

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: January 27th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

01/27/2021

Holding a COVID-19 briefing. WATCH:



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, sorry to be a couple of minutes behind. Joining me today is the woman on my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health Judy Persichilli. To her right, COVID-19 Response Medical Advisor and former state epidemiologist – a face becoming more and more familiar to you, I suspect – Dr. Eddy Bresnitz. Great to have you and Judy. Guy on my left, another guy who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police Colonel Patrick Callahan. We have Jared Maples here from the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, Parimal Garg, Chief Counsel and a cast of thousands.

Today is International Holocaust Remembrance Day. That's a picture, actually, of Tammy and me a couple of years ago at Yad Vashem with Dani Dayan, who is the former Consul General Ambassador Dani Dayan, now a Minister in the Israeli Government, with us. Today we join all nations in remembering the 6 million Jews and millions of others who were senselessly murdered by the Nazis. The memories of those we lost stand as an eternal memorial to the awful power of hate and intolerance, and they must be a reminder of the ever-present threat of extremism in our world and yes, even in our nation.

The ranks of those who bore witness to the Holocaust are dwindling, and their stories must not be lost of history. And I should note that Eddy, if I'm not mistaken, you are the son of Holocaust survivors and I know that you carry their legacy of ensuring that what the world came to grips with nearly eight decades ago is never ever repeated. Never Again.

Before we get to the numbers, I want to give a quick update on one long-term project that we've been working on, and that is closing the digital divide for students who have been utilizing remote learning, whether because their school is all remote or working on a hybrid model. I will explain this eye chart. Over the summer when we began to attack this issue, the Department of Education's initial estimate was that roughly 231,000 students statewide, mostly in underserved areas, lacked either the proper hardware, or the internet connectivity, or both needed for remote learning. Throughout the summer and fall, the department worked closely with districts on their needs and provided roughly \$54 million to help close this educational gap.

Today, I am proud to note that what once was a 231,000 student gap is now down to 1,928. That breaks down into 1,723 students still in need of a device, 190 needing internet connectivity, and just 15 students across the entire state who remain in need of both. And again, we're happy it's down but we won't be happy until it gets to zero. Now of the outstanding number of those needing devices, roughly 1,450 is made up of an order for equipment headed to the Lakewood Schools, which has been much delayed but which should finally land this week. I am knocking on wood. Once that order is fulfilled, Lakewood's entire digital divide will be closed.

Closing the digital divide has remained a priority for Acting Commissioner Dr. Angelica Allen-MacMillan and her team. We are now more than 99% there and we will not stop until this gap is 100% closed. But getting to where we are now has been a tremendous undertaking and I salute all the folks who have helped get there.

Moving on to the numbers, Judy, if I may, our dashboard this morning is showing 642,613 vaccinations. We have now gotten more shots in arms than we have had confirmed positive PCR COVID tests. We are certainly optimistic about all the signs coming from the White House, especially coming out of the call yesterday and the announcement that we will be seeing an increase in our vaccine allocation as well. I think, Judy, you appreciate this more than any of us. It's not just the increase which we desperately need, and we need more, but having a three-week window, as opposed to one week to the next is a big deal. I know you were on with the White House again today, you may want to talk about that in your comments. This will allow us to make better decisions about statewide distribution and administration.

Make no mistake, however that we, like every other state, need greatly increased vaccine production and delivery. We just need the doses to make our program run as it has been purpose built to run. Also, as Judy will speak to in greater detail, we're working hard to ensure that those who need their second dose will get it in a timely manner.

Now, if you received your first vaccination dose through an appointment you made via our information hub at covid19.nj.gov/vaccine, your second dose appointment has been automatically scheduled and you will receive an email confirmation regarding this within the next several days. If, on the other hand, you received your first dose at the Gloucester County mega site but booked your appointment directly with the mega site and did not use our state website, the Gloucester County mega site will be reaching out directly to you this week to schedule your second dose.

If, on the other hand, you booked directly with a vaccine site for your first dose and did not book your second dose appointment at the time of your first shot, which we strongly encourage everybody to do, by the way, then you need to contact the site where you got the first shot to schedule your booster shot.

And finally, if by the end of the weekend, so a few days from now, you are still not certain how you will get your second dose appointment, contact our vaccination call center and our operators will assist you with scheduling one. That number is again 855-568-0545. Dan Bryan is hard at work at coming up with some call letters that will make that number roll off the tongue a little bit more easily. And again, Judy will have more color and detail to add here, as I've just given you some, what are admittedly very broad strokes.

Today, we're also adding 3,950 new positive PCR tests and 1,080 new presumed positive antigen rapid tests to our statewide totals. You add all that up and it's 676,537 in total cumulatively. The positivity rate for last Saturday, now because it's a Saturday, fewer tests were taken, 25,509 by the way. Positivity rate was 12.62%. We had this discussion earlier. If you're getting tested on a Saturday, I think we've now felt for many months that you're doing that for a reason and you probably have some reason to want to get tested, which I think may explain the bump up in the positivity rate from literally just yesterday, a couple of points.

The statewide rate of transmission happily continues to be lower, 0.91, and our job is to keep it going down. As of 10:00 p.m. last night, our hospitals were treating 3,190 patients for COVID; 2,969 who were COVID positive, along with 221 persons awaiting test results. Judy, that's the first time below 3,200 in a number of weeks, and that's good news. There were 578 of those patients in intensive care and 406 required a ventilator.

During the day yesterday, 416 live patients were discharged from our 71 hospitals, while 375 new COVID positive patients were admitted. That's 375 too many, but I like the days when more are coming out than are going in. Our hospitals again, at the risk of comparing apples to oranges, reported 69 deaths yesterday yet to be confirmed.

However, these are confirmed. We're announcing an additional 107 blessed souls who have left our New Jersey family confirmed. That brings the statewide cumulative total of confirmed fatalities to 19,091. The number of probable deaths has been adjusted to 2,129. We never -- I mean it's been months since I've said this, but I do want to remind folks because we said this a lot in the spring. These are individual blessed lives lived, lost, family members mourning their passing and we'll speak about a few today in a minute, but it does merit reminding, folks, that fatalities are a lagging indicator, not a leading indicator of this awful virus.

These are folks who got sick, Eddy, probably some number of weeks ago and may have been hospitalized -- or even longer may have been hospitalized some number of weeks ago, and we mourn every single one of these lost lives. But remember, that is a lagging, not a leading indicator of this virus. As I mentioned, let's remember a few more of these blessed souls.

I want to begin today by remembering John Heulitt Sr., and John was 90 years old. He spent his youth in Neptune City, not far from us, and moved with his wife, Francis, to Wall Township to raise their family. John was a builder. He served as a mason for Toms River's Ciba-Geigy for 20 years and also owned a construction company that built many homes throughout Monmouth County. He also gave back to his community as a longtime member of the Glendola Fire Department in Wall, and he was a man of tremendous faith, who served his church in multiple ways. He had a band, his band was called The Believers and The Believers helped spread the gospel to seniors at local senior centers and resident homes.

John and Francis, by the way, who sadly passed away last March, I believe not from COVID and with whom he is now reunited, had four children: Debbie, Sharon, John Jr. and Beverly. I had the honor of speaking with Beverly on Monday and she lives in Ocean Township. They blessed their parents with many, 10 grandchildren and 16 great-grandchildren, and Beverly asked that I mentioned them by name. So here it goes, the grandchildren: Michelle, Melinda, Travis, Sean, Shanna, Steven, Shelby, Johnny, John Henry, and Isabel. And again, that group of 10 have in turn added 16 great-grandchildren to the family: Richie, Luke, Logan, Kaz, Kayla, Carson, Maya, Colby, Skyler, Cheyenne, Shayla, Sage, Gavin, Dillon, Caden and Zoey. Bless them all. So it now falls to these generations to carry on that guy's legacy. May God bless and watch over his soul and his extraordinary family.

One week ago today, and you may have read about Howell Township lost one of its pioneers, Suzanne "Sue" Veitengruber. For 45 years, Sue and her husband George on the left called Howell home, and Howell in turn called her to service. In 1981, Sue won a seat on the Howell Township Board of Education. From there, she continued her service as a Howell Township Councilwoman, and in 1991 became the first Republican woman elected mayor of Howell Township. In addition to her elective duties, Sue served as either Administrator or Chief Financial Officer for the municipalities of, get this, Tabernacle, Keansburg, North Brunswick, Clementon and Shrewsbury. And for 25 years, she also taught municipal government at the Rutgers University Center for Executive Leadership in Government.

But Howell was where her heart was, and she dedicated countless hours to its kids and seniors and its police, Pat, and fire personnel. She now leaves behind George after 49 years of marriage and 54 years together. She's also survived by her two children, George III and Melissa and their spouses and her five beloved grandchildren. Sue was only 71 years old. I had the great honor of speaking on Monday with George III and Melissa and we had a really soulful, long conversation about Sue, and this was all together, and about several things.

Number one, they wanted Jersey Shore Hospital to be given a big shout out. They said they were extraordinary not just in their medical prowess, but in their personal connection with Sue and with her family. And they also, Judy and Eddy, we had a long conversation about therapeutics. We've talked about this a lot lately. You get tested positive, you're either asymptomatic or modestly symptomatic. But getting that monoclonal antibody right then is a game changer as opposed to down the road. They were brainstorming, Melissa was particularly articulate about, how can we find a way to deliver that more easily, almost in an outpatient format as opposed to in a hospital format? They offered their help. It was a really good conversation in the context of having lost Sue so recently. Sue, we thank you for a lifetime of commitment to the people of Howell and so many other communities, and they I know thank you right back. May God bless and watch over you and your family.

Finally today, Judy, we honor one of your own, Glenda Simmons. She was a member of Judy's team at the Department of Health in the Division of HIV, STD, and TB Services. Glenda was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania but grew up in Montclair. She also grew up with a love of travel and of motorcycles, and was the cofounder of the East Orange-based all-women's Motorcycle Club, Leather and Lace. For the past 30 years, she was a valued member of the Department of Health's team, as I mentioned, working in the Division of HIV, STD, and TB Services Offices in Newark. She was a proud member of CWA and served as the shop steward, and she was the go-to person who all her colleagues knew they could always depend upon.

Glenda didn't just bring life to her workplace. She was also an avid urban gardener with a green thumb that could push any plant to fulfil its potential. Glenda leaves behind her siblings, Alfreda with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Monday, who lives in Georgia, and Tony, and countless friends. She also leaves her Department of Health family, who I know will miss her services tremendously. Glenda had only recently turned 67 years old. On behalf of the State of New Jersey, thank you, Glenda, for your years of caring service to your fellow residents and may the road you travel now be free and open. God bless and watch over you.

Three more New Jerseyans who gave back to their communities in varied and lasting ways. We will remember them as we remember all who we have lost to this pandemic.

Next and switching gears to introduce you to another of the small businesses that's been able to remain open, thanks to the efforts of in this case the New Jersey Redevelopment Authority and the innovative small business lease emergency assistance grant program it stood up to help businesses in the 64 municipalities where it operates. Today we're just a stone's throw, I think almost literally, from where we sit. It's City Deli II, and anyone in Trenton knows it. It's a Trenton lunchtime fixture. It's owned by the Pereda family since 1995 and is operated today by Liliana and her son Cesar Pereda. That's, I believe, Liliana and her husband Cesar, who is retired and that's their grandson, but it's a family affair.

Over the past 25 years, the Pereddas have turned City Deli from a nondescript side street shop into a bustling business that serves hundreds of customers every day, from locals to lawmakers. Obviously when the pandemic hit and much of Trenton went on a remote work schedule, City Deli felt the pinch and it too had to close its doors. Thankfully, a loyal customer alerted Liliana to the support available from the New Jersey Redevelopment Authority and City Deli received a grant that has ensured their rent is paid so they can focus on better times ahead.

I had the opportunity on Monday to catch up with young Cesar, and I know that he and Liliana, his mom, are looking forward to all of their regulars coming back soon. I wish them the very best. They truly believe in Trenton's future, as do I. Check them out. Their address, everyone please rush there right now, Pat, after this, 15 N. Willow Street, right here in Trenton, right off of State Street.

So to get us to that future, that brighter future, we need to get through the next few weeks. We need to have patience as our vaccine program awaits the doses we need to kick into higher gear. We need to maintain our social distancing, we need to keep wearing our masks, we need to keep doing all the smart things to drive down the numbers, to keep folks out of our hospitals, and ultimately to save lives. If we do this, I promise you, we will be in a much, much, much better place.

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

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor and good afternoon. Well, as the Governor mentioned, we know that many residents are concerned about ensuring that they will receive the second dose of their vaccine, so let's go over that again. Our expectation is that at the time an individual receives their first dose, they will receive an appointment at that same location for their second dose. The department is working with sites to ensure that they are able to make this happen.

Now, sites using our state registration system will notify individuals that they will receive their appointments by email. Later this week, for those individuals, we are enabling the automatic generation of appointments for patients to receive their second dose of vaccine. Again, if you received a first dose vaccination by making an appointment through the state's scheduling system at covidvaccine.nj.gov, you will receive an automatically scheduled second dose appointment this weekend. You will receive an email confirmation with the details of that second dose appointment. If you received your first dose by booking directly with the vaccine clinic and did not use the covidvaccine.nj.gov to schedule your appointment, you likely scheduled a second dose appointment when you had your first dose. If you did not receive a second dose appointment at the time of receiving your first dose, you need to contact the site where you received your first vaccine for assistance in scheduling the second dose.

If you received a first dose at the Gloucester County mega site before they brought up the state scheduling system, you will be contacted directly by that site. The Gloucester County mega site has already begun contacting individuals to schedule their second dose appointment. Starting Sunday, the NJ COVID-19 Vaccination Call Center will have operators available to assist anyone in need of a second dose appointment. The call center, available at 855-568-0545, will open from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. seven days a week, and they will be available to assist you in making that second dose appointment.

We want everyone to receive both doses of vaccine, in order to have maximum protection against the virus. It is recommended that individuals get their second dose as close to the recommended date as possible. That's 21 days for the Pfizer vaccine and 28 days for Moderna. However, it's important to note that there is no known loss of efficacy of the second dose, as long as someone receives that second dose within six weeks of receiving the first dose. We don't want anyone to panic if it's not exactly at the 21-day or 28-day limit.

We are reinforcing with all sites that they should be making second appointments when the individual receives the first dose. Again, everyone who wants to get vaccinated will be able to receive a vaccine when the supply is available. Right now, the supply is very limited.

Moving on, we continue to monitor for the spread of B-117, the variant of this virus that emerged in the UK. Right now, New Jersey is reporting an additional six new cases, bringing the total cases of this variant in New Jersey to eight. Among the reports of this variant, four have occurred in Ocean County, two in Essex, and two in Morris County. Ages of those affected range from 10 years of age to 65. One individual had an international travel history, and there has been one death of an individual with this variant. However, that individual did have significant underlying conditions. We are working to begin reporting cases of this variant on our COVID-19 dashboard.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 3,190 hospitalizations and thankfully our hospitalizations are staying pretty steady. There are 578 individuals in critical care and 70% of them on ventilators.

We are reporting one new case of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. That brings the total number to 83 cumulative cases in our state. As I've reported, the children affected have either tested positive for COVID-19 or have had antibody tests that were positive, suggesting an exposure to COVID-19. Fortunately, in New Jersey, there are no deaths reported at this time. Two of these children are currently hospitalized. The breakdown of the race and ethnicity of these cases are White 23%, Black 24%, Hispanic 40%, Asian 7%, other 7%.

The Governor reviewed the new cases and deaths and in terms of the deaths, the breakdown by race ethnicity is as follows: White 55.5%, Black 16.7%, Hispanic 19.1%, Asian 5.1% and other 3.6%.

At the state veteran homes, there are no new cases among their residents and the psych hospitals are reporting seven new positive cases among their staff.

Positivity at the state as of January 23rd is 12.6. The Northern part of the state 12.45, Central 12.72, and the Southern part of the state 12.88.

That concludes my daily report. Stay safe. It's more important than ever, with the variants in our state, to continue to mask up, social distance, stay home if you're sick, get tested. Remember, for each other and for us all, please take the call and download the COVID Alert NJ App. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you for everything, especially the color on the second dose. Can I ask you and Eddy a question on the variant? We've been saying -- and when I say we I don't mean just us but the federal authorities have been saying now for some number of weeks that in the early incomplete, admittedly incomplete scientific data the variant is more transmissible but not necessarily more lethal. There was a little bit of a head fake from the Brits at the end of the week that perhaps it might be more lethal. Is it fair to say the jury is still out on that question, Eddy?

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: In a nutshell I would say yes. The UK did analyses. Actually, they had several studies looking at the variants. All of the three or four that they looked at showed that there appeared to be some increase in mortality but there are weaknesses methodologically in those studies; by a sample, not very many deaths, power calculations, and so on. It's certainly worrisome, but I think the jury is out on that.

Governor Phil Murphy: Eddy, a federal authority who I'll leave nameless because they said admittedly, they're still trying to study this said they thought -- and I think this is a different way of saying what you just said -- that the UK data was soft.

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: An equivalent way of saying it Easier to understand, which is why they probably want to be left nameless.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you both. Pat, great to have you. We had some weather. Depending on the weather, you are, you got either a dusting or some rain or maybe a little bit more than that. Any post-mortem on that, compliance or other matters? Great to have you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Since we last briefed there's been four reports to the ROIC with regards to Executive Order compliance. Newark police responded to a large apartment complex party, more than 50 people not socially distanced, not wearing facial coverings. In Union, the same pool hall two nights in a row. The police, again, capacity issues, unmasked patrons and not adhering to social distancing, and also serving food and alcohol. And lastly, in Jersey City, Jersey City Police responded to and cited an unlicensed nightclub.

With regard to the weather, yeah it was a little bit – I was up in the north and it started a little bit later than we thought but it was a little bit dicey on my ride up on 78 yesterday afternoon. We're also watching another storm, Gov. It looks like it's a Sunday/Monday snowstorm which will be another statewide event.

Governor Phil Murphy: What did you get at home?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: We got about, I would say an inch of ice and snow up in Warren County.

Governor Phil Murphy: The roads, any reports of accidents?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: There was a few but I thought DOT did a tremendous job and I thought the brining helped tremendously from what I saw and what was reported back to OEM.

Governor Phil Murphy: That Labor Day brine, the roads strategy appears to be paying off. Thank you for that, Pat. I think we'll start over here with Stacey, Aswan's got the mic today. We will be, I think, on the same rhythm, Monday, Wednesday, Friday so we'll see you virtually tomorrow, one o'clock on Friday. The White House has, as we expected, started to make connections and they've been telephonic, I believe, so far. Your call today was video as well. There was a good call yesterday where they came, I think, with several announcements that we've referenced but I want to underscore. Increase in doses, so it's not as much as we need but it's better than the alternative; three weeks visibility, which allows Judy and Eddy and their colleagues to plan this in a much more thorough and efficient manner.

I also wanted to note that for the Pfizer vaccine, I was calling this equipment but it's really more paraphernalia, if there's an ability to squeeze out the sixth dose out of the vial. Also, aggressively as you probably have seen in the press was also discussed, making very specific significant steps to acquire more doses in the medium term.

There's also a lot of noise around Johnson & Johnson right now. I hope that'll turn out to be good noise. It sounds like they're signaling their test trial results may be as early as next week. They're obviously a New Jersey – not just an American but a New Jersey icon and we wish them the very best, but clearly another vaccine in addition to what we've got, even though I suspect there will be some lag between any approval they might get and scaling and manufacturing, anything that comes in over the next number of months is a positive, a big positive for us. We wish them the best as well.

With that thank you, everybody. Stacey, we'll start with you if that's all right.

Q&A Session

Stacey Barchenger, The Record: I was curious, you had just mentioned the Biden administration said they were going to increase doses to states. Do we know yet how many more New Jersey will get and if so how they will be used in terms of first doses, second doses, long-term care?

Governor Phil Murphy: I can answer that. I believe it's 130,000 for the next three weeks. Is that correct?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: That's what we've been told. It could change.

Governor Phil Murphy: It could change but that's what we've been told. The breakdown between the state program and the long-term care will be depending on the Walgreens/CVS schedules, I guess?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, those doses have already been put aside, 452,000 doses have been put aside at the federal level for long-term care. The 130,000 will go to the general population.

Governor Phil Murphy: We had some folks on with Walgreens this morning. By the way, Walgreens deserves a shout out in this respect. We've got to call the balls and strikes as we see them. They've just named the first African American female CEO in their company's history, and sadly, one of the very few CEOs among African American women for any company. But having said that, our team was on with them this morning; Judy, you and I will be on with them on Monday. They've made progress this week. We've got to hand it to them in that respect. As you know, they scheduled the appointment, as Judy said, they take the doses, they put them in cold chain storage, and then they dole them out on the day of the appointment. All of that needs to happen sooner than later.

Stacey Barchenger, The Record: Governor, can you give us any details on the latest update on your negotiations with the Legislature regarding the legal marijuana and decriminalization bills? What would you say to people who have been arrested in recent weeks, or the voters who supported the bills about the delay or the seeming hold up?

Can you also tell me what your understanding is of why kids in Lakewood are still stuck in the digital divide? I think 1,400 is about one-fourth of that whole district, which is relatively small. I'm just curious what you understand about why it's taken so long to get them equipment?

How many of the positive test results are analyzed for the variant? Is that something the state lab can do or are we sending out those tests? And what about the variants from South Africa and Brazil? Can we test for those too?

Governor Phil Murphy: I don't have a whole lot more to say on marijuana other than to reiterate, and this has the added virtue of being the God's truth. There are two principles that have guided us on this, other than we got to support it as a general matter for social justice reasons. The two principles are, which I've stated earlier many times, number one, the last thing any of us want is our kids getting tied up in the criminal justice system, especially kids of color. And secondly, the voters voted to legalize adult use marijuana. It said it right on the referendum, 21 and up, that's always been the case. So getting both of those principles respected is not an easy process and that's what we're trying to do. I thank the Legislators who are working really hard with us to try to get that.

I think to somebody who's recently been arrested and Parimal, if I've got this wrong, you'll correct me but the Attorney General has asked for a stay on any prosecutions at least through to the end of March. I remain an optimist, Stacey, as a general matter that we're going to get to a better place and I hope sooner than later.

On Lakewood, by the way, I just happened to have – I call educators randomly out of the blue. I happened to have a good conversation with Kim Shaw who is a union leader and a terrific educator in Lakewood today. It wasn't about the digital divide but it was talking and comparing notes about what is a very stressful school year and a lot of heroism. This isn't coming from us. In Lakewood's case, it's a vendor issue, to the best of my knowledge. I think they're optimistic that it gets solved within the week. Not surprisingly, we weren't the only state or the only districts to be looking for this equipment. I think we've closed the gap as well as any American state, but it hasn't been overnight.

How do you test for the variant? Where does that get done? Is there any evidence of either the Brazilian or the South African strain in New Jersey? Eddy, do you mind?

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: The answer to the question is no, not to date, we haven't identified any. We've only had eight of the UK strain. I guess we should stop calling it the UK strain at some point but that's its origin. The CDC has really geared up on doing sequencing of variants or of the virus. They have a national SARS-COV-2 strain surveillance system called NS3. They're also partnering with national reference laboratories to gain samples on a weekly basis. They are also partnering with universities that are able to do this, as well as state laboratories, including ours. I know that they were working to become certified for that, I thought it would be up last week; I don't know what it is today. But if it's not, it should be shortly. They're also going to be sequencing any viruses where an individual got COVID-19, despite being vaccinated. That's an important element, too, of their surveillance system. It's pretty complex system that they've launched at this point and we're part of that.

Governor Phil Murphy: Great, thank you for that. Pretty clear, there's some really good stuff written in the press lately. I know David Lee and The Times wrote something about the benefits of restricting travel. Now, we spent most of our time in the past almost year talking about travelling from one state to another. In this case, this is one country to another and the benefits, as painful as that may be, particularly if you need to travel for your business or your profession. But it's pretty clear that that has a lot of benefits.

Thank you for that. Dave, good afternoon, Dave, I want you to note that I started over here. I was on a run of late where I've been starting to my right and I moved to the left.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Yes, and I appreciate it. Thank you, Governor. Also one note before my questions, every time the word brining is mentioned, you smile, so, you're watching this.

Governor Phil Murphy: May it always be that way.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: All right. Governor, you have taken a stand that there must be equity in vaccine distribution. As you are aware, we have a story -- I believe you're aware -- today documenting that apparently Hunterdon Medical Center systematically offered the COVID vaccine to big donors and their families, and the children in the families in December, before anybody else got it. What is your reaction, Governor? Commissioner, what is your reaction on this? Is it possible that this might involve possible charges, penalties and so forth? The sense is from people I've spoken with if a strong stand on this is not taken, it kind of opens up this door to this kind of monkey business that would happen in other hospitals, medical centers, etc. And people, frankly, are outraged about even the prospect of this taking place in New Jersey.

Governor Phil Murphy: And that includes me.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Okay. Second question. I believe, Governor, you're also aware that some counties have started not allowing people that don't live in that county to get a vaccine, they're claiming. Assembly Minority Leader Bramnick was ranting about this earlier today. You and the Commissioner a couple of weeks ago specifically indicated that New Jersey residents are allowed to go wherever they want in New Jersey to get vaccinated. Are you taking a stand on this? Are you going to speak to county leaders about this apparent overstep in what they're trying to do?

Third and final question, the interstate youth sports ban apparently will expire on Sunday. Is it going to be renewed or not? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Let me start and Judy, you may want to, or Pat, weigh in. I only saw the headline so I have not read the article. But disgusting, this is Hunterdon Medical Center. If that turns out to be the case and they volitionally did that in the face of guidance that was crystal clear, that's incredibly offensive. I think early on, admittedly -- I can't remember the hospital, Judy, but early on there was, I thought, a legitimate question, hey, does this include our Board of Trustees? Well, it depends. Is the board member a medical doctor or a private citizen? I think there was some legitimate question in the first days. If this is volitional, it's completely unacceptable.

Listen, among other things, if people monkey around like that it's going to impact the amount of doses that they're going to get going forward from us. I want to make sure folks hear that loud and clear.

Yeah, Jon Bramnick, also Jon does not hesitate to come to me privately. He also raised the same thing. Our team is following up on a couple of specifics that came up. I continue to be, Judy, of the opinion if you live here, you work here or you study here, you should have the ability to get vaccinated, but any color you want to add to that?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: We work very closely with all the county sites and we have told them that they could give priority to individuals that live, work and study in their county. If other individuals show up there to take their name, their number, and have a callback system so that they're not necessarily out of hand turning people away, but they can give priority. These county sites are using their own staff, their own funding and they're doing a great job. But we are telling them to do it with a soft hand.

Governor Phil Murphy: Again, I was answering the question black and white. You can't say no, but the question is, how do you sequence it?

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: If somebody makes an appointment, for instance, if they live in for whatever reason, Mercer County and they make an appointment at a place in Burlington County, they get an appointment. Are they going to show up there and be told, oh, sorry, you don't live here, you can't get a shot?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: My understanding is most of the people that go through their systems and make an appointment and get an appointment will get a vaccine.

Governor Phil Murphy: That is mine as well. I've got nothing to report on the ban. Anything, Parimal, you want to add on the interstate sports?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: So the regional ban on interstate youth hockey expires as of January 31st, so we'll have to work with our neighboring states and see if that's something that we will extend or not.

Governor Phil Murphy: And that in fact is Sunday, no news. Again, I'm leaning toward if the numbers keep getting better, we haven't made any formal decisions and Judy has got to vet all this, I'd love to see a little bit more attendance at these things. I'm not sure that includes travelling from one state to another. The issue that I've had with that, I think you've got more importantly with that, are the adjacent activities that go with that. That you're gathering, you're on the road by definition, you've got to be in a hotel or staying at somebody else's house, and you're doing things outside the actual sport that increases your risk. Thank you for that. Hello, good afternoon.

Reporter, NJ Spotlight: Good afternoon. Governor, what is your reaction to the first come, first serve vaccine site that opened last week in Paterson where no appointments are necessary and people have been waiting in line for hours for limited doses?

Why didn't the state create a unified vaccine registration system from the start? What steps is the state taking to make it more of a one-stop shopping system, as Commissioner Persichilli said on Monday?

A quick one, how many ventilators does New Jersey have in total?

Are we vaccinating people who have already had COVID if they're among the first priority classes? If so, since they have some protection and we have a short supply of the vaccine, shouldn't they wait for the others?

And last, and apologies if part of this is repetitive but how many cases of the UK variant have been confirmed in New Jersey? How is the state choosing which cases to test for the variant? Is the state able to do the test for the variant here or do the samples go to the CDC?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, I'm just going to incorporate by reference to the last question we've addressed. I think it's eight cases. Eddy addressed the CDC process of which we are a part of.

Listen, we've worked with the Paterson team and the mayor is a great leader and we are very close to him and his team. We're not wild about just show up first come, first serve. We've said from the get-go we want this to be an appointment-based system. We don't want to see the scenes that we've seen in some other states and for the most part, that has been the case in New Jersey.

Judy, you can talk about the unified system question but remember, we're building the airplane here as we're flying it. This may be the most complex logistical undertaking, other than going to war, in the history of the United States. The fact that we have 270 sites that we've got a place, we've got a call center with trained people answering it and all of that is from scratch literally in a number of weeks, obviously this is a work in progress, but I'll let Judy come back in.

Vents, I know at the state level we have 2,600 in stockpile and then there's a whole other bunch in the hospital systems. Dan, you can help me follow up on the amount that is within our hospital systems. Judy, if you wouldn't mind, any comments on the unified system and/or folks getting a vaccine who may have already had COVID?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: I can give you the vent numbers too. We have about 1,445 vents in use and 2,572 in what we would call our stockpile, so more than adequate to handle any surge that might come. Hopefully, we will not have to use that.

In terms of the scheduling system, that was a new build. We did not have, at the Department of Health through our immunization system, a scheduling system. We brought up the preregistration module first. As we've shared, over 2 million people have been able to use that module, putting it into the appointment system proved to be a little bit more difficult. We are doing this with our own information technology experts at the state level and at the department level, and in collaboration with a Microsoft team. It was a big undertaking, and we're still working out some of the bugs; it's something we've never done before at the Department of Health.

Testing on the variants, I know that our lab can test. I don't know how often or how they do the sampling.

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: Yeah, I had mentioned about the fact that we're gearing up to do the testing ourselves, but we've been sending specimens to the CDC, as I mentioned earlier. Did you want me to answer the question about vaccinating people that had COVID-19?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yes, that's the one that is still outstanding.

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: First of all, the CDC has recommended that those who have been previously infected should be vaccinated, and there are good reasons for that. For one, we don't really know how long the immunological response they've had to natural infection actually lasts, what the durability of it is. We know also that when you get vaccinated, the neutralizing antibodies, the level of immunity is higher than those that you get with natural infection. Third, many of the people who've actually had natural infections are those who are at highest risk, older people, people with underlying chronic morbidity, and we know that reinfection can occur again. So being vaccinated with a higher immunologic response is the right thing to do.

The only caveat that the CDC has said is, and acknowledging that, in fact, people might have some protection because they were previously infected, is that they might consider waiting 90 days before they get vaccinated. But again, it's not a mandate. It's just something that they should discuss with their physicians.

Clearly, you don't want to get vaccinated when you're acutely ill, it's not going to help you at that point. It's not a therapeutic, it's a preventive approach. Basically, that's it. People should be vaccinated. Where they are in line, I don't think we should distinguish. If they're eligible, they should try to schedule an appointment if they can.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said, thank you. Sir, have you got anything? Give us one sec.

Reporter, News 12, New Jersey: Two from News 12's Alex Zdan. First, Commissioner, have you seen evidence that new cases of the COVID-19 variant were linked to community spread, or were they all connected to the international traveler?

And for the Governor, will you be taking action on the marijuana decriminalization or enabling legislation soon? Why not veto the decrim bill, but sign enabling legislation to get the legal market off the ground? Why should minors face criminal penalties for alcohol possession but no criminal penalties for marijuana? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, I've got nothing new to add on marijuana, in addition to what I said earlier, so tell Alex I'm sorry to disappoint him but that's where I am.

The variant, I think you said one person was a traveler and the rest, presumably, is community spread?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Again, we wouldn't call it community spread. We don't know yet. We are doing the contact tracing. We don't have any specific information at this point in time about whether it's linked to spread, but it will be contact traced, case investigated and contact traced like every other case.

Governor Phil Murphy: Again, this is early on. So for Alex's benefit, and if I get something wrong here, either of the two of you will or maybe even Pat will come in, as Pat and I are in our epidemiological degree. You know, again, what do we have? We believe we've got one variant in the state. I agree with Eddy, we should probably come up with a new name. Secondly, the data of the science on it is early. Thirdly, based on what folks think so far, it's more easily transmitted and the jury's out on whether or not it's more lethal. Lastly, we do know this: the basic stuff that we're doing works against coronavirus, whether it's Variant 1, 2, 3 or 4, social distancing, mask up, wash your hands with soap and water, take yourself off the field if you've been exposed or you don't feel well, and at the right moment, get tested. And on top of all that, God willing, we'll get the supply-demand. We'll get the supply we need out of the feds. We'll get the supply-demand back in balance. It will continue to vaccinate more and more of our residents. That's what we've got to play with here. Is that fair to say?

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: I'm going to give you an honorary epidemiological degree.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that. Pat wants to weigh in. He's trying to get an honorary as well, apparently. Thank you for that. Matt, we'll round it out with you. Give us one second.

Matt Arco, Star-Ledger: Good afternoon, Governor. For starters, Congressman Pascrell is currently quarantining after exposure. You were with him yesterday. Are you aware that the Congressman was potentially exposed? Will you be quarantining or taking any safety steps regarding that?

You said this morning that teachers are quote "on deck" for eligibility for vaccines, as you continue to advocate for more in person instruction. Teachers' unions have pushed back on this, and it's reached a stalemate in some towns, How soon will teachers who currently aren't eligible be eligible? Who else will likely be included in that next expanded group?

Just a couple on vaccine. Commissioner, can you repeat what you said about people who get the second dose later than 21 or 28 days? Based off your studies, because you said it didn't take away the effectiveness, we've seen the opposite. What research are you using?

Governor, you said people can call the call center to set up an appointment. One reader told us as soon as today that the call center wasn't setting up shots. Are they currently arranging appointments, yes or no?

Governor Phil Murphy: On the last one, it is my understanding that they're helping folks. If the folks are not online accessible, they're helping them get preregistered.

appointment scheduling.

Governor Phil Murphy: For the moment, it is helping preregister. I am aware of Congressman Pascrell. To his credit, he called me this morning and he told me that he had a family member who tested positive. To the best of my knowledge, he has not. I don't want to get into personal medical situations, but he was completely classy. We were with each other yesterday but we were in a very large setting and I don't think I tripped the 15-minute CDC, and we were both masked as well.

Having said that, I will likely wait a couple of days, with Judy's blessing, and get a test myself. Listen, I hope educators, sooner than later. That's all I can say. They are rightfully are on deck. I can't give you a timeframe. I had a good exchange this morning with Marie Blistan who is the President of NJEA. As I mentioned, I spoke to one of her colleagues in Lakewood. We're on with them all the time. And yes, you've got communities. I was interviewed this morning by CNN and the leader of NJEA, who I mistakenly referred to as a man, it's a woman from the South Orange Maplewood District where I know there's been a lot of anxiety and lately you've read some press about Montclair. There's stress throughout this whole education process. All I can say is we understand it and we're going to do everything we can. We need more doses. The step the Biden administration took yesterday was a great step in the right direction. I think you'll agree with me, to say that they're laser focused on the pandemic is the understatement of the century, perhaps, never mind the year.

The other thing is this: unlike what we had heard in the last team, of which listen, we're not throwing the entirety of the last crowd under the bus. In fact, Gus Perna was on the call yesterday. Tony Fauci is very much still in the game. But there was a much deeper team. It's not just the quality and the intensity of the focus, but it is a much deeper team.

I got school numbers today and they weren't part of my remarks, but I wanted to just hit the point that the hybrid districts are now up to 457, remote is now 228, in-person is 86, one of which by the way is Lakewood which has come up several times, and 40 are combination. Please God, better days are ahead sooner than later.

Judy, any more color you or Eddy have on that point, which was a good one? Yes, we want you to be on Day 21 for one of the vaccines, Day 28 for the other. But if it slips a little bit, the data suggests that the booster is still highly effective. Any color you've got on that?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, right before I came here today I was on the call with the experts from the White House. They talked about six weeks from the time of your first dose. Within that window is the time you should get your second dose. They prefer 21 and 28 days but if it has to be stretched out, they didn't want anyone to think that it would not be effective.

Governor Phil Murphy: Did you get a sense from them as to how diminished the efficacy is, or do they think it still is --

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: They did not say. Eddy?

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: First of all, I just want to point out that the clinical trials, the Phase 3 trials which each one had at least 15,000 people who actually got the vaccine itself, they all didn't get it on exactly the day; it ranged up to about six weeks because people didn't necessarily come back exactly on the day. You have to understand that the clinical trial actually included those people.

Secondly, the recommendation is not more than six weeks but the CDC has also made the recommendation that if it's even longer than six weeks, don't start the series over again. This is in line actually with what happens with pediatric vaccines where there's a series, is that there's a set regimen and interval but if you come back after that, even if it came back months after that, get that dose, don't start over again.

I don't know how much data they have on the actual efficacy between getting it at three weeks or four weeks or six weeks, because I don't think there are enough numbers in there. But they know from sort of the antibody, the immunologic response that it doesn't really change very much. Based on that, they sense that the efficacy is really not going to change that much.

Governor Phil Murphy: Again, on behalf of Pat and myself, in a perfect world, it's 21 or 28 days, but in the world that we're in with a supply-demand imbalance which is as overwhelming as it is not just here but everywhere, I think the message is it's not the end of the world if that slips. You're still going to be relative to the baseline efficacy of these vaccines. You're still going to be highly protected. Is that a fair way to put it?

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: Yeah, and if I could make one other point. We've been talking about when people should come back, what's the right time to come back for the second dose, and it's three weeks, four weeks. I also want to point out the other side of that coin. There are people who are not coming back for the second dose purposely for the simple reason that they had some reactogenicity, sore arm and that, and they're concerned that in fact, if they come back for the second dose, they're going to have an even bigger reaction. The clinical trial showed that you could have a bigger reaction with the second dose.

I think we all want to just urge those people, come back for the second dose. You need to come back to get the maximal efficacy out of the vaccine.

Governor Phil Murphy: I was going to ask you and Eddy, we get the treat to have you with us on Wednesday so I will not wear out my welcome but knowing you won't be with us on Friday. Eddy and Judy, is it fair to say that the incidence of folks having a reaction to the vaccine remains low? Based on what we know, in many cases if not most, related to some other health issue? I don't mean just a sore arm, obviously. But anything that is beyond a basic reaction?

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: Yeah, and we call those serious adverse events, or SAEs, and those are low. Reactogenicity, like local or headache, that's common with both doses, but the serious adverse events are really quite low. In many cases, they're not necessarily even related to the vaccine.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, would you --?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Absolutely.

Governor Phil Murphy: That's it, folks. Listen, thank you. We will be back with you live unless you hear otherwise Friday at 1:00. We'll be virtual tomorrow. Dan will let us know if that changes. I want to thank Judy and Eddy, and Eddy, God bless your mom and dad on every day, but particularly this day. Pat, likewise to you and your family. Jared, Parimal, Dan. Again, folks, I guess patience, we ask you for that and we understand why there's a lot of anxiety and we completely get it. Some amount of patience here. I still think not only are the numbers going up in terms of vaccine doses, we're well into the 600-and-something thousands already, the supplies are going up. Not yet where we need them but if you look in the intermediate, not just next week or the three weeks coming up, but if you look at the acquisitions by the feds of another bucket of 100 million Pfizer doses, the potential of Johnson & Johnson, and you look out say not too far from now, maybe April, we're in a dramatically different place. It's not just going up from 105 to 130 but at that point, I think you're going up dramatically.

Our hospital numbers, as we mentioned earlier, have started to come down. Please God, that continues to be the case. That's consistent, Judy, with the modelling that has been guiding you and Eddy and colleagues. That's a positive in our favor. The weather's not getting -- the weather ain't warm today but at some point, you know, six, eight weeks from now you're in a different place, that combination. In the spring, when a bunch of things conspired together to crush us, there will be a number of different trend lines and datasets that come together over the next six to eight weeks that will have the opposite effect. It'll have a salutary effect in terms of our public health reality.

Governor Phil Murphy

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