

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: December 23rd, 2020 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Holding a COVID-19 briefing. WATCH:



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon. I'm proud to be flying a tie actually worn by Brendan Byrne, given to me by Ruthie Byrne. I want to thank Ruthie and wish the entire Byrne family a Merry Christmas. Joining me today, 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 Department of Health's Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz, great to have you both. To my left, the guy who needs no introduction, Superintendent of the State Police Colonel Pat Callahan; we have Jared Maples, Director of the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, Parimal Garg, Chief Counsel.

So this is our last time being together before Christmas. I, once again want to wish everyone a Merry Christmas, obviously, but urge everyone to please, to keep to a small indoor celebration among only your immediate family. And if you are going to gather with others, please, I know it sounds crazy, please try to do it outdoors. We do not want anyone's Christmas to lead to anyone being sickened or hospitalized for New Year's Eve. We want everyone to enjoy their holiday but to enjoy it responsibly.

We're going to bounce around a fair amount today. Next up, Judy and I had the opportunity to be at Ocean Health Initiatives in Toms River earlier this morning. I'm not sure why you were cut out of that, Judy. That's my fault. I apologize. One of the countless community health centers that have been, as I described, the frontline of the frontline in this fight. We were able to visit with some of the medical staff as they receive their first doses of the Moderna vaccine that we now have in our toolbox for fighting this pandemic. It was an exciting step forward as we continue to roll out our statewide vaccine program. We were joined there by Dr. Teresa

Berger, who's also the Mayor of Howell, who is the CEO, Freeholder Director, soon-to-be Director of the County Commissioners in Ocean County and terrific leader and friend Joe Vicari. Congressman Andy Kim was with us, who has been fighting like heck for us in Washington, so it was a good way to start the day.

And on this coming Monday, Judy and I plan on being at one of our long-term care centers as they begin the process of vaccinating residents and staff. Our overall vaccination plan for individuals living in high risk, congregate settings is comprehensive and inclusive, and it goes far beyond the plans for serving just nursing homes that other states have. We have prioritized vaccinations in our state developmental centers, as we've mentioned, our group homes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, Federal Housing and Urban Development residences, and continuing care retirement communities for elderly residents. These are roughly, Judy if my math is right, 125,000 New Jersey residents who will be vaccinated under a program, by the way, paid for by the federal government.

The pharmacy program has been activated. There was a very good call yesterday between our teams and CVS and Walgreens. They will continue working with their facilities that have been accepted into the program to schedule their vaccinations. On this end, in total, no state right now in America other than New Jersey is as prepared to vaccinate these highly vulnerable residents.

We are also aware, switching gears, that the holiday season can be a stressful one in good times. But for countless frontline workers, the pandemic has made things even harder on your mental health. Please know first that it is okay to not be okay, and second, that help is available and just a phone call away. Through the great work of Commissioner Carol Johnson and her team at the Department of Human Services, and in partnership with Rutgers University Behavioral Healthcare, we're proud to provide emotional support and crisis counseling to healthcare workers and first responders impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For our frontline healthcare heroes. The Heal NJ Healthcare Workers COVID Hope and Healing Helpline can be reached at that number, 1-833-416-8773. Heal NJ offers live support for doctors, nurses, hospital staff and all other healthcare personnel by trained crisis counselors and healthcare peers from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. daily with emergency support available 24/7. The helpline can also provide connection to other resources, including telehealth crisis counseling, virtual support groups, and wellness webinars. Again, the number is 1-833-416-8773, or you can visit online at that website at the bottom, healhealthcareworkers.com.

And for our law enforcement officers, Pat, and firefighters, EMS professionals and other first responders, the Rise NJ First Responders COVID Hope and Healing Helpline is here for you. Rise can be reached at 833-237-4325. Rise also offers live support from specialists and peers daily from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. with again, emergency support available 24/7 and access to additional resources. Again, the number is 833-237-4325, or you could go online at that website as well at the bottom, risefirstresponders.com.

Our frontline healthcare workers and first responders have seen far too much heartbreak and tragedy, and we want to be sure that they have a safe place to talk about their experiences, their anxieties, and trauma. From the very start of this pandemic, they have risked their lives every day in the battle against COVID, caring for our families while they worry about the health and wellbeing of their own families and of themselves. In every sense, they are heroes, but even heroes can need help. If you do, please make the call.

I know we're throwing a lot of numbers and websites at you. Help also remains available for any resident who is feeling the strain of the pandemic on their own mental health, and there are many. Any New Jersey resident can call 866-202-HELP, or they can text NJ Hope to 51684 for free, confidential support from NJ Mental Healthcare, a partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Mental Health Association of New Jersey. This toll-free line is also open 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. every single day and is staffed by live, trained specialists. Again, the number is 866-202-HELP or text NJ Hope to 51684.

Lastly, for the deaf and hard of hearing, mental health assistance in American Sign Language is also available through a partnership with Access at St. Joseph's Health in Paterson. You can reach them via video phone at 973-870-0677. That one is from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. And again, support is free, confidential and provided by live, trained specialists.

Again, we know the holidays can always be stressful, especially in a year like this when many of us are not going to be able to see many of the loved ones we usually gather and celebrate with. The pandemic has been hard on all of us and we all know that while we need to keep up our fight, there are those who need a break

and need someone to talk to. So please don't hesitate to reach out and make the call. Someone will be there to help you. And again, our thanks to Commissioner Carol Johnson and her entire team and all of our mental health partners. And by the way, I'm not a professional at this but I would say to all of us, this is going to be an important period over the next couple of weeks to just pick up the phone and call somebody you know, or send them a text or an email, maybe do a Zoom call, particularly with the folks who have been left alone by this awful pandemic, who are isolated for whatever reason. They could use a pat on the back. We could all use some amount of time with each other, even though it may be virtual. We'll get through this, but the next few weeks are going to be tough.

Next, this morning the Department of Labor released the unemployment figures for last week. I think they did this a day early across the country in a nod to Christmas Eve, and the number of new initial unemployment claims increased slightly from last week, a little under 1,300 statewide. Overall, New Jersey workers impacted by the pandemic have now received a total of \$20.2 billion in unemployment benefits.

Additionally, at the end of last week, the Labor Department processed another round of FEMA lost wages assistance payments to roughly 18,000 newly eligible claimants. Those payments, if they have not already landed, should be arriving in the coming days. Please God, just in time for Christmas. The impact of this pandemic on our workforce and on our economy has been enormous and I urge the President to sign the stimulus bill that's on his desk so an estimated half-a-million New Jerseyans aren't left without vital federal unemployment benefits at the end of this week.

I want to repeat something I said earlier today with Judy in Toms River. The President wants to give people more money, I am all for that. States need more money. Local authorities need more money. But let's please, Mr. President, sign this bill and then get right back at it with Congress to find more of that money. Again, it's \$908 billion, there's a lot of important support in that for a variety of interests in our state and we're thankful for it, but it is literally a fraction of what we need. Folks need more money. Unemployment benefits need to be extended longer, small businesses and restaurants and the like need even more support than what's in that bill, and I know state and local authorities need support, as we are at the frontlines of this pandemic. It's our frontline workers. Our revenues have fallen off the table, our expenses have gone through the roof. We want to continue to be able to deliver those services and employ those women and men. Again, Mr. President, please sign this. But we're right with you. We need more support, everything from individuals right up to the state, and we stand strongly on that side.

I want to again go back to the unemployment challenges and thank Labor Commissioner Rob Asaro Angelo and his entire team who continue to do all they can to reach every eligible worker to ensure they receive every penny of benefits to which they are rightfully entitled.

We also have one final update for the year on the efforts of the Department of Education to close the digital divide for students lacking either the equipment or internet connectivity, or both, needed for remote learning. Today, we can say that what was originally a gap estimated over the summer at roughly 231,000 students, that's now down to 9,281. That number is more than 35% lower than the update we gave on Monday. We won't have our next numbers until the new year, and our hope is that once remaining shipment delays are cleared, this number will continue to drop. I'm gratified that it's all the way down to 9,281. That's still 9,281 too many.

We also have the final full week of data from our schools pertaining to in-school transmissions. You can see seven new confirmed instances, another 31 individuals, a cumulative amount of in-school transmissions of 105 impacting 459 individuals. I would say since the start of the academic year, the majority of our schools have been opened in some capacity for in-person instruction, whether it's fully in person or more likely through a hybrid learning model. During the same period, by the way, since the beginning of the school year, it's interesting to keep this in mind, New Jersey as a state registered over 250,000 total positive COVID cases. You compare that to the numbers on the screen in terms of the in-school transmission reality, it's a fraction of 1%.

Again, I'd make two other comments. Number one, there is transmission going from outside the school building into schools, and we have to remind everybody that just because you walk into our schools and they are extraordinarily well set up and they're proving that from moment one to deal with COVID, it's not as though you can just walk in there having been exposed and not expect something to happen inside the walls.

Secondly, while this is an extraordinary accomplishment, this is a very stressful year. Educators, parents, kids, staff, administration, I speak to all of the above regularly and I salute them for staying in there, hanging in there in an incredibly difficult school year, as was the end of last year's school year, God willing, again with vaccines and other developments, we'll get back to some sort of normalcy, I hope sooner than later.

And on another educational issue that is vital to many thousands of students, we remind all districts to ensure that students have as easy access to healthy and nutritious food provided through school meal programs. School meals are invaluable for students, and incredibly helpful for families in need, especially right now.

With that, we go to the overnight numbers and I will just say up front, for the most part, they are not good. We're reporting an additional 4,919 positive cases. That's a cumulative total of 445,138 since March 4th. The percent positivity for all the tests that were recorded on Saturday, 23,494 PCR tests was 12.97%. That number is too high.

The rate of transmission currently rests at 0.97. That's going in the right direction and ultimately, that will help lead us out of this but we're not there yet.

As of last night, our hospitals were treating a total of 3,841 each of the past two days, Judy, if my math is right, have been an increase of more than 100 each of the two days in a row. Of that 3,841, 3,612 were COVID positive, 229 were awaiting their test results. That number, by the way, is our highest number since May 13th. Remember 3,841, our peak was 8,270.

Throughout the day yesterday, the good news is 426 live patients were discharged, and that is not to be under appreciated, but another 498 COVID positive patients were admitted. And again, it's apples to oranges. They have not yet been confirmed but our 71 hospitals reported 62 in-hospital deaths yesterday.

So of the patients in our hospitals last night, 765 of them were intensive care. That's the most since May 26th, and 485 of them needed a ventilator. That's the most since May 29th. Again, 765 total in intensive or critical care; Judy, our peak was 2,080. We're inching up, high 30% of that number. These numbers remained sobering. A week ago, our hospital numbers were actually dropping a little bit and now they're even higher than they were seven months ago. They remain the biggest reason why we can't get lax in our precautions, in our social distancing, in our wearing of masks. And it's the reason why this year cannot be the year for the large Christmas for family and friends. I hate even saying that. I hate hearing it. It's lousy for all of us but that's the way it's got to be.

As we noted on Monday, the weeks following Thanksgiving, the numbers of residents needing hospitalizations or needing an ICU bed or a ventilator all jumped. Our healthcare workers are doing heroic things, but it is up to us to keep our loved ones out of the hospital. To anyone who is under the misconception that no one is dying from COVID anymore, let's dispel this myth right now. Today we're reporting another 103 blessed members of our New Jersey family have fallen to COVID-19. Our count is now of confirmed 16,521. The probable deaths has been revised upward to 1,945. So today, 103 losses of life, yesterday 104. Deaths, that's the first day since June 13th, I believe, which is more than six months ago, that we reported at least 100 deaths. And with today we have our first back to back days of 100 or more deaths since the end of May.

And of the 103 we are reporting today, all but a handful have actually come over the past week. These are all families whose Christmas will be spent remembering a loved one who is no longer with them. I actually got a jump and started making some calls to families who have lost loved ones who we will salute and memorialize on Monday. I guess three families, Judy, all three of them, the individuals died within the past couple of weeks. This has gone from a month or two ago I was calling families regularly who lost somebody in March or April, still making up for lost time. These folks lately have been dying literally in the past number of weeks, if not days. Let's honor a few more loved ones we've lost and families who we join in mourning those we have lost.

We begin by remembering Evelyn Gillich, what a beautiful picture there, a longtime resident of both Cranford and Rockaway, who was 93 when she passed on Thanksgiving. For many years, Evelyn was a secretary for the Elizabeth Board of Education before ending her career in the private sector with the McDonogh and Sullivan law firm in Watchung. But even more importantly, Evelyn gave back. She was a volunteer for the

Summit Speech School for the hearing impaired. She would often keep a list of yard and garden sales to stop at to buy baby clothes, which she would then donate to young moms in need. And she would do anything for her family, whether it be a care package or jumping right into the fray during a grandchild's birthday party.

Her husband of 67 years, John, passed away in June of 2018. Together again, I am sure they are recalling the vacations they took in retirement, which allowed them to travel the world. Evelyn now leaves behind her tremendous family. Son Steve and daughter-in-law Bernadette, and they are West Caldwell; daughter Evie and son-in-law Steve, they live in Florida. Daughter Kathy with whom I had the great honor of speaking and son-in-law Ken, they live in Randolph, and daughter Jean and son-in-law Charles, they're in Denville. And, her beloved grandchildren, Nicole, Caitlin, Kevin, Eileen, Erica, and Brendan.

Kathy her daughter recalled particularly how much her mother loved gifts. It didn't matter what it was, it was the thought behind it. So folks on Christmas, let's keep Evelyn Gillich in our prayers and remember those she left behind. May God bless and watch over her.

Next up, we were called Newark's Sandra Arrington, known by many as simply San. She dedicated more than 20 years to the men and women and patients at University Hospital, most recently as the unit clerk in the neonatal intensive care unit. San wasn't just another face at University Hospital. She touched so many lives, was so well known and so loved by her colleagues that she was recognized by many as the unofficial Mayor of University Hospital. You know, San. Judy's the former CEO there. She didn't leave that caring nature at work. It was the environment she created at home for her daughters Tomika with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Monday, Hanifa, Sharifah and Salima, or for the foster children to whom she opened up both her home and her heart, and for her 14 grandkids with whom she would sit down and watch countless movies.

It was what she shared with her husband Michael, to whom she was married for the past 10 years. San also leaves behind her mom Emily, keep Emily in your prayers, her brothers Thomas, Alvin and Julius, and her sisters Elvira, Benita and Julie and their families. She also leaves behind, as Judy knows well, her beloved family at University Hospital. San passed away on December 7th and she was just 60 years old. We thank her for her years at University Hospital and may God bless and watch over her, and comfort her family at this time.

Finally, we honor Bayonne's Bob Weinel on the right side, Bob Weinel II, a graduate of Hudson Catholic Regional High at St. Peter's University, he proudly served two years with the United States Marine Corps, including time as a member of the Honor Guard stationed at Camp Smith at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. After returning from the service, he became a member of Bayonne American Legion Post 19. He began his post-military career with Bell Atlantic and then switched over to a job as superintendent of operations at the MAR terminals at the Port of Elizabeth, From 1998 until his retirement in 2013, he worked for Continental and then United Airlines at Newark Liberty International Airport, overseeing the daily operations.

We may be two days from Christmas and I want Pat to pay particular attention here, but Bob's favorite holiday by far was St. Patrick's Day, where he let his Irish heritage take center stage and when his warm, funny and compassionate nature would really shine. He was also an active parent volunteer at St. Andrews Elementary School and church in Bayonne, and later at St. Dominic Academy. Bob is survived by his wife of 40 years, Mary Ellen. I had the honor of speaking with Mary Ellen. Both she and Bob were COVID positive. She skated through okay, he obviously was lost. They both came down with it on Halloween.

He also leaves behind his daughter, Kimberly and that's Kimberly in the middle. That's Bob on the right, by the way, Mary Ellen on the left, and that's Kimberly with her husband, Scott. Kimberly, I also had the great honor of speaking with. She is an NJ JJC senior correctional police officer, carrying on that life of service. Her mom said I'm not sure where she got it, I think it was the marine in her dad that led her to this career, so God bless them all. He also leaves behind his sister Lynn, and numerous nieces, nephews, cousins, godchildren and friends. We thank Bob for his service to our country, for his lifetime of dedication to his hometown, and for representing the very best of our state and our people. May God bless and watch over his memory and his family.

Three more families who are entering what should be one of the happiest times of the year, mourning loved ones lost to this pandemic. I cannot think of any better way to close than with the words Evelyn Gillich's family used in her obituary, and I quote the obituary "In her beautiful memory, we ask that you please wear a

mask."

And on a point of personal privilege, this is on behalf of Dan Bryan and myself, I want to remember one more person we just lost, though not from COVID-19. On Monday, I learned of the passing of this guy, Chris Tobin, the Chief Technology Officer and radio engineer at WBGO in Newark, New Jersey. For the past three years, Dan and I, although with the pandemic we've been doing it on the phone, Chris has been engineering the program on telephone, but for most of the past three years Dan and I would go in to do the radio version of Ask The Governor Program from WBGO Studios and Chris was always there on the other side of the board, making it all happen. I am keeping and we are keeping Chris and his family, including his WBGO and New Jersey Public Radio family in our prayers. He will be missed.

Let's end today with a couple of stories that will lead us into the Christmas holiday with a sense of optimism for the times ahead. First up, let's meet Jabu Matthew, that's Jabu on the right. Janu is the owner of Kochi, a Hightstown restaurant that specializes in cuisine from India's Spice Coast. With the pandemic impacting his establishment and with bills piling up, Janu was on the verge of closing Kochi. However, by reaching out to the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, Jabu has been able to receive a pandemic relief grant to pay the bills and position Kochi back to pre-pandemic business. I spoke with Jabu on Monday to check in on his progress and I know he's looking forward to getting back fully to his passion, which is cooking and serving his customers. And when he does, I hope everyone will stop by to celebrate that with him. And when they do, he's at 370 US 130 in Hightstown. Good luck, Jabu.

And with Jabu in mind, a reminder that the application window for the EDA's new Sustain and Serve NJ Grant Program, pairing community organizations with our restaurants, is still open. For more information, go to that website business.nj.gov/COVID. Together, let's get our restaurant workers back to doing what they do best, feeding New Jersey.

And finally this morning, I had an incredible conversation after I saw you, Judy, with five extraordinary young men from my neck of the woods in Middletown. Tyler Armagan, Ryan Day, Joey Dietrich, Kieran Foley and Drew Scalice. You may have heard this story, last Thursday as they were wrapping up a day of sledding at Beacon Hill Country Club, which is at the edge of Middletown and Atlantic Highlands, they heard something that did not sound right. They turned in time to see a sled carrying two young siblings, a sister and brother ages eight and four, and saw that sled fall through the ice into a pond at the bottom of the hill. This posse, by the way, includes some proud Boy Scouts, and they did not hesitate to take action. They formed a human chain with Kieran and Drew, I believe, at its head and waded into the water, reaching the children and pulling them back to safety and then staying with them to help warm them up before their father and mom were able to get to their sides. Thanks to their selflessness and quick thinking, there is one family that has a little extra to celebrate this Christmas. I have to give a huge thank you to these five young lads with whom I spoke, and to Kieran's mom, Maureen, who was able to get us all on the phone this morning. Kieran, Tyler, Joey, Drew and Ryan embody the spirit of our state, that we are truly one New Jersey family and we all look out for each other. They deserve every bit, by the way, of the now national news coverage they are receiving, and we are all grateful that even in the midst of this pandemic, we have some truly good news to rally around. That is a high point on which to leave this last briefing before Christmas.

Again, I urge everyone, please keep your gatherings and celebrations to just your household. Let's get through the next eight days in the strongest position to start 2021. With that, it is my pleasure and honor to introduce the woman who needs no introduction. Please help me welcome the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor and good afternoon. I am pleased to report that as of 11:00 a.m. this morning, 27,730 healthcare workers have received their first dose of vaccine in 54 hospitals and six other sites, including two FQHCs. Boosting vaccine confidence among healthcare workers is critical. They are trusted by patients and will play an important role in the public's understanding of why it is important for them to get vaccinated when the vaccine is widely available for the public.

This week, the state received a total of 208,000 doses of both Pfizer and Moderna, cumulatively; 34,000 went to long-term care, 175,000 are being distributed to hospitals, FQHCs, county and local health agencies, psychiatric hospitals, urgent care clinics, medical practices, pharmacies, and clinics will start using Moderna.

They started using Moderna either yesterday or today. Overall, we now expect to receive a total of 405,825 Pfizer and Moderna doses in December.

As we strive to ensure personnel throughout the healthcare system are vaccinated, the department last week announced a network of community-based vaccination sites. Today, we are announcing a very exciting partnership with Rite Aid to provide COVID-19 vaccinations to homecare and hospice staff in the community. Rite Aid will provide end-to-end management of the process, including the cold chain storage that's required, and vaccinations at mobile clinics to vaccinate these healthcare workers. Information about scheduling appointments is being provided through the home health agencies and their industry associations. The department thinks the Homecare and Hospice Association of New Jersey and the New Jersey Hospital Association and the Home Health Services Association for their collaboration in this undertaking.

As the Governor mentioned, we will be visiting a long-term care facility Monday as they begin to vaccinate residents and staff as part of the federal pharmacy program. Both CVS and Walgreens will start vaccinating on Monday as part of this program. Of that, we have reserved 55,000 doses for the federal pharmacy partnership for skilled nursing facilities. The state expects to provide 112,000 first doses of Pfizer for vaccination of nursing home staff and residents over the next month.

As of now, we understand that approximately 90 nursing homes are scheduled for vaccination clinics during the shortened holiday week next week. That number is expected to increase as additional clinics are scheduled. The pharmacies will visit the facilities several times in order to reach everyone with the first and second doses.

As I outlined Monday, after nursing home residents and staff are vaccinated, CVS and Walgreens will begin to vaccinate thousands of residents and staff in other congregate settings, including assisted living facilities, the five state developmental centers, federal housing for seniors and group homes and other long-term residential facilities. New Jersey is allocating proximately 500,000 first and second doses to cover these facilities that are part of the federal partnership program.

Let me go over those facts again. We've allocated 55,000 doses to start the vaccination process in skilled nursing facilities starting Monday. This represents 45% of all the Pfizer doses received in our first two weeks. Walgreens and CVS will begin vaccinating residents and staff of facilities Monday, December 28th, with over 90 facilities already scheduled for next week. All in, New Jersey is allocating a minimum of 500,000 Pfizer doses, that's the first and second doses, to cover approximately 1,700 facilities included in the Part A and Part B of the federal pharmacy partnership, which will be running all through the rest of December, all through January and into February. These doses are the first to be allocated from the Pfizer availability each week. The partnership calls for the pharmacy providers to provide three on-site clinic visits per site over roughly an 8 to 10-week period. The start of these clinics are arranged directly between CVS and Walgreens and the facilities.

Recognizing that not every congregate setting was eligible for, or enrolled in, the federal partnership, we have a network of community vaccination sites for the rest of these vulnerable residents. We are also engaged in aggressive public outreach efforts to educate the public and build trust in the vaccination process and the importance of getting vaccinated. Since September 30th, I have engaged in over 60 vaccine awareness calls with more than 4,000 stakeholders throughout the state. The calls share our vaccine rollout plan and our goals and encourage the stakeholders to join with us to build confidence in the vaccine. The stakeholders represented organizations including community and interfaith based groups, pharmacies, higher education, elected officials, disability advocates, healthcare unions and associations, counties and local health departments, medical professional boards, law enforcement and first responders.

In addition, this week, we are launching the first phase of a multimedia multi-lingual statewide public awareness campaign to create the public awareness to educate healthcare workers, other essential workers, and the public about COVID-19 vaccine safety. The campaign will include TV, radio, digital ads, billboards, social media, and transit ads. As part of our effort to make science-based public health information as widely available as possible, the department's COVID-19 vaccination page includes fact sheets, FAQs, infographics, links to state vaccination plan and various federal resources. In addition, the FDA has published translated fact sheets for both the Pfizer and the Moderna COVID-19 vaccines. The fact sheets, which are intended for recipients and caregivers, are now available on our vaccine webpage in more than 20 languages, including

Spanish, Arabic, Chinese. The FDA has also posted updated FAQs on both vaccines, which includes additional information on vaccine efficacy, development and safety. It is important that residents stay informed and understand this process. All of these resources and more are available on the FDA's COVID-19 vaccines webpage.

So moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 3,841 hospitalizations, with 765 individuals in critical care and 63% of those patients are on ventilators. There is one new report of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children, so there are currently 67 total cases in the state and one of those children is currently hospitalized. Fortunately, we are reporting no deaths from multisystem inflammatory disease.

At our state's veterans homes we are reporting two new resident cases at the Vineland home. At our state psychiatric hospitals, we are reporting two new cases. The daily percent positivity as of December 19 is 12.97. The Northern part of the state reports 12.46, the Central part 12.54, the southern part of the state, 15.16.

All of us at the Department of Health wish you a safe and joyous season. The best gift you can give this season is protecting your loved ones, your neighbors, and your community. So mask up, wash your hands frequently, celebrate remotely, avoid gatherings, and for each other and for us all, please take the call. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you for the lengthy discussion on vaccines. Separately, the multilingual piece here is so important. I was on a Zoom last night with a bunch of largely Latino, not entirely, Latino and Asian, I'd say, healthcare workers and they were making the point that multi-language is going to be important. I said I was proud that our first guy to get a shot, I knew this already last night, as did you, was going to be a Latino doctor. I said, if he doesn't volunteer to speak in Spanish for part of this, I'll ask him to and he did it on his own, to his credit.

Listen, we had this conversation earlier. Folks, again, I want to repeat something I said and Judy underscored. The past two days, hospitalizations are up over 100 per day, two days in a row. That's a concern. Now it's well below and Judy has calls, I speak to these folks all the time, Judy speaks to them far more so than I do. That is spread across 71 hospitals, right? I don't want to put words in your mouth, but there's no one place that this is exploding right now. It is a state reality. But when you look at the models that we talked about a couple of weeks ago, those numbers are going to go up. That's the one thing that we cannot let happen, and that is our hospital systems to get overrun. Again, 8,270 was the peak in the spring. Remember, that was with a ban on elective surgeries at the same time, so there was a capacity that was essentially created. We had field medical stations that were that were set up, and then over 2,000 ICU beds, 2080 I think was the maximum. We are at 700 and something today. God willing, we don't touch those numbers, but all levers remain on the table and have to remain on the table and it's important to reiterate that.

It's another reason, folks, you're sick of hearing this, I don't blame you, throw something at your television if you're watching, I don't blame you. I would as well. But don't screw up Christmas. Don't go big. Don't go multigenerational. Stay within your immediate family. We saw Thanksgiving perhaps better than we feared, I think it's fair to say, but we still saw the fallout and I think you're seeing some of these hospitalizations reflective of folks who were infected two, three-plus weeks ago. Judy, for that and for all, thank you.

Pat, we've got Dave Daly of PSE&G as if on cue reached out to me just five minutes ago and said Governor, I'm sure you are looking at this, but the weather's nasty. Compliance on the one hand, but folks we do have some nasty weather and as luck would have it, it is 2020 by the way, it is coming in Christmas Eve into Christmas Day. It looks like it's one to two inches of rain, but it looks like very strong winds, and that means likely power outages. With that wonderful, upbeat intro, Pat Callahan, great to be with you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Merry Christmas, Governor. Good afternoon, everybody. Since we last met, just one EO violation and that was in Dover. Dover police were called to respond to a landlord-tenant dispute where the landlord had removed the tenant's belongings, changed all the locks and threatened to kill the tenant if he returned, so he was charged with terroristic threats as well as the EO violation for that improper eviction.

Governor Phil Murphy: Spirit of the holidays exhibited by him.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Yes. And with regard to the weather, I was sitting here as well, Joe Fiordaliso, the President of Board of Public Utilities reached out. The wind is going to be a great concern, the rain, it is probably a good bet that people are going to wake up Christmas morning with no power. So, have generators ready to go, batteries for flashlights, remember to run those generators outside so we don't have a carbon monoxide tragedy. Again, always about avoiding downed power lines.

The other fear is it's going to be warm so with all the snowpack, we might see some flooding throughout the state with quick melting. Then also, the temperatures bottom out during Friday so you're going to have some black ice and you're going to have some slick road conditions on top of it. So just kind of a wet, windy, turning to very cold with some flash freezing expected. Again, preparedness is one of those pillars of emergency management and just recommend that everybody, even though it's Christmas morning, to the Governor's point, 2020 might just go out as it started. Thanks, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thanks, Pat. So again, folks, warm on Thursday, rain beginning it looks like Christmas Eve. By the way, we will aggressively communicate on this, ready.nj.gov is always a good place to go. We will communicate aggressively on this but pretty warm on Thursday, tomorrow, Christmas Eve. Rain beginning into the night, high winds and then temperatures bottoming out pretty dramatically Thursday to Friday, right?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: And we might even have some snow in the in the North and Central parts of the state because of that temperature drop, which just adds another to our point about staying home and staying small. I think it's just another good reminder for us all to do that.

Governor Phil Murphy: And the locusts will be arriving on the 26th. If I could, Sarah, we're going to start over here with Dustin, just to review the schedule. We'll be with you virtually for the next three days and we will, unless you hear otherwise, I've lost Dan Bryan, we will be with you Monday and Wednesday next week. At this moment, at least, at one o'clock.

I should say a couple other quick things before Dustin jumps in here. I thought we had a good White House call again on Monday. They previewed what you're now seeing in the press today. The feds had bought 100 million doses from Moderna. They had the second 100 million from Moderna locked up, so that'll be 200 million doses. They had 100 million Pfizer on Monday, you've seen in the press today, they previewed the fact that they were close to getting the second 100. And that's now out there. That's a 200 million number. And then when you take out the folks who are 16 and under, etc., you're getting within shouting distance at that point of having what we need as a nation, which I thought was encouraging. General Pirna, New Jersey's own, cleared up some questions that were out there.

Debbie Birx and Tony Fauci were also there. I want to give her a shout out. She's been very good to us. She announced that she's going to retire soon and I thank her for her support.

Completely unrelated, we had a really remarkable event yesterday in Paulsboro, where the offshore wind, not just the fact that we'll have clean energy coming from the offshore wind industry but that we're actually going to make big chunks of the supply chain in New Jersey. We christened a port in Paulsboro, which if you don't know that community, it's a magical community. It sits right on the Delaware. I can tell you having been there yesterday, it's pretty chilly this time of year, but it was a remarkable, tangible step. I was with Senate President Sweeney, Chairman Assemblyman Burzichelli, who's the former mayor of Paulsboro, Donald Norcross from Congress and some other labor and other representatives. A huge, huge step forward for New Jersey.

Again, we'll be with you virtually and unless you hear otherwise, Monday at one o'clock. Sarah's got the mic. Dustin, good afternoon.

Q&A Session

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Good afternoon. Were you aware that your office helped devise penalties early in the pandemic at veterans homes if staff wore masks without permission? Why would your office try to restrict the use of face masks, even though at that time the Health Commissioner had required them? Should anybody involved be held accountable for that?

Some readers have been upset that prisoners are getting the COVID vaccine before the general public. I am wondering if you can explain that or offer any additional information? Thanks.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thanks, Dustin. I was asked this question yesterday and if I stand to be corrected, either Parimal or Dan will come to you privately. I believe and again, remember, we've made changes in our veterans homes. There's all sorts of legal and other reviews going on in and around this, so I'll keep this fairly simple. I believe this was not my office. I believe that this was about the protocol of how and when you could get a mask, I believe what that was about. I think this was a case with a lot of long-term care facilities. There was a very limited supply of PPE, and there needed to be a protocol that was pursued. That is what I believe it is. If there's more color on that, we will come back to you.

I think, Judy, it's fair to say that we're still very much, you know, we've got the 1A runway that you've laid out in graphic detail. 1B is still being dealt with, and that includes vulnerable communities. We've taken a lot of steps, as you know, in our prison population, assuming we could do it responsibly and safely for nonviolent folks in particular, to get them outside of the system. That has been a big step forward, but I think that 1B population looks like essential workers. I was on with educators this morning. Clearly the CDC wants older Americans to be on that list. That is a work in progress. Merry Christmas, if I don't see you. Brent.

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: Good afternoon. Will the state include how many vaccines had been administered on the online dashboard, so people can get a sense of how much has been done? What percentage of new cases and deaths are coming from long-term care facilities, of the recent ones we've seen? What are we seeing with new outbreak stemming? Where are we seeing them stemming from now that Thanksgiving is in the past?

Governor, do you plan to sign the unemployment bill on your desk, now that the federal stimulus package appears to be in jeopardy?

Governor Phil Murphy: Nothing new to report on the unemployment bill and I hope the federal stimulus package is not in jeopardy. Again, I hope that we can walk and chew gum here. That the President both signs it and again, he wants more, I want more, that we could do that as a separate matter.

Judy, Debbie Birx said she thought nationally, when we were together in Camden a week ago Friday, that 60% of transmission nationally was private setting. We had been talking, I know Governor Cuomo said he thought in New York it was 70% to 80%. I think you and I were in the 70%. But any color you've got on that?

I'm going backward as if you don't know this already, I apologize. Long-term care fatalities, you I think referenced this. If you didn't, we will get back to you on that. How many people are vaccinated will be on the dashboard, and I think you're kicking the tires and going through a beta testing on that right now. Anything else you want to add on long-term care? I don't know that we have the number. I thought it was 11 today that you had said.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Eleven associated with the 102 cases today. I don't have the overall number. Of the 102 deaths that are reported today, 11 are associated with long-term care.

Governor Phil Murphy: Whether or not it's been, so that's about 10%. Whether or not that's been the number or not, but that feels to me within a range, but we can give you that over the past couple of weeks. And again, the dashboard, you're hoping for early to mid-January, right?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, hopefully sooner.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hopefully sooner, okay. Your first reaction there to me was we may be on the other side of that, but we'll be somewhere in there. And again, right now, you mentioned 27,000 plus had received at least their first shot. We've also got a reality, we previewed this the other day, you've also got a reality of hospitals and now a federally qualified health center, they're all feeding data in and this is going to be a little bit of a lead lag, but that will be on the dashboard eventually.

Have you got anything, sir? Okay. Brent, again, Merry Christmas. Sir.

Reporter: Hello, Governor. The administration has continued to ramp up the amount of contact tracers you have on the ground, but the needle isn't moving with compliance. Why do you believe New Jersey is struggling so much more than our neighbors with this effort? What can you tell us about the proposal you said you planned to hand over to the DOH?

Governor Phil Murphy: I don't recall what proposal you're referring to, sorry. We will come back to on that. Dan, help me out. I don't know that there's evidence that our neighbors are doing better than we are in contact tracing, but Judy would like to weigh in here.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, I do want to share what we're doing with contact tracing. We have over 3,000 contact tracers working in our local health departments. We're following the CDC risk priority levels, because there are so many cases. They've pivoted to more case investigation than full contact tracing, but it shows up on our dashboard as people not providing enough contacts. It's actually that there's been a pivot to a different conversation, more towards case investigation, CDC priority setting, where you look at the immediate household first. A little bit different.

Governor Phil Murphy: Can I add one wrinkle to what we did this morning, which I think we've got a minute before Dave takes us into Christmas here. Today was a live example of an organization that you and the Department have worked with across a number of initiatives. Ocean Health Initiatives, where we were this morning, federally qualified health center, you tagged them to go in on seasonal workers and testing. You tagged them as part of the surge team to go into Lakewood, also in Ocean County, when we had the surge there and in mid to late September. I just say that because that was a good example of, it is the Department of Health. It's the county health officials, Joe Vicari was there, again, he does a great job running Ocean County, it's the local folks, but it's also the folks who are outside the government orbit. Sir, did you figure out the question. Sarah, can you help? Hold on one sec.

Reporter: Apparently, you said that you were meeting with an unnamed company to consult about a proposal you planned to hand over to the state DOH.

Governor Phil Murphy: We meet with companies all the time who come to us and we always, if we think they're legitimate and they've got umph and they can add -- I had one guy reach out to me literally an hour ago, a friend who just got hired by New York to do something. We turn over every stone, and if we think there's a way to improve our batting average, we're all ears. Fair to say? Merry Christmas to you, sir. Dave.

Dave Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. We're now up to more than 1,200 confirmed COVID cases in December, the most of any month since June and we still have more than a week to go. A big jump up today. But the increase in hospitalizations has been slight, although steady. The rate of transmission keeps trending downward. People are confused about this because the understanding is the RT is supposed to reflect what the rate of transmission is and it is going down, but we're getting more and more cases. What do we think is going on here? Is there a lag of some sort with this data? Governor, perhaps you as well as Judy and Ed could speak about this?

Second and final question, we've had inquiries from children as well as parents regarding the guidelines for Santa's visit to New Jersey this year. Have you discussed masking, social distancing? Possible quarantine with Santa or the elves as he delivers gifts in our state? Do you expect compliance or might there be a citation situation involved? Are the reindeer required to mask up? Is there any word on whether Santa has received the COVID vaccine yet? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I had expected Pat to address some of the compliance issues with Santa and the elves, never mind the reindeer. We've been given, at the highest levels of authority here, that Santa and elves and reindeer are all clear, but we still want folks to mask up if they're around Santa, keep the social distance. But he is cleared for takeoff and he's cleared for all the work that I know he will do up and down the State of New Jersey tomorrow night for all the boys and girls out there. Very good question and I'm glad we were able to clarify that.

You actually, all kidding aside, took the question, I was looking down at Ed, I figure we'd drag that out here, we had to give make sure we get his money's worth. This is a question that I was going to ask him, so I will take your question, Dave, and Ed, pose it to you this way. You know, what's the lead versus the lag as an indicator of what we're looking at? I've already said when we look at models, and Judy, you should correct me if I'm wrong here, but could we get up to 6,000 hospitalizations? The answer is, unfortunately, yes. But you're absolutely right, spot positivity has stayed uncomfortably sort of in the 9 to 13 range and RT has steadily -- remember it's a seven-day look back, and the fact that the number of tests have been sort of largely, you know, in a band, it contributes to some amount of unsteadiness. Can you give us any hope, Ed, or optimism that that may be the beginning of at least something that is positive headed our way?

DOH Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: I do think that there is certainly room for some optimism. As I've said before, one of the big differences now compared to what it was back in the early spring is back in the early spring we took an elevator right up to the top. We went very quick from zero to 6,000. Then when very harsh measures were taken as far as closing to the state and so forth, we were able to flatten that curve and drop it down pretty quickly. This time, largely I believe because of all the factors that are in place now, all the things that people are doing, the wearing of the masks, being cautious, all those sorts of things, instead of taking that elevator right up, we've been taking the stairway up, meaning it's been a much slower increase.

We've been going up, but I do believe that all the steps that the people of New Jersey have taken have stopped us from being in a much worse situation than it could have been, as far as that went. The good news is that we've been rising much more slowly.

When we talk about the RT. The important thing to remember about that, as the Governor says, it's a look back at the last seven days, essentially, and it tells you the rate of change. If you have a whole lot of cases and they're staying the same, the RT is going to be one. If you have very few cases and they are staying the same, the RT is going to be one. In the spring, we had an RT above five, because again, we were going up extremely fast. The fact that our RT has been in the 1, 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 range is again saying that same thing, is that we've been increasing very gradually. As it begins to fall down to one and below one, I expect that we are going to begin coming down gradually as well.

Certainly, my hope is, and as I've said before it's tough to make predictions, I did come in last in my fantasy football league this year so I may not be the best person. But my hope is that what we are seeing is that we are now cresting near the top of the curve, and that we will hopefully begin to see it begin to drop down again.

The deaths are a lagging indicator, meaning unfortunately, as things begin to look better, deaths will increase and the deaths are nowhere near what they were back in the spring for a wide variety of reasons. They will not likely go down as early as other things would go down.

Governor Phil Murphy: I mean, we took the stairs up and we're going to take the stairs down it sounds like, right? Again, the lead-lag components here and elements of it lead us to again, we want to warn everybody that the hospital system is the main focus here. We cannot let it get overrun. Could we see these numbers deteriorate? Sadly, we think that they will, but I think Ed is basically saying, I don't want to put words you know, you're kind of in the neighborhood of a plateau here. Let's hope it is the case.

Merry Christmas, Dave. I've gotten two notes since you asked that question. I'll mask up as I answer. Judy said please remind everyone to not leave milk and cookies for Santa. We want Santa to keep his mask on. Pat hands me this, he has just declared through an administrative order rather that Santa travel has been deemed essential. Pat, thank you for saving Christmas. Judy, thank you for keeping Christmas safe. Judy and Ed, thank you, as always. Pat, Jared, Parimal, Dan, the whole team. Again, folks, this is a little bit, I wouldn't say make or break, but this is a big weekend we're pulling into and then we'll have another big weekend next week. The extent to which we handle this collectively, all of us, by the way, we have the same responsibility. But the extent to which we handle this the right way and do the right things, I think dictates a lot of the question you asked, Dave, and Ed answered as to whether or not this is in fact getting in the neighborhood of a plateau or we're going to have another jolt upward. Please God, it's the former and not the latter.

To each and every one of you, to those who celebrate it, one of the great holidays of the year, Merry, Merry Christmas. God bless you all. Stay safe. Do it the right way. We'll see you on Monday at one o'clock. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy

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Office of Governor PO Box 001

Trenton, NJ 08625

609-292-6000

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