

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: March 10th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everyone. Sorry to be a minute or two behind here. I am joined by the woman on my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, the COVID-19 Response Medical Director and former state epidemiologist, another familiar face, he's been here on Wednesdays for the past couple of months, Dr. Eddy Bresnitz. It's great to have you both. To my left, the guy who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan, and we have Jared Maples, Director the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, Chief Counsel Parimal Garg and a cast of thousands.

Before we jump in, you may have noticed I said this to Pat, I've got my Department of Military and Veteran Affairs mask on today. And the reason is I participated in a really special ceremony this morning with Dr. Lisa Hou, she is our Acting Adjutant General and is doing an extraordinary job. These were the first Global War on Terrorism Medals on a legislation that I signed, bipartisan legislation, Senators Vin Gopal and Chris Brown, Assemblyman Chris Tully, Chris Dephillips and Roy Freiman. We gave out awards in recognition to five extraordinary individuals. And it gives me a chance to give a shout out again to the National Guard because they're everywhere these days. And Dr. Lisa Hou, a medical professional herself, so it's a timely to have a medical professional, Judy, at the helm of the National Guard. But you see them and we hear these stories all the time at our vaccine mega sites. I was with them this morning. They were there, Pat, with you and your colleagues who have done a great job on things like testing, vaccines, field medical stations. We have 333 members of the Guard still in our nation's Capital as we speak. It was another great opportunity to be with them. So I know I joined the 9 million members of our New Jersey family to say thank you again to the Guard.

So today, on with the program, I am pleased to announce that effective next Friday, March 19th, the indoor capacities for our restaurants, indoor recreational and amusement businesses, gyms and fitness clubs, and barber shops, salons and other personal care businesses will increase to 50%. These businesses have been capped at 35% for the past five weeks. Additionally, effective next Friday, same date, we're also announcing changes to our general gathering limits. Indoor gatherings that are not religious services or ceremonies, political events, weddings, funerals, memorial services or performances will be capped at 25 individuals, that's up from 10. And similarly, outdoor gatherings that are not religious services or ceremonies, political events, weddings, funerals, or memorial services will be capped at 50 individuals up from 25.

We feel confident in these steps given the data that we've been seeing over the past five weeks since the last time we expanded the indoor reality. For example, on February 5th, when our restaurant capacity last changed, our hospitals were treating just under 2,900 patients. That number has come down by about 1,000 and it's been consistent since then. In fact, our hospitalizations have been below 2,000 for the past 12 days. While the numbers of new cases we report daily can fluctuate from day to day, particularly when you look at weekend testing and you're going to see an example of that today, and some days can be high, we believe that when all factors are weighed, we can make this expansion without leading to undue further stress on our healthcare system.

Unlike some states, which are prioritizing frankly flat out politics of Republic health, Texas and Mississippi come to mind, our mask mandate remains in effect and will continue to be enforced. We will continue to move deliberately, responsibly, incrementally guided by public health data and the other data points, obviously, that we look at. You saw some other states like Texas and Mississippi, frankly, that opened all at once last summer and we saw the surge in cases and hospitalizations that came on the back of that.

Also, as our weather finally, Pat, becomes warmer, I'm happy to say I believe I'll predict that you have very little report on the weather front other than it's nice. I'm encouraging everyone in the strongest possible terms to engage in social activities outside whenever possible. We know this virus is many times more transmissible and lethal indoors than outdoors and I applaud every restaurant and there are literally tens of thousands of them that have undertaken creative efforts to facilitate outdoor dining, and I look forward to seeing outdoor dining reemerge in full force this spring.

And as I said a month ago, we can only take these steps because of the actions of literally millions of you to put us in a better position. So as you keep up with social distancing, wearing your masks, getting vaccinated when you can and the like, we can continue to responsibly reopen.

Switching gears, yesterday that organization gave us tremendous news and another feather in our cap as US News and World Report rated New Jersey's public schools as the very best in the United States of America. We just beat out Massachusetts, I'm happy to say. Now while this is a great title to hold we know we have room to do better and to bring more schools, more students and more communities under this banner, and our work in achieving this continuous. Our administration is committed to funding our schools as they should be. And with this year's proposed budget investment, we will have increased investments in our public schools by \$1.5 billion. That's an increase of \$1.5 billion since we got here. This isn't just an investment in our kids. It's an investment in our future, our economy. It's an investment in our communities.

We have taken tremendous pride in our schools, as well as in the educators and parents, educators and educational support professionals and school and local leaders who make a school a true community. Now certainly this is not your run-of-the-mill school year. But even with the challenges and hurdles, our public schools are working hard to clear them every single day and working beside them has been the Department of Education under the leadership of Acting Commissioner Dr. Angelica Allen-Macmillan.

And as if gaining the top spot in the nation isn't good enough news, we have even more. As of today, New Jersey's digital divide is now no more. It has been closed. Based on the latest input from our schools and districts the reported number of students across New Jersey still lacking either a device or connectivity for remote learning is zero. Last summer when we first looked to take on this challenge, it was estimated that 231,000 students did not have all the tools they needed for remote learning. These students lived in every setting: urban, suburban rural. We committed \$54 million in federal pandemic relief funds earmarked specifically for education to partner with our districts to close this divide. And today, that investment has paid off.

However, don't expect us to rest on any laurels because now our task shifts to ensuring that the digital divide isn't allowed to creep back open. And closing the digital divide wasn't just about meeting the challenges of remote learning, although it is, it's been about ensuring that every student has the tools they need to excel in a 21st Century educational environment. This is vitally important, as more and more of our students return to in-person instruction, whether their schools are all in person or are reopening to allow in-person classes on a hybrid schedule. Their laptops are not just for home instruction. They're just as critical these days as any textbook.

So let's remember there are about 812 public school districts, charter schools, Renaissance schools, and schools for students with disabilities across our state over which we have stewardship. Today, of that number, currently 110 are open for all in-person instruction. That's more than 70,000 students back in their classrooms full time. Another 541 are open for hybrid instruction. That is more than 831,000 students. These numbers are both up from the last time we gave a full report. I think that was 10 days ago. Some 36 of our local education agencies are using some combination of in person, hybrid or all remote learning across their buildings and this impacts about 85,000 students, but many of them we know are back in their classrooms in some fashion. This leaves roughly 367,000 students in 125 different districts or schools who are still on full-time remote learning. And this number also continues to trend downward.

But keep in mind too, that these students have now been out of their classrooms for a full year, and getting all of our students back in their familiar school surroundings, learning alongside their friends and in classrooms headed by their dedicated educators and support staff is among our top priorities. It's one reason why we are working with our educators to get them vaccinated, so they can move confidently in returning to their classrooms.

Next, Judy, I want to build on some of the conversation we had on Monday, and I know you may have some things, I know in fact you have some things to say on this. Before I move to the overnight numbers, I want to reiterate and expand on some things, again, that Judy and I touched upon in Monday's briefing as it pertains to visitations at our long-term care facilities. And it is this, and I want all long-term care administrators, residents and loved ones to hear this clearly. Compassionate care, essential caregiver, outdoor, and end-of-life visitation by appointment should be permitted even when indoor visitation is otherwise restricted because of the status of your facility.

Essential caregivers should be permitted visitation if a facility goes 14 days without a positive case, and compassionate care visits are allowed even when there is a known case in a facility. And importantly, compassionate care visits are not end-of-life visits. They are for any resident who may not be coping well, or whose status of health is declining. We have enormous concern regarding the emotional distress caused by isolation, and it's much broader impact on the overall health and quality of life of residents in our long-term care facilities. Although compassionate care visits are not meant to be routine, they may need to take place more than once.

Additionally, Long-Term Care Ombudsman Laurie Breuer and her staff, both full time and volunteers, must be permitted to visit facilities regardless of whether there is an active outbreak, to monitor the health and safety of residents, investigate complaints of abuse and neglect and ensure that resident rights are being respected. That's why they're there, by the way. We fully recognize the work that our long term care facilities are doing to mitigate the further spread of this virus. Many of these facilities have experienced enormous emotional strains and losses of life. We get that you want to be and need to be cautious. However, all long-term care facilities must take visitation allowances as seriously as they are taking virus control. No one should be prevented from visiting a loved one without a reasonable cause for health and safety. And no facility should place all residents on lockdown in their rooms without taking a full accounting for individual resident needs, staff, PPE capacity and building characteristics.

Judy and her team at the Department of Health have already helped numerous facilities problem solve to accommodate the needs of residents to move freely outside of their rooms and allow for essential and compassionate visitations, while also meeting stringent infection control standards.

I'll say, Judy on your behalf, you and your team stand ready to help others. There should be no one-size-fits-all blanket policy when it comes to these types of visits. Every resident has unique needs that should be uniquely addressed. I encourage any resident or loved one who is experiencing a challenge in navigating the options for visitation in a long-term care setting to call the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman at 1-877-582-6992 or visit that website, nj.gov/OOIE to send an email or to file a complaint, Thank you for allowing me to go through that.

Now to today's numbers. As of midmorning today, we have delivered a total of 2,671,480 vaccine doses into people's arms. That includes more than 1.75 million initial doses of either Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, as well as 919,000 folks who are now fully vaccinated, either because they have received both doses of those vaccines or because they have received the one-dose vaccine from Johnson & Johnson.

However, we are reporting if you add up PCR and antigen tests, an additional 3,995 positive tests today. The positivity for the 22,756 PCR tests, again recorded on Saturday, was 10.56% and it is our assumption, if you're getting tested on a weekend or a holiday, you're getting tested for a reason. And that's why literally, I think for the past three months, every single Saturday, Sunday and holiday has shown a spike in our positivity.

The statewide rate of transmission based on the seven-day rolling average of cases through Monday is now at 1.04. And that's roughly, not quite, roughly a one-to-one rate of spread. As of last night, our hospitals reporting 1,961 total patients, including 1,823 who were confirmed positive, those numbers are up a bit over the past couple of days.

Throughout the day yesterday, 227 live patients were discharged, 244 new COVID patients were admitted. Our hospitals reported again at the risk of comparing apples and oranges, as these are not confirmed, 17 deaths. As of 10:00 p.m. 408 residents were being treated in ICUs and 235 ventilators were in use.

And sadly, we must report the loss with the heaviest heart of another 56 members of our New Jersey family to this virus. The total count of confirmed deaths, as you can see, is now 21,294. Today marks the one-year anniversary of our first confirmed deaths from COVID-19 and I'll put that in a little bit more perspective in a couple of minutes. The number of probable deaths has been updated as well as it is every Wednesday, it is currently 2,474. This includes 714 from within our long-term care facilities, both residents and staff.

Three months ago, on December 11, we reported a total of 1,868 probable deaths, including 675 from our long-term care settings, to give you some sense of comparison. The majority of our probable deaths occurred prior to June 25th when we began releasing these numbers. Our first report was 1,854 probable deaths. And many of these, by the way as I speak today, still stand as probable, dating back to the early days of the pandemic when testing was scarce and may not have been performed on someone who passed away, but whose symptoms indicate a likely COVID complication. Regardless of whether one's passing has been determined as a confirmed COVID complication or a probable death. They are gone and we honor them all. And we remember them all. And with that, let's honor three more who have recently lost.

I want to begin today by me by honoring Rumson's Paul Ahn. Paul is there, second from the right. A graduate of Rutgers University, Paul founded Flavor Materials International in 1984 and took it from being a small Avenal-based operation producing flavorings for the food industry into one of the world's leading taste and smell creators. He led flavor materials for 36 years and put his heart and soul and taste buds and nose into the business. But while his business gave him international acclaim and took him on numerous international travels, Paul was happiest at home in New Jersey with his family, spending time watching the Navesink River roll past or sharing a meal with friends and loved ones.

Paul now leaves behind his family. His wife, Kathy on the left, his sons Douglas, Douglas is 28 and lives in Brooklyn, and Chris 27 lives in West Palm Beach, and daughter-in-law Jessa and they are all there before you. I had the great honor of speaking with Kathy and her sons on Monday. He's also survived by two of his brothers, Philip and Christopher and numerous sisters and brothers in law and seven nieces and nephews. As I mentioned, the Ahns live not a couple of miles from where we live. There are lots of apocryphal jokes about the tastes and smells of our great state, but Paul changed that and made our state the place from where only good things come. We thank him for all that he did and may God bless and watch over his soul and his extraordinary family.

Next up, Pat, we remember Retired Police Detective Sergeant A. James "Jim" Rambo, who proudly served the residents of Monroe Township in Gloucester County. for 25 years. He was a proud member of the Monroe FOP Lodge 125. He was a native of Woodbury, a graduate of Woodbury High and throughout his 79 years called Woodbury Heights, Williamstown and Mantua home. He wasn't just an accomplished law enforcement professional, which he was. He was also an accomplished saxophonist. Jim's lifelong love of the sax began at the age of nine and he was playing paid gigs, Judy, by the age of 14. Even in his later years, he could still be found playing for patrons at Geat's Diner in Williamstown.

Jim leaves behind his wife Faye. He was predeceased by his first wife Patricia in 2012. He leaves behind their two children, Mike with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Monday, and Donna, and Donna's husband, Kevin, he will be greatly missed by them all, and especially by his four beloved grandchildren, Emily, Olivia, Aiden and Michael. We thank Detective Sergeant Rambo for his service to the residents of Gloucester County, and for always bringing a smile to people's faces through music. May God bless him and watch over him and his family.

The last one today is a particularly tough one. We remember Joanna Jimenez of Paterson. She is the one who's pictured in those photographs being held by family and friends. Joanna was just 36 years old when she passed shortly after giving birth to her third son in an emergency delivery made necessary because of the way this virus had weakened her. She was confirmed as COVID positive in her eighth month of pregnancy. Sadly, Joanna passed away a week after the delivery and was never able to hold her son, Ashton. And by the way, her son Ashton, who was born, I think, on February 13th if my notes are correct, was born to this world COVID negative.

In addition to Ashton, Joanna leaves behind her husband Chad with whom I had the great honor of speaking. You can only imagine how it's going for him, and her two other sons 15-year-old Jordan and Christian who is just 19 months. And it will be up to Chad and Jordan to tell young Christian and Ashton what a loving woman their mother was. Joanna also leaves her mother Sarah, and two sisters Jacqueline and Jancyeth, her brother John and numerous other family and friends. Joanna's best friend, Cynthia Sanchez, set up a GoFundMe campaign that has raised \$50,000. I will just say this unequivocally, it's not enough. So folks can track that down and help out Chad and his three blessed sons. I think you'd be doing the world and our state a great deal of good, never mind for their family. So while every life we memorialize is hard, and admittedly, this is one of the hardest losses to speak about. We know Joanna is looking down upon her family, and will continue to be a guiding and protective presence in their lives. God bless her and watch over her, her guy and her three boys.

As I noted when we announced our first confirmed death due to COVID-19 complications one year ago today, March 10th, 2020 Little Ferry's John Brennan, 69 years old, I was back and forth with Little Ferry's mayor and dear friend Mauro Raguseo this morning, exchanging thoughts about this one-year somber anniversary. We had no idea at that time how many more lives we would lose and how many families would be impacted. The toll of this virus has been staggering. it exceeds the numbers of New Jerseyans lost in any war. In one year, we have lost an average of 65 residents per day. And today, we still don't know how many more we will lose and how many more families will be impacted. In memory of all we have lost, I think it is appropriate that we take a minute and observe a moment of silence.

In their honor and in honor of the loved ones they left behind, we cannot give up the fight and we cannot stop doing the things that we know will save lives: social distancing, wearing our face masks, in our today's case, our case two of them, getting vaccinated as soon as we can, using common sense, take yourself off the field. If you don't feel well or you have been exposed, get tested at the right point. Keep doing that folks, and we will get there.

Now moving forward, as we have noted many times, there are multiple state departments and agencies working directly with our downtowns and small businesses to help them weather this storm and prepare for the post-pandemic days that we know are coming. So today I want to highlight the partnership between the Department of Community Affairs, under the extraordinary leadership of Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver, and the longtime nonprofit organization, NORWESCAP, to support Phillipsburg's South Main Street District. Through DCA, NORWESCAP received a \$430,000 neighborhood preservation COVID-19 relief grant. NORWESCAP made numerous investments in the district, including things like building an outdoor dining area, purchasing PPE and sanitation equipment, and even working with a dozen businesses on digital marketing plans to help them create ecommerce solutions.

But that wasn't enough. NORWESCAP also awarded direct grants to 20 small businesses, accounting for roughly 20% of the businesses in Phillipsburg's South Main Street District. One of those businesses was Graphic Action Printing and Signs, owned and operated by that guy, Frank Garrity. He's had his business in Phillipsburg since opening in 1989, obviously the upheaval of our businesses due to the pandemic hit Frank and Graphic Action hard, but the direct grant he received has allowed him to cover his operational expenses and stay open.

As we continue moving forward with reopening our economy, we know businesses will be going back to Frank for help with their marketing needs. Phillipsburg is a town that is coming back and we want to make sure that Frank is there to help that downtown community be seen. Check him out, not only at 296 South Main Street, but at graphicactionnj.com.

And finally today, with a heavy heart, I want to honor a friend Blanquita Valenti, the former Middlesex County Freeholder back when that's what they were called, who passed away late yesterday at the age of 87. And she was a dear friend of mine and of many. Blanquita was a trailblazer in Middlesex County, the first Latina to serve on the New Brunswick City Council in 1990, and the first Latina to win countywide election when she won a seat on the Freeholder board in 2004.

She was an educator by profession, and an activist by nature, staunchly proud of her Puerto Rican heritage. Now she and I had some great memories together. My favorite one was one of the several South Plainfield Labor Day parades, Blanquita was up sitting on the back of a convertible. I was hoofing it and we were exchanging notes and comparing notes in the shade, and then the sun, and I loved her. She was a great, great woman and a great leader. Middlesex County Democratic Chairman Kevin McCabe, another dear friend, called her and I quote Kevin, "The personification of dignity and class." And that was Blanquita to a T. She will be missed by so many, not just her children and grandchildren of which she had many. I spoke with her daughter Terry, who's up from Florida today, her granddaughter, Marissa, who lives in New Jersey and was taking close care of her grandmother, please keep her in your prayers. God bless you, Blanquita, and we thank you for everything you have meant to our great state.

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 covered, the department is working to provide a balance in accommodating long-term care visitation and doing it in a way that keeps residents, staff and visitors safe. We know that COVID-19 remains in our communities and we must maintain our vigilance to ensure that the appropriate safeguards are in place for these vulnerable residents. While the number of outbreaks in long-term care facilities continues to decline, we still have 273 active outbreaks in these facilities. As vaccination progresses, we expect that progress to continue. We expect to see more declines in outbreaks. But we do need high levels of both residents and staff vaccinated for that to occur.

As part of our effort to safeguard the residence of these facilities who were so severely impacted by COVID-19, the department has developed phases of reopening for the facilities. The phased reopening is based on the outbreak status of a facility, based on the department's COVID-19 activity level index or CALI score, and the facility's ability to meet criteria including testing of staff and residents, infection control protocols, adequate staffing and personal protective equipment.

However, as the Governor stated, compassionate care, essential caregiver and end-of-life visitation and outdoor visitation can be permitted, even when indoor visitation is otherwise restricted because of the facility's status. Compassionate care visits are permitted in a wide range of situations affecting long-term care residents, including when a resident's physical or emotional health is significantly deteriorating. Some examples of compassionate care visits can be for a resident who was living with their family before recently being admitted. We know that a change in their environment and sudden lack of family can be traumatic. Allowing a visit from a family member in this situation would be consistent with the intent of the term compassionate care situations.

Similarly, allowing someone to visit a resident whose friend or family member recently passed away would also fall under a compassionate care visit. Or, a resident whose health status is sharply declining. Additionally, a resident who needs encouragement with eating or drinking previously provided by family or caregiver, and who is experiencing weight loss or dehydration. A resident who used to talk and interact with others, but is now experiencing emotional distress, seldom speaking or crying more frequently when the resident had rarely exhibited these characteristics in the past.

Also, as a reminder, an essential caregiver could be an individual who was previously actively engaged with the resident, or was committed to providing assistance with activities of daily living. These caregivers would include a family member or an outside caregiver, or a friend who provided regular care and help to the resident prior to the pandemic.

Outdoor visitation is allowed in all phases, and with the weather turning milder, opportunities for outdoor visitation should increase. Again, a facility is able to resume general indoor visitation if the CALI score for that region has been in moderate to low level of activity for at least two weeks and if the facility can attest that it has met the following department requirements: after no new cases have been detected in the last two weeks, in accordance with CDC guidance. The facility is not conducting outbreak testing, and the facility has sufficient PPE and cleaning and disinfection supplies to permit a visitation, and also has a mechanism to collect informed consent from the residents and visitors.

Visitation is permitted in a resident's room if they are in a single room. If a resident is in a shared room, the facility needs to identify a visitation location that allows for social distancing and for deep cleaning. For situations where there is a roommate and the health status of the resident prevents leaving the room, the facility should attempt to enable in-room visitation while adhering to the core principles of COVID-19 infection prevention.

The CDC guidance that was released Monday about gathering of vaccinated individuals does not apply to healthcare facilities. But we have reached out to CDC and in concert with CMS, they are expected to release updated guidance perhaps later today that addresses healthcare facilities including long-term care facilities. We are looking forward to that sometime after 4:00 p.m. It is likely that guidance will reference community spread similar to how we developed our CALI scores, however.

The COVID-19 activity report which outlines CALI scores remains the same as last week. Therefore, indoor visitation will remain open in facilities in 10 counties that have met the department's requirements. Those counties are Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, Hunterdon, Mercer, Salem and Somerset.

As I noted earlier, vaccination is an important part of protecting residents of these facilities. Long-term care facilities are reporting that about 72% of residents are fully vaccinated, meaning they've followed their two-dose regimen, and assisted living facilities are reporting that 90% of their residents are fully vaccinated, meaning they have received both doses of the vaccine. Both of these types of facilities, however, report about 50% of their staff have been fully vaccinated. We know there has been some vaccine hesitancy among long-term care staff. Since January, the department has specifically targeted long-term care staff through its vaccination campaign to build confidence in COVID-19 vaccination. Through digital and social media advertising, we're sharing messages from healthcare providers about how important it is for staff, particularly in long-term care, to be vaccinated, and we're sharing safety and efficacy information on the vaccines. A long-term care toolkit was developed for facility leaders, which includes these messages, answers to frequently asked questions, and draft messages that they can share with their staff to increase their interest in getting vaccinated. The toolkit was sent to the long-term care industry associations to distribute to facilities throughout the state.

I also want to provide an update on the vaccination call center. After providing enhanced training, they began scheduling appointments yesterday. The hotline 1-855-568-0545 is open from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. every day and can help callers in more than 240 different languages. Agents are also available to register individuals in the New Jersey Vaccine Scheduling System, answer questions about the vaccine, provide contact information for sites and check registration status, in addition to scheduling appointments. Cumulatively, the call center has registered over 30,000 individuals and at this point in time has made over 11,000 appointments.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 1,961 hospitalizations with 408 individuals in critical care. There are no new reports, fortunately, of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children.

There are now a total of 145 CDC variants of concern reported in the state, six newly reported today and also including the first South African variant, that is variant B-1.351. At the state veteran homes, there has been one new case among residents at the Vineland home, no new cases in Menlo Park and Paramus. In the state psychiatric hospitals, there are no new cases among our patients.

The Daily percent positivity in the state is 10.56. The Northern part is 11.18, Central 10.82, Southern 8.29. So that concludes my daily report. Stay safe, continue to mask up, socially distance, stay home if you're sick, get tested and remember, for each other and for us all take the call. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. Not surprised about the variants. We've been assuming they are in our midst, but confirming now yet another one. I think the number that jumps out for me, and if I may, with your blessing, triple underscore this, 50% of staff at long-term care getting vaccinated is unacceptable. And I know you agree with that wholeheartedly. That number has got to change.

Now the good news is when you have residents getting vaccinated at the levels, they're getting vaccinated, you've seen the outbreak numbers come down. But it's not foolproof, number one, and number two, that doesn't mean you can't have outbreaks among staff, who then are either bringing it into the long-term care resident or getting infected from another staff member and bringing it home. So that number has got to -- I know you join me in this plea, that number has got to change. And so thank you for everything and thanks for the full report, particularly on visitations. And you mentioned you're going to get more guidance from the CDC after four o'clock today. Okay, great. Thank you.

Pat, I have a feeling this is a light report for you. I know it is on the weather front, but anything you see on compliance or any other matters?

State Police Col. Patrick Callahan: No, thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Since Monday, there were no Executive Order compliance violations reported to the ROIC. And the weather, just David Matthau taking off his jacket during the press conference is an indication of how nice it is out there, and he might get a quick nine in, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good sign. He still has Bernie's mittens on though, so we just want to keep folks attuned to that. So I think we'll start over here with Dustin. We're going to be virtual tomorrow as we have been, and I think we will be some combination of on the road on Friday, as I predicted. So I think you'll see some combination of the three of us out there on Friday, and we'll do our level best to give you the COVID numbers from the road. Again, where we will be, so assuming that's right we'll be virtual tomorrow, on the road Friday. We will be, as we have been on weekends unless you hear otherwise and then we'll be back together on Monday as usual. So with that, Dustin, good afternoon.

Q&A Session

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Good afternoon, on the indoor limits. Why aren't you comfortable going as far as nearby states like New York or Connecticut? If Johnson & Johnson is manufacturing 20 million vaccine doses this month and New Jersey is not getting more beyond its 70,000 are we getting a fair allotment?

In Lakewood, about 20% of the public school staff has gotten sick since July and four are currently hospitalized. Does this cause you concern?

Earlier this week, we reported about 200 users of the state's My New Jersey portal were hacked. How do you think people should view the state's vulnerability level after this? And what steps are being taken to address or fortify the state's technology? Is the state giving any assistance to victims who had their personal information exposed?

And finally, Governor, over the past year, you said repeatedly how committed you are to transparency. But respectfully, there's a long list of examples that say otherwise. I'll spare you the details but it's a pretty sizable list. So do you think your administration has lived up to your public statements about transparency? Thanks.

Governor Phil Murphy: I want to say among other things, I appreciate you sparing me the details. But if you give me the list, I'll make sure we make it public. Let me take a couple of these, Judy may want to weigh in. Jared Maples, I want to ask to come in here in a second.

On indoor limits, we're going to do this incrementally. And, you know, we continue to be in harmony at the thematic level with our neighborhood. But that does not mean that we take the exact same steps at the same time. I predicted a couple weeks ago, Judy, I'm pretty sure I did a couple weeks ago here that you could assume the next move on the indoor capacities was going to be to 50 and that's what we're saying today, effective a week from Friday. I think it's at 6:00 a.m. a week from Friday in case anyone's asking. I think Judy would echo this. We don't want to lurch out there and have to come back. And so we're going to continue to be that way. I believe New York City is announcing or has announced that they're going to 50% on the same timing and that is one that does matter because of the density of the population on both sides of the Hudson.

Judy, I believe we're getting our fair allocation of Johnson & Johnson, there's no New Jersey specific, why aren't we getting more. It does feel to me like Johnson & Johnson has put some on the street and we're using them. Thank God we got them and they're game changers, particularly with hard-to-reach people, homebound, etc. But at the same time, it feels like they're holding back to make sure that they've got their manufacturing in place for sort of an end of the month or early April ramp up of meaningful amounts, would you agree with that? And that's not just New Jersey, that feels system wide, statewide.

Yeah, Lakewood has concerned us. I was on with the NJEA leadership last Wednesday, back and forth about that. I saw the same press reports you did. I think you said four were hospitalized when we had that conversation, there were two at that time. It's among other reasons, I think you'll find Judy and me in Lakewood sooner than later to get up close and personal there.

I'll skip to transparency and say listen, we are doing, I promise you, our level best to be transparent in every single way. I would also remind folks that we're still at war and we're building the plane as we fly it, so I would just say to you, that's our commitment. That is our sort of philosophy. And I'm not suggesting we're perfect, but that is what we're committed to. And maybe it's a question of time. Maybe it's something that we are committed to making sure something is disclosed and is transparent, which we are, but maybe not as fast as some people would like, but we will get there.

Your fourth question I'm going to turn over to the Director of the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, this is about the incidence of the 200 or so accounts that were hacked. Over to Jared Maples. Jared.

Director of Homeland Security and Preparedness Jared Maples: Thank you, Governor. So in reference to that, first of all, I'll state declaratively that the systems and servers were not hacked. There were individual accounts. It was done by a process called credential stuffing, which essentially means that those individual users' personal data, whether it be a password or username were harvested on the dark web. So they came from a personal email account or another account that they used. And they used, they stuffed every credential they could find into certain accounts. In this case, the pension system that has been outlined in your article that you talked about. I won't go into any further details other than to say it is under active investigation as a criminal act and there will be more details that come, obviously, at the conclusion of that investigation.

From a perspective, a good perspective, and this is why the NJ CCIC was created is to correlate the data, the threats, and make sure the public and users were aware of the resources available to them. In this case, each of those users were notified that the breach had happened to their accounts, that the hack had happened to their accounts, and given resources to mitigate their individual accounts and steps they can take on the back end. If anybody from the public, especially those 200 users, but anybody from the public needs more information and more resources for cyber security, including best practices like protecting yourself in your accounts, we encourage you to go to our website at cyber.nj.gov. And again, that's one of our core mission areas at Homeland Security is making sure both the private sector, the public sector, and quite frankly, all the New Jersey community has a good and safe online presence and has the resources and tools available for free at that website, cyber.nj.gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: I would just say that it's a good example of the broader reality in which we live. And that is everything from lone wolves, criminal operations, to state-sponsored cyber activities. And in case you're watching out there, folks, that includes the Russian government, the Chinese government, the Iranian government and the North Korean government. That's not an exhaustive list, but those would be my top four. And that's the world we're living in, folks. So anybody who thinks you can let your hair down in cyber world, whether you're a state government or an individual and everything in between, you're not paying attention. So thank you for asking that, Dustin. Matt, to you. Good afternoon.

Matt Arco, Star-Ledger: Good afternoon. Will the state at some point expand reopening by county or geographic area based on local vaccination rates? Also, will we rely mostly on CDC guidelines for expanding reopenings or will the state come up with its own guidelines?

Governor, on the stimulus, with the proposal set to give New Jersey another \$6 billion, will any of that be spent on retiring the debt incurred last year? If so, there will be strings attached by the feds, but it could free up your budget in other areas. What are your plans?

And also just in general, what's your reaction to the stimulus that's expected to be signed? And real quick on today's announcement with restaurants, will there'll be stipulation or will seating at bars be allowed again, or is that going to be something that's still prohibited?

Phil Murphy: I think in the last question, the answer is no. Am I right? Yeah, so we're still not at seating at bars. And that's one where I've gotten a lot of incomings, and I appreciate the incomings. And I've sat at a few bars myself, so it's a special sort of ambience, it's a special sort of thing, whether you're having a drink or you're having dinner and a drink, whatever it might be but we've got to take this in steps.

Could we do something on a county basis at some point? I think it's possible but Judy has really, we have done that already. Early on, Judy established the three big regions for the hospital systems. We then had, Judy has broken that down from three to six as it relates to school metrics, as well as visitations that we spoke about earlier. School districts, clearly 99 point something percent of kids who go to school in a public school district live in that district. So by definition, that is happening already.

Could I see it? I would not say hell no, but we are the densest state in the nation, among the smallest geographically. We're on top of each other. I think we continue to be, as it relates to business and other moves, I think we continue to move as one. But again, I would not say hell no on that.

CDC guidelines, yeah, I think we will continue. We've been following them as a health matter quite adherently. So I think on the health side, absolutely. I think you asked though on reopenings. I think we're, you know, the CDC is sort of telling folks pretty clearly to be cautious. So they're not giving us prescribed your restaurants ought to be at X percent. But they are saying explicitly, be cautious. They've been quite critical, I think, of indoor capacities going to 100. And they've been especially critical of lack of mask mandates, especially indoors. And so I think plus or minus, we will continue to do that.

I think what we will do is, I think sooner or later, in some format, come back with a comprehensive answer on the rest of the American Rescue Plan and how we see the deployment of those resources in the state. I have said from the get-go, looking at opportunities to reduce our debt has got to be on the list of considerations. But just looking at where we need support right now, but yeah, I think you asked me what was my reaction? Overwhelmingly positive. This is a big positive deal for New Jersey. There's just no other way to put it.

I was looking at the sort of the list of the needs, we have, vaccination support, and all the monies that go with that, keeping frontline workers employed and delivering services, unemployment insurance benefits, the expansion of Medicaid that we've seen over the past year, rental assistance, landlord assistance, all of the utilities payments that are in arrearages. I think now the estimate is \$700 million, a devastating reality for small businesses, restaurants, bars, more help for childcare, I could go on. There's lots of areas where we could put those resources to good use. But we do owe folks a more comprehensive answer to that and with time, we will do that. Thank you for that. Sir, do you have anything? You good? You got one? Nice mask, by the way. Hold on.

Reporter: I just have one, Governor. What is the status of your plan to vaccinate people with developmental disabilities who don't live in group homes?

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, you should jump in but that's a big piece of the Johnson & Johnson reality, getting to people who are homebound for whatever reason, and are unable to be swept into either our federal long-term care partnership or the mega sites or other community locations. By the way, I meant to say this earlier, Judy I looked at our note today, we not only have almost now surely 2.7 million vaccines administered, but we have 492 points of distribution around the state. But to your very good question, not everybody can get there. Judy, please.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: We are vaccinating developmentally disabled individuals who are ambulatory or mobile, or even in wheelchairs if they can get to our sites. All of our mega sites have special accommodations and particularly quiet rooms, that may be more appropriate to help those individuals through. For those that cannot leave their homes, they will be part of our homebound plan that we're developing right now. But we will reach everyone.

Governor Phil Murphy: I know we were mobile on Saturday in one of the big, I forget which of the big Newark parks over the weekend. I mean, this is evolving. And again to repeat something, Judy, if you if you see this differently, or Pat or Eddy, tell me. Incremental increase in vaccine doses for the next two or three weeks, and then it's going to be a quantum uptick. And that's a combination of J & J, which doesn't sound like they're really going to be online for the next couple of weeks, sort of loading their gun and getting ready to really come out with a major slug, as well as the commitment that Moderna and Pfizer have each made that will come online for manufacturing of increased doses. And that'll all come together within a fairly short amount of time. Thank you. Dave, good afternoon.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. First, a question from our Statehouse correspondent Mike Symons, New Jersey is back as the state with the highest COVID infection rate in the nation, according to COVIDACTNOW.org. What do you make of this?

Last week, you announced, Governor, the indoor capacity for wedding receptions was being raised to give people time to plan their big event. Are you thinking about increasing capacity limits for late spring or summer outdoor gatherings, festivals and celebrations as well? These folks say, and understandably so, that they also need a long runway so they can plan whatever kind of an event they're going to have.

And sort of connected to that question, the final question here, what about this idea of some kind of vaccine passport? Wouldn't this allow us to significantly increase capacity for outdoor and indoor shows, concerts, sporting events, etc. New York and other states have already launched pilot programs for this kind of thing. How do you feel about this? Do you think there are pros and cons? What's your sense of this kind of an idea? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Dave, thank you. My colleague Dan Bryan reminds me, it was Branchport Park in Newark where we had the mobile vans out. And as Judy said, that's only the tip of the iceberg in terms of our reaching into communities. Give Mike Symon's my best, by the way. Yeah, Judy and I had this conversation yesterday in Paterson. It is a fact and it is our density. It's our proximity to the New York City reality. We're in the densest region in the country. We've got to give Eddy his money's worth here, we've got to pull you in from the bullpen. How do you assess that reality? If not the top, we are one of the top-rated infected case states in the nation?

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: Well, it's all the factors that you mentioned. You might add also that we had some bad weather a couple of weeks ago, and maybe people, it drove people indoors a little bit more than they would have been and so a little bit of mixing. We do have variants, as we discussed in the state, that also might be contributing to, you know, to the increased positivity. And, you know, behaviors changing as well. We're still, every meeting we have, every event that's had, we stress the importance of the non-pharmaceutical interventions and not everybody is necessarily following it, so it's a multifactorial basis for the higher positivity rate that we have in the state.

The good news is that hospitalization rates continue to be low and the severe disease continues to be low. We still have deaths, but those deaths are delayed. They're from some weeks ago as well. I think we're heading in the right direction but we're not there yet.

Governor Phil Murphy: Amen and well said. I think as it relates to late spring and summer activities, I think we will be getting to that, I hope sooner than later. I've got in the back of my mind graduations and proms, which are similar long runway events. So I'd say to folks to bear with us. We're good on that front.

And lastly, I've expressed, I was asked last week I think on Ask The Governor, I'd be open minded to that. I guess the problem I have, Judy you and Eddy should weigh in on this vaccine passport. The specific context I was asked about was to go to a sporting event or a concert of some sort indoors. And I guess the concern I have on the other side is because there was also some other states that ask you to present evidence of a negative COVID test within the past 72 hours. And I think you've felt, you and Eddy and Tina felt well, okay, but you probably should apply that to a restaurant you're going to or some other event. How do you react to that notion, that notion of a vaccine passport?

Commissior of Health Judith Persichilli: I think we all forget that these are new vaccines never before available to fight a disease, a virus that never before has been seen in humans. We know that all the vaccines are extremely efficacious in protecting you against severe disease, hospitalizations, and death. We don't know about reinfections yet. It's still under study. All the vaccines are still under study. There will come a time when we'll have all that information and a vaccine passport may make more sense at that point in time. I don't know if Eddy, if you want to.

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: I've had mixed thoughts about the passport. On the one hand if it's a legitimate passport, and the term is passport, which is technically legitimate and it's not faked, and there's a way of ensuring its legitimacy, I think it has a lot of value. It may have more value than other things we're doing to screen people. You know, we take temperature measurements of people and there's lots of issues around you know, the sensitivity and specificity of that. People can still be infected and transmitting disease, and so which is more, which is a better screening tool? Taking someone's temperature or someone showing a passport that's a certified passport?

And so, I think that there is a place for passports as long as the issuing of those are done in a responsible and legal fashion. Right now, for example, you know, there are airlines that are requiring antibody tests or some sort of screening tests before they get on within 72 hours of getting on it. Even that's not perfect. It's good as a screening tool but someone still could be infected and transmitting virus. So I think it's a tool that we certainly should be looking at. I'm not sure when it's going to be ready for primetime. There are a number of companies working on that. And maybe it needs to be some sort of federal issuing of a passport. I'm not really sure. I think there's a lot of debate around that. But there is room for it I think somewhere in the future.

Governor Phil Murphy: Pat reminds me as I'm sure Jared would as well and Eddy, you alluded to this, that you also get folks who would create some fraudulent passport of some sort. Thank you all.

I want to give a moment of personal privilege. First of all, God rest my brother-in-law, Sean Brickell, who passed away suddenly. But I had an incredibly profound conversation by phone the other day with Associate Justice Jaynee LaVecchia, who has been on the New Jersey Supreme Court for 21 years. And that was not her first gig in public service. She was appointed by a friend and predecessor Governor Christie Todd Whitman. But before that, across at least a couple of administrations, including Governor, another mentor of mine, Governor Tom Kean, she served as the Commissioner of the Department of Banking and Insurance. She was a senior member of the Division of Law with the Attorney General and she was in Counsel's Office, as Parimal is, under Governor Kean, and just an extraordinary run of public service, and she is going to step down at the end of their session. And I'll bet you that she will find ways to continue that service, even after she leaves her court.

The last time I was in a room with her she was presiding over newly sworn in that day, Associate Justice Fabiana Pierre-Louis and she handled that with great distinction. So I want to give Justice LaVecchia a particular and personal shout out of deep, deep appreciation for decades of public service to our state. And as I say, based on my conversation with her, my guess is we have not in one form or another, I know her family's incredibly important to her, but we may not have seen the last of her in public service.

So with that, I mask up. Judy, Eddy, as always, thank you. I've got my DOMAVA mask, Judy, back on. Pat, as always, Jared, Parimal, Mahen, the rest of the team. Again, we'll be virtual tomorrow, on the road on Friday, please bear with us. And Saturday and Sunday again electronically, and I suspect Monday we'll be back to some semblance of normality.

Please keep doing what you're doing, folks. We are getting there. There's no question about it. We'll have ebbs and flows. We saw positivity up, hospitalizations up a little bit. But there's no question, as Eddy said, for the most part, this is going in the right direction. We would love to get more vaccine supplies in March. We will do everything we can with what we've got. But we have a very high degree of confidence that we will have the supplies we need in April and May to get vaccinations by, as we've said, by Memorial Day, any adult New Jerseyan who wants a vaccine will be able to get one, and that's our commitment. Thank you all. God bless.

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