

Governor Phil Murphy

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everybody, sorry to be a few minutes behind. I'm joined today by the woman to my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, another familiar face, the State's Epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan, great to have you both here. To my left, a real treat to welcome back, Acting Commissioner of the Department of Education, Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan. Angelica, great to have you. We have Jared Maples, the Director of the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness; Parimal Garg, Chief Counsel; Dan Bryan, and a cast of thousands.

Pat Callahan is not with us today, and I'd asked that you keep him and his family in your prayers. He would want me to say the following. The weather is still finding its way out of the state, doing a little something outside as I came in. The state police -- and this is the state police only, this doesn't include county, local or DOT data -- but the state police only, 665 accidents that they responded to, 589 motorist aid requests.

Diane Gutierrez-Scaccetti and her team at the DOT, in addition to the Colonel, did an extraordinary job. At the peak of the storm yesterday, they had 4,000 pieces of equipment on the roads. It's like invasions every other week here, Judy. It's incredible, the logistics. The power grid held up very well. I think as I sit here, believe it or not, there are 66 outages in the entire state, which is extraordinary. There was a peak of 4,000; not clear that that was related to the storm. But again, this is still winding its way through and it's going to be a little chilly. And then we look like we may have some more weather next week, which is almost hard to believe.

You'll bear with us as we run through the program a little bit more quickly. today. Judy and I are taking the entire team on an off-site to Cancun. That's not true.

Listen, a failure of leadership is no laughing matter even though that's a cheap line that I got off -- but I will tell you something. Our hearts are bleeding for the Texans right now. Story after story after story, please God, we have reached out to Governor Abbott's office and team to offer our help and we will be there, as we always are, for other states in need. I know Pat would have said that if he were with us today, and I'm sure he'll say it when he's back with us on Monday.

And unlike some folks, Senator Ted Cruz is one who voted against Sandy aid for New Jersey. We have never been and we never will be in the two wrongs make a right category. We will always be there for our fellow states and our fellow Americans, and this is no exception. Please keep our blessed brothers and sisters in the Great State of Texas in your prayers and please, God, may we see some real leadership there.

Angelica, switching gears to something closer to home, is with us today because the Department of Education is releasing its plan to address learning gaps and the increase in mental health issues among our students and staff, including our extraordinary educators, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

While our schools and educators have done tremendous work in this extraordinarily stressful past 11 months to keep our kids learning, we know that our students are still facing themselves incredible stress. Now I will let the Commissioner give the fuller picture, but here's a snapshot. We think this is the most comprehensive plan being put forth by any American state.

We're utilizing the latest round of federal elementary and secondary school emergency relief assistance provided by the most recent coronavirus relief package. That totals \$1.2 billion in support for New Jersey schools. Now, 90% of that, and Angelica will correct me if I'm wrong, which is basically a little bit over \$1 billion, will be distributed to all of our districts in the schools that we have oversight responsibility for, to be used across a broad range of COVID-related needs. I think there were 15 categories as I read it, Angelica. And this is everything from, as you said, in classroom, learning loss that the district may want to do, afterschool programs all the way to new HVAC systems or other ventilation realities.

But I want to highlight a couple of pieces of this plan and these, in my way of thinking, are accelerants. It's not just the money that each of the districts and schools will get but it's what can we do? And Angelica and her team have done an extraordinary job, sort of layering on top of that base amount of money a couple of programs that we think are unique in America right now, that we believe -- and more importantly, the experts believe -- will address both learning loss and mental health challenges.

So, we'll offer \$75 million in grants -- this is all in addition to that money that I just discussed, the 90% of the \$1.2 billion -- \$75 million in grants to regular operating districts, charter schools, Renaissance school projects, county vocational school districts to help curb learning loss and accelerate learning. These efforts can come in a multitude of shapes and sizes, whether it be greater access to one-on-one tutoring, or broadening summer learning programs, providing educators with new professional development opportunities, and parents with new tools to help promote their kids learning.

Also, in addition to that \$75 million – and again through the use of the federal relief funds – our schools may apply for \$30 million worth of non-competitive grant funding to help them strengthen mental health supports for their students and school staff. We are also using some of our state set-aside funds to help broaden the use of DOE's Start Strong assessment, so we can have a measure of attaining where our students are at the beginning of the next school year and beyond. And on assessments more generally, the department will be applying to the federal government for a waiver of statewide standardized testing administration and accountability requirements. We went over this in great detail. The reasons to apply for this waiver are many fold and very valid.

To be sure, importantly, we have not yet received any indication from the Biden administration as to whether a waiver of assessment administration will be accepted. And we also recognize the importance of statewide assessments to gauge where our students' learning may be. But given the need to ensure our students' instructional time is maximized, and the levels of stress on them, our educators, our school administrators, our parents and families are minimized, we are putting forward the waiver request.

As I mentioned, in a few minutes, Angelica will go into much greater detail on each of these issues. And again, great to have you with us.

Outside of this announcement, my office will be submitting its application today to the federal government for the emergency assistance for non-public schools federal program, which will allow the Department of Education to provide COVID-19 grant assistance to our non-public K through 12 schools. More information on that grant program will be forthcoming from the department.

My words say this has been a challenging year. I believe that's the understatement of the century, is that fair to say? But we remain unwavering in our commitment to our educational communities. And again, I thank Commissioner Allen-McMillan and her team at the Department of Education for all they are doing, every day, to support our schools, our students, our educators, and our families.

Right now, Dan, I'm told it we're going to go to the base? I want to call in one other quick audible. I wanted to say this at the top but I want to repeat. The New Jersey Council on the Green Economy is coming together incredibly well. Members of that council will be announced, I think at this rate, next Wednesday. Stay tuned. It's an extraordinary group they're putting together. I want to thank Senior Policy Advisor Jane Cohen, and Honorary Chair of the Council, First Lady Tammy Murphy

Next and moving to a different department but staying in the area of helping our kids, the Department of Human Services is again extending several of its COVID-19 related childcare assistance programs for families and providers. These programs will now continue through the end of June. The department will also continue to waive copays in the state's childcare subsidy program for parents who request it due to impacts from COVID-19. For more information, please visit that website, childcare.nj.gov.

We know how important access to affordable childcare is for our working families, especially in times like this, so I want to thank Acting Commissioner of Human Services Sarah Adelman and her team for continuing to look out for them, for those in need, throughout this pandemic.

Now checking in, Judy, on our vaccination efforts. Four of our six mega sites were closed yesterday due to the winter storm, so today's numbers didn't grow by as much as they otherwise would have. However, everyone who had an appointment for yesterday has been rescheduled, so we will make up for each of these vaccinations.

As of midmorning, we are reporting a total of 1,559,569 vaccinations having been administered, shots in the arms already done, across the state. That includes, Judy, more than 1.1 million administered first doses, and I've got more than 456,000 second doses. Now as Judy will get into in more detail, weather issues – not necessarily in New Jersey but in this case elsewhere in the country – we've spoken about the tragedies unfolding in Texas, but this has been a "whole of nation" weather challenge. Those weather issues have impacted the delivery of new doses. And because planes at major hubs for both FedEx and UPS have been grounded due to the weather, this week's delivery has not made it to us on time. We are working with all of our vaccinators for them to use existing inventory to satisfy their current appointments. However, we are keenly aware that not all sites have the inventory on hand to be able to do this, and this will result in many appointments needing to be rescheduled.

Now to be clear, everyone who wishes to be vaccinated will be, period. We have directed our sites to prepare to ramp up operations and extend hours to efficiently manage this delay once their doses do arrive. We know that the doses that we have been allocated will eventually be delivered. The rescheduling of your appointment is a result of these weather-related delivery delays; in fact, in this case elsewhere in the country. This is not a matter of how many doses we will get – we know the number – but rather, Judy, a matter of when we will get them.

Both the Department of Health, under Judy's leadership, and representatives from my office have been in regular communication with our vaccination sites throughout the week to help us all get through this potential delay. We will continue to remain in close contact and we will help with any logistical issues for making sure everyone gets vaccinated.

After the first major storm earlier this month, our mega sites showed that we can meet the dual demands of vaccinating both those with regular appointments as well as those whose vaccinations had to be rescheduled. In the days following that first major storm, our mega sites were administering to upwards of 10,000 people a day until all the rescheduled appointments were cleared out. So the good news is, we have the capacity. We built our vaccination program to handle this capacity. We simply ask, and we understand people are anxious and/or frustrated, we ask everyone for a little patience considering the latest kink Mother Nature has thrown into the works, not just here but nationally.

And on the topic of vaccines, here is the latest progress report by both CVS and Walgreens as they continue vaccinating residents and staff at the long-term care centers that are part of the federally run pharmacy partnership. And again, I want to repeat, Judy and team took the time to submit, and it was overwhelmingly approved by the feds, the broadest definition of long-term care of any state in America. As we've noted, CVS and Walgreens are scheduling multiple clinics at each facility they visit, as many as four, to ensure that all residents and staff are given ample opportunity to be vaccinated.

So far, as you can see, I've got a different number here but it looks like 1,083 facilities have completed their first clinic, 873 facilities have completed their second clinic, and 167 facilities have completed their third clinic. Fourth clinics are just starting to be scheduled where they are needed.

And by the way, Judy reminded us the other day, I want to make sure I get this right. Fourth clinics, CVS and Walgreens committed to three clinics. The fourth clinics are typically for one of two reasons. One is there may have been an outbreak, or secondly, weather or some other logistical. So, to the credit of the teams at CVS and Walgreens, they've committed to doing this sort of makeup round as need be.

All totaled I've got 190,083 vaccinations have been administered to our long-term care facilities. This is a nearly 70% administered rate. Now, three Fridays ago that number was at 12%. It has come a long way. It's still not as good as the other pile, which is the doses that Judy oversees that the state controls. Remember CVS/Walgreens are a federal program. On the state side, as of this morning, Judy, I showed we had administered 88% of all the doses that have been allocated. So progress, while not in a straight line by any means, continues to be made on all fronts of the vaccination effort.

Now with that, let's turn to the overnight numbers. Today we are reporting an additional 2,679 positive PCR test results, 593 presumed positive rapid test results. That totals 3,272. Statewide rate of transmission is now at 0.91.

The positivity rate for the 43,848 PCR tests recorded this past Monday was 7.58%. I don't ever want to say I told you so, but we predicted that the weekend positivity rate was higher and it would come back down. And as we've said many times, there are fewer tests on Saturday and Sunday. Folks probably are going out to get tested on Saturday and Sunday because they feel like they have to, that they don't feel well or they've been exposed. This just in, we've said this many times. It might be smart, folks, if you want to get tested, to get a test scheduled on Saturday and Sunday, because we know that capacity well exceeds demand on those two days of the week and on holidays.

In our hospitals, we continue to see promising signs as the numbers overall continue to decrease. The total number of patients being treated last night was down again to 2,202. That's the lowest, Judy, I think in many months. Of this number, 2,028 are known COVID positive and 174 awaiting results.

We had 443 of those patients in ICUS, 300 ventilators in use. Throughout the day yesterday, as you can see, 323 live patients left our hospitals; 216 new COVID patients were admitted. And sadly – and again, we're comparing apples to oranges, these are not confirmed – we have been told that 33 blessed souls lost their lives. However, we can confirm this: that 64 additional folks have been confirmed losses from our extraordinary New Jersey family. You can see the total numbers, now 20,495 confirmed and another 2,289 probable deaths. Let's recall three more extraordinary New Jerseyans who we have lost.

First up, this guy. This is all you need to know about this gentleman when you look at that picture, Nelson Cheng, a native of Taiwan, who had called Hamilton Township and Mercer County home for the past 35 years. You won't be surprised to hear in about a minute or so what his line of business was.

Nelson and his wife Leslie came to the United States from Taiwan in 1978. They first settled in White Plains, New York and they soon after moved to Parsippany where Nelson started a career as a hibachi chef at the Bonsai Restaurant in Denville. And when a second location was opened of the Bonsai Restaurant, in this case in Hamilton in 1985, Nelson signed on as head chef and part owner. But Nelson's American dream was to own completely his own business. And that dream was fulfilled in 1989 when he purchased the Carvel Ice Cream Store in Hamilton's Yardville section. Judy, you are in Mercer County, through and through, I suspect you have passed through that Carvel Store many times.

Always community minded, Nelson's Carvel maintained strong ties with many local organizations and sports teams. Generations of Hamiltonians knew Nelson. The store remained his passion and his pride and joy right up until his passing on February 10th. Nelson gave so much of himself to his store that he left little time for other hobbies, though he'd find the time to indulge in his love of Chinese and Japanese movies, a good pastrami from Katz's Deli in New York City, or a gin and tonic made by his daughter. But most of all he loved in order: his family, his store, his employees and his customers.

Nelson's services, by the way, were just Wednesday, two days ago. He leaves behind his Leslie after 43 years of marriage, along with his two children, Nicholas and Jessica. I had the great honor yesterday morning of speaking with all three. He's also survived by his brother George and sisters, Julie and Shuman and their families. And he leaves countless friends both here in New Jersey and back in Taiwan. And he leaves, for sure, a grateful Hamilton. We are honored that Nelson chose to be part of our family and the place where his American dream came true, and may God bless and watch over him and his family and boy, will he be missed.

Next up today we remember Sharon Cohen, on the right, of the Lake Hiawatha section of Morris County. Sharon passed on February 6th, one week to the day after she lost her best friend and husband of 47 years, the guy on the left, Arthur, not to COVID but to a heart ailment. Sharon was a working mom, one of the many who found a way to balance a full-time job with raising two kids. But in every aspect she and Arthur were a team, never missing a family event and together, looking after friends and neighbors and never refusing to help someone who needed a lift.

Sharon was a devoted grandmother, an aunt, and maintained a close circle of friends with whom she would check on almost every day. This was second nature to her as she lost her father at a young age and took on the responsibility of caring for her mother as she grew older with her sister Millicent. And, she learned to deal with Arthur's many bad dad jokes and was always his best audience – boy, can I appreciate that – even when her response was a knowing eye roll and sigh.

Sharon leaves behind her and Arthur's two children Jason, who's from Cleveland, Ohio these days and I had the great honor of speaking with him on Wednesday, and Alicia who is in Maryland, and her two beloved grandkids Henry and Ada. As Jason related and I quote him, "Arthur and Sharon couldn't live without each other and now they are together again." I hope that knowledge brings some solace to all who knew and loved them. May God bless and watch over each of them and the family they leave behind.

And finally, for this week, we celebrate this woman the life of Shirley Matulewicz, a longtime Patersonian, who we lost at the age of 85. Shirley was a bright light and loving and compassionate presence to everyone around her. She especially cherished her roles as mother, grandmother and great grandmother. One of her greatest passions was sewing, and she was renowned for her ability to fix just about anything. Shirley is now reunited with her beloved husband, Robert, who passed away 12 years ago and with her son, Thomas, who also predeceased her. She leaves behind her surviving children, Donna, Tracy, Robyn, William, Larry and Robert and their families who blessed her with 12 grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren. She also leaves behind her brothers William and Gary and many nieces and nephews.

I had the great honor on Wednesday to speak with one of those grandchildren, Donna's daughter Leslie, who lives up in Riverdale, and she spoke glowingly about her grandmother. May God bless Shirley and may her wonderful and loving spirit continue to watch over her family.

So for Nelson, for Sharon and Arthur, and for Shirley and for their families, let's honor them by maintaining the practices that have kept us going for nearly 11 months now. We can't let up with our social distancing, wearing our face coverings, or using common sense. We have to do it for ourselves, but even more for our families and our communities. This is a fight that can only be won if we win it together, if we pull together to do just that.

That goes, by the way, as well to supporting the small businesses in our communities as well. They have also been a central focus of the efforts of the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, and this is another reminder to our small business community that the EDA's small and micro business PPE access program application window is again open. As we've discussed before, the PPE discount program can save participating small businesses up to 70% off their purchases of personal protective equipment for their employees and for their customers.

One business that it has saved is the Eiros Group, a three-year-old Hunterdon County-based organization that works directly to provide for individuals with developmental disabilities, focusing on solutions for challenges such as accessible housing, employment, transportation, education, healthcare and community engagement. It's a fascinating group.

Their first question when they meet you is, what are your hopes and dreams? As so many folks in their community have been stripped too often of their hopes and dreams. They make it their business to bring folks not just back in touch with their hopes and dreams, but back into the community. Jennifer Brown, right there on the right, and she's an extraordinary woman, and her team of roughly 20 employees serve a clientele of 58 individuals across 12 counties. Through the PPE discount program, Eiros has been able to procure the protective equipment that both staff and clients have needed to stay healthy throughout the pandemic. And the money they've saved has meant more money for meeting their core mission.

I had the great opportunity to check in with Jennifer on Wednesday and to thank her and her entire team for their commitment and compassion for some of our state's most vulnerable residents. Check them out, it's eiros-group.com.

She wanted me to give a big shout out to her husband Mike, who has been her partner in this from day one. And this is not abstract for Jennifer or Mike. They've got three kids, one of whom has, as she described it, profound special needs, 24-year-old Kyle. They also have Connor who's at Rowan University and Catherine is at Stetson University in Florida. So keep up the great work, Jennifer and Mike and team.

The Eiros Group is one of the roughly 9,000 small businesses that have collectively saved more than \$7.6 million through the PPE discount program. If you need to enroll your business, please visit that website, covid19.nj.gov/PPEaccess. I'm grateful to Tim Sullivan, to Kevin Quinn and the Board and the staff at the EDA, everybody there for their commitment to our small businesses, and I'm grateful to every small business who has looked to the EDA for support.

In that vein, I have to give a shout out to these two New Jerseyans who come from my neighborhood, Barton and Kristina Henderson of Red Bank. They own a promotional company in Red Bank, but when the pandemic took hold, they expanded into PPE production, launching their own face mask manufacturing business and providing – free of charge by the way – masks to organizations nationwide through their Masking Up From Coast to Coast campaign. Many of the masks they've produced have helped groups across our state who are working to ensure families have food for their tables.

Among their beneficiaries or organizations, I think many of you know very well the Community Food Bank of New Jersey, Fulfill Food Bank of the Jersey Shore, and Lunch Break in their hometown of Red Bank. They've also donated thousands of masks to our frontline healthcare workers and first responders, including police and fire personnel in numerous towns, a total, Judy, of more than 100,000 masks. Extraordinary. So Barton and Kristina hats off to you. They represent the true giving spirit of New Jersey. Yes, we look after our own and we look after others. Maybe they're not in New Jersey, but we will always stand tall, but we always make sure everyone has what they need too, so hats off to Barton and Kristina.

Finally, today I have to acknowledge two passings, one of which I just heard about just before coming over here. A sudden loss, Tamika Allen Jackson, at the age of 46, passed suddenly either last night or this morning. She is, if you don't know Tamika, she is the sister of a dear friend Angela McKnight, Assemblywoman in Hudson County. Tammy spoke to Angela a short while ago, I then spoke with her. As you can imagine, she's incredibly busted up. I asked for permission to raise Tamika's passing and I said it in the very simple sense, the more people we have praying for her soul and for her family, I hope the better and faster she'll get to heaven, because that's exactly where she's headed. So God bless you, Tamika, and God bless you, dear friend Angela.

And finally today, we must acknowledge the passing of a giant, Jack Rafferty, the former longtime Mayor of Hamilton Township right here in Mercer County. He served six years on Township Council before being elected Hamilton's first full-time mayor, a post he held from 1976 until 1999. Over his 24 years in office, he helped transform Hamilton into the thriving and growing community it is today. He also spent a term, if that weren't enough, in the State Assembly. His legacy is seen throughout Hamilton and by the way, folks on both sides of the aisle have saluted his passing; Jeff Martin, the current mayor; David Fried in Robbinsville, a dear friend of ours as well; Brian Hughes, County Executive; I'll add my name to the list.

The legacy can be seen in Veterans' Park, in Hamilton's New Jersey Transit Station which serves so many area residents, and in bringing a hospital into the community, an institution which, by the way, is now the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Hamilton. The Hamilton YMCA was a particular favorite cause of his and today its building bears his name. He was also a big supporter and a leader in the election of President Ronald Reagan. Jack was 82 years young. We send our condolences to his family and to every Hamiltonian whose life he impacted.

And that is a good place to end. I hope everyone has a safe weekend. It looks like the weather's going to be chilly but warming a bit next week and all this snow and ice, God willing, we'll have a little bit of a chance to melt away before we get our next storm.

A final quick program note, and that is my budget address for the upcoming fiscal year will stream online via social media at 1:00 p.m. this coming Tuesday, February 23rd. I look forward to sharing the details about our budget. Now is the time to look ahead and put in motion a plan to spark New Jersey's economic recovery. We will not allow this pandemic to pull us backward. In the meantime, stay safe, continue to be smart, and let's keep working together by the millions to stop the spread.

It is now my pleasure to hand things over to the woman to my left, the Acting Commissioner of the Department of Education, Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan.

Acting Education Commissioner Angelica Allen-McMillan: Thank you, Governor Murphy, for the opportunity to join you today. I am thrilled to announce a series of initiatives that will pave the way forward for our education community, by investing heavily in identifying and addressing the academic and mental health impacts of COVID-19 on our students and educators. The Department of Education has aptly labeled our plan *The Road Forward*. It consists of a series of four coordinated initiatives to assist our students and educators in the spring, next school year and beyond.

First, we are releasing, for public comment, a draft request to the United States Department of Education to waive federal requirements to administer statewide standardized assessments for the 2020-2021 school year. If granted, districts will not be required to administer our suite of statewide assessments this spring, which includes the New Jersey student learning assessment, access our ELL students, and the dynamic learning maps.

Second, we are releasing two substantial tranches of funding on March 15th. In one tranche, the department will establish a pair of grant opportunities, totaling \$105 million, to aid districts in providing additional academic and mental health supports. The Learning Acceleration Grant, consisting of \$75 million, is dedicated to providing academic supports. This grant will support research-based academic enrichment activities in STEM, literacy, and the arts, including summer learning academies and one-on-one tutoring. This grant will reinforce the broader learning ecosystem by funding student efficacy supports, professional development for educators and formative assessments, and programs to engage parents and caregivers through a multi-tiered system of supports.

While this grant will target low-income districts most in need of support, all school districts will be eligible for funding. To ensure long-term planning and support, awarded funds will be available for use through September 30th of 2023.

The department will also establish a \$30 million mental health grant to assist districts in implementing school-based mental health supports for all students and educators. This grant will assist school districts in building a tiered, sustainable intervention model of comprehensive mental health supports and services.

The other tranche will make over \$1 billion in federal funds available through the new round of elementary and secondary school emergency relief funding, also known as ESSER-2.

However, these flexibilities and supports cannot be provided in a vacuum. We must continue to use a data-driven approach to inform student growth and achievement, which is even more important in the current educational environment. Therefore, we will be collecting local interim assessment data from every district in the application for these grants to help identify progress towards grade level and content standards, as well as learning gaps resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Third, the department will provide two assessments in September 2021. The first is the formative assessment known as Start Strong, which was first offered to districts this past fall. The next iteration of Start Strong will better enable districts to collect timely, actionable, standards-based student performance data at the beginning of the school year. The second assessment will be a kindergarten readiness assessment that the department will pilot this September. The kindergarten readiness assessment will give participating school districts data on how prepared

their students are as they enter kindergarten. Additionally, the tool will give educators and families the information they need to adjust and improve teaching and related resources to best suit the needs of their kindergarten students.

Fourth, today, the department will release a clearinghouse of successful practices that have been identified by chief school administrators throughout the state as effective ways to address COVID-19's impact on students and educators. Topics addressed include learning gaps and acceleration, attendance, and securities and operations. This resource will help school districts identify strategies and effectively leverage all of the funding streams we are announcing today.

As I have said in the past, one of my top priorities is to provide students and educators with the flexibility and support they need to focus on social and emotional health and wellness for students as we navigate these uncertain times. While today's announcement focuses on the response to COVID-19, we also understand that continuing to move Governor Murphy's educational vision forward is not a short-term effort, but one that we must continue working toward in the years to come.

The 2020-2021 school year has changed how educators, students, parents and caregivers experience education in New Jersey. The Department of Education is committed to realizing its mission of supporting students, educators, and school districts. And our plan, *The Road Forward*, furthers that mission.

Educators, parents, caregivers, and students of all ages, I once again, thank you for your steadfastness as we navigate through this pandemic to our collective next normal. Thank you, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: So well done, Angelica. Thank you. This is very exciting. As I say, I'd put what we're doing, in this respect, up against any state in America. We had a great conversation earlier this week with you and your team. Certain states, depending on who you are -- and I'm not picking on states, I'm just stating a fact -- certain states have a different mix of attributes that they promote to attract families, businesses, whatever it might be. Some of them use low taxes. Some use warmer weather. We use talent and location.

At the very core of talent is public education. And it's not just money, but putting programs in place that are well funded go a long way toward what we have, which is the top public education system in America. I mentioned I'm going to give my budget address on Tuesday, it'll stream. You should expect, folks, not to be surprised by going, again, all in on talent and location. And again, at the core of talent is education, pre-K right up through 12th, higher ed, workforce development, career paths and beyond. Angelica, I can't thank you enough, great to have you with us.

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

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor and good afternoon. Well, as the Governor shared, the extreme winter weather across the country has caused temporary, nationwide disruption in the vaccine shipping supply chain, and that's also impacting our delivery of COVID-19 vaccine, not only to New Jersey but to all the states. Many of the shipping companies are in the southern states where the cold weather, snow and ice has led to power outages which halted shipping.

New Jersey has not received approximately 230,000 doses of vaccine that was expected this week. They were prime doses and booster doses.

But we did hear some good news this morning. We are working with our federal partners to ensure delayed vaccine to some of our mega sites. Our federal partners told us this morning that they have located and expect to deliver some delayed doses, first doses of Pfizer vaccine, and they should arrive at the mega sites hopefully tomorrow. Those doses had been expected to arrive this past Monday. We're closely tracking this shipment and we will keep the mega sites informed as we learn more, and all sites informed as we learn more about the delayed shipments to other points of dispensing.

As I mentioned on Wednesday, we've directed vaccination sites to use all existing inventory to be able to vaccinate those with current appointments. However, we know that most sites will not have sufficient inventory which will trigger the need to reschedule appointments. We absolutely know that rescheduling of appointments causes significant frustration and disappointment for those of you who are eager to get vaccinated, but I assure you that everyone will be rescheduled.

Like the rest of the nation, we remain in a period of tremendous imbalance between the supply of vaccine and the demand for appointments, and the shipping delays have just added another layer of strain to our ongoing supply challenges. I understand the frustration. Many of my own family are experiencing that frustration. And it's especially frustrating among our seniors who are losing sleep checking various websites in the middle of the night to look for one of the few available appointments.

We track availability of appointments on a daily basis, and right now there are very few available appointments. This is not just a New Jersey problem. It is a national problem. Our allotments of vaccine from the Biden administration are increasing gradually. However, 2.4 million people in New Jersey are searching for those limited number of appointments. We have been notified that nationally, vaccine allotments will increase. We are patiently awaiting to learn of that impact on our supply. So again, while acknowledging the public's frustration, I ask for your continued patience until we receive increased supplies from the federal government.

The vaccine call center is able to register individuals in the New Jersey vaccine scheduling system, as well as answer frequently asked questions about the vaccine. The live agents at the call center have spoken to approximately 176,000 residents.

Last evening, through a partnership with Univision, we promoted the call center to Spanish-speaking residents and saw a significant increase in our calls. Agents were able to help callers register for appointments, check registration status, provide vaccine site locations, and answer questions about the vaccine. At this time, the hold on call center agents actually booking appointments remains, as we need more time to train more agents and streamline access to the scheduling system, stabilize the scheduling system overall. We have a team at the department, and with the help of the information technology team at the state and our Innovation Center, we have a team that are working on this 24/7.

As the vaccination program continues, the department is eager to increase distribution points, or what we call "points of dispensing" for the vaccine. But we cannot expand the number of sites until we have more vaccine. The department has more than 1,700 providers approved; they're enrolled and they're registered in our system, so they are approved to actually distribute the vaccine. But we only have enough vaccine supply to provide vaccine to about 300 points of dispensing.

So employers, private medical practices, universities and community-based organizations who have expressed interest in becoming points of distribution, you are on our list. We appreciate your willingness to serve the public. At the same time, there is not enough vaccine or vaccination supply to support these efforts.

The department is expecting to continue to see increases and allotments from the federal government. And when vaccine is more plentiful -- and it will be -- we look forward to these partnerships to reach more of our residents that are eligible to be vaccinated. At some point, we will be reaching out to all appropriate sites to participate with us in our vaccine efforts.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 2,202 hospitalizations with 443 individuals in the intensive care unit, and 68% of those individuals were on ventilators. The number of variant cases in the state remains at 50.

There are, however, three new reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. Currently, we have 95 cumulative cases in the state; one of those individuals, one child, is still hospitalized. As I've reported previously, the children have either tested positive for active COVID-19 infection or had antibody tests that were positive for COVID-19 exposure within four weeks prior to symptoms.

The Governor reviewed the new cases and deaths. In terms of race and ethnicity, the deaths are White, 55.6%, Black 16.6, Hispanic 18.9, Asian 5.1 and other 3.7.

At the state veteran homes, there are no new cases among the residents. At the state psychiatric hospitals, there are no new cases among our patients.

The daily positivity as of February 15th in the state is 7.58; Northern part of the state 8.07, Central part of the state 7.42%, and the Southern part of the state 6.42%.

That concludes my daily report. As always, stay safe, continue to mask up, socially distance, stay home when you're sick, get tested. And remember, for each other and for us all, please take the call and download the COVID Alert NJ app.

And if you don't mind, Governor, I want to offer my condolences to Doris Rafferty and family, my husband's first girlfriend.

Governor Phil Murphy: Is that right?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yes, they went to grammar school together, and he was a dear friend of my late husband, and I'm sure my husband is pleased that he is joined by one of his favorite Irish sons.

Governor Phil Murphy: God bless Mrs. Rafferty, and I mentioned family as a general matter, but to her and her family, that's a great story. That's a great story. I knew there was a Mercer County, Pennington/Hamilton angle, I just couldn't fish it out on time. Bless you and bless them both. Bless your guy and Mayor Rafferty.

A couple of things other than amen to that, and thoughts and prayers are with the family. You made a very good point which I haven't made in a while: we have just under 300 places that are currently distributing and vaccinating. That number is only going to go up, right? It's not a question of whether or not we have anyone else who's qualified to do it; they're qualified. We just need more doses. So this number is going to go up over time.

Let me also remind everybody that nobody still knows – Tina, unless you correct me here – no one on the planet still knows at this moment how long the effectiveness rate is of these vaccines. So it is possible, I hope it isn't the case, that we're in a flu shot reality and that it's every year or two. In which case, the fact that you've got, I think you said 1,700 or 1,900 places that are qualified, that will be really relevant. Maybe not in 2021, but it's going to be relevant if there's a frequency to this vaccine.

Thirdly, you and I were just kind of kibitzing on the side here. There's some interesting, early – and it's too early, I think, for any of us to have a, I'll speak for myself, a view on this – but there's some press out there today that the Pfizer team believes that there's a higher degree of efficacy with just their first shot. And that they separately think that regular refrigeration may be an alternative. I think it's too early – I'll speak for the experts here – but probably too early to have a reasoned reaction to that. But if that were to be the case, that's a big deal, right? That's a big deal.

Unrelated to your report, but I meant to say to Angelica's report, I was given as I was coming over here, Angelica, which I know you watch like a hawk, the current status of school districts. Again, there are 811 of them, so it's school districts, Renaissance schools, charter schools, votech, it's schools for the developmentally disabled. So, the current numbers are the following: Hybrid 514, that's up somewhat since the last time we reported; remote 162, that's down somewhat almost district for district with hybrid; 99 in-person; and a combination of all of the above, 36 districts. So that number, again, overwhelmingly, there is you know, to the tune of now well over, it looks like over three-quarters of districts have some form of in-person education, whether it's hybrid or full on in person.

So we'll start with Brent, who I almost called Matt. Apologies to both of you. Before we do, we will be virtual today and Sunday unless you hear otherwise. Dan will tell us if that changes. We will be, I think, live here Monday at one o'clock. Again, budget on Tuesday. Next week is shaping up to be a fairly busy week so assume that we're on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday rhythm unless we signal otherwise. So with that, Brent, good afternoon.

Q&A Session

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: Good afternoon, and I've always wanted to be Matt, so. The deadline on the marijuana bills is Monday and it's not clear the final cleanup effort has enough votes to pass the Senate. If there's no cleanup bill on Monday, will you conditionally veto the bills? And if so, will you ask the State Attorney General to order police cease arrests as negotiations continue?

With the limit on weddings having 150 people, does that include staff and, like, wedding bands and everything else?

The CDC change –

Governor Phil Murphy: Are you looking to get your band into a gig, or?

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: No, we only played one wedding, and it was mine.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay. That's good to know.

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: The CDC changed guidelines saying those who had the vaccine would not need to quarantine if they are exposed to someone who had COVID. Will you require those who have traveled but have had the vaccine not to quarantine upon arriving back here?

And last two, education, from Carly Sitrin of Politico. The Acting Commissioner and Senator Ruiz have mentioned the need to collect data from districts to assess learning loss. If these waivers are granted, how does the department plan to collect data from districts?

And how should schools interpret the waiver announcement? Should they prepare to administer an assessment in April, in case a waiver isn't granted?

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. I'll start with a couple of thoughts, and then Judy and Tina on the CDC vax/quarantine question and we'll end up, Angelica, with you if you don't mind.

Nothing to report on marijuana but I do want to say this. There are a lot of folks right now doing – and they have been doing extraordinary work trying to get to a good place. A special shout out to the Black and Latino caucuses in both Chambers. I take my hat off to them and the energies they have put into this. Our team, I'm proud of; the Senate President, who I both saw yesterday and spoke to last night, the Speaker who I spoke to last night. Just, there are a lot of folks doing everything they can to try to get this thing into a good place before the clock runs out. We shall see. It's too early to predict exactly where this lands but God willing it lands in a good place.

Other than disappointed that you're no longer playing weddings, the 150 on weddings, Parimal, does that include staff, band, other folks?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Yes, it does.

Governor Phil Murphy: It does include them. Thank you for that. Judy, Tina, you've been vaccinated, you travel... are you still going to be required to quarantine when you return back home?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Well, it's a little confusing right now, the current CDC guidance on quarantine. Right now, the guidance related to people who are vaccinated, who complete the two-dose series, you're exempt from quarantine as long as you're at least two weeks or more out after you finish your vaccination series. It's within three months of completing the vaccination series and you've remained asymptomatic during that entire time.

Right now, the current CDC guidance related to travel and quarantine is that travelers are still recommended to quarantine after they return from travel, because that only underscores the concerns and the dangers that we've been reiterating right now about traveling during this time, particularly related to a lot of transmission out there. There's concerns related to the variant.

We do anticipate, however, that CDC will likely make some modifications to those travel quarantine guidance at some point, so we'll stay tuned.

Governor Phil Murphy: The two weeks, Tina, is after your booster shot to make sure that you're fully inoculated, right?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Yeah and then eventually, when we get to the state where we have a one-dose vaccine, two weeks after that.

Governor Phil Murphy: Got it. And again, I've not heard from the Consul Generals of either Brazil or South Africa, but not only do we discourage travel, but we particularly discourage travel to places where we know have either variants or a very high rate of transmission that well exceeds New Jersey.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: You know, I think we need to be very mindful about travel in general, because CDC recently released a study looking at the Minnesota situation. They had something like nine variant cases, and they took a look at the travel history. Some had international travel, none had travelled to areas where those variants had actually originated, some had domestic travel, so it really depends. To that end, we know that variant is out there. Minimize that travel at this point.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, including it's out there and more prevalent in other American states, as well, so it's not just overseas. Thank you for that.

Angelica, really two questions. By the way, the learning loss piece is a huge focus of yours and your team, and it's at the core of a lot of what you talked about earlier today. How do you go about collecting the data and getting a sense of that learning loss?

And also I think the other question you asked is, how should districts interpret the request for a waiver when the federal government has not made a decision to grant that waiver? I personally think it's hope for the best, prepare for the worst, but you're the boss, so.

Acting Education Commissioner Angelica Allen-McMillan: Thank you. So yes, we do take that same posture with hoping for the best and preparing for the worst, but we initially extended or expanded the testing window into early June. That gives us flexibility if, indeed, we are required to administer the spring's suite of assessments. Our goal now is to monitor daily, as we have done in the past, to ensure that we continue to advocate for what we believe is best for the New Jersey students.

I want to just add on that point as well, as it relates to data and how we're going to collect it, we know that educators are assessing their students. That is an ongoing daily practice in classrooms; teachers know where their students are. But we as a state want to ensure that we have data that supports the growth of students toward mastery of their grade level and their content standards. And so what we're going to do is ask school districts, during a particular window, to give us data that they already have on hand. We want to reduce the burden and any anxiety that will come along with assessing going forward. And from that, we're going to have targeted discussions and produce guidance that they will know exactly what we are targeting in our collection.

Governor Phil Murphy: Angelica, I don't want to put words in your mouth but in our conversation a couple of days ago, in fact, you and your team mentioned you're already assessing data that you've got in house from, was it October to January, over the past three months?

Acting Education Commissioner Angelica Allen-McMillan: Well, the window is from November 16th through February 19th is what we will be asking school districts to share with us and we will provide a template that will give them the format in which we can collect the data.

Governor Phil Murphy: That's an important point. And by the way, February 19th is today, so the window in fact closes today. Thank you for that. Sir, do you have anything? You good? Matt Stanisci, Councilman, don't pull a hamstring. Nikita?

Nikita Biryukov, New Jersey Globe: So I have a few things for you today. So the Edison Council President says he hasn't been contacted regarding allegations of a 2017 racist campaign flyer that may have violated campaign finance laws. Do you believe your administration should at least hear what local officials like Bob Diehl have to say? Note I'm not asking if you know of an investigation, but whether you believe that there should be one?

And on that same matter, do you know if Attorney General Grewal has recused himself from the matter in Edison?

And then separately, I know you've said that Matt Boxer's probe is being conducted on some sort of expedited manner. But are we talking about days, weeks or months here before we can expect some sort of report?

And when did you last speak with Commissioner Hicks? Have you ceased your usual communications with him while the investigation is ongoing?

And then Acting Commissioner, I have one for you. I'm just wondering where or how far along your confirmation process is? Whether you've spoken to everyone that you need to speak to and whether you've been informed about any possible hearing dates?

Governor Phil Murphy: I would just say, Angelica, on your behalf if I can, we don't get into that on where things stand. So is that okay with you to leave it there?

Acting Education Commissioner Angelica Allen-McMillan: Yes, thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: But it's moving along and we couldn't have a better Commissioner.

Acting Education Commissioner Angelica Allen-McMillan: Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: As captain of our number one in America ship, so bless you.

Acting Education Commissioner Angelica Allen-McMillan: Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I am going to, I suspect, disappoint you wildly Nikita, but I still think very highly of you. So you have to, at some point, ask me questions that you know I can answer.

All kidding aside, the Edison incident, I remember it very well and it was deplorable. Beyond that, I've got no more color on that. That's not to say I'm not willing to give you color or it's not that -- it's separate from not talking about an investigation, I just don't have anything. Parimal may be able to get back to you on that one.

No insight on the AG on recusal.

I can't give you a date on the independent investigation led by Matt Boxer. Expedited is the word I used. He knows that. Remember there is also a criminal investigation that's obviously made some decisions, but also very much is ongoing.

And I don't get into how often or with whom I speak privately in terms of our team, but thank you. That's it, I think, right? Anybody else? You're good? I will suggest we mask up and say a few parting words here.

It took a little longer than normal here today. I didn't say this, but I would say there is still some precipitation in the state so without question we're well through the worst of this storm but please be careful, to our friends in the media here who are moving around, but anybody who's moving around today. The roads are generally good; secondary, tertiary roads not as good so be careful.

Thank you, Judy. Thank you, Tina. Thank you, Angelica. Thank you, Jared, Parimal, Dan, the team. Again, virtual tomorrow, Sunday, Monday, our usual rhythm, budget on Tuesday. We'll be back here on Wednesday. A lot of moving parts next week and look forward to being with you all.

Folks, keep doing what you're doing. We are in active discussions on a whole range of fronts, including other potential steps that we could take to open the state. I would say this: if it weren't for the variants, Tina and Judy, I think those discussions would have bigger aspirations and maybe be happening sooner, but what we don't want to do is lurch forward and have to pull back. We've not done that and we don't want to start doing that now, so we've got to keep an eye on those variants. And I like what Tina said, unless you absolutely have to, don't travel. And if you do travel, make sure you're doing the right thing.

Judy, God bless the Rafferty family, God bless your late guy. Keep Angela McKnight and her family in your prayers, and all the other families who have suffered loss over this past year as well as these past days. God bless you all.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy

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