

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: January 6th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Holding a COVID-19 briefing. WATCH:



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everyone. I'm joined, as always, by the woman to my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, former State Epidemiologist and our current COVID-19 Response Medical Advisor, Dr. Eddy Bresnitz. Eddy, it's very good to have you back, and Eddy's particular focus these days, I think, overwhelmingly is on the vaccine, so great to have you with us, Judy, as always. Another guy who needs no introduction on my left the Superintendent of State Police Colonel Patrick Callahan; we have Jared Maples, the Director of the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, Chief Counsel Parimal Garg and a cast of thousands.

First up, we're announcing that effective tomorrow, police and fire professionals will be eligible to receive their vaccinations. Bless them all. These are folks who have been just as much in harm's way on the frontlines as many of our healthcare workers, and they often have been called upon for emergency medical support. I might add also, and we talked about this a lot Pat, in the spring, they've been the ones who have had to deal with the knuckleheads, including at superspreader events. So our EMS teams are already in the 1A category and we will continue to ensure access for our 1A populations, but it also follows that the people they often work so closely with, our police and fire, also be allowed to get in line for the vaccines.

Next, as you know, our vaccination preregistration portal went live yesterday and throughout the day, more than 450,000 New Jerseyans preregistered for their vaccinations. That number alone gives us great optimism as we continue to roll out our robust statewide vaccine program. So while we're incredibly encouraged by the tremendous interest in volume of incoming preregistrations, our top priority for the moment remains vaccinating residents in the 1A category, which includes our frontline healthcare workers and residents and staff at our long-term care centers. But by preregistering, you'll be among the very first to know, when the time comes for you, to roll up your sleeves. We know the process wasn't perfect for anyone who tried to preregister yesterday; I mean, the pent-up demand, folks, you've got to bear with us on day one. We worked with our vendor throughout the day and overnight, I want to give Chris Ryan, our Head of Technology a huge shout out, and his team. As of this morning, most if not all of the issues have been resolved.

However, the big news for me and Judy and Eddy, I know you join in this, is the one I've already noted: more than 450,000 of you have already preregistered so there's no way to categorize yesterday other than a success and another strong step forward to beat this virus.

Next, as a program note and keeping with the topic of vaccines, on Friday morning both Judy and I will be in North Jersey visiting two of the vaccination centers coming online. Eddy and Pat, you're welcome to join us if you're in the neighborhood. We will start with a tour of the new vaccine mega site opening Friday morning at the Rockaway Town Square Mall in Morris County and being operated, I might add, in partnership with Atlantic Health. We thank the Atlantic Health team. The second mega site opening on Friday is at Rowan College of Gloucester County, and we'll be paying a visit there early next week.

Also on Friday, we will head to West Orange to be with Essex County Executive and dear friend Jody Vincenzo to tour the county-operated vaccination centers set up there for frontline healthcare workers. So because of these visits, we will not be holding our usual in-person briefing on Friday and we'll be providing the daily numbers to you virtually or at one of those stops.

One final note on vaccinations. New Jersey, and Judy, you mentioned this on Monday, is actively looking for retired healthcare professionals with vaccination skills to volunteer with the New Jersey Medical Reserve Corps and bolster the ranks of those capable of vaccinating our fellow residents. If you have the skills, we need you so we asked for healthcare help out of the bullpen in the spring, we're asking for it again. Please visit that website. The address is known to you all if you've been watching [covid19.nj.gov/volunteer-to-volunteer](https://www.covid19.nj.gov/volunteer-to-volunteer).

Next, I want to turn attention to our schools and the ongoing effort to ensure every student engaged in remote learning has the tools and accessibility they need for their school days. This is a bona fide eye chart. As a reminder, over the summer, the Department of Education identified an initial digital divide of an estimated 231,000 students who did not have either the hardware or internet accessibility, or in some cases both, that they needed. As of this week, that need has now been cut to just over 8,800 and that's the number second bottom line, second from the right, so the gaps shrunk another 5% over the winter break that just concluded.

The number of students needing a laptop or other devices now below 7,000 while the number of those lacking internet connectivity is about 12,050 and 640 students statewide lack both. Also the remaining divide, 50%, is accounted for by just two school districts, Lakewood and East Orange. Lakewood accounts for roughly 40% of that 50% while East Orange is about 10%. Each district is currently awaiting the hardware that they have ordered to be delivered, and both expect these deliveries within the coming days, knock on wood. The full weekly data is available

online at nj.gov/education and as we always do, thank you to Education Commissioner Dr. Angelica Alan McMillan and her entire team for their continued work alongside district leaders to get our numbers to zero across the board.

As I do regularly, I speak to educators and again, I want to give them – I spoke to some this morning in fact – and I want to give them a big shout out. The educators, the moms and dads, the kids, the administrators, it is a stress-heavy school year and folks are doing heroic work.

One other note on education, and this is a big one. The State Board of Education met earlier today to make the final determination to return local control to the Paterson School District. The Department of Education presented its final report to the state board, which detail that Paterson has met all the requirements necessary for its transition back to local control. There are a lot of people who have, over the past 30 years, worked hard to prepare for the restoration of local control of Paterson schools and today all of their hard work has paid off. I thank, especially by name, Paterson Superintendent Dr. Eileen Schaefer and the Board of Education, the Paterson Education Association and all of the heroic educators. I also want to thank Congressman and former Mayor Bill Pascrell, Jr. talk about a fighter, Senator Nellie Pou, Assembly Members Shavonda Sumter and Coach Benjie Wimberly and the Mayor of Paterson Andre Sayegh and council, among so many others, over the past three decades for their commitment to the students, families, and educators of Paterson, one of America's, not just New Jersey, one of America's great communities.

Let's turn our attention, if we can, to the overnight numbers. Today we're reporting an additional 5,028 cases confirmed through PCR tests. Statewide cumulative total of 504,647. In addition, 921 new probable cases based on antigen testing, the so-called rapid test, with a cumulative total of antigen tests of 52,624. And, Judy, it's fair to say there's probably some overlap; if you test positive on an antigen, at least that's the rules of the road as I understand it, we're encouraging folks to go get a PCR test, so folks have to keep that in mind.

Look at that top number, though. We're now over a half-a-million cases statewide. Put that another way about 1 in 20 New Jerseyans has now tested positive. The positivity rate for the 26,752 PCR tests only recorded on January 2nd was 14.96%. I don't want to put words in Judy or Eddy's mouth, but I think we continue to think if you're going out getting tested the day after New Year's, you're probably more likely than not to have a symptom that would drive you to have that test. And again, time will tell whether or not those numbers come down. 26,000 is, you know, 30,000-plus below some of the so-called normal days we were seeing before the holidays.

Statewide rate of transmission, the good news is it's 0.96 and it remains under one now for the past number of days. That's a good sign. Judy and I and Eddy and Pat were on the phone earlier. I think we expect that to climb up a little bit. Unfortunately, we need to get that down, by the way, to 0.70 or 0.69 or 0.71, I can't remember which, the all-time low, we need to see that neighborhood again before we can start feeling really good about that. And obviously, the lower that goes, the better our long-term prospects as our vaccination program continues and grows. Remember that notion we talked about a few weeks ago, compare a really strong fire hose up against an out-of-control fire with a medium-strong fire hose against a fire that was not out of control, you actually save more lives in that second case. So it's up to us to not just get the vaccination sign up for them when it's your turn, but to do the stuff like wearing these and all the other basic stuff that we do that we know that can keep this raging virus under control.

To that end, at current we are reporting 137,829 vaccinations statewide. Of these 135,606 are first dose and 2,149 are second dose. Let's stay here for a second. There is no question, I just had a conversation just as I was leaving the office, there is a significant amount of underreporting. You referred to one, we will leave the entities' names out, but you referred to one earlier. I had a conversation about another one. I think this is what every American state is going through, frankly. But there is no question, no question that that number is undercounting the amount of shots that have been actually delivered. And by the way, that will smooth out over time. There's just no question about that. Again, everybody's going through it. We're no exception.

In our hospitals as of last night, and this is a number that we all watch like a hawk, 3,744. That includes 3,531 who are confirmed, and 213 awaiting their tests. Now that is up, let me just read the past seven days, I'm going to begin with seven days ago, 3,727, 3,716, 3,625, 3,497, 3,521, 3,633, 3,702, and then today, 3,744. Remember our peak COVID beds just after Easter, 8,270. Obviously, we're not near that but that's a number that we cannot allow, at any costs, our hospitals to get overrun. All levers remain on the table to make sure that does not happen.

Of that number 668 patients were in intensive care, 456 of them on ventilator. If you go back to the 668, Mahen, that peak was 2,080. The good news is we're about a third of that number but again, we cannot – never mind can we not hit that number, we can't go near that number. And folks ask us all the time, what are you looking at most closely? We look at all of this, but that's at our peril we allow this virus to overrun either total beds or ICU beds.

So there's good news and bad news, throughout the day yesterday. This is a big deal, 449 live patients walked out. Unfortunately, 459 came in. At the risk of comparing apples to oranges, there were 62 in-hospital deaths and those are not yet confirmed. However, with a heavy heart, we must report an additional 104 confirmed losses of life from our great New Jersey family. The number of probable deaths has been revised to 2,059. That gives us a total of confirmed of 17,464. Then when you add in that 2,059 you get 19,523 losses of life from this pandemic. Unfathomable. Let's remember a few of these blessed souls.

Let's begin today by remembering this guy, Vincent Butler. What a great smile, huh? God love that guy. He was just 49 years old when he passed away last Monday. Vincent was born in Bridgeton and he was raised in nearby Fairfield Township, graduating from Cumberland Regional High School and receiving an associate's degree in criminal justice from Cumberland County Community College. For the past 23 years, Vincent served with the New Jersey Department of Corrections and was a senior correctional police officer at the South Woods State Prison and a proud member, not surprisingly, of PBA Local 105. He was a committed student of the martial arts and he loved to cook. He had a longstanding interest in real estate and enjoyed reading whatever he could on fixing up homes and the tools he would need for what was going to be his next great adventure.

Vincent is survived by his wife Teresa, and I had the great honor of speaking with her on Monday. She, by the way, is a fourth-grade educator. He's also survived by daughters Candace, Rashanna and Rashida and sons, Rashad and Rashaan. He was predeceased by another son, Rashaan. He is also survived by his father Larry, keep him and all of them in your prayers, and siblings Tanya, Keith, and Nicole, as well as by his mother-in-law Camille and many more aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, and two great-nephews. We thank Vincent for his dedication to duty and commitment to the cause of justice. May God bless him and look over his family. Let me just say this, and Pat, you know this well as do Judy and Ed, this is not the first member of PBA Local 105 who we have eulogized. The fact of the matter is, our criminal justice system, our prisons are vulnerable communities, period, for everybody involved. It's just a fact. God bless this guy, we have lost him to this awful virus.

Next up, we celebrate the life of Shrewsbury's Laura Smith. One day after Christmas, she passed away at the age of 96 and And it's an incredible life story. She was born in Rochelle, Georgia. Anyone going down to Georgia by the way, these days? Sorry, by the way, we should be brief, because the fate of the Republic is actually unfolding at the same time were together today, so keep our country in your prayers. She was born in Rochelle, Georgia in 1924. Laura was the seventh child in a family that raised 15. Think about that. She eventually found her way to New Jersey. She will be remembered by her family and friends for her exceptional cooking and baking as well as being a storyteller in a class by herself. Laura and her late husband William never had children of their own, but she found enjoyment in the company of her – are you ready for this? – 32 nieces and nephews and many, many more, I think too many to count, great-nieces and great-nephews.

She also played, and this is a particularly poignant New Jersey angle here. She played a central role in the life of one family, the Frankel family in Monmouth County and I want to thank Senator and dear friend Vin Gopal for raising Laura's life with us. For 35 years, starting in 1973, she worked for the Frankels' and she was an additional

grandmother to their two daughters, Susie and Amy and I had the great honour of speaking on Monday, and Amy reiterated what I'm about to say. In fact, Laura's first day with the Frankels was the day Amy was born. Talk about timing. That connection stayed strong through to the next generation, and she was a surrogate great-grandmother for some of those folks right there, for Matthew, Mark, Max, Lucas and Addison.

Laura's funeral service was held this morning, with her nephew and niece, Reverend Alvin McBurrows and Reverend Veronica McBurrows officiating. May God bless her and her blessed memory and the families and the lives that she touched. What a life to have touched so many.

And finally today we remember Christopher Mazauskas of Perth Amboy, who served the people of Edison Township for more than 13 years as a grant writer and resource development officer, bringing the township millions of dollars and becoming known by those he worked with simply as Chris, the grant writer. Chris was just 65 years old, but he was much, much more than just Chris the grant writer. He was a heck of a grant writer, by the way, but he was more. He was a community advocate known for handing out hundreds of saplings to residents to commemorate Earth Day. He served on numerous boards and commissions, including the New Jersey Housing Authority all who met Chris and immediately recognized that behind the gentle wit and warm spirit was a true renaissance man who enjoyed learning about any topic. He loved to laugh and travel with his family and share stories of his travels with his friends and colleagues.

Chris left us on December 29th. He left behind his partner Lorraine, and I had the great honor of speaking with Lorraine. They were together for 22 years. She herself had COVID so much so that she was hospitalized. He passed on the 29th of December, she left the hospital on the 30th. He also leaves behind his stepdaughter, Tisha. He's also survived by his brothers, Lenny, John, Robert, and Jamie and his sister Donna, and their spouses, his nieces and nephews, and numerous aunts and cousins. So we thank Chris for his years of service to the people and Township of Edison. Surely Edison is a better place because of his work, and has many more trees that will grow as a lasting legacy of his service. May God bless him watch over him.

So three more tremendous members of our New Jersey family lost to the pandemic. For their sake, and for our own families, let's not give up our fight. Let's not give in. Let's keep doing all that we can to push back.

Finally, switching gears one more time for today and please don't laugh at the guy in the middle. For today and to end on a positive note, I want to put a spotlight on Maria Nieves. Maria is the woman standing between Tammy and the tall guy with the sombrero. Maria is the owner of Las Marias Delicias Poblanas, a Mexican restaurant in New Brunswick. Maria and her husband Miguel came to New Jersey from their native Puebla region 20 years ago, Las Marias, their second restaurant by the way, opened four years ago. Aside from being a tremendous eatery, and by the way, I have had some of the food, it is outstanding. Las Marias, as you can see, we have some pictures, catered our Hispanic Heritage Month celebration at Drumthwacket two years ago. Maria has made sure that that restaurant also serves a greater purpose. In particular, most of our staff are single mothers. As Maria knows from her own experience is the need for community support.

To keep this essential support system in place, Maria worked with the New Jersey Economic Development Authority to receive two pandemic relief grants that have kept Las Marias open and feeding the community. I had the opportunity to check in with Maria on Monday. I use my limited Spanish which is by the way, single digit words sadly. I had not seen Maria since we were at Drumthwacket, as this picture points out. I thanked her for making Las Marias more than just a restaurant. It's a true community asset in New Brunswick and I know she's ready for the better times ahead. Look them up, stop by 515 Livingston Avenue in New Brunswick, 515 Livingston Avenue in New Brunswick. I know she's ready for better times ahead, and aren't we all? We will get there. Our vaccination mega sites are preparing to open and hundreds of thousands of New Jerseyans, as I've already mentioned, have already raised their hands to say they're ready to receive the vaccine and help us end this pandemic. Let's keep up the faith folks. Let's keep fighting remember we are Jersey, and there's nobody that can touch us.

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 stated, we're beginning to move into phase 1B. That phase includes law enforcement and fire professionals; that is sworn law enforcement and fire professionals. According to CDC, fire professionals and police officers are among those frontline essential workers recommended by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, ASIP, to receive vaccination in phase 1B. These are our frontline responders who through their jobs have a greater risk of coming into contact with infectious individuals and/or infectious materials. We are able to open up vaccination to them based on the available supply.

Many police and fire personnel are also first responders in their municipalities, so they are a priority group within 1B and we'll be the first group in 1B to have access. The ASIP recommends that when supplies of a vaccine are limited, vaccination should be offered in a phased approach. ASIP defines frontline essential workers as the subset of essential workers likely at greatest risk for work-related exposure to SARS COVID-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, because their work-related duties must be performed on site, and their duties involve close proximity to the public or their coworkers.

These considerations apply in the context of limited vaccine supply during the first month of this national COVID vaccine program, and will be updated as needed based on changes in the supply. According to the CDC, considerations for transitioning are needed to ensure expeditious transition from one phase to the next. For example, from Phase 1A to 1B to 1C, as vaccine supply increases and exceeds demand within specific populations or geographic locations in a given phase, or when low demand puts vaccine doses at risk for going unused. It is not necessary to vaccinate all individuals in one phase before initiating the next phase. The phases may, in fact, overlap.

The movement between phases will be very fluid. One phase will overlap with another. We will not wait for all individuals in one phase to be vaccinated before opening up to additional groups. Individuals in Phase 1A will continue to be eligible and those in high risk and congregate care settings will remain a priority. Once COVID-19 vaccination has been expanded to additional phases, jurisdictions should continue to offer and promote vaccination to all persons in the earlier phases who have yet to be vaccinated. Opening vaccination up to sworn law enforcement individuals and fire professionals is also in line with the recommendations of the Department's Professional Advisory Committee, the PAC, led by Dr. Bresnitz. When developing the phases for vaccine distribution, the PAC uses the following guiding ethical principle: maximizing benefits and minimizing harms, equity, justice and transparency. Their strategic aims to provide equitable access to COVID-19 vaccine to all who live, work or are educated in New Jersey to achieve community protection, assuming vaccine availability and uptake and to build sustainable trust in COVID-19, and hopefully other vaccines. We will continue to update the public on the progress of the phases so all of you will know when the vaccine will be available to you.

As the Governor mentioned, as of 10:00 a.m. this morning, 134,985 individuals have been vaccinated so far. Tuesday evening, we launched the New Jersey vaccine scheduling system, NJVSS so individuals can preregister for vaccine. Because of the enormous interest in receiving the vaccine, the system did experience capacity challenges causing a delay and the state IT teams worked with Microsoft throughout the day yesterday and overnight to vastly increase the servers to scale up the capacity to meet the demand. This is a massive undertaking. And as with any new information system, capacity and other technical issues arise that need to be addressed. But as the Governor pointed out, it is clear that people are registering in very large numbers and we are very pleased about that.

If you are a healthcare worker in category 1A who has yet to be vaccinated, the Department of Health encourages you to go online and preregister. At this time, we are asking for the public's patience throughout the registration and vaccination distribution process. We are recommending that the public wait until there is an announcement in coming weeks about when you will be able to schedule an appointment to be vaccinated.

Vaccination of healthcare workers and long-term care facility residents and staffs continue. Some vaccination sites, particularly hospitals, have their own vaccine registration system so registering in the NJ VSS is not necessary. Two-thirds of healthcare workers, including staff in urgent care centers, physicians, dentists' offices, surgery centers, any healthcare worker working outside of hospitals, so the NJVSS is a way for all of them to preregister.

For those in the later phases, once you're preregistered and the phases are preregistered for openings, they will not only be able to register, they will be able to receive an email letting them know when they can schedule an appointment.

Moving on to my daily report, the Governor shared 3,744 hospitalizations and 668 individuals in intensive care with 68% on ventilators. We are reporting one new case of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children, so there are now a total of 73 cases in our state. All of these children affected have either tested positive for COVID-19 or have antibodies that were positive to COVID-19. Fortunately, in New Jersey, there are no deaths associated with multisystem inflammatory syndrome. One of the children is currently hospitalized.

The Governor reviewed the new cases and deaths. In terms of race and ethnicity for the deaths, White is 55.1%, Black 17.2%, Hispanic 19.6%, and Asian 5.3%.

At the state veteran homes, there's one new positive patient at the Vineland Home and sadly, one new death at the Vineland Home, bringing that cumulative number to 10 deaths. At the state psychiatric hospitals, there have been eight new positive patients at Ancora, one at Ann Klein and one at Trenton.

As of January 2nd, the positivity for New Jersey is 14.96. The Northern part of the state reports 14.64, the Central part of the state 14.93, and the Southern part of the state 15.71. That concludes my daily report. Mask up, socially distance, wash your hands frequently, stay home if you're sick, get tested, stay safe. 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. Pat has given me permission to go off script to ask you and Eddy to address two myths that we hear out in the ether as it relates to the vaccine. We would welcome any thoughts you have on either one of them. One of them is one we've discussed before, which is impacting fertility. I think less on the guy's side but on the childbearing women age. And then secondly, Eddy, this question of the myth out there that this somehow impacts your DNA sequencing. Any comments on either of those that are out there? Thank you.

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: Well, thanks for those questions. They're actually both related. So for these two vaccines, which are messenger RNA vaccines whereby the injection is of the messenger RNA into the muscle of the individual, this is then taken up by the cells. The messenger RNA goes into a cell but not into the nucleus of a cell; there's a nucleus and then there's the cytoplasm. And so it goes into the cytoplasm, it begins to produce protein or what we call antigen. That protein is then released into the body and the immune system recognizes it as a foreign body and then essentially begins to produce antibodies to it and other immunologic cells.

The mRNA itself in the cytoplasm is never incorporated into the nucleus, where the DNA is. In fact, it is broken down within about 48 hours and then disappears from the body. It's not incorporated into this nucleus. It's not reproduced there and it can't be, as a result, a cause of infertility and it never really has an impact on that.

From that perspective, it's ingenious, actually, in terms of how it works, because you're not infecting the genetic structure of an individual. And you are actually using the mechanism of the body or the cell itself to produce the antigen, and it produces it quite rapidly. Within a couple of weeks, you have antibody being produced with the first dose, and actually the data has shown that in fact you begin to see some benefit of the vaccine in terms of reducing the risk of infection. And then after the second dose, whether it's a three weeks or four weeks, you see an even greater immunologic response.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that, taking those two myths off the table, which are related.

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: Yeah, and I think the message though, with all that technical, the message is that young women who are of childbearing age should not fear taking this vaccine because of a fear of infertility. It's just not something that they need to be concerned about.

Governor Phil Murphy: I mean, the risk is completely asymmetric. I can't recall anything I've ever been around where the risk was so asymmetric, between taking it and not taking it, and the risk you run of just go out there and getting this virus and the implications that come with it. Thank you. Thank you, Judy. Pat, over to you. Compliance. I don't think we have any weather coming up. I'll knock on wood. Any other matters? Thank you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Thank you, Governor. With regards to compliance, just one issue to report which was earlier in the week, Kearny police responded to a report of a fight. It was actually a very large house party with more than 50 people, so that homeowner was cited. I would just let everybody know that yesterday afternoon, Commissioner Persichilli, Director Maples, the AG and I hosted a call with more than 300 police chiefs to talk about the vaccine distribution plan. Again, that communication in this whole process is key and that messaging and timing, so we appreciate Judy's time, certainly, for being on there with all of us and then making this announcement today. I greatly appreciate it. Thanks, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: You bet, Pat. And, Judy, the phrase you've used, if you live work or study in New Jersey, you're eligible. Is that fair?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Can I add one thing just to clarify, because it came up yesterday, because we have a lot of federal law enforcement partners. Again, maybe an agent lives in Manhattan, but works at Newark office. So to the Governor's point live, work or study. That Port Authority officer that may live in Jersey but works at JFK Airport, I just wanted to make sure we were clear on that, because a few questions came up from our federal law enforcement partners as well as Port Authority Police Department. The whole goal is to get that entire population, beyond all others, vaccinated. Thanks, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: I don't know who broke up the Kearny party. I assume it was Kearny PD, if not Hudson County Sheriff or Kearny PD but that's an example, where you've got 50 people inside, I'm guessing not wearing masks and not doing a lot of social distancing, where a member of law enforcement is putting themselves in harm's way. Thank God, we don't have a lot of that, but that's an example. In addition to the more, I think, regular drumbeat of being much more in close proximity with folks, as you pointed out earlier Judy, who have a medical issue which exposes them. I think that's the more regular reality. In any event, thank you all.

We'll start over with Elise. But before we do again, virtual tomorrow. We will be on the road at least Friday morning. We may have the numbers by then; if we do, Judy and I will present them to you and any color. If not, we will come at you virtually and then we'll get back on the same rhythm next week. So Elise, good afternoon.

Q&A Session

Elise Young, Bloomberg: Good afternoon. My first question is from Tom Davis from patch.com. With the slow pace of vaccination, is there a risk that supplies of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines could expire, and does the state have the cold storage capacity to stash until they can be used?

My questions. Some counties are operating their own signup sites. Is that under the advice of the health department? Does the administration have confidence in the web-based services, such as Signup Genius and Eventbrite that some counties are using? What are you advising New Jerseyans to do as they're confronted with various ways to sign up?

What is the estimated workforce needed for the vaccination program? When did the state begin to recruit qualified staff? How many staff are on hand and how are you advertising for more?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, in discussions with the hospitals yesterday, we do believe there's some reporting lag. Secondly, rolling out a massive vaccine program during the holidays did delay people from signing up, so healthcare workers are lining up right now, where they were delaying till after the holidays.

Additionally, I think there is still some vaccine hesitancy generally. We're working with the myths that Dr. Bresnitz just spoke to, to clear up that, because many individuals working in hospitals, particularly and in health care, are women of childbearing age. We really do need to work to educate them a little bit more from what they're hearing on the internet.

Putting that all together, we believe that the numbers that are showing up in our systems are definitely under reported. I can give you an example, with CVS and Walgreens, our system shows about 5,700 to 6,000 administrations and their systems show over 15,000. We're working out some of those things.

Governor Phil Murphy: And again, that's not unique to us, having compared notes with other states. again, I think we have to give credit where credit is due. The development of these vaccines, and the two people on my right are far more qualified to say this than I, is nothing short of miraculous. Now, it's not just the private companies. It's the federal government. It's decades of investment in public health in our country, so we should acknowledge that.

Secondly, we should also have to acknowledge that what we're getting is not what they said we'd get, and the burden of execution is entirely on states. In particular, when you start with the 1A population, and I'll use healthcare workers as the example, which by the way we don't dispute, that's the place that we all agree we need to start, you're going to the very people to administer something who are already getting their clocks cleaned by this virus. That is not to be underestimated. We're trying to do all the stuff you would expect us to do, deploying the National Guard and the state police to help set up these, if the persons aren't qualified to put a shot in the arm, they can do something else to relieve the pressure on others of our communities.

And there wasn't enough money associated with this. The \$908 billion not enough, but it's a start. We'll do what it takes, we'll find the money, we'll find the resources. But again, the complexity, hats off to the development, the complexity in the distribution cannot be underestimated. Thank you for that. Matt, good afternoon.

Matt Arco, Star-Ledger: Good afternoon. The are all about the vaccination sites, so it's probably mostly for the Commissioner. About the sites, some healthcare workers have said that they've signed up and said they received a confirmation email that said their group wasn't eligible, yet they are 1A; others said they didn't get a confirmation email at all. How can these people check their specific registration if they're afraid that there was a mistake in this process?

And with the portal, you spoke about this Commissioner earlier, but can you clarify what the state will notify eligible people about? Will it tell people you're eligible, now go make an appointment? Or will they be able to make an appointment directly on that site? Will people have a say in what locations they can go to once they're approved?

Does the state actively talk with providers like CVS? How does that system work?

Finally, what documentation will people need to provide, if any, to show for example that they're a teacher and not an at-home accountant? How will the state get this information about what people need out to people?

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, may I say two things before I hand it to you? Judy and team and our team talk to CVS and Walgreens all the time. Those are, shall we say, highly charged conversations at times. We talk directly. We don't take the word from the feds on this one. And Eddy, you're part of that as well. I believe the portal gives you both the moment you're eligible and you can sign up for the appointment. I don't know whether or not it tells you where to go for the appointment but I do know it does that. Anything else on –

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: It will. Once we link the sites up to the portal, you'll be able to register. There will be a drop down, you'll identify where you want to go, and you can sign up for an appointment. We will be encouraging everyone to have an appointment for exactly what Dr. Bresnitz talked about. We don't want to have any leftover doses at the end of the day. So if you have a tray of 1,000 doses, you want to give 1,000 doses. That is just a better situation.

The last question, I do have that from now through the end of February, between CVS and Walgreens, 1,092 clinics are registered, 1,092 facilities to the end of February. That includes long-term care, developmentally disabled, HUD, seniors.

Governor Phil Murphy: Let me ask you, the first part of your question was something you heard stories that someone tried to sign up and they were spat out and whatnot. I mean, there's probably going to be some of that. But my advice is go back in, right?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, absolutely. You know, wait 24 hours, go back in. And if you're still registering as a healthcare worker and it's telling you you're ineligible, tell them to call the department and we will look into that, because that should not happen.

Governor Phil Murphy: This a little bit like we've actually had this conversation about unemployed folks. Failing that, if you know of someone, John Smith, Jane Smith, tell us and we'll track it down. Do I show up? I assume you do, you show up with your ID that you're a state trooper or a member of law enforcement?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah. And then there's a lot of integrity with this as well, because I know a lot of states are really strong on the enforcement and we have decided that that type of enforcement right now is not necessary.

Governor Phil Murphy: It may change over time. But also you've got other states who have basically rejected the CDC guidance, which we're also not doing. Thank you, Matt. Do you have anything, sir? Please.

Reporter: A couple of quick ones from News 12 New Jersey's Marcy Ruben and then one from a viewer. Do people need to register now to get a vaccine later? And either way, can you expand on why registering ahead of time is recommended? And what do those who register have to do next to ensure they get the vaccine as soon as possible? As soon as they are eligible, for example, how do I find out where I can get an appointment once I am eligible? I think you might have just touched on that.

And, and also from a viewer, Governor, she wants to know your reasoning behind giving elected officials and prisoners priority over seniors age 65 and over, especially those with cancer and other medical conditions. It is their understanding that this is the most vulnerable population along with healthcare workers with direct patient contact. Shouldn't this vulnerable group at least be in 1B if not 1A? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I think we answered your first couple of questions. The reason you register is because your name is in the system. When you're eligible, you won't have to do the work to figure it out. You'll get a notification and you'll get the option as to where to sign up to get it. If the system works, right, and please God it will and we believe it will, there'll be nothing else you have to do. I don't know who the viewer is. First of all, these are not either/or questions. These are and/both. This is a fairly narrow window. I'm not aware of anyone who said elected officials were up to bat, so that's a premise of the question which is actually not true. There are no elected officials who are eligible unless they're frontline healthcare workers or they happen to be working in long-term care or they are police or fire. You and I both know, now as of tomorrow, some guys who are mayors or members of council are going to be also members of law enforcement or firefighters.

And listen, I think Judy's addressed this. This is again not either/or it's and/both. The 1B group is a very large group but we must address vulnerable communities. We saw a guy today who's dead from this virus, who works in one of those vulnerable communities. This is not any more complicated a value judgment than we're trying to keep people

alive and we're trying to go to the places where folks are the most exposed and are most vulnerable. It's that simple. There's no easy answer with something like this but that's a fact and we've got an example today of a blessed guy, 49 years old, he's dead. He worked at South Woods and he's no longer with us. You heard the amount of kids he left behind, his wife he left behind. We just have to accept the fact we're trying to get to as many vulnerable communities as we possibly can, including folks with underlying conditions, older folks, all of which. We're going to do everybody. We have just got to make sure we're getting there in a way that's the most sensible as possible, and elected officials are not on the list. I want to make sure that that viewer knows that unequivocally. Thank you, sir.

Reporter: Governor, have we now seen a bump in cases that we were expecting after the holidays or is it too early to tell?

Last month, you said about three quarters of residents reached out to by contact tracers weren't cooperating with them. Has there been any improvement there?

What is your reaction to the rise in COVID cases at Fort Dix Federal Prison? There are now currently 600 COVID positive inmates there out of a total of about 2,700.

On vaccines, can we get an update on the federal shipments and what has been shipped to date? And also, are volunteer firefighters included in police and fire professionals?

Governor Phil Murphy: I think the answer is going to be, without checking with anybody, the answer is yes on volunteer because the same rules apply, I assume, to fire and law and EMS that do to healthcare workers, as you make a point of saying, whether you're paid or unpaid, so unless you hear otherwise.

Eddy, I think it's probably still too early on Christmas, in particular. We're 13 days, I guess, out. That feels like it's too early, maybe seeing some cases, but certainly too early for hospitalizations.

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: For Christmas it's getting on almost close to two weeks so we're getting the tail end of the 14-day incubation period maximum. New Year's we are clearly not there yet. It's only been a week. So you know, we can see an increase and of course, if you look at the numbers, the deaths have been slowly increasing a little bit too. We know that there's always been a lag behind the incidence of cases.

I am encouraged by at least when you look at the curve that it seems to be flattening a little bit. It's not going down necessarily but it seems to be flattening from the rise that began in late September, early October.

Governor Phil Murphy: And remember at least one of the models we showed, the window it feels to me, as we have our discussions, middle of the month, which is by the way, two weeks after New Year's Eve to the end of the month feels like the fight that we've got on our hands. I'm not aware of any improvement in contact tracing engagement, unless you are. The Fort Dix prison is exactly the example that I just cited a minute ago. There's no value judgment here other than keeping people healthy and alive, and that includes both folks who are in the system, the folks who work there, their loved ones. That was a very striking reality and a good example.

Vaccine shipment, do you have any update on what we're expecting?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, I do. For the week of January 3rd, we ordered 108,625 doses and we received about 1.5% less than that, 106,825. Next week, for the week of January 10th, we've requested 108,625 and we're expecting to get 107,025, which is actually what the federal government has told us. So another about 1.5% decrease from what we're ordering, but much better than what we ended the year at, which was total for December, which was an 18% decrease from what we had wanted.

Governor Phil Murphy: I am not making a political comment as much as I'm making a comment based on fact. Number one, we have a transition of one administration to the next two weeks from today and that is not without risk. As I mentioned to earlier questions, this is incredibly complex; that will make it more complex.

Secondly, I have to comment on what appears to have happened in Georgia. Again, not calling this as a political matter, but calling balls and strikes. The probability for things like state and local aid have gone up dramatically. That's a big deal for New Jersey as it is for every American state. I think the likelihood that shovels go into the ground sooner on things like that Gateway Project have gone up. I think this is a longer road, but the state and local tax deduction limit, which has been crippling to a lot of states, including ours, I think that's now back on the table. I think it would be a mistake for us not to acknowledge that those are actual probabilities that have moved in a direction which are favorable for New Jersey and our residents. Eddy, you wanted to add some?

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: Just that I think it's possible, and we maybe have to check that, that those shipments also include the second dose of the vaccine, because we last week we began to give the second dose to those who were initially vaccinated in the middle of December, and we're going to continue to see those second doses in the shipments.

Governor Phil Murphy: We will come back to you and break that down if that's the case. Thank you for that. Dave, please take us home.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Thanks, Governor. First question is on the portal and signing up, preregistration and so forth. Do you get any advantage in terms of your place in line if you do a preregistration to get the vaccine? Or is it just going to be done alphabetically? How's that going to work?

Also people when they get the information, you're told you can get a text message or an email? Is it one or the other? Would you get both if you sign up to get a text message? Do we know yet?

If you don't preregister, how are you going to get the vaccine? I know we mentioned that you could sign up at a hospital, but I'm assuming that means if you're a hospital worker. So if the average person who's not in a high risk group, they're going to be in 1C or 1D, how would they wind up getting a vaccine?

And some people are concerned about this? Perhaps, Governor, some of those people at one of these parties might be included in this group. What happens to the information you fill out? Is it used to keep track of how many Jersey residents are getting vaccinated? Or will this information go into some secret vault somewhere or be used in any other way?

Second question, we've mentioned that the target for New Jersey is to get 70% of the adult population vaccinated within six months. Will this give us herd immunity? What does this 70% number mean really? And if we don't get 70% what's going to happen? Will this possibly mean that we will continue with restrictions, mask wearing possibly for years? Governor, would you want people to kind of think about this in terms of their own impact and how that's going to play out in the general population in our state? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: The information goes right to the Russians, to answer that. No, the information is protected, obviously, like any information in and around healthcare matters. Judy and Eddy, I mean, I think you get a choice, as far as I know, between text or email. That's your personal choice. I think one of the advantages is that you don't have to worry about, am I in 1 A, B, C, D, E? You're just going to get a notification. I guess the question is, when it gets to the general public who's not maybe in one of those categories, how are you going to get it? At that point, you're just going up and getting it. It's that simple at that point, everybody's going to have access to it, but you should add color on that.

I'm not qualified to answer herd immunity but I will repeat something that Tony Fauci said to me privately a few months ago. That is, we will get to a wholly dramatically different and better place, but some of the stuff we're doing now is probably going to stay with us whether – again, I am practicing without a license – whether or not we're above some bogey of what herd immunity looks like. You know, I don't see a lot of handshaking, kisses on the cheek, hugs

for a while. I'm not necessarily going to take Jared's invitation up and go to his basement with 40 other folks and watch the Super Bowl a year from February. I think we've been changed. I don't know that it's permanent. But whether or not we get to 70%, we're going to be in a dramatically different place.

I will tell you, I'm going to hang my hat on this, Memorial Day is going to look a lot different this year than it did last year, and I mean that in a very good, good way. But I don't know that we're all the way back to the old days in the foreseeable future. That's a nonmedical answer almost as much as it is medical. Judy, anything else on what if you're in the general public and you want to get vaccinated? I think this is going to be a moment I hope not too far down the line where you just pull up in your car to one of these mega sites and you're getting vaccinated. Any comments on herd immunity?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: I think it's important to go over the numbers. In New Jersey 70% of the eligible adult population, it's about 4.7 million individuals. 650,000 of them are in the 1A healthcare worker category. Another over 2.5 million are in the essential worker category, 1A, 1B, and 1C. We're hoping to get a supply of vaccine April to May that will meet the demand for everyone. In the meantime, if you preregister and you fit into an essential worker category, and we open it up in segments, your advantage is that you're preregistered, and you will get an email and you'll be able to make your appointment. You may get your vaccine more quickly. That would be the advantage of preregistering. And the information obviously is confidential when you register. It is our same privacy rules that we live by every day at the Department of Health.

The hospital pods, they're what we call closed pods right now for their own workers. They were notified yesterday that they can open up their pods and be available to community healthcare workers and now sworn law enforcement and fire professionals. All they have to do is notify us that they want to be an open pod. We're already getting notifications of that.

Governor Phil Murphy: I just wanted to get yours or Eddy's comment on this question of herd immunity.

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: I personally don't like the term herd immunity, it has too much of a connotation that I don't accept. I like the word community protection, because that's really what we're talking about is community protection. It really is dependent on several factors. The first is the efficacy of the vaccine. The higher the efficacy, the more likely than when you vaccinate people, it's going to work. And in this case, we've got two vaccines that have 95% efficacy, so that is tremendous. I mean, it's almost unheard of, and that's true in even subpopulations such as the older populations, which typically don't have such a good response. That's number one that's going to impact on community protection.

The second is how many people get fully vaccinated. When I say fully vaccinated in this case, it's both doses, not just one dose. Related to that is the factor of durability. How long does the vaccine last in terms of efficacy and how much efficacy over time? We have no idea, really. When the vaccines were authorized under the EUA, we only have three months of basically data looking at efficacy.

And the other factor that we have to also consider is how many people in the population actually had COVID-19 infection? Because they also had a development of an immunologic response and they have a certain amount of protection as well. We don't know how long that protection is, but we know that very few people have been reinfected. We know that there's some durability, and it may be quite long, if you've had natural infection versus vaccine infection. It doesn't mean you shouldn't get vaccinated if you've had the disease. So it's a combination of all those issues.

And then what is the target? You mentioned 70%. I think Tony Fauci used that initially. I've seen him in interviews where he's kind of raised the bar a little bit. He's now said, maybe it's 80%. Maybe it's 90%. The fact the matter is, we don't know with this virus what level of community protection is needed, so that those who don't get vaccinated, whether because medically they can't get vaccinated, because they are hesitant to get vaccinated, for whatever reason they don't get vaccinated, that there's enough immunity in the population, whether natural or vaccine related, that protects those that weren't vaccinated and reduces that R value to not 1.0 or 0.95, but down to 0.5 or even zero, basically eliminating it from the population.

Governor Phil Murphy: Eddy mentions a point that we get asked a lot, how long does this thing last? I want to underscore what Eddy said We don't know. A flu shot is an annual, every October I feel like I go in and get a flu shot. Is it that? Is it a booster like you'd get for something like polio which is maybe a 10-year life, tetanus or something like that? A lot of these questions are to be determined.

Judy and Eddy, thank you. Eddy, I should have said this up front. I think we're going to try to make a habit of having you here every Wednesday for at least the next few Wednesdays to give us an update and that'll be heavily on vaccines, but not exclusively, but thanks for your service and willingness to come back out of the bullpen and help us out in the past year. Judy as always, Pat, Jared, Parimal, Mahen. Again, we're with you virtually tomorrow. We'll be on the road on Friday, and then we'll get back to the Monday/Wednesday/Friday rhythm next week. Stay at it, folks. We're not out of the woods, but we can see the edge of the woods. We have just got to keep our guard up and plough through this as we have done so well so far. God bless you all. Thank you.

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