

Governor Phil Murphy

# TRANSCRIPT: February 24th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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## Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



**Governor Phil Murphy:** Good afternoon, everyone. Sorry to be a couple minutes behind here. Thanks as well for everybody coming a little bit later than usual. I just came from the funeral, the extraordinary funeral I have to say, for the late Senator Gerry Cardinale. Tammy and I were there, many Legislative partners, Senator Tom Kean, Assemblyman Bob Auth; both spoke, among others. It was a beautiful mass for a really good guy who was in public service for the right reasons. So please keep his wife Carol, by the way, married 62 years. Judy, I'm 63, so you can do the math. Carol and Gerry were married 62 years, five kids, four grandkids. Please keep them in your prayers.

Joining me today is the woman to my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. It's a Wednesday so we've got COVID-19 Response Medical Advisor and former state epidemiologist to Judy's right, Dr. Eddy Bresnitz, great to have you both here. To my far left, another guy who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. And by the way, Pat, you had six colleagues who were extraordinary pallbearers for Senator Cardinale today. Thank you for that. And we're also welcoming the gentleman to my left, the newly confirmed Secretary of Higher Education, Dr. Brian Bridges. And again, congratulations, Brian, to you on your confirmation. We also have the Deputy Secretary Diana Gonzalez with us, an old and close friend, and a great leader in her own right, so thank you. Parimal Garg, Chief Counsel and a cast of thousands.

Brian is with us to detail two new initiatives being undertaken by the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education at our colleges and universities in response to the pandemic. I'll ask him to go into greater detail in a couple of minutes, but here is a 30,000 foot view. Using just under \$30 million in COVID response funds from the last tranche of federal assistance, the office is setting up two new grant programs to ensure the goals of our overall state plan for higher education are not undermined by the pandemic.

First, Brian and Diana and team are standing up a new competitive grant program open to all institutions of higher education that receive state funding to spur the implementation of plans in key areas that impact degree completion. This program is being called the Opportunity Meets Innovation Challenge, and it will provide awards totaling \$28.5 million, ranging from \$500,000 to \$1.5 million based on enrollment.

Secondly, the office will put another \$1 million toward the Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program, which is focused squarely on eliminating hunger and food insecurity on our campuses. And by the way, this is an epidemic, not just in our state but in our country. Brian, you know this but of anybody, it's far too often overlooked. This grant program will further build on the state law I proudly signed in 2019 to meaningfully combat the issue of food insecurity on our campuses. These grants will range from \$40,000 to \$100,000 per institution. And again, I'll ask Brian to dive into the details of both these innovative grant opportunities.

But to the broader point, we know that the past year has placed enormous challenges both on our institutions of higher education and their students. Working collaboratively, we know that we can create new best practices and innovative solutions that will keep New Jersey's colleges and universities among the very best of the nation, if not in the world. So to you, Brian and Diana and team, thank you for taking on these issues and I can't wait to see what comes out of these initiatives.

These initiatives, by the way, aligned perfectly with the values and priorities laid out in the new state budget I unveiled yesterday. As I said, now is not the time to shrink away from the opportunities that await us on the other side of this pandemic, but rather to lean in to the smart policies and key investments that will move us ever forward.

I'm proud of what our budget can achieve. The first full payment in quite literally a generation, that's, by the way, \$6.4 billion; \$700 million more for our public schools; more accessible healthcare and childcare for working families; direct tax rebates for hundreds of thousands of families, and real investments in our small business community and the jobs of tomorrow, among so much more. I look forward to working with our Legislative partners and stakeholders and advocates over the coming months as we finalize the budget, which will take effect on July 1st.

Also, earlier today, I announced the full membership of the New Jersey Council on the Green Economy, which will be overseen by the new Office of Climate Action in the Green Economy, headed by Jane Cohen, our colleague, and will serve to develop the blueprint for expanding the green economy and creating a diverse workforce for the clean energy economy we are building.

In addition to the First Lady, Tammy Murphy, who is an honorary chair of the council, members of the council -- and by the way, it is a great group, a mix skewed toward Jersey folks, but with some national and international names. It's a really dynamite group. The members include representatives from across numerous state departments, as well as leaders from organized labor, business and industry including our utilities and green businesses, environmental justice communities, academia, small business, workforce development, and environmental advocacy. They are names prominent, as I mentioned, in both our state and across our country. So I thank everyone who is a part of this council. I look forward to building the workforce of tomorrow.

With that, let's keep moving forward with a look at our latest numbers, we'll start with vaccines. Judy, this is my latest number, I think it's yours as well. As of midmorning, 1,758,979 vaccines administered – that's doses administered – it's about 1.2 million first doses and more than 565,000 second doses.

And as a programming note, on Friday we will be with you virtually at 1:00 p.m. unless you hear otherwise. We will be welcoming Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith, the Chairwoman of the White House COVID-19 Equity Task Force. She will join Judy and Pat and me on Friday, again one o'clock, virtual. As you know, we have been working to ensure not just as efficient a vaccine program as possible, and we are quickly as you can see making our way to 2 million doses statewide, but also as equitable a vaccination program as any state in America.

In this first regard, we continue to work against the vaccine scarcity that is impacting every state. But we are making tremendous strides every day with tens of thousands of doses administered. Our sites are open to anyone who lives, works or studies in the Great State of New Jersey. And we know it's not a straight line and we know there's still a big supply/demand imbalance. And we know there are folks out there who are anxious and frustrated. We get that, but with each and every day, we continue to plow through this.

Again, with regard to equity from our community partnerships to our mega sites, we have taken every effort to ensure equitable access to vaccines. The headlines we are seeing in other states, including of vaccine doses seemingly being auctioned off to wealthy enclaves while under-resourced communities go without, that will not happen under our watch. Our commitment to this, by the way, is evidenced by what we saw this morning. Judy and Pat and I were at First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens in Franklin Township with a dear old friend, Reverend/Dr. Buster Soaries and his team, as well as elected officials from Franklin, from the Legislature, from Somerset County. And, Judy and I saw it yesterday afternoon right here in the capital city, at the Iglesia Pentecostal Asamblea de Dios, right here in Trenton, with father and son Pastors Rodriguez and their team. And each of those visits were really moving and you could see, slowly but surely, the needle moving in the right direction as it relates to not just total shots, but equity.

We're taking the same spirit of community partnership that we brought to our testing regime in the spring and summer, and are applying it to our vaccine program, bringing together broad coalitions consisting of our faith institutions, community organizations, our healthcare partners and federal, state, county and local officials. FEMA was with us both yesterday in Trenton, and this morning in Franklin. And to that, we recently exceeded 500 total pop-up community-based testing sites since September. Local health centers, community centers, churches, each have been involved in the effort. This could not have happened without deep and meaningful community partnership.

Moreover, we're not going to stop, as testing remains just as important a tool for defeating this virus as our ever-growing vaccine program. Testing gives us many of the statistics we need to track this virus, so we can work even more efficiently to stamp out hotspots before they become new flashpoints.

With that, today we are reporting another 2,661 positive PCR test results, an additional 785 presumed positive antigen rapid test results. Total number of reported test results reaching back nearly one year now is 775,386. That's more, by the way, than 8% of our total state population. The positivity, and I could have predicted this Judy and Eddy, as sure as we're sitting here, for the 20,993 PCR tests recorded last Saturday was not surprisingly up, 10.7%. We've said it here before, if you look at Monday through Friday, you literally can read off 7.58, 7.27, 6.92, 6.35, 7.99 and bracketed on either side of that are the test taken from the previous Saturday and Sunday, and now this Saturday and Sunday. And invariably, the numbers of test taken are down. The reasons why folks get tested skews a little bit toward "I think I've been exposed" or "I'm not feeling well" and the positivity rate goes up.

Rate of transmission is currently at 0.87.

In our hospitals, we continue to see an improving picture emerge as the total hospital patient census was 2,070. That breaks down into 1,908 known COVID-positive patients and the remainder awaiting test results. By comparison, interestingly, Judy, we glanced on this conversation earlier. If you go back one month ago today, so go back to January 24th, the total number of folks in the hospital 3,186. And by the way, 2,943 of them were confirmed COVID positive on that day.

Our intensive care units, 435 patients there, 273 ventilators in use. Again, if you go back a month, each of those numbers are respectively down by 155 in terms of patients in ICU, and 103 in terms of vents in use. All in all, 238 live COVID patients were discharged from our hospitals yesterday, 253 went in. And again, at the risk of comparing apples to oranges, these are not yet confirmed, 34 in-hospital deaths yesterday.

We can, however, report with a very heavy heart 57 more confirmed deaths today, bringing the total confirmed to 20,746 and the number of probable deaths has been adjusted to 2,331. Let's take a couple of minutes to remember several of those we have lost.

Just last Thursday, the Borough of Lodi lost one of its lifelong residents. The guy on the left Anthony Luna Jr. known to many, if not most, as TJ. TJ was just 57 years old. TJ served as the supervisor of buildings and grounds for the Lodi Board of Education. He was also a lifelong parishioner of St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church. Community service ran in TJ's blood. The Luna family legacy in Lodi goes back more than 130 years, with numerous relatives having served in public office or other areas. TJ's father, Anthony Sr., served on Borough Council and as Mayor before later becoming Borough Manager. TJ's brother and a dear friend of mine, Scott, is the current Mayor of Lodi.

Besides father and brother, TJ also leaves behind his wife Francis on the right there, and their two daughters Alexa and her fiancé Joey, and Cassie and her boyfriend Julian. I spoke to Scott while TJ was sick. I spoke to him I think the morning after he passed, just unbelievably challenging. And I had the honor of speaking of Francis on Monday. TJ also leaves behind another brother Jeffrey and his sister Sherry, among many other family and friends. But the Luna family has gone through hell and back. TJ's mom Ruth passed away last month, as did his uncle – her brother, I believe, John Stellingworth. Neither passed due to COVID, but that doesn't make losing three beloved family members in such a short time any less painful for a whole lot of reasons that won't be surprising to anybody. Please keep the family in your prayers, especially TJ's dad, Anthony Sr. May God bless you, TJ, and watch over you and we thank you for your lifetime commitment to the only town he ever called home. Bless you, buddy.

Next we recall this couple, Victor and Minerva Diaz. They lived in Wayne in Passaic County. They were among the earliest New Jerseyans we lost to the pandemic and as our nation remembers the more than a half-a-million Americans we have lost in total, we must ensure Victor and Minerva never become last among the numbers. They both passed away in a span of three days between March and April of last year. Just by the way as well, a few doors away from each other in the hospital.

Victor, a native of Puerto Rico was 83 at the time of his passing, just six weeks shy of his 84th birthday. He had served the people of Paterson in the city's human resources department for many years before retiring to spend time with his family. He was both a boxing aficionado and an avid baseball fan. He also had his artistic side and spent many a free hour drawing. Victor's son described his dad as the rock who took great pride in looking after his family.

Minerva was born and raised in New York, and was a devoted homemaker across more than 50 years in which she and Victor were married, ensuring that their seven children were always taken care of. She was a master cook, and a committed craftswoman. She volunteered her time helping older residents in the community and never turned down an opportunity to dance. In addition to their children, Victor and Minerva also leave behind 22 grandchildren and 21 great-grandchildren. What a legacy, what a family. We cannot imagine the pain of losing one parent to this pandemic, let alone both, and in such a short span of time. May God bless them both and continue to look after that tremendous family. And I must thank Victor and Minerva's daughter-in-law Melissa for bringing their lives and their stories to our attention. I had the honor of speaking with Melissa and her husband Victor, their son, on Monday. It is an honor for us to honor them.

So for them and for every single New Jersey and American who has been lost to this pandemic, our flags are flying at half-staff under the direction of President Biden, and will do so for the remainder of the workweek.

Now switching gears to highlight another of the small businesses that is partnering with the New Jersey Economic Development Authority to receive the supports they have needed to remain strong and open for business. This is Kelly Pladeck on the left. Kelly runs the family-owned dealership Auction Access Auto in Vineland. Kelly and her team pride themselves on working with their customers to provide them a reliable vehicle that will get them to work, to school, the store or to medical appointments. And over the past year, Access Auto has been providing cars to many of Vineland's area frontline and essential workers. Taking care of the community has been something they've been doing for 20 years.

To help keep the dealership going and to meet the needs of both staff and customers for a safe place to conduct business, Kelly worked with the EDA to receive a grant that allowed her to modify the waiting areas, streamline the buying process and make other necessary upgrades. And, she also has been participating in the EDA's PPE Discount Program to purchase essential personal protective equipment for workers and customers. I had the great pleasure to catch up with Kelly on Monday and to thank her for being a leader in Vineland's small business community. Her commitment to keeping her workers and customers safe and healthy is helping us win this war. I don't know that I understand why this website is what it is, but check them out. You see their address there, 1903 South Delsea Drive in Vineland. Their website is [autoaccessmcbride.com](http://autoaccessmcbride.com). Dave, we'll need you to help me figure that one out, [autoaccessmcbride.com](http://autoaccessmcbride.com).

And finally, with a heavy heart today, we close on a sad note. Yesterday, our state lost a really good man and an honorable public servant with the passing of Superior Court Judge Peter Barnes III. Before joining the bench in 2016, Pete served in a variety of roles in his hometown of Edison, including on Council. In 2007, he was selected to fill a vacancy in the General Assembly and to fill the seat that had been held by his dad, Peter Barnes Jr. In 2013, the people of the 18th Legislative District elected Pete to be their Senator, and he served proudly in the Senate until his appointment to the judiciary.

As a Legislator, Pete garnered a strong reputation for focusing on policy, not on garnering headlines. He asked the right questions. He made the right calls. He worked across the aisle to seek common ground where common ground existed. The things that made him a good Legislator made him a good judge, and they made him a good man. And in his true Irish style, he did it all with a tremendous twinkle in his eyes, as you can see, and often with a well-timed story.

I had the honor of speaking with his wife Katie yesterday, as well as their son Jack, who is the next Barnes to enter public service, as he works in the Senate Majority Office down the street. He also leaves another son Kenny, and a daughter Meg. He's also survived by two sisters, as well as by his mom, Barbara, with whom I had as well the honor of speaking yesterday. And of course, he leaves many former colleagues and countless friends. We thank you, Peter, for your years of service to your community and to our state. Until we meet again, may God bless you and keep you in the palm of His hand.

And that is where we'll leave it off for today. Please help me welcome, in this case, the guy to my left. It is an honor to have the Secretary of Higher Education of the Great State of New Jersey with us. Please help me welcome Dr. Brian Bridges.

**Secretary of Higher Education Dr. Brian Bridges:** Thank you, Governor, for the opportunity to be with you this afternoon. Today's announcement, combined with the investments in higher education announced yesterday in your Budget Address make this a consequential week in higher education in New Jersey, to say the least.

I would be remiss if I did not also thank Commissioner Persichilli, Colonel Callahan and their extraordinary teams for their support and collaborative partnership, as we work to ensure that our New Jersey campus communities remain safe spaces for students, faculty and staff.

The ongoing pandemic has impacted every aspect of higher education and its long-term effects will be felt for years to come as we recover and build long-term resiliency. That's why I am announcing today that we are dedicating almost \$30 million in federal funding to address the core priorities of our state plan for higher education and ensure students have the resources and opportunities to graduate with meaningful credentials, compete in our innovation economy, and succeed in whatever pathway they choose.

A significant portion of the second round of Governor's Emergency Education Relief funding, GEAR2 as we affectionately call it, \$28.5 million will establish a competitive challenge grant program available to New Jersey's public and private institutions that receive state operating aid to implement vetted best practices released last March when COVID-19 cases were rapidly escalating. And nearly a year later, we know how devastating this crisis has been on students in the colleges and universities they attend.

Grant initiatives will help institutions develop system wide reforms that pave the way for long-term progress in achieving our goals, and will also help New Jersey achieve its educational attainment goal of 65 by 25, or 65% of working age adults obtaining a high quality degree or certificate by 2025. Institutions will be able to select from a series of grant options that reflect the five core priority categories of the state plan. Examples include funding for launching student entrepreneurship programs to spur innovation, right on our campuses. Or, imagine developing a program to ensure students from disadvantaged backgrounds get early exposure to college and ensure they succeed in their academic pursuits.

So whether it's motivating students to follow in the footsteps of historic New Jersey innovators, or ensuring their success to possibly become a future Nobel Laureate, colleges will be able to strengthen pathways for students through this funding. Institutions will be able to apply for a number of these categories and develop a strategy that works best for their campus needs.

The Murphy administration recognizes that students are juggling a great deal and should not have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, and how they're going to pay for it. To help colleges address these realities, our legislative partners put forward the Hunger-Free Campus Act Bill that Governor Murphy signed into law in May 2019. And this funding establishes a grant program to address food insecurity among students enrolled in public institutions. Another \$1 million in GEAR2 funds will be awarded to public institutions to help foster innovative ways to combat food insecurity among their students and strategize long-term solutions. This funding is only available to public institutions that receive the Hunger-Free Campus designation. Eligible institutions can use the funding to advance the work they're already doing in this area, including improving campus food pantries, conducting more robust student hunger surveys, and increasing students awareness of SNAP resources, for instance.

This second round of GEAR funding is in addition to the more than \$68 million that was made available to public institutions the first time around through the federal CARES Act. New Jersey was among the very few states who dedicated its first round of GEAR funding entirely to the higher education sector. So when you combine the monies from the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund, Coronavirus Relief Fund, and GEAR funds, more than \$1 billion in federal funding was made available to our institutions over the course of this pandemic.

Through this funding, we remain committed to ensuring students have equitable access to postsecondary education now and in the future, and are equipped with the supports needed to succeed and graduate. We look forward to continuing to explore innovative ways to strengthen higher education in the state. I want to thank you, Governor Murphy, for your commitment to ensuring New Jersey students are given equitable opportunities during this unpredictable time.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Brian, thank you. Just as we saw last week with Angelica Allen-McMillan, our colleague who oversees the Board of Education, we're trying to do things whether it's pre-K through 12, or in this case in higher ed, in a way that is nation leading, that is ahead of the pack as it were, and to basically put accelerant into the

challenges that we have to get solved as fast and as completely as possible. So thank you for your leadership. Diana, thank you for yours as well. Very exciting. Great to have you with us.

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

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon, everyone. This week, as the Governor mentioned, I had the opportunity to join the Governor at two of our vaccination sites that are part of the new community-based vaccination partnership launched earlier this month to provide equitable access to the COVID-19 vaccine to underserved communities throughout the state. Last evening, we visited the Iglesia Pentecostal Assemblies in Trenton, and this morning we joined Reverend Soaries at the First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens in Somerset.

The community-based vaccination partnership, which also includes sites in Elizabeth, Vineland and Paterson, will vaccinate 15,000 individuals throughout March. These cities are strategically selected, as they have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and are among the most diverse or challenged, socioeconomically challenged communities in our state. During the visits, we talked with members of the Latinx and African American communities who have been hit hard by COVID-19. Their eagerness and their appreciation to receive the vaccine was truly moving.

Bringing vaccine directly to their congregations is critical, given the many barriers to care these communities face. Each site will vaccinate approximately 1,500 people per week over a two-week period, followed by a return to administer the second doses. The sites are supported through a partnership of the Department of Health, the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the US Department of Defense, in addition to the local faith leaders, nonprofit organizations, local officials, and health departments.

This initiative is part of our efforts to expand access to the vaccine to those disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. In addition to the community-based vaccination programs, the Department of Health has developed a vulnerable populations plan that was modeled after the same strategies we used to ramp up COVID testing in our urban centers. As part of our vulnerable populations vaccination plan, community health workers will work in partnership with community centers, senior centers and churches to address concerns about vaccine safety and help people schedule vaccine appointments. We expect the opportunity for everyone to get vaccinated to increase as the vaccine manufacturers have committed to increasing production of these doses.

Additionally, this Friday, the Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee VARBAC, will review data on Johnson & Johnson vaccine and make its recommendations to the Food and Drug Administration. If the J&J vaccine is authorized for emergency use authorization, this will also boost the supply of available vaccine in the coming weeks.

In the area of long-term care, yesterday – and this is good news – the department notified facilities in seven counties that once they meet certain requirements and attest to them, they can restart indoor, socially distanced visitation by appointment, because they are in a region with moderate COVID activity over the past two weeks. As you may remember, the department uses a COVID activity level index, known as CALI, to determine the level of COVID activity in a region, and that color-coded level determines if a facility is able to allow indoor visitation. This follows the CMS requirements for indoor visitation.

The counties where facilities have met the requirements to allow for indoor, yet socially distanced visitation as of February 13th are Hunterdon, Mercer and Somerset Counties in the Central West region of the state; and Burlington, Camden, Gloucester and Salem in the Southwest region of the state. So indoor visitation can only occur in facilities where the facility has sufficient staff, a mechanism for appointments and sufficient PPE and cleaning and disinfection supplies to permit safe visitation; no new facility-onset COVID-19 cases are identified in the last 14 days; the facility is not currently conducting outbreak testing; there is a mechanism to collect informed consent from both the residents and the visitors; that there is a designated location for the indoor visitation and all required attestations have been submitted. This is good news. We are seeing the outbreaks in our long-term care facilities decrease.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 2,070 hospitalizations with 435 individuals in critical care and 63% of those critical care patients on ventilators.

However, there are nine new reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. Right now, there are 104 cumulative cases in the state. The children affected have either tested positive for COVID-19 or had antibody tests that were positive for COVID-19 exposure within four weeks prior to symptoms. Fortunately, in New Jersey, there are no new deaths reported at this time. Two of these children are currently hospitalized. The breakdown of race and ethnicity is as follows: White 23%, Black 25%, Hispanic 42% – 39 of the cases are in Hispanic children – Asian 4% and other 8%.

There are two new confirmed cases of B-117 variant in the state. There are a total of 55 total reported cases of this variant. The Governor reviewed the new cases and deaths. In terms of race and ethnicity, for the deaths White is 55.6%, Black 16.6%, Hispanic 18.8%, Asian 5.1% and other 3.9%.

At the state veterans homes, fortunately, there are no new cases among residents. And at the state psychiatric hospitals, there are no new cases among the patients.

As of February 20th in New Jersey, positivity was 10.70. The Northern part of the state 11.19, Central 11.06 and the Southern part of the state 8.70. So that concludes my daily report. Stay safe, please continue to mask up, social distance, stay home when you are sick, get tested. And 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, as always, thank you. Again, I said this earlier, you've said it many times, there remains without question a supply/demand imbalance but it feels like the ground is beginning to shift potentially into a better place and we've had incremental improvements. The Biden team have done a great job, I believe. I think you'd join me on that. But you look at, you know, Eddy, was it the FDA that puts this out? They revealed the paperwork behind the Johnson & Johnson application.

**Dr. Eddy Bresnitz:** Yeah, it was posted this morning around eight o'clock. I had – this is a printout of the FDA review.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I already read mine.

**Dr. Eddy Bresnitz:** I'm sure you did, yeah. It's quite detailed. It's got a lot of great information there. Anyway, their advisory committee is going to review it formally and publicly online. You'll see it on Friday. I can't imagine that the FDA won't issue an EUA by Saturday and then the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, which advises the CDC, will – actually has an emergency meeting on Sunday and Monday, so expect to see their recommendations on the same dataset by the end of Monday and then the CDC will issue its guidance.

That triggers a number of things and we're anxiously looking to see what kind of recommendations they make on using this particular vaccine, given its attributes compared to the Moderna and the Pfizer vaccines because they are different.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Yep. And you've also got with Moderna and Pfizer, you've got two other headlines popping. One is they're each going to – they've committed to more manufacturing. And secondly, now there's a buzz out there that the feds may be considering Pfizer as a one-shot, non-coldchain storage alternative, which again, if any of that

comes to pass, and they continue to be as efficacious, those are game changers, potentially, right? And remember, we talked about things changing in March. March is Monday, so it is upon us. This is not sort of some theoretical time down the road. This is five days from now, so thank you both.

Pat, it's a beautiful day outside so we can take weather off the list, I hope at least for a few days. Anything you've got on compliance and other matters? And again, your colleagues were extraordinary at Gerry's funeral as honorary pallbearers.

**State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan:** Thanks, Governor. And we were certainly honored and humbled to be asked to be a part of his tribute. With regards to compliance, just two issues to report since we last met. Police responded in Newark to a grocery store where the employee refused to wear a mask, she was cited. And in East Orange, police responded to a party with 100-plus people. And that party organizer was subsequently cited.

And yes, Governor, I think the next 10 days, from all accounts by the National Weather Service, show that there's no snow in order. Some rain this weekend but hopefully a lot of this snowpack is going to melt down over the next 10 days. That's all I got, Gov.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** And in the category of be careful what you wish for, with the sunshine and rain, we probably have some risks of some flash flooding, which folks need to be, particularly in low-lying areas, be mindful of. Thank you for that.

So again, tomorrow, we'll be with you virtually. I'm going to be on the road. I'm not sure I'll be on the road in time to have the COVID numbers overnight. But obviously if I do have them, I will faithfully report them. Otherwise, we'll be with you electronically. And Friday, by virtue of the fact among other things that we've got the White House COVID Equity Head with us, we will be with you virtually at one o'clock unless you're otherwise. With that, let's start. Alex, is that you? How are you?

#### Q&A Session

**Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey:** Good. I know that J&J vaccine was mentioned earlier, but how soon could we have it in the state? And what does that mean for expanding vaccine locations to doctors' offices and others?

Governor, how close are you to increasing indoor dining capacity again, with no uptick since the 35% change went into effect? And would 50% be the next step?

And last question, according to the latest CALI report last week, the Southeast region was also considered moderate risk. Why didn't the long-term care visitation change also applied to those three counties, Atlantic, Cape May and Cumberland?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I will start on a couple of comments and then I think, Judy, turn it to you if that's okay. J&J is a potential game changer, there's no question about it, in two respects. How soon? My guess is within the first week or two of March, but again the first week is next week so I'd probably point you to the second week if they get – they've already indicated that they've got some amount of supply ready to go.

Again, Eddy and Judy are the experts here, but assuming it's approved as a one-dose vaccine with regular refrigeration, I can't say overnight you're in doctor's offices but that gives us a flexibility and an ability to get to hard-to-reach places that we just don't have today with both limited supplies and two-shot coldchain storage vaccines. Chanel Robinson, dear friend and the Director of the Somerset County Commissioners made the point, Judy and Pat, with us this morning that you've got homebound people that right now are on the outside looking in. That's a great place where you could envision the J&J vaccine making a difference.

Indoor dining, I would guess, and Judy has to give the holy water on any moves we make, and Eddy and the team, but my guess is the next move probably is from 35% to 50%. That would be my guess. I don't know when but if the numbers keep getting better, it'll be sooner than later. And again, I've said this recently and Judy, if you see this differently, or Eddy, correct the record. But for the variants, it would be even sooner and maybe even more significant. But we're keeping a weather eye, because of the much higher transmittable realities or aspects of these variants.

Anything you want to say on either the J&J, indoor dining and the CALI report on the Southeast Region is above my pay grade, so I'm going to turn to you for that one.

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** The CALI reports, they're posted, by the way, on our website. So I recommend you to look at that. And you can actually see the progression from red to yellow. You have to be in yellow, there's three indicators that are looked at: cases per 100,000, positivity. I forget the third one. But it's all laid out on the website. And when you move to yellow, if you're in yellow for two weeks and the positivity is 10% or lower, can open up visitation.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** So I think that's the answer to the specific question, same color, but it's not – it hasn't matured enough. That makes sense. Okay, thank you. Dustin, good afternoon.

**Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record:** Good afternoon. How many nursing home residents have gotten both vaccine shots, and what percentage of that is of the entire nursing home population? And as I understand it, the CVS and Walgreens vaccination programs in the long-term care facilities expire at the end of the month, or soon. What's the plan to vaccinate in those facilities once that program does end?

And on the budget, correct me on any of this, but it appears the \$4 billion you borrowed is being used in the general fund for your budget plan for 2022. Why can't that be paid early? And what are the terms on interest and how long that will be paid back? When did you know your revenue projections were not as bad? And did you do anything to try stopping the borrowing? And how is this not a violation of the Supreme Court decision that said the borrowed money must be used to pay for only COVID-related expenses? Thanks.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Okay. Do you have the nursing home numbers, Judy?

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Nursing home numbers right now, total doses administered, 232,627; residents 126,319, staff doses 106,308 are the doses that are reported in Tiberius. In terms of the CVS and Walgreens, CVS reports total doses 157,442, Walgreens 75,185. Both of the pharmacies are significantly into their third clinics and CVS actually has scheduled eight fourth clinics. Do you want those specific numbers Dustin, of the clinics? I can show you that. It's a lot of numbers.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Judy, I had thought that the either you or Parimal, I thought the CVS/Walgreens contract was going to get extended by the feds.

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** It was a possibility it's going to get extended.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I believe if they've not yet completed the minimum of three clinics, my understanding is it gets extended. Do you have a different opinion on that? We'll come back to you, Dustin, on that one.

Yeah, listen, I think the fact that I've presented a budget on the day that I presented it is a little bit like – first of all, I'm required to. It's a little bit like you're in the middle of an athletic contest, a game of some sort and someone arbitrarily said that, you know, at minute five, 5:52 of the third quarter, you have to give us an assessment of the game. The jury is still way out on the impact of this pandemic, on our fiscal reality.

Did certain revenue sources come in better than we had expected? Yeah, they did. I heard the Fed Chairman yesterday being very cautious about the economic outlook. Did we try to do everything we could in the budget to balance the various realities that we have to balance? Like we put a lot in for small businesses, for daycare, for you

name it, areas that have been crushed by the pandemic. Yes. If I could do more? Absolutely. And I hope to be able to do more. So it is a work in process. That's all I can say.

You know, we have benefited without question by folks sort of walking away from a vertical, urban living or working environment toward wanting a backyard. There's no question. You look at housing prices, you look at the imbalance of supply and demand and that front end, and has that helped the local economy, local economies in our state? Without question. It's also exacerbated what was already probably the nation's most challenging affordable housing reality. So we're still in the middle of the game.

As I mentioned, we didn't score one penny of any further federal help, of any other realities that now are going to turn out to have some impact down the road, like legalization of adult use cannabis. And this, again, I think the fact that we gave the budget on the date that was agreed to with the Legislature is an artificially drawn conclusion date. As I said, I won't repeat it again, but this is a work in process. Thank you for that though. Sir, do you have any? Please.

**Reporter:** I've got one from News 12 New Jersey's Walt Kane. In your budget proposal, you allocated \$7.75 million for upgrades to the unemployment system. The New Jersey Department of Labor has estimated that a new system would cost \$200 million. Last year, you wondered how we got to the point where we are using a 40-year-old system. Are you now satisfied that the system does not need to be replaced? And if so, why? Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Is that it? Listen, the number that's in the budget reflects what our folks believe is a realistic, inside of this fiscal year. Remember, this is a one-year budget. That is absolutely needed here. I think what you've heard Rob Asaro Angelo say many times when he's been with me on my left, is doing a complete overhaul at the state level, in the absence of a federal overhaul to the unemployment benefits system is, at least to some extent, throwing good money after bad. The feds need to boil the system down to its essential parts and rebuild it in a 21st Century reality. I think the number in our budget is a reflection of what we think is the right, prudent thing to do to make sure we stay ahead of the game.

And my guess is if the feds ultimately do boil it down and rebuild it from scratch, we will then want to be more heroic on our side. But I don't want to waste money in the meantime. Thank you. Say hi to Walt for me, please.

**Matt Arco, Star-Ledger:** Good afternoon. A couple quick questions, two from reporter Colleen O'Dea. Can you provide the number of vaccine doses each county got this week by county? Why are you not providing this information on the dashboard so the public can see availability?

Also, given this month's grant study found that every \$1,000 spent on tuition aid grants boosts graduation at state colleges by 2.6 points, why are you not providing more money in TAG to needy students?

And a question from someone on our stream, are you requiring out-of-state students to quarantine if they attend college in New Jersey? Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I don't have the county numbers with me. I'm not sure I'd sit here and go alphabetically through the counties., but I assume we can get to Colleen afterward, Judy, with the numbers. Is that?

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** I mean, we can get it but I mean, the counties have all different number of sites. We post the number of sites in each county, so it depends. You know, there's the local health department, there's the federal retail program. There's the FQHCs. There's the hospitals, there's some medical practices. There's the mega sites, there's the pharmacies, the psych hospitals get some, public health clinics, universities, urgent care. I mean, it just --

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I withdraw the suggestion. Having said that, I think, Mahen, if you got Mike Delamater to follow up with Colleen, just to give her some sense of the dynamic at the county level, that might make sense. Does that sound okay with you?

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Sure.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** But again, for instance, I'll just pick Bergen, for instance. They have the Meadowlands Racetrack site, which skews the Bergen reality, versus a county that may not have a mega site in it, for instance. I can't read my writing. Why aren't we putting more money into higher ed? I think we're putting a lot more money into higher ed, Brian. Thoughts on that?

**Secretary of Higher Education Dr. Brian Bridges:** Yes, I would agree that we are and actually, given the investments that were announced yesterday, I mean, there's a \$27 million increase in CCOG, \$50 million increase to establish the Garden State Guarantee. So essentially, students who are under an income threshold of \$65,000 AGI, adjusted gross income for their families, can go to college, can earn two years of college for free at community college and then two years of college for free at a four-year public institution. So the same students who would receive TAG are covered under those programs as well.

In addition to that, there's a \$2.8 million investment in EOF, one of the state's hallmark, longstanding programs that dates back 53 years. And so I think that these investments combined are significant and substantial in helping students to get to and through college.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Well said, that's a point, the TAG money or the EOF money, the father of which is a former Governor, one of my mentors, Tom Kean Senior, as an Assemblyman. Those monies are essentially, Brian, going into the same pool of students. They're all needs based, right? And the EOF magic, I have to say even furthermore, has a sort of mentoring handholding element and aspect to it. It's not just money. It's counseling and mentoring, which I think makes that a pretty cool program. Thank you. We will come back and give you some county color at some point. Dave, how are you? Good afternoon.

**David Matthau, NJ 101.5:** Hi, Governor. The CDC recommending now that kids should and can go back into schools, and we're hearing from a growing number of parents. They're frustrated and angry about the kids' school staying virtual. I'm sure you're aware that police in Sussex County were investigating threats made online about violence. Parents have rallied in Maplewood. They filed lawsuits demanding that kids can go back into school. Parents in other parts of the state are also very unhappy. What's your reaction? What do you want parents to be aware of? What do you want them to keep in mind on this issue?

Are you concerned, Governor, that only giving minors warnings for multiple pot and alcohol violations is sending the wrong message? I know you're a father, as am I, Governor, and kids being kids, they believe that if there's no serious consequences for doing something, such as drinking alcohol, maybe smoking pot, in a sense, are we really kind of encouraging them to test the limits and go ahead and do it? Parents again, very concerned about this.

If a police officer sees a kid smoking a joint on the street, and then the officer is allowed to, I assume, take possession of the joint and then issue a warning to the minor, what about the fact that even though recreational pot is now going to be legal in New Jersey, it cannot be used in a public setting. In other words, would the minor be issued a warning for the pot, but then a summons for smoking pot in public?

And final question, in the past few days, as I'm sure you're aware, there have been reports the current vaccines are effective against the variants. Will these studies give you more confidence about opening things up more quickly if we continue to see the metrics moving in the right way? You've kind of commented on this already, but would there be specific indicators that you would follow? I'm assuming hospitalizations, and would there be a way to follow that as it progresses? Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I think on the last one, the answer has to be yes, it gives you more confidence. But I think we're going to be, the last thing we want to do is lurch forward and pull ourselves back. So on the margin, we want to certainly open things up, but we want to do it carefully and responsibly. And if there is mounting evidence, and you

all should tell me if you disagree, if there's mounting evidence that the vaccines are good against the variants, in addition to the fact our numbers continue to go in the right direction, there's no question we're going to open up. Just a question of when and how much. And again, the last thing I want to do, I think I speak for all of us, is to lurch open and then have to pull back, which is hell to pay on the businesses, on the customers and everybody associated with it.

Back up to schools. Yeah, I know, listen, this is – we've said this from day one. This is incredibly stressful for everybody, for parents, kids, educators, administrators, period, full stop. I don't have a today update on the schools, but it remains somewhat over three-quarters of either the districts or the charters, Renaissance, developmentally disabled, other schools that we've got stewardship for, over three quarters of them have some amount of in person and that number is continuing to go up.

People will respond, yes, but some of the big school districts are not in person, they're remote. I absolutely grant that. My guess is a combination of these numbers and realities continue to go in the right direction, a month or two from now just to go out a little bit and you're a completely different ballgame as it relates to school.

I was asked on CNN the other day, can you commit if educators are vaccinated, that schools open? I said that's a false connection. I think you all would agree that the CDC has been crystal clear, I think you all have been crystal clear. It is not a magic wand or a binary you're in or you're not in, it is a very positive step, in fact, a data point to have at your disposal if you're able to vaccinate, and I hope we can vaccinate educators sooner than later.

But I don't blame anyone for their frustration and stress and it's legitimate on all sides of this. And again, we slowly but surely continue to get into a better place. And as you saw from the program that Angelica unveiled last week, with what Brian and Diana are talking about today, with what we're putting in the budget, we're not just saying the right words, we're putting serious money to work to address learning loss, mental health challenges, etc.

Listen, I'll just give you the my overarching reality. Are you good with that, on those thoughts? I don't want to – I'm not going to practice without a license Eddy, please. Listen, I understand it as it relates to pot. Remember where we started, and I think that's an important point here. We had wholly unfair laws that dragged, literally over decades, tens if not hundreds of thousands of disproportionately young people of color, disproportionately young males of color, into the criminal justice system. And it either derailed, delayed or permanently impaired the lives of thousands of people. That's where we're starting. That's what we had Monday morning.

I think we've all gone into this with a spirit of, this is, we think, the best common ground we can all find. But we've got to turn the page on what I just described. Is it going to be perfect? Are we going to have growing pains? I bet you we are. Did we legalize weed for kids? We did not. We committed to that and we didn't, and at the same time, we cannot in any way, shape, or form put more young people, particularly of color, into the criminal justice system. That also has ended. That has stopped.

So I don't have a perfect answer for you. But I know what we had was not only imperfect, it was devastating for thousands, if not tens and hundreds of thousands of lives in our state over decades. It's time we turn the page. We have turned the page. I suspect we'll learn a lot over the next weeks and months. I was told, and Parimal will be mad at me if I don't say this, that when I said plus or minus six months until the legalized cannabis business is up and running might be a little bit aggressive. So I don't want to over promise and under deliver. But that's my overarching answer to that.

All good questions and my strong belief is we'll get to – we've gotten to a better place and we will stumble even furthermore into a far better place. Nikita.

**Nikita Biryukov, New Jersey Globe:** Governor, some months back when I first asked you about early voting, you said that you'd like a 30-day voting period. The bills moving their way through the Legislature now provide for a three-day period for some primaries, and then a five-day period for presidential primaries. And then for the general election, they provide a nine-day period. Is that enough?

And then on a separate bill, the Assembly Appropriations Committee today advanced one allowing members of the PFRS, the police and fire retirement system, to retire and collect pension payments at 50% of their max pay after 20 years, regardless of their age. It's currently limited to 55 years. Is that something that you support?

And then on Assemblyman Gordon Johnson, who was I believe, the first notable politician to back your 2017 campaign. I'm wondering if, since you've endorsed Joe Cryan, if you've come around and are ready to endorse Assemblyman Johnson?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I won't talk about the specific bills. On the second question, Nikita, I actually don't have a reaction to it, because I haven't been focused on that. So if we can come back to you, Mahen, make sure we follow up on the PFRS Bill. So forgive me for that.

Without getting into the specifics of early voting, and I mean this not facetiously, I mean this, I'll take anything. I think anything early is what the doctor ordered. It's like my answer to Dave. Let's start somewhere and then we've got a lot of people of goodwill who want to have a good result here. And I'm confident that we'll start in a good place. And if we need to end in yet a different place, then we'll do that together.

I do think I was equivocal, I think is the right word, about whether or not it could be in place for the June primaries. I don't think there is any realistic chance for this year that it can be done by then. I want to make sure I address that on the record. I think Parimal would agree with me. It was a noble hope but I think this is really right now, beginning of the general and then beyond in years to come.

Listen, that particular race, I believe you are right. Gordon was the first elected official in the state to endorse my candidacy and I'm forever grateful for that. By the way, Valerie Huttel is somebody who I and we are just as close to and have worked on countless bills together. Two stars vying to replace one of the all-time greats in Loretta Weinberg. I'm big fans and big believers in both of them. I'll leave it at that.

Thank you, everybody. I'm going to take five more seconds, Judy, with the second mask here to mask up. Pat, you notice I am flying the colors here? I just want to make sure. Judy and Eddy, thank you both for today and for everything. Deep appreciation. Pat, likewise as always. Brian, a real treat to have you here. It's great to have you on the team, confirmed and here today. Thank you, Diana, as always. Parimal, Mahen, everyone out there. Thank you again. We'll be with you Friday virtual at one o'clock, unless you hear otherwise. Tomorrow I will be on the road so it's possible I'll have some COVID news. But if not, we'll get it to you electronically.

And just folks, keep doing what you're doing. I think to several of the questions that we got today, these numbers keep getting better. The vaccine news, God willing, sounds like it may be getting better. That supply-demand imbalance begins to correct, the weather gets a little bit better. Pat, that's your job. You put all that together a month or two from now, we are in, I believe, a completely different ballgame. The variants are the one thing that sort of is in the back of my head, at least, to make sure that we're not taking any of that for granted. We're watching it like a hawk. Take care, everybody. God bless.

## Governor Phil Murphy

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