as of November 18th for the state is 4.77. The northern part of the state reports 4.3%, the central part of the state 5.05%, and the southern part of the state 5.41%. That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe. Let's get vaccinated and get boosted to protect ourselves, our family, friends, and our children and have a happy and safe Thanksgiving

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. You and I had an exchange a short while ago. I believe this is accurate. 42 of the 50 American states have an RT now that's over one, and there are eight that are below. When I looked at the list of eight, they didn't have a whole lot to do with each other. They were different geographies, different demographics, different densities. Again, this thing takes turns that humble you, right? Thank you for all of that and for your leadership. Pat, I know you've got a few – anything on weather? Any

advice for folks for the holidays? I know we're knocking on doors in 34 communities. Any update on that front? The other item I had was any update on FEMA, Ida, whether it's homes or small businesses. Great to have you. Thank you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. I'll start on the COVID-19 front with our all-hazards incident management team continues to support the vaccination efforts with Department of Health using those rapid mobile response teams throughout the state. This week those response teams are in Camden and in Newark. We promote those locally as locations and times are coordinated in the areas of most need at the grassroots level. With the announcement of the expanded eligibility for the boosters, we will be partnering with both Burlington and Somerset County. We expect to have those booster sites up and running in the coming weeks. I remind everybody that Gloucester County site opened back on September 20th and has been administering about 100 boosters a day.

With regard to Ida, Governor, I do – I always continue to thank FEMA and particularly the AmeriCorps team for coming in here. They had four teams that assisted in the field. They did 106 damage assessments. They removed debris from 54 homes, which totaled over 1200 cubic yards of debris, and they also did mold suppression activities on 84 structures, so just again, a phenomenal effort by AmeriCorps and certainly under the leadership of FEMA. Weather looks good for the rest of the week. 57 and sunny on Thanksgiving, and as far as the holiday season, I just remind everybody we tend to see an increase in DWIs at this time of year, so from this week and through the end of the New Year, there will be additional supplemental patrols out there on our highways and throughout the towns that we cover, DWI checkpoints, mobile patrols.

We do announce where we're having those checkpoints. This is not a gotcha. This is just letting the public know. We announce them because we don't want you drinking and driving and driving under the influence, so there's enough alternatives out there as far as car services and designated drivers, so to the Governor's point, let's get through not only this Thanksgiving season but the holidays to come that take us into 2022 without a tragedy on our highways. Thanks, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: Pat, thank you for all and God bless the folks at FEMA who have been there consistently for us. By the way, through both administrations. We didn't miss a beat from the Trump administration or the Biden administration. Again, I repeat something that Judy said and it's something that you've said. Please, please, please enjoy this holiday but enjoy it safely and responsibly at every level. Sarah's got the mic. We'll start down with Matt. Before we do, we'll stay in the rhythm that we've been in over the past number of weeks, so we'll be with you again in person a week from today right here in this room at 1 o'clock. Between now and then, we'll communicate as need be electronically and otherwise. Thank you.

Q&A Session

Matt, good afternoon.

Matt Arco, NJ.com: Good afternoon, Governor. Just getting a quick look at the new dashboard. Are all districts – all school districts currently reported? I'll have a chance to look through that but just curious if you know off the top of your head, and will the state have district by district breakdown of those rates or is it going to be on the county level? As far as the percent of fully vaccinated – excuse me, the percent of vaccinated teachers and staff on the dashboard, does that mean fully vaccinated? From NJPBS, Governor, are you considering lifting the school mask mandate if a certain vaccination rate is reached among students and staff like how mask usage is doing at 80%? If so, would the rate be – what would that rate be here in New Jersey? Would it be done statewide, district, or by school? Thanks.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. Judy, tell me if I've got this right. It is not all districts. This is a self-reporting system that's getting more robust by the day, I think it's fair to say. We'll keep it at the county level for now as opposed to the district level. Then on the vax numbers, the question is is that fully vaxxed or – Tina's saying yes. Tina, come on in the from the bullpen. We've got to make sure we give you your money's worth here.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Yes. The data that we have on our new dashboard is a representative – a representation of what’s going on in terms of trends throughout the state. While we do not have every single school reporting at this time as the Governor had mentioned, we’re anticipating that more schools will enroll, but for the purpose of trends and monitoring trends, we feel that this type of information is very valuable for schools, for parents, for administrators to get a sense of what is the disease burden because we have to remember that the cases that are being reported, they might not have occurred through in-school transmission, for example. These are self-reported cases, for example, that parents and staff might be reporting or that we’re picking up from the school testing itself.

Governor Phil Murphy: Again, we’re – Judy, you should weigh in with anything on this that you want to add, but we waited until now because we wanted to get – as you said and I’ve repeated, the self-reporting has gotten more robust, and I think we’re at a critical mass is the way to put it. Anything you want to add?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah, I think it’s important to know it’s a surveillance report, so as Dr. Tan shared, it’s to look at trends and give us an overall picture of where we’re going so that we can make better public health decisions as a result.

Governor Phil Murphy: Matt, we’re not there yet on lifting the mandate, but please God we will be, and I hope it’s sooner than later. I think you should expect that while I don’t have a number to hang our hat on yet – and obviously, Judy and Tina and teams will be the ones working with the Department of Education to come up with the metrics and the timing, I continue to envision something that looks phased. In other words, the 12 and up kids have been eligible a lot longer and their penetration rate of the vaccine is a lot more significant than the 5 to 11 crowd. That to our way of thinking is a guideline, but listen, the more kids we get vaccinated, the more everybody we can get boosted, the faster we’re going to be able to get out of this, lift the mandate, get rid of all the stuff that is hanging over all of our heads which is weighing heavily including on us. Thank you. Let’s go to Dustin in the back. Dustin, good afternoon.

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Good afternoon. As you just pointed out, the COVID metrics have risen pretty quickly in the past week. How long does your modeling say this will last and how bad will it get or could it get? On the Reproductive Freedom Act, it’s still uncertain whether this will come up for a vote in lame duck, and if it does, there’s a possibility it will be scaled back. Would it be acceptable to you to simply codify Roe v. Wade into state law given that other pieces of that bill will be taking effect through legislation – I’m sorry, through regulation. How important is the insurance requirement making abortions and contraceptives available with no out of pocket costs to you?

Then a couple questions on overdose deaths. New Jersey was one of the few states that didn’t have an increase in overdose deaths last year, but we are on pace to set a new record, and we’ve hovered around 3,000 annual deaths the last several years. Understanding that a lot has been done on this front the past decade, are there any measures you’re considering to try reducing those deaths? Do you think you’ve used the power of your platform enough on this, and do you support legislation expanding harm reduction services particularly needle exchange programs? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Let me start at the top. Judy, we had this very conversation – Pat, Judy, and I and others of our team – how bad does this get. I don’t want to put words in your mouth, but you should answer this and Tina. Your feeling, the combination – I think we’ve been saying this for a while – between cold weather driving us more indoors and holidays means I think fair to say you’re looking at something that rises to some kind of a peak in January. Is that –

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: That’s exactly what we saw last year after the holidays. I think the bigger difference this year is that we have many more people vaccinated. Remember we just started vaccinating on December 15th, so we saw a peak mid-January. I think we had almost 3,000 hospitalizations. Now, if we did nothing, that might happen again, but because of our high vaccination rate, we’re hoping that severe disease, hospitalizations moderate, but it could still reach – we have about 800 now. It could still reach 2,000 or more hospitalizations.

Governor Phil Murphy: I think to your point in terms of the vaccinations, I think Parimal said this that a year ago today, we had three times as many people in the hospital and so I don’t want to put words in either yours or Tina’s mouth – going up but not to the level that we saw a year ago. Please God.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: That's our hope.

Governor Phil Murphy: That is our hope.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: As long as the variants don't – I'm going to let Tina talk about the variants.

Governor Phil Murphy: Tina, do you want to address that?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Actually, yeah, we always need to be concerned about the variant, monitoring for potential new emergent of new variant strains that might be of concern, but what I did want to add was the issue of flu because I don't – I think as we're starting to see influenza activity pick up, and what we're starting to see predominately circulate in the community and nationwide is influenza A, H3N2, which oftentimes leads to more severe outcomes, especially among children and older adults, and while we're talking about COVID and concerns about trends and potential peaks in the future, we really want to try to minimize the burden from influenza that we didn't see last year with this year, particularly since the data suggest that we might be in for a more severe influenza season this year. So get vaccinated for the flu.

Governor Phil Murphy: Very good words of wisdom. We had that discussion, that very discussion, earlier as well. Thank you for that. Dustin, I can – by the way, continue to have very good leadership meetings and exchanges with the Legislature, which I'm grateful for. I'm at the end of the spectrum where the more robust, the better on the Reproductive Freedom Act, and that includes insurance. To be determined when and how this all works out, but that's where I have been and where I'll continue to be.

I took no solace – I mean, I know that we're one of only four states, I believe, that showed April to April a reduction in overdose deaths. When you're hanging around 3,000 a year, I take no solace in that. We're going to stay at it until we break the back of this. I'm a big believer and supporter of harm reduction centers. I want to say that unequivocally. Medically-assisted treatment is another, I think, positive weapon in our toolkit. As wide – and Pat, you'll appreciate this, I think. As wide an access to Narcan as possible, whether it's those days that we've had over our Administration where it's free distribution or whether it's in the hands of law enforcement and first responders, those are three things that we believe on and God willing, they will be important weapons in ultimately our ability to break the back of this. Thanks, Dustin.

Let's go across to Joey, and then we'll go back to Alex. Joey, good afternoon.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Good afternoon, Governor. We're going into Thanksgiving when Governors both in New Jersey and around the nation have often announced pardons, commutations, and reprieves. Do you plan to make any pardons any time soon and if not, why is it that you will have gone your whole first term without personally pardoning or commuting any sentences? Then as we shift from your first term to your second term, what is your timeline for announcing any changes to your Administration? Finally, soon-to-be Senate Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz said a couple of weeks ago that she hopes the state will soon have its first ever Latina Supreme Court Justice. With several Supreme Court seats soon to be open, is that something you're considering? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Joey. No news on pardons to make. That doesn't mean that I'm making a statement either for or against them. I am proud of the fact that we've expunged 362,000 low-end drug records. I'm proud to have stood on the right side of the minimum mandatory sentences and all the work that we're doing around that but nothing beyond that to report.

I don't think there's going to be one day where we're going to announce a bunch of changes as it relates to the second term in terms of the Administration or our team. I think as and when opportunities arise, we'll make those announcements. I think they'll come as they do in terms of the – bless you – in terms of when those particular opportunities on their own two feet arise. Without making specific news on a particular type of candidate, whether it's ethnicity or gender or race or otherwise, we are the most diverse state in the nation, and we owe it to our residents to put on the field. Whether it's in the halls of justice, whether it's our Administration, we have the most diverse Administration or diverse Cabinet, rather, in the history of the state. Whether it's in elected officials, whatever it might be, we owe our residents the same level of diversity where folks can say listen, I see myself when I look and walk into that room or into that chamber, and that's something, as a general matter, we're committed to. Thank you.

Alex, good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Good afternoon. Dr. Tan, can you explain how vaccinations play a role in the rate of transmission? Is the rate of transmission being over 1 somewhat inflated because it's more difficult for vaccinated people to spread the virus. Can you explain how that works? Commissioner, you don't seem as concerned about a post-Thanksgiving surge in cases this year. Why is that? Can people have a normal Thanksgiving this year sitting around the table with the ones they love? Governor, since Sam Sutton's not here, I'm going to ask you, what percentage of the state workforce is vaccinated? When are you going to tell us?

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank Sam in absentia for me.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: I didn't even talk to him, so I just figured I'd ask. When are you going to tell us, if you're going to tell us? Following up on Matt's question about masks in schools, Governor Tom Wolf, Pennsylvania, has announced that he intends to make that mask mandate – put it down to local control in January. What does Tom Wolf see in the data that you don't?

Governor Phil Murphy: I missed – he's going to do what in January?

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: He's going to return the masking decisions to local control, not more statewide masking mandate, but districts can impose one if they want. If you're going to say that your decision on whether or not to rescind that masking mandate for kids in school is connected to a vaccination rate, why not be open? Why not set a target and why not let parents know it's a carrot-and-stick approach to get their kids vaccinated so then you'll release that particular rule? Then finally, just in general terms about a surge in cases and uptick, whatever word we want to use, have we lost perspective here? The week after Thanksgiving last year, we were getting 6,000 new cases a day, hospitalizations going from 690 to 816. That's 126 people. I feel for those people, but that's in a state of 9 million people. Have we lost perspective of what really constitutes an increase for an uptick, and can you at least admit that even if the game's not over, we're in the ninth, tenth, or eleventh inning of this ballgame with COVID?

Governor Phil Murphy: Runner on second. Let me start with the last one, because I alluded to this a minute ago. I wouldn't phase – I don't agree with the premise of we lost perspective, but I do think it's a very fair point to raise and it was asked – Judy addressed this and I mentioned that Parimal reminded me a year ago today, we had 3x the amount of people in the hospital that we do today. I think I can say this with a high degree of conviction. This is never going to zero, right? This is with us, and we're not going to manage it as though we have to see it go to zero for us to do X or Y. I do think we owe it to folks to give them a sense of the trends and the trends are, frankly, as we've been predicting for two months, it's turning out exactly as we had said it would. Between cold weather, going indoors, holidays, it's going up, but I think it's a very fair point. We have the vaccines, which we did not have a year ago today. We now have boosters. We now have more people eligible for the vaccines. All of that should mean that even as it ebbs and flows and it goes up that it's not going to be going up, please God, to the levels that we've seen before. Judy and Tina refer to the variants. I think in the sequencing in the state right now, 99.7%, I believe, is Delta. That Delta Plus is not evidencing itself in New Jersey at the moment, so that is not one of the reasons why things are surging, and please God it stays that way.

I'll go backward, Alex. I think that the general comment – I'm not – while I'm not hanging my hat or we're not hanging our hat on a particular rate of vaccination, the general point – and we may do that. The general point is well taken, embedded in your question. Folks need to hear this loud and clear. The more kids vaccinated, the more people vaccinated, the more people boosted, the sooner we'll be able to pull back on X, Y, or Z and obviously the school mask mandate is a big one that people are – it's hanging over our heads. It's hanging over my head, all of our heads

Not necessarily seeing anything differently than Governor Wolf is seeing in Pennsylvania, and I suppose leaving it to local control is still – should be an option. I think Parimal would be mad at me if I didn't remind folks that the executive order which mandates masking in schools expires on January 11, so that's a date out there that's both post-holiday, cold weather. That's something obviously we'll need to get our arms around.

State workforce, please tell Sam if you see him before I do I do not have a number for you. We're working on that. I've got no news to report, but maybe ask Alex and Parimal to come back to you on that front.

I'm going backwards. I'm going to end up, I think, with Judy and Tina here. You asked Tina the question of could you walk through the connection of vaccination rate and rate of transmission. I think the way you put it is the rate of transmission overstated because it's on the backs of a minority of our state because of folks largely who are unvaccinated. Then secondly, I think you asked post-Thanksgiving last year, you had a big surge. I think the implication, Judy, was you sound like you're not as worried as you were last year. I think part of the answer I've already alluded to, and that is we have a vaccine which we didn't have a year ago. Either of you – Tina, do you want to start with the – drawing the connection – the very good question, drawing the connection between vaccination rates and rate of transmission?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: The way that the rate – the vaccination coverage relates to the rate of transmission is based also on the fact that the rate of transmission is calculated based on a bunch of different dynamic inputs. It changes day-to-day based on the case rate or the positivity on any given day. That said, it really depends on how vaccination makes an impact on the overall case rates based on the overall vaccination coverage of the population and also the whole concept of potential waning immunity. That's why ACIP on Friday made that recommendation to make – to expand the eligibility of boosters to anyone 18 and older to – because there's a recognition based on the data that ACIP had reviews on Friday and earlier, rather, that there has been demonstrating waning of effectiveness, particularly against mild and moderate illness. That said, vaccines still are very effective in terms of preventing hospitalizations and deaths. We don't want to give the message that the vaccines are not effective because the vaccines are effective but that there's a potential benefit in terms of the mild and the moderate disease, particularly among our adult populations.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Tina, for that. Judy, I don't want to put words [transmission interrupted] seriously, obviously, particularly those who are severely – who were hospitalized and God forbid, we lose, but compared to a year ago, we have more weapons at our disposal, it's fair to say, which I assume take some level of concern off.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah, we not only have more tools in the toolkit, vaccination and boosters being the most important, but we've also been giving the same – the message hasn't changed. We've been giving this same message now for 21 years. Good mitigation, wash your hands frequently, socially distance, wear a mask, stay home if you're sick. We have said that repeatedly and repeatedly and it works. I keep giving the example that the team that I work with every day since March 4, 2020 – we have been in the office every single day, and we have had no cases of in-office transmission. It's remarkable because we have been working close with one another, but we spread ourselves out. What we called our war room was a pretty big room with posters and data. We were working 7 a.m., sometimes til 10 p.m. No cases even without a vaccine. Am I worried? I'm a natural worrier when it comes to this virus, but I think that people do have the message. Those that want to adhere to it will adhere to it, and they will be safer for it.

Governor Phil Murphy: Pat also reminds me, Judy, we've got other treatments, monoclonal antibodies, which we didn't have. We've got the antivirals, a lot more tools in our toolbox, thank God. Thank you for those.

Trish, is that you?

Trish Hartman, ABC 6: Yes, hi.

Governor Phil Murphy: Up from Philadelphia?

Trish Hartman, ABC 6: Yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: Nice to see you.

Trish Hartman, ABC 6: Thank you. Dr. Tan, another question for you, this one about the timing of the effectiveness of booster shots. We've seen an uptick in demand, obviously, since Friday, and we visited a walk-in clinic that was very busy today and a lot of appointment-based systems are booked into December. If folks are getting vaccinated for the holidays today, say, and Thanksgiving is this Thursday, how protected are they for a Thanksgiving gathering considering it takes about two weeks to – for that booster to really kick in? Then Colonel, you mentioned additional resources to help with boosters in Burlington and one other county. Can you – do you have any more particulars on that? Is that going to be another dedicated site, or is it just going to be more resources for the county sites that already exist?

Governor Phil Murphy: Trish, thank you. Good – the first one is a good one. We had been for months now on the regular base vaccination. It was two weeks after your second dose. What about for the boosters, Tina? What's the evidence – research show?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Well, again, we know that if you've gotten the primary series, you've got a lot of protection right now. We know that completing the primary series even months afterwards, you'll still have some baseline protection particularly against severe disease and complications like hospitalization and death. That said, the Commissioner had just mentioned we already have other tools that help prevent illnesses. Again, we keep on stressing in our holiday messaging if you're sick, please try to – it's hard to say around the holidays because we want to be together but if your sick, we have to think about protecting other individuals and try to not partake in some of those events. Wash the hands, masking if you want to take additional precautions, do things outdoors potentially to again look at some of the other tools that we have in addition to the vaccinations. In light of trying to catch up with getting boosters, if you get your boosters now, definitely by the December holidays, you'll be well-protected for sure.

Governor Phil Murphy: There's no two-week hard window with the booster as there was with the original...

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: It really depends, I think also, on individual host factors and also, we have to remember that for J&J, it's a two-month period versus for the mRNA Pfizer and Moderna. I think everybody has slightly different circumstances.

Governor Phil Murphy: That's a good point. We're not all starting from the same baseline as we would've been a year ago. Pat, any more color on Burlington or other – I know Gloucester, you mentioned we've been up and running. Bob Damager continues to do a great job there since September but how about the other counties.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: That's right, so the two sites that are going to be opening up, one is in Burlington County; one is in Somerset County. We're working through those lease agreements right now. We also anticipate partnering with the health systems. I think if it's – I'm not mistaken, Judy, RWJ as well as Virtua. We're looking at a close Lord & Taylor, a closed AC Moore, similar to what we did when we were doing the initial vaccines, but we anticipate them being open within the next few weeks.

Governor Phil Murphy: Importantly, Trish, you didn't ask it but embedded in your question, there's no supply issue here and please, God, it stays that way. We have the supply for whatever expected demand, and there are, Judy, I believe – did you mention earlier, 4 million people now eligible for a booster? There is a significant increase in eligibility and we have the supply to meet it.

Thank you all. Let's mask up and just a couple of final words. Happy Thanksgiving, everybody. Please celebrate it safely and responsibly. Have some fun. Do not drink and drive, ever. I think as it relates to COVID, this can be – if you're with obviously family but if you're with people, Judy and Tina, that you have a high degree of confidence – you know then; you know their vaccine status, have at it. Raise hell. Have a great Thanksgiving. Just don't do it in a car. It's – when you're inside and you're in a crowded place and you just don't know who you're with, that's where you got to be careful. That's – it's not a mandate, but it's common sense. Putting a mask on will really help you, or take it off. Fifty-seven degrees and sunny on Thanksgiving, you'd take it outside. That's darn good weather for this time of year.

Get boosted. Everybody who's waited the amount of time is now 18 and up is eligible. Get vaccinated if you've not yet been vaccinated. Moms and dads, the 5 through 11 year olds are eligible. That number's rising, which is great, but we need that to rise even faster. The booster update, Judy and Tina, has started to pick up at a better pace. I think we're happier about that than we were a week ago, but it's still not where it needs to be. Continue to do all the things – the right things you've done, folks, by the millions over these 21 months. Happy Thanksgiving. We'll see you back here a week from today. God bless.

Governor Phil Murphy

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