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Governor Phil Murphy

Press Pool Coverage: Governor Murphy Tours Acute Care Facilities at East Orange General Hospital and New Bridge Medical Center

04/22/2020

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Gov. Phil Murphy on Wednesday morning tour a pair of quickly constructed pop-up hospital sites in Essex and Bergen County to help ensure the state has enough space for the influx of patients from the coronavirus pandemic.

Murphy first visited what was once a partially closed wing of East Orange General Hospital that has now been outfitted with 250 beds. He then visited a one-time gymnasium at New Bridge Medical Center in Paramus that has been transformed into a 30-bed facility – with some beds directly under the basketball hoop. There will also be a 100-bed tent facility at the site.

East Orange is set to open around May 5, officials said. The gym site at New Brunswick will open Monday, with the tent part opening April 29, officials said.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has spent the last few weeks to rapidly rework the locations.

Murphy was joined on the tours by Lt. Gen. Todd Semonite of the Army Corps of Engineers, as well as State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan and state Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli. He was joined in Paramus by U.S. Rep. Josh Gottheimer, D-5th Dist., and Bergen County Executive Jim Tedesco.

Officials said the sites are needed not just to help handle patients now but in case the virus comes back in the fall or winter – which experts say is possible, if not likely.

Semonite said the goal was the Army Corps giving the state options – sites that are able to be adapted to handle patients now or later, with the ability to leave them up or take them down when needed.

“That buys you insurance down the road if you need it,” he told the governor.

Murphy agreed.

“We have plussed up our capacity in a dramatic way,” the governor said. “It’s not just what we need on May 5. If this virus returns like a lot of other viruses, you could see it come back in the late fall or early winter.”

Murphy told reporters that the state needs to prepare for a second wave, including beefing up testing, with help from the federal government.

“A lot of folks the general and I would look to to take our cues from will suggest this is something that not only could come back but is more likely than not to come back – even if we do everything right,” the governor said. “We’ve got to be prepared yet. We’re not there yet. But this is a huge step in that direction.”

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Officials said several floors at the East Orange building have been used for years, though the facility still been used for outpatient and rehab services.

They said workers at the site restored multiple floors, including installing 30 miles of electrical cable and 30,000 square feet of flooring.

Murphy thanked Semonite and the team for the hard work.

“We could not do this without you,” he told workers gathered outside the East Orange building. “We’re not through this yet. We have a long way to go. But you see something like this, and you realize: We’re in this together. We are making the progress we need to make. And we will get there together.”

Meanwhile, the site at New Bridge — New Jersey’s largest hospital — has long been a gym. But workers converted it, adding new air and HVAC systems, new flooring, and a nursing station set up with white blocks that connect like Legos.

“Kids would love this,” Murphy said.

Gottheimer said the new facility shows how federal money is being spent wisely.

But, he added, “we need more” for the state, counties, and municipalities.

Brent Johnson

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