

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: November 29th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everybody. With me to my right is the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, the state's epidemiologist, another familiar face, Dr. Christina Tan, great to have you both. To my left, likewise, someone who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have Chief Counsel Parimal Garg, Alyana Post. Jamil's got the mic. Hope everyone had a great Thanksgiving. Good to be back with you.

First and foremost, let's turn to another holiday I want to wish everybody across our tremendous Jewish community a Happy Hanukkah, which began at sundown last evening. Later this afternoon I will have the honor of once again joining in the lighting of the menorah outside the statehouse. Did that in 2018 and 2019, and like a lot of things, last year we didn't do it, so very excited to get back at that. To all who are celebrating, may your candles burn bright and Hanukkah Sameach.

Now, as we bring up today's vaccination numbers, before you, this is a good time to note the importance of everyone who is currently eligible to sign up for and get your booster shot. To be sure, the world's intention is focused on the Omicron variant that was identified by doctors in South Africa. I believe at least at this point there are two cases identified in Canada, and I'll be – I'm not the expert, but I'll be stunned if it's not already in the United States. The reality is that as our region is a hub of international hub and commerce, we must be ready now in anticipation of this variant hitting us. There is still very much unknown about this new variant. We are all closely following the research into this variant as it is released, and we're all watching closely as new cases are discovered and reported.

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The team at the Department of Health is prepared to quickly identify Omicron through both PCR testing and virus sequencing processes and protocols in partnership with the CDC and our own lab capabilities. Again, and as we have said since day one of the pandemic, we're going to follow the science as it pertains to our readiness and response. Another thing that we all must keep in mind that just because there's a new variant out there does not mean that Delta has lost any of its transmissibility or its virulence. As you'll see in a minute, we're still registering more than 1,000 new confirmed cases a day, and our hospitalizations are up sharply over the past several weeks.

As Judy and Tina would want me to remind everyone, our numbers are still being fueled by the Delta variant. The importance of preventing further spread of Delta or we hope to prevent Omicron from gaining a foothold is tantamount. We strongly encourage everyone to keep masking up when you're indoors and distancing is not possible, especially when you're with people whose vaccination status is not clear. And get vaccinated, folks, and get boosted if you're vaccinated. The added protection from a booster is no longer just a bonus. It's a necessity.

As you can see, I got my booster yesterday along with Tammy and three of our four kids to protect ourselves against any waning immunity. Our fourth child will get his on Wednesday. By the way, easy peasy. Did it at Monmouth Medical Center in Long Branch in Monmouth County. Judy, it was in and out. As always, great nurses there. You know from whence that comes. Easy. Feel totally fine. Sore arm. That goes with vaccinations. Other than that, feel great, and I think I can speak on behalf of all five of us that other than a sore arm, it came – we came through this with flying colors. Go out and get it, folks. It's easy. If you're eligible, get boosted. We know the vaccines continue to prove themselves against the Delta variant, which remains the predominant strain here in New Jersey, and elsewhere in the country. This fact is borne out by the data on breakthrough infections that is compiled and updated weekly by another familiar face, Dr. Ed Lifshitz and his team at the Department of Health's Communicable Disease Service.

Here are the most recent cumulative data points going back to mid-January and not only are those who are fully vaccinated showing strong resistance to the virus, their odds of a COVID-related hospitalization or death are either further minimized – are even further minimized. Here is the – here are the preliminary figures for the week of November 8th through the 14th, and again, just to be specific on this, Judy, as you said low 20s percent of the – plus or minus of the positive tests statewide are fully vaccinated, but a much lower percentage of folks who are hospitalized and thank God a very low percentage of folks who we are losing to this awful virus. We know that for some the initial vaccine courses have begun to wane in terms of preventing infection, but the effectiveness for keeping these same folks out of the hospital or the morgue, God forbid, continues to prove the importance of that initial vaccination, and it speaks to the even greater and more immediate importance of getting that booster.

Here are today's reported new positive test results which doesn't say much beyond just a – being a snapshot in time, but pay attention to the rate of transmission, which is based over a longer term seven-day rolling average analysis of these daily numbers, and that remains, unfortunately, well above the benchmark of 1, but it's also down over the past week. I personally – Judy, tell me if you disagree with this. The positivity rate which has been running weekdays 4-5% spiked up, but this is from Thanksgiving, and the assumption I would have is you're not getting tested on Thanksgiving if you're not more than likely having symptoms and needing to check that out. The big test I think will be over the next couple of weeks to see if we're going to see the anticipated spike coming out of the Thanksgiving holiday or now as we have happily Hannukah upon us or other holidays to come over the next month or six weeks.

Yesterday, our hospitals were treating a total of 950 patients. You can see 906 of them were confirmed COVID positive. This is the most people, by the way, we've had in our hospitals in seven weeks, but importantly, on November 28th of last year, the number was 2,908, which is more than three times the amount of folks in the hospital on this November 28th. Moreover, the ICU and ventilator counts, new COVID positive admission, and in-hospital deaths all from one year ago were also more than triple what they were yesterday. What is the difference? I don't think we can say it clearly enough: vaccines. I also cannot say this clearly enough. The number we just reported are being driven overwhelmingly by the unvaccinated.

Here are with the heaviest of hearts, today's newly reported COVID-related deaths, updated probable deaths, and now as is our practice, let's honor the lives of several more of those blessed members of our New Jersey family who we've lost. We start by honoring this guy, David Mariconda, a native of Paterson who spent many

years in Fairfield. He had a passion for helping those who could not speak for themselves, especially stroke survivors, and he served on the board of the Brain Injury Association of New Jersey, and sadly, David was only 62 years old. Professionally, David worked in payroll departments for the postal service and ADP, but personally, his time was dedicated to his wife named Tammy, a particular favorite name of mine, and his sons Gregory and Timothy, and I had the great honor of speaking with all three last week. He left them and their families as well as his brother Stephen and his family and after his passing, his grandson Nicholas was born. They and his friends remember his sense of humor, his love of Christmas decorating, and his passion for the New York Rangers. May God bless and watch over his memory and the family he leaves behind.

Next up, we remember West Milford's Florence Riker, known by those close to her as Punkin. She had called that community home for nearly 60 years. During the weekdays Florence had worked as an insurance underwriter. She set aside her weekends for gatherings with family and friends. She was predeceased by her daughter Tracey in the year 2010. Please keep her in your prayers as well. She left behind her husband Arthur along with their four surviving daughters Tammy, Kim, Kelly, and Terri, and their families, and I had the great honor of speaking with Kim last week, including her grandchildren, Brittany, Jennifer, Michael, Jessica, Bobby, and Kaitlyn and great-granddaughter Harper. She also left two brothers and their families. Florence was 76 years old, and may God bless and watch over her memory and the family she leaves behind.

Finally for today, we recall Marcella Caplin of Franklin Lakes who the virus took away at the age of 90. Throughout her years, Marcella remained an active member of Bergen County's Jewish community, whether it be through Temple Israel in Ridgewood, the Fair Lawn Jewish center, or the Women's League for Conservative Judaism. Her husband Irving passed away in the year 2009 after 59 years of marriage, and Marcella leaves behind their children David, Jonathan, Leah, Lois, and Sarah, and their families, which includes her beloved grandchildren Roni, Avital, Yishai, Sam, Jordana, and Ariana, and great-grandson Jack Irving. I had the great honor of speaking with Leah and Lois last week, and they wanted me to remind folks two things about their mom. Number one, she lived for over 60 years, Judy, with multiple sclerosis, and it was only this virus that finally did her in, which is extraordinary, and that she was a poll worker for decades, and she was very proud of that. Thank you, Marcella, for your extraordinary life and obviously for helping make our elections run smoothly and may her memory be a blessing to all she leaves behind. May the memories of David, Florence, and Marcella live strong with all who knew them and even for us who did not, we remember them and everyone we've lost.

Before I turn things over to Judy, I want to acknowledge another small business that is taking advantage of the Department of Labor's new Return & Earn program to attract and train the skilled employees they will need as they move forward. Today we're putting the spotlight on this team, the Lawrenceville-based Princeton Sports & Family Medicine, which has been assisting families and athletes for more than 25 years. Dr. Peter Wenger, third from the left, and his team of 40 have also served the needs of the US rowing team, which trains in Princeton, the Trenton Thunder baseball team and numerous local colleges and high schools, and Dr. Wenger in particular helped shepherd the US rowing team through a COVID outbreak that impacted roughly half the team.

That instance aside, throughout the pandemic, Dr. Wenger and his staff did not see a slowdown in the number of folks who needed them. Indeed, many New Jerseyans focused on exercise as a means of attending to not just their physical but their mental health. In this he recognized that the practice needed additional trained staff to meet the ongoing needs of its patients. Through the Return & Earn program, Dr. Wenger was able to bring on three new administrative specialists to keep things going. The funds he received through Return & Earn made sure Princeton Sports & Family Medicine could give them the training they need to keep the operation running, and each of the new employees received a 500-dollar signing bonus and the skills for a new and rewarding career. That's how Return & Earn works, pairing those looking for work with businesses looking for new employees. I had the opportunity last week to catch up with Peter to thank him for not only being among the first employers to partner with the Department of Labor but for all he and his team do to keep New Jerseyans active and healthy. Check them out. Their website is princetonmedicine.com.

I think that's where we'll leave things for this Monday. Again, I urge everyone who is eligible to get out and get their booster and if you've not even started your first vaccination course, I urge you, I beg you to do that now. We do not yet know what the Omicron variant means for us, but we are still not done with Delta. With that,

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

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor, and good afternoon. As the Governor mentioned, the Department is closely monitoring information about the Omicron variant. The World Health Organization has designated it a variant of concern. No cases have been identified yet in the United States. There are many unknowns, but WHO, the World Health Organization, has raised concerns about the potential global spread of this variant. Studies are underway to evaluate the transmissibility, the severity, and reinfection risk of the variant. Given the unique signature generated by this variant, PCR tests are able to identify the Omicron variant. This will help lead to efficient detection of this variant while further sequencing is being performed. Our lab is reaching out to clinical labs to be on the lookout for this pattern and to report if and when it is observed.

Currently, our lab and our commercial lab partners are sequencing about 1200 specimens a week. Sequencing decodes the genes in the specimen to learn more about the virus and how it changes over time. To protect against this new variant, the World Health Organization has recommended accelerating COVID-19 vaccination coverage as rapidly as possible, especially among populations designated as high priority who remain unvaccinated or are not fully vaccinated. Increasing our booster uptake will be vital in blunting impact of this and any other new variant that may occur. Booster doses provide essential additional protection with waning immunity and particularly with the Delta variant still having a significant impact in New Jersey. Studies show after getting vaccinated again COVID-19, protection against the virus and the ability to prevent infection with the Delta variant may decrease over time.

As reported previously, the effectiveness of all three variants decrease over time. A recent *Science* magazine study found the J&J vaccine effectiveness to decrease from 86.4% to 13.1%, for Moderna from 89.2% to 58%, and for Pfizer, effectiveness went from 86.9% to 43.3%. All residents 18 and over who have received their primary series are now eligible for a booster. Those who received the Moderna or Pfizer vaccine at least six months ago can receive their booster, and those who receive J&J vaccine at least two months ago can receive their booster. About 29% of those eligible for a booster dose have actually received one here in New Jersey. We need to increase that percentage to protect ourselves and loved ones, especially with the holidays drawing closer. Receiving a booster now ensures protection during the upcoming holiday season. Visit covid19.nj.gov to find a booster appointment. If you have any difficulty getting an appointment, call the call center at 855-568-0545, and they will assist you.

We are also actively working to increase vaccination among younger populations in our state. Protecting them through vaccination helps further protect everyone. The clinical data that the federal government examined showed the Pfizer vaccine is safe and 90.7% effective in preventing COVID in children between the ages of 5 and 11. Among this population in New Jersey, 12% have been vaccinated. 27% or 383,788 of those between the ages of 5 to 17 have completed their primary series, and 38%, 546,473, 5- to 17-year-olds have received at least one dose of the vaccine. The department is working with the Department of Education to support school endorsed vaccination events by leveraging relationships with schools, local health departments, FQHCs, acute care hospitals, and other vaccine providers in the state.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 950 hospitalizations, and that number has been increasing. Since last briefing, there have been seven additional reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. Six of these reports are older cases from earlier in the year that were identified through the regular review of hospital discharge data, so now there are 149 cumulative cases in the state, and none of these children is currently hospitalized. At the veterans' homes since our last press briefing there has been one new case among the residents in the Menlo Park home, and at the state psychiatric hospitals, there are no new cases among the patients. The percent positivity as of November 25th in New Jersey is 9.23%. The northern part of the state reports 9.06, the central part of the state 9.86%, and the southern part of the state 8.57%. That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe. Let's get vaccinated and let's get boosted to protect ourselves, our family, friends, our children, and to enjoy the holiday season. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, you mentioned the call in number, and I think you mentioned earlier today on our pre-call, you're still getting about 15,000 calls a day?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: That just gives you a sense of the volume continues to be extremely high. Secondly, I'd love to get your reaction – you or Tina's reaction to this. It feels like for the next number of weeks, we're going to see this wave hopefully not go up too high but largely fueled by Delta. Almost certainly, this new one is going to end in our lap you would think. It's hard to believe it otherwise, but also, a fair amount of inconclusive – everyone is saying they need more time to really understand this mutant. Is that fair to say, everybody? We're going to be in this limbo period. Tina, anything you want to add to that?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Yeah, we have to remember that this Omicron was just identified within the last week, and as – and again, I think the CDC and the federal government have given tremendous credit to the South African government for being so forthcoming to share this information on such a timely basis so that we could actually start really monitoring this – these data as they come in. Right now, we've got Delta, 99.9% of cases in the US are Delta, but we're on high alert right now, and as the Commissioner had mentioned, our laboratory is monitoring as well as getting – hoping to get our commercial laboratories ramped up as well.

Governor Phil Murphy: Great. Thank you for that. I know whether it's for members of the press or the general public, there are probably a lot of questions and not a lot of answers yet, right, so this is going to evolve over the next number of weeks. Thank you, both. Pat, in particular, first of all, great to have you. Thanks for everything. Anything you've got in particular on building out infrastructure to help folks get either boosted or kids get vaccinated? Great to have you. Over to you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thanks, Governor. Good afternoon. Yes, I'll reecho my remarks from last week with regards to those three state run vaccination sites. Our all-hazards incident management team is working on the two additional ones. Just a reminder that Gloucester's is open at the Gloucester County complex in Clayton. They're currently operational five days a week. They do about 175 vaccinations a day open Tuesday and Thursday from 11 to 7, Wednesday and Friday 7 to 3, and Saturday 7 to noon. Happy to report that Virtua has signed the lease agreement at the - it used to be an AC Moore on Nixon Drive in Mount Laurel. That site will be having a soft opening this week by appointment only for children 5 to 11. They'll be scheduled for their second dose starting tomorrow.

Also, happy to report that there's over 2,000 children from 5 to 11 that have already registered. Those dates right now Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday from 9 to 3:45, Thursday and Friday from 11 to 5:45, and next week, we anticipate a full opening including adults for their first, second, as well as booster shots. Lastly, Somerset, RWJ is in the process of finalizing their lease agreement. That's going to be at a Lord & Taylor – or used to be a Lord & Taylor the Bridgewater Commons Mall in Bridgewater. We anticipate that buildout to be done by the end of next week – or end of this week with the goal is to open that one by next week. That's it, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: Kind of a review of retail locations years past, right?

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: That's right.

Governor Phil Murphy: Very encouraging to hear the 2,000 kids signed up. Is that right?

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Yeah, it's great. More than 2,000 already, and that news just went out, so I encourage anybody for first, second, or booster to go to covid19.nj.gov. That vaccination finder is extremely user friendly. Take it from a non-IT guy.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah. Again, the process for getting boosted for us went swimmingly, so get out there and get boosted. As Judy reminded us, Pfizer or Moderna, anybody 18 and up, six months after your second shot, get out there and get boosted. For J&J it's two months after your initial dose, and you can mix and match, right? Get at it, folks. One programming note. Just due to some scheduling next week, I think we're going to end up doing our weekly on Wednesday as opposed to Monday, so keep that in the back of your mind, Wednesday at 1 o'clock. Clearly, depending on which way the road turns, we may want to revisit the frequency with which we're doing this. I hope the road turns in a way such that we keep this at one a week as opposed to more, even better if it goes to zero, but bear with us on that, but next week at least we'll go with Wednesday at 1 o'clock. I'd ask you – there's a lot of you here today – if you could keep a little bit more economical.

Q&A Session

John, is that you? Do you have anything, or are you here just taking pictures?

Reporter: No, I have a couple questions.

Governor Phil Murphy: Jamil's got the mic. Let's go. Nice to see you.

Reporter: Nice to see you. Couple questions. One is are there any – referring specifically to new steps or considerations that you're looking at in preparation for the latest variant coming to New Jersey – as you said, it's likely that it will, and is there any modeling even tentative about what it means for the potential trajectory of the virus here in New Jersey? Then a second question from David Cruz. Did the Governor's office have any role in the change of policy pertaining to access to the Senate and Assembly chambers, which as you know is causing some debate this coming week?

Governor Phil Murphy: No new steps at the moment. People have asked me. I'll preempt the question. Some of them may ask New York put a state of emergency in. We have a state of emergency. It's been in effect since March of 2020, and literally everything they did – Parimal, correct me if I'm wrong. Everything that Governor Hochul has wanted to do in New York, we already have in place either through the state of emergency or the very good cooperation we've had with the legislature. Nothing at the moment. Again, I think it's going to be – we're going to have to find our way forward as the research unfolds. I don't want to speak for Tina or Judy. I don't think there's anything on the modeling front. We just don't know enough on that front.

This was a separate decision taken by the legislative leadership, but one that we completely endorse, and again, let's remember what this is. I don't want to give the – I think it's just the Assembly today. Is that right – give the Speaker and the Senate President a big shout-out. This is not just you need to be vaccinated or show proof of a negative test. He's actually got rapid tests at the statehouse, so there's no burden whatsoever on anybody outside of that, and I think anybody who is messing with this is being completely reckless. Looking at the numbers, they're going up. Come on, man. Let's not play politics. This is about keeping people safe and healthy. Good to see you. Let's go to Matt down front here. Matt, good afternoon.

Matt Arco, NJ.com: Good afternoon, Governor, and on Friday, New York's Governor signed an executive order that would allow the state's health department to ban elective surgeries to boost bed capacity anticipating a spike in COVID cases. Under what circumstances would you ban elective surgeries here in New Jersey. You mentioned that we are an international hub, obviously, flights coming into Newark. Are you concerned at all that we have flights coming into Newark from, say, South Africa while other countries have had flights come in – over the weekend, we read reports about having flights come in from South Africa, folks test positive for this new variant. Is that cause for concern or alarm for you?

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for both. I don't have any crisp answer on when we would ban elective surgery, Judy, but that would be a pretty draconian step. I had surgery for cancer and found out later – a malignant tumor and found out later that would've been considered elective, which is not the way I saw it, so that's a pretty draconian step, and we're not remotely there, unless you disagree, Judy, please.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: No, we'll have weekly calls with the collaborators, the regional collaborators and the hospitals determining along the way capacity, and with them make the decisions whether any curtailments need to take place, but right now we don't see – we don't see that happening.

Governor Phil Murphy: I think embedded in your question – Parimal, you'll correct me if I'm wrong. If we needed to take that step, we have the authority to do it. That's different than whether or not we'd ever – please God we don't have to take that step. Yeah, that is a concern. I'm actually speaking to the White House I think 5:30 today, and so you're seeing national bans on travel. Whatever steps we're taking as a country as well as other countries and steps they are taking and so that's something that we're watching very closely. This is clearly a time, I think, when you want to be mindful of where you're going. That's not to say you can't go anywhere, but you've got to be mindful about what your movements are these days. Thank you for that. Let's go to Joey here, and then we'll go across to Daniel. Hi, Joey.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Hello. On the subject of the statehouse vaccine mandate for Superintendent Callahan, what are you going to do if Republican legislators try and bypass the vaccine mandate? What is the State Police like? Do you have anything in place for that? For Governor Murphy, the state constitution essentially only allows state legislators to be barred if they've committed treason or some similar act like that. Do you think that flaunting the vaccine mandate counts as treason?

Governor Phil Murphy: That's one I've not gotten before.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Next question, how is the national search for a new corrections commissioner going, and then finally on the New York state of emergency declaration, are you at all concerned that with the moves on elective surgery and non-essential medical care there, there might be New Yorkers coming to New Jersey and clogging up New Jersey hospitals because of moves taken in New York? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Pat, I'll jump in and then pass over to you. Again, you used the word mandate. I want to make sure everybody knows – this is how ridiculous this is. Not your question but the furor around it. It is a requirement to either be vaccinated, to prove that you've got a negative test or again, I give credit to the legislative leadership. They've got rapid tests at the State House. I just took for something I've got to go to tonight – I just took a rapid test back in the office. It is 20 seconds of time, 20 seconds, 10 seconds in each nostril. It's just ridiculous. Treason is beyond me, but let's stop playing politics for something that is not intended – this is going to put people's health at risk. Again, Pat, I'll come back to you one sec here.

Corrections Commissioner, we are blessed to have an outstanding acting commissioner. Victoria Kuhn is doing an outstanding job but beyond that, nothing to report on the process.

Again, in New York, unless Parimal or Judy correct me, Governor Hochul's steps are to have the ability to take those steps as opposed to taking those steps. We have that ability, so I don't have that concern at the moment, that people are going to come across the Hudson, because all that does is put them on a parody with the powers that we have already in New Jersey. Would you concur with that?

Pat, other than bemoaning playing politics with public health, anything you want to add?

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: No, I think you – the Governor answered it. I think the reasonableness behind proof of vaccination and/or get tested basically says it all. Thanks, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: Amen. Thank you, Joey. Let's go across to Daniel. How are you, Daniel?

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: I'm good, thank you. Hope you're doing well, as well.

Governor Phil Murphy: Very well.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: So do you think people should curtail travel, in-person gatherings, or resort to their earlier COVID travel protocols where they would test and self-quarantine? With regards to this \$700 million COVID recovery spending, is the day after Thanksgiving when people are traveling or with family really the best time to make such a large announcement? It seems similar to what Governors Christie and Cuomo did in 2014 when they vetoed the major legislation the weekend between Christmas and New Year's. Thanks.

Governor Phil Murphy: I don't know how to respond to that second one other than we think it's money that will be well-spent, going to great uses, including helping bolstering public health institutions and doing some things that the state really needs, and it just so happened it came together in that timing. There's nothing either that we're trying to hide or are ashamed of. We think these are smart investments across the board, up and down the state.

I think I would just say, Daniel, at the moment, again, we're going to be in this period where we're going to be in the uncomfortable reality of probably cases continuing to go up, largely if not overwhelmingly fueled by Delta. I'm going to say that it's inevitable that this new mutant is going to land in our laps. Thirdly, incomplete research and research findings, unless Tina or Judy disagree. So it's hard – with that combination, it's hard to say we're going to take X, Y, and Z steps affirmatively. I will say this: We continue to have in place – much is made of the mask mandate in schools, which is a mandate, but we have in place a strong recommendation to wear masks indoors, particularly if you're tightly packed and you're with people whose vaccination status you can't verify.

I think what we – unless you two disagree, any of us disagree. Let's triple underscore that's the strong recommendation. Is that fair to say? If the weather is benign, take whatever you're doing outside if at all possible. We had a little family reunion over the weekend and I spent 99% of the time at this establishment outdoors with coverings and heaters and felt really comfortable and didn't feel the need to wear a mask. I went inside, literally, to find some folks to come back out and I put the mask back on because I wasn't 100% sure. Just let's just strongly ask folks to be vigilant about that. Get vaccinated. If you've been vaccinated and your time is – makes you eligible, get boosted. Again, we're all going to have to bear with each other over the next number of weeks is my guess. Judy, Tina, you okay with that?

Let's go – sir, good afternoon, right behind Daniel.

Ry Rivard, Politico: I'm Ry Rivard from Politico. This is my first one of these.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hey, Ry. It's what?

Ry Rivard, Politico: It's my first one of these.

Governor Phil Murphy: Oh, my Lord, welcome aboard.

Ry Rivard, Politico: Thanks for having me, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Of course.

Ry Rivard, Politico: Two questions: The state unemployment rate is higher than the national average. Why do you think that is? What factors are contributing? Then a second question about Omicron, the emergence of this variant, is that hastening any timeline for a vaccine and test requirement for students?

Governor Phil Murphy: On the second, no, not – again, not yet. It's probably – it's a good question, but it's in the list of questions that we just have to bear with each other here over the next number of weeks, but the answer is no.

So on unemployment, this is my analysis, and I think this is borne out by the data. We had achieved the lowest record unemployment level in the history of the state before the crisis. I have every confidence we're going to get back to that neighborhood. I think if you look at our current unemployment rate, it is very similar to steps – to states, rather, that took steps that aggressively went after public health in similar levels of strength, of steps. States that, as we did, closed down dramatically under that – we haven't said this in a while. Public health creates economic health. If you look at states that did that, plus or minus, with a similar amount of intensity that we did it, you see a similar result. I have every confidence, particularly as – notwithstanding the variants and notwithstanding where the Omicron takes us or how Delta proceeds over the next period of time. If nothing else, when you combine the American Rescue Plan money with the infrastructure money with what hopefully will be another big investment bill coming out of Congress, I have every optimism that our economy is going to get fully back on its feet. Good to have you, Ryan.

Alex, good afternoon. Alex, this is not your first press conference. Just want to remind you of that.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Far from it.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Dr. Tan, can you just tell us the differences between the Omicron variant and the Delta variant? How are they similar? How are they different? Commissioner, does it say anything to you that a lot of the reports of people that have got the Omicron variant and they've suffered it to have relatively mild symptoms? Is that a good sign if this Omicron variant eventually comes here? Governor, do you worry that you're over-playing a variant that's not here yet and produces a mild infection, or do you worry about downplaying it? I'd also like to ask you if Omicron changes your thinking on if you will ask the legislature for a six-month extension of any of your pandemic powers as you would have to do by January 11th, I think? If this makes you less likely to ease back on the in-school mask mandate as more kids get vaccinated? Colonel, I got to follow up from Joey's question. Give me a straight answer. Are troopers going to be hauling Republican lawmakers out of the State House in handcuffs if they refuse to test and they're not vaccinated?

Governor Phil Murphy: Let's go quickly through this. Good – I'll – Tina, I'm going to come back to you, but based in – again, I'll reiterate the health warning on the side of the cigarette package. We don't know a lot of the answers yet. When I say we, that means the universal and anybody we – Tina or her colleagues at the federal level, so there's really two questions there. Tina, we'll come back to that, difference between Omicron and Delta? Secondly, does the early sense that it gives you just mild symptoms – I think you're going to say we don't know enough yet, but that's one question.

On something like this, I worry more about downplaying than over-playing it, Alex, particularly given there are so many unknowns. It's a very good question because we wake up every day trying to get that balance right. I haven't been asked this in a long time, but somebody asked me a while ago – it might've been yourself – why aren't you doing X? I said we're trying always, led by Judy and Tina and their teams – we're trying to meet the moment with the right response or the right preemptive step, so that's a challenge. I'd be wary – frankly, given it's public health and the unknowns, I'm more worried about not taking steps than I am about taking too many steps.

Nothing yet on whether or not this impacts either legislative extensions or school maskings. Again, our opinion has been the more people that get vaccinated, including kids, the more people who get boosted, the faster we can lift those mandates. That's still where I would be but again, next two or three weeks, we're probably going to know a lot more than we know now.

Tina, anything on the public health – two very good public health questions?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: So the reports of milder illness with this Omicron are anecdotal right now, but based on some of the preliminary information that we're getting from South Africa – we're still in the process of better understanding the scope of illness that Omicron can cause. Again, we can say right now that the data that South Africa's providing right now suggests that there might be less hospitalizations. That might be good news, but again we just don't know enough right now about the scope of illness.

In terms of the differences between Omicron variant and Delta variant – and remember, we had other variants, too, like Alpha and Epsilon. They were also variants of concern – all really relate to the types of mutations and the number of mutations. Omicron just happens to have many, many more mutations that might be concerning to public health officials because some of these mutations right now might be in areas that might potentially impact immune response, vaccine efficacy, and transmissibility, but again, all of that's theoretical right now, and only time will tell as we have a better sense of what's going on in terms of the impact of Omicron on transmissibility, vaccine effectiveness, and the scope of illness.

Governor Phil Murphy: Tina, thank you for that. Judy, anything you want to add or you good? Pat, I'm not sure whether or not – how you want to tackle that, but let me just repeat the general – let's not play politics with public health, period. Come on, this is beyond reasonable. Anything you want to add?

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thanks, Governor. I would – I have a hard time envisioning troopers handcuffing anyone, Alex, but I do think they'd have the ability to refuse entry for those men and women. It's certainly something I would consult with the Attorney General's office on and would certainly do that if that issue arises.

Governor Phil Murphy: Parimal, you good with that? Okay, did Trish leave? Okay, do you have anything or you good? Okay, thank you. Let's go to Dave, and then we'll finish out with Nikita. Dave, good afternoon.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. First of all, we're hearing Omicron, Omicron, Omicron. Is there a right way or a wrong way to say this variant? Does anybody know?

Governor Phil Murphy: I think it's Omicron. Does anyone else have a –

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Fauci says Omicron.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: There's actually –

Governor Phil Murphy: He's from Brooklyn.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: That could explain it.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: There's actually three ways to pronounce it.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: They're all correct?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: It's very interesting. One is the American way, which is Omicron. One is the international Omicron, and then there's a third, the British, and I didn't quite get theirs yet.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: But yeah, Omicron, Omicron.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Okay. So whatever we're calling this variant, some people are actually very worried, and I know there is a great deal of concern around the world about it, and that's why some travel restrictions are in place. There's a segment of the population that may be discounting it. There's a segment of the population that is becoming hysterical about it, as well, and nervous. Should we get nervous and hysterical, or is this the kind of scenario where there will be other variants besides the Omicron or Omicron variant? Will this ever end? Will we get to a point where we'll say well, the pandemic is over, thank goodness; let the champagne begin? Or will this turn into something kind of like influenza where we will continually be faced with it? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Dave, I'll jump in but I would ask Judy and Tina, obviously, to come in here. Let me just say this: Do not get hysterical, okay? That is not warrant – we just don't know enough, so please don't do that. Are we taking this seriously? Are we sober about it? Are we going to look to make decisions based on the science and the data and the facts as they become known? Absolutely. In the meantime, strongly encouraging folks to do the things that we know, at least up until now, work. Get vaccinated. Get boosted if you're eligible. Wear a face covering; wear a mask if you're indoors, particularly crowded and you're not able to verify the vaccination status of the folks you're with.

My second answer and then I'm going to defer to the experts is I think this is going to be with us. My operating assumption is it's going to be some version of the flu. I remember Ed Lifshitz said – Judy, this goes back to the Spring, I think, when he said – reminded us a bad flu season was about 1,000 deaths a year in New Jersey. At that point, we were running 2,000 deaths per year. I don't think this is – we're not managing this as if it's going to go to zero. We don't want people's expectations be that it goes to zero. Please, God, we'll be thrilled if it does. My personal view is it's in and among us, but God willing – and this is an important point – at a point I hope sooner than later that it is manageable like the flu is manageable. Doesn't mean that it can't get you or, God forbid, kill you, but you don't manage it or set expectations that this is going to zero. Please chime in, disagree, add, delete. Tina, do you want to go, and Judy?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I just want to say that Dr. Tan has shared that 99.9% of our cases right now are due to the Delta variant, so our increasing trend is Delta. The vaccines are effective against Delta, so I encourage everyone not to be hysterical about what we don't know about Omicron but to be really proactive in controlling what we do know, which is the Delta variant is here; it's with us. It's causing increasing trends. The vaccines are effective, so if you haven't been vaccinated, get vaccinated, and if you haven't been boosted, get boosted.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: And just to add that variants will always be happening. To strengthen at the point that the Commissioner was saying about get vaccinated, I think everybody has been hearing for many, many weeks and months that the way to minimize increase in mutations and the emergency of new variants is to get vaccinated and to minimize the potential mixing that happens when you get infected. If you get vaccinated, you'll do your part in terms of trying to keep down the spread and the emergency of new variants.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, would you and Tina agree that it's likely – again, we don't know the answer to this – likely in our midst like the flu is? Tina, would you agree with that?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Yeah, we're still – this is a question that not just New Jersey faces but every single state is looking at the whole concept of endemicity, when we expect to see COVID-19 in pockets emerging every single year. We simply don't have enough information right now at this time to make those types of conclusions. The reality right now is we do have the tools. Even with the emergence of

Omicron, we still need to maintain high vaccination, the everyday precautions, staying home when you're sick, particularly around this holiday season that we have to be mindful of the actions that we take to try to keep things safe not only for us but for others around us.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said. Thank you for that. Nikita, good to see you. Please, take us home.

Nikita Biryukov, New Jersey Monitor: Good afternoon, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon.

Nikita Biryukov, New Jersey Monitor: I'll surprise you by asking unrelated questions. Before the pandemic, you made a proposal to raise the excise tax on cigarettes to \$4.35. I'm wondering if that's still something you'd like to see done. Separately, Republicans have criticized your proposal for the debt defeasment fund and the American Rescue Plan spending that you announced last week, calling it insufficient and too slow in coming. I'm wondering what your response to that criticism is. Then lastly, only about 400 of the roughly 6,000 applicants for money from the Excluded Workers Fund have been accepted. Immigrant applicants report various technical problems and improper denials. Are you concerned by the low acceptance rate? Do you believe the state is doing enough outreach, and will you still consider a second round of funding if the \$40 million in that fund is not exhausted by the December 31st deadline?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, let me start with the last one. Not necessarily atypical of something you set up for the first time gets off to a slower start than you would like, but that batting average is not acceptable, so we'll continue to stay at it until it is acceptable. I've said unequivocally if the legislature sends something my way for more funds, assuming it makes sense, and I think it would for folks who've been excluded, then I would sign that unequivocally.

I'm going backwards, so forgive me for that. Actually, I'm going to jump around. No news on cigarettes. That's obviously a budget item, and we're early days on that, so if you could bear with us on that front. Listen, not surprisingly, I don't agree with the criticism that it's either insufficient or it's too slow. As evidence of the past several days, part of the reason why we've kept the amount of money in the tank that we have is because we ain't out of the woods yet, and we can quite clearly see the discussion today about this Omicron and the case numbers that are rising. This is a step. It was never intended to be the final step, the ultimate step, the full step. We still have – the good news is we still have monies to spend. We want to spend them smartly. Avoiding debt is something we should be proud of. The wind port, for instance, is a big chunk of money for that that otherwise would've been indebtedness that the state of New Jersey would have had to take on and burden taxpayers, and that's not going to be the case. That's a big deal. The investment in public health I mentioned in this case, level one – another level one trauma, outstanding health institution, that's smart investments. It was never intended to be any final step. It's another step on the journey to wisely and unlike our past as a state where we spent like drunken sailors, we took monies like that and filled budget holes. We're going to avoid that like the plague, and we're going to do this the right way and the responsible way. Good to see you.

Again, thanks, everybody, for coming out. Listen, I think as we mask up here, again, a week from Wednesday, December 8th, we'll be together unless Alyana corrects the record, right here at 1 o'clock. I think – and I'll tee off or jump off from Dave's good question. If over here is hysteria and over here is completely ignoring it, we got to be calibrating it. We got to be sober and Judy reminds us, 99.9% of the sequencing in New Jersey is the Delta variant. That's the one that's in our lap right now, and we know for sure vaccines work, boosters work, face coverings when you're inside and you're not with folks whose status you know or can verify That's still money good.

Keep a weather eye on this, on the Omicron as obviously the health experts will do both in New Jersey, and around the country, and around the world. Let's stay close to it. Let's make all of our decision based on the facts. Folks, I would say accept that there's going to be an uncomfortable period of time here where it's still Delta driving cases that are going up, please, God, not very high but are going up. Remember, we're a third of where we were last year. Let's hope that stays. We're going to have to allow the research, the experts to really kick the tires on this new variant and just stay – let's stay close with each other, and let's stay close with the development and the facts and God willing, by the millions, you've all done so much the right thing and will continue to do that and get through this together. God bless y'all. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy

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