Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: January 25th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

01/25/2021

Holding a COVID-19 briefing. WATCH:

Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon. Joining me to my right is the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, the Department of Health's Communicable Disease Service Medical Director, another familiar face, Dr. Ed Lifshitz. Great to have you both. The guy to my left who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have Jared Maples with us, the Director of the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, Chief Counsel Parimal Garg and a cast of thousands.

As of this morning, our dashboard shows our continued progress with a total of 565,401 vaccinations. That's an increase of 65,179 from our report on Friday. We are doing our best to maximize the resources available to us, even with the limited weekly supply we are receiving, and we are averaging approximately 25,000 vaccinations per day across our six mega sites and through community-based and county and local government-sponsored sites.

On Friday, this is a great shot, I didn't get this in time for Friday's presser. I was sent this photo by our dear friend Trenton Mayor, right here in the capital city, Reed Gusciora. This is of a resident of Trenton, Vera Williams, receiving her vaccination at the Trenton Fire Department headquarters. Miss Williams will turn 100 years old next month and she drove herself to receive her shot. She was one of 270 Trentonians to receive their vaccinations on Friday. There's something else cool about this picture. To administer the vaccinations, the city rely on some – Judy, you'll love this – on some fourth-year nursing students from the College of New Jersey in next door Ewing Township. And in this photo, Miss Williams is being vaccinated by TCNJ's Cassidy Weikert. So a special shout out not only to Miss Williams, but to all the student nurses from the TCNJ School of Nursing, Health and Exercise Science.

Tomorrow, Judy, I know Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver and I – Pat, we would love to have you if you're available – will travel to Kearny to tour the Hudson County vaccine clinic that has been set up there, and to look on as several Hudson County residents get their vaccinations. So as we have said many times before, we know that there is far more demand for vaccines at this moment than we have actual supply of doses available to us. We continue to ensure an equitable distribution across our state and to ensure that in addition to our frontline healthcare workers and first responders, that those residents at highest risk, whether due to age or medical history and condition or both, are vaccinated first.

We continue to ask for patience as we await more vaccine doses coming into our state. We have built the infrastructure from the ground up. All we need are these doses and we will be able to fire on all cylinders. We will get there. There's no question about that. It won't be tomorrow or probably not next week, but we will get there and everyone who wants to be vaccinated will be vaccinated.

Also today, our toll-free vaccination hotline went live to assist residents with general questions about vaccines, identifying whether or not they're currently eligible for a vaccination, and to help them identify locations nearest to them where they can get vaccinated. That number is the one on the screen, 855-568-0545. It is staffed from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. every day. We have 250, Judy, thanks to you and your colleagues, 250 trained New Jersey-based operators to assist you.

Because of the scarcity of vaccine supply, we know there are limited appointments available and we ask all callers for patience. Now, we expected a lot of people calling. They did. I'd say two things. The first hour the number was up, 17,000 calls came in. So, you know, there's a lot of pent-up demand, obviously. And by the way, on the website I've checked, Judy, in terms of preregistrations, 2,098,659. So please, we would ask you to have patience. I know already that hundreds of folks have been pre-registered via the phone as we sit here at one o'clock today, in the first five hours of its operation. I'm told over 500, if not more. Again, the number is 855-568-0545. And of course, our online information hub, covid19.NJ.gov/vaccine remains fully functional to provide answers to many of your questions or to take the steps for scheduling a vaccination.

We have made these resources available to make sure that you have accurate and concise information on the safety and efficacy of these vaccines. As supplies increase, we anticipate being able to schedule more vaccinations online and over the phone. I know Judy will have more on this in her report. I think we had a constructive call with the senior leadership of Walgreens on Friday, at the end of the day. They committed to certain benchmarks that are going to come to pass or not within the next week. We've got another call with them getting scheduled. In fact, it is scheduled for a week from today, as they have committed to do certain things by, at latest, a week from this Sunday, in fact. We shall see. Again, I thank them for the constructive spirit of the call and we now need to see the delivery of shots in the arms for our long-term care residents and staff.

Three more quick but important items before we get to the rest of the overnight numbers. First this morning, First Lady Tammy Murphy, along with Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver, Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman, healthcare experts and practitioners and advocates unveiled a new statewide strategic plan to combat the maternal and infant health crisis that has threaten the lives of our mothers and babies, especially countless mothers and

Back to top

babies of color. For too long, New Jersey has held the dubious distinction of having one of the nation's highest rates of Black infant and maternal mortality. This cannot stand and hopefully with this strategic plan, New Jersey will make irreversible strides to becoming the safest and most equitable state in America to have and raise a baby. I congratulate the First Lady and everyone involved with the Nurture NJ Initiative, on what has truly been a multiyear effort. Together with our legislative partners, we have already enacted numerous measures aimed at saving the lives of more new moms and babies, and now this plan is an exciting and important big next step.

Secondly, I want to give a quick update on our schools. As of this morning, 86 of our schools are now open for full in-person instruction. This is up six from last week, and an increase of nine since our students and educators returned from the winter breaks three weeks ago. 414 schools or districts are offering a hybrid of in-person and remote instruction, meaning that some students and educators are in their buildings at some point in the school day. This is also up over the past several weeks, 348 schools were operating in a hybrid model on January 4th. The number of schools using all-remote learning has declined to 270, that's down 55 from last week and 69 since the beginning of the month, and 41 districts are currently implementing a mix of all-remote, in-person or hybrid learning across buildings, and this is done from 47 at the start of 2021.

We are grateful to all school leaders and educators and families who continue to work together to ensure the right decisions for their education communities. Again, I want to thank Acting Commissioner of Education Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan and her team at the department, and our executive county superintendents for all they are doing to ensure flexibility and communication needed to maintain a full slate of instructions.

Each week, I have the honor of reaching out up and down the state to speak with educators. I left a couple of voicemails this morning, mostly to say thanks for their extraordinary work in this incredibly stressful school year. But I had a couple of really good conversations with Fatima Hayes, who teaches in Pennsauken, and Regina Gordon who is in Atlantic City but is a school nurse and also works, Judy, at AtlantiCare Hospital, really, really good conversations, unvarnished in the sense of what they're seeing, what their hopes and fears and challenges are. I just have to give all educators up and down the state, all members of our educational community, including moms and dads and our students, as well as educators and staff, for everything they're doing in this extraordinary time.

Third, lastly, before we do the numbers, the online form for petition signatures for the June primary is going live on the Secretary of State's website today. Additionally, I'm signing an Executive Order today that will allow in-person collection of signatures as well. We want campaigns to have the option to collect signatures, either virtually or in person but we are hopeful that all campaigns will ensure that the collection of signatures is done safely and responsibly.

With that, let's turn to the remainder of today's numbers. We are adding another 3,694 new positive PCR tests, 645 new presumed positive antigen rapid tests to our statewide totals, and the positivity rate for Thursday's 54,987 PCR-recorded tests was 9.62%. The statewide rate of transmission has dipped to 0.94.

As of 10:00 p.m. last night, our hospitals were treating 3,033 known COVID positive patients alongside 221 patients who are awaiting their test results. That's a total of 3,254. Of that number, 598 patients were in intensive care and 392 were requiring a ventilator. Throughout Sunday, 242 live patients were discharged statewide, while 314 new COVID-positive patients were admitted. While our hospitals reported 52 deaths, as we note every day, those are not yet confirmed and not yet in our numbers.

So over the past week, Judy, the numbers coming from our hospitals have been, by and large, moving in the right directions. However, we cannot give up one bit on our vigilance and in maintaining the practices that have kept so many residents safe, keeping social distances and wearing your mask. Our vaccine number continues to steadily increase and as I said earlier, we are ready to kick into high gear whenever our supply increases. But until then social distancing, wearing a face mask, washing your hands and using common sense remain the best deterrence.

I had a conversation on Saturday afternoon with the one and only Dr. Tony Fauci. You can imagine he has had a little bit of a burden lifted off of his responsibilities. We were talking about the new variant and the punch line is this. There's mixed data that came out of the UK on its lethality, and I don't think our government is there yet, at least at the federal level; at least that's my sense. But also, this gets back to the basics that we're dealing with.

My question of Dr. Fauci was does the new variant change the shape of the epidemiological curve? You know, we think that we're in that plateau range right now. Does that extend it? Does it take it down and then back up again? A lot of this, obviously, is to be determined but it's funny, he came back -- folks, it sounds very basic -- You keep doing the smart things, wearing a face mask, social distancing, washing your hands with soap and water, taking yourself off the field if you're not feeling well or you've been exposed, getting tested at the right point -- that continues to be the formula.

[Break in audio stream at start of eulogy for Patricia Ann Hassert]

-- got put on probation until January, I think, and they were relieved that Pat had not. They want her back but they were happy that she avoided that announcement. She leaves behind her husband of 44 years, David, and her four children, son Jeff, son Tim and his wife Rebecca, son Matt and his wife, Kimberly and daughter Lindsay. I spoke with David, Jeff, Tim, Matt and Lindsay on Friday and boy, she was quite a woman. She also leaves behind her grandsons Andrew and Collin. She's also survived by her four siblings Richard, Barbara, Albert and Andrea and their spouses and her many nieces and nephews and her grand-dogs, Yogi and Tucker. We thank Pat for a lifetime of commitment to our state and her family, and may God bless and watch over her and each of them.

Next, we celebrate the life of Donald Cesare who called Plainfield home for many years. Following his graduation at Plainfield High, he joined the army and served in the Vietnam War. He worked as a mail carrier for the Postal Service and then gave another decade of service as a mail clerk for the Somerset County Courthouse. Always a lover of the arts, Don had a passion for museums and the theater. He did some acting, by the way, in his younger years, and he would spend countless evenings with his sketchpad, or working on a watercolor painting. Finally, in his retirement, he found the time to go back to school and earn an associate's degree with a focus in the fine arts.

Last Monday would have marked 36 years of marriage for Don and his wife, Linda. Please keep her in your prayers, she was also COVID positive. He leaves Linda along with his children Steven and Jennifer, and I had the honor of speaking with Jennifer, and he also leaves his granddaughter Nola. He leaves behind his brothers Robert, Joseph and Patrick, his sisters Diane and Nancy, and many nieces, nephews, cousins, and friends who he dearly loved. Donald was only 73 years old. We thank Donald for his years of service to our nation and our state, and may his art live on as a lasting legacy, and may God bless and watch over him.

Finally, for this Monday, we remember longtime East Hanover resident Matthew Lepore, Jr. He was 76 years old. Natty, as he was called, had a remarkable 47-year career at the Port of Elizabeth, a crane operator and proud member of the International Longshoreman's Association Local 1235. As you can see, he even had the honor of introducing then Vice-President Al Gore at an event at the port. But just as he contributed to the operations at the port, he also built a legacy in his hometown. He was a cofounder and coach of the East Hanover Girls Softball Association, among many other contributions.

But through it all, he remained most dedicated to his family to his wife of 55 years, Louise and his four daughters Lisa, Laura, Lois and Linda and their spouses and his nine grandchildren, Amber, Anthony, Ashley, Jamie, Brittany, Tyler, Gabriella, Amanda and George. I spoke with both his wife, his widow Louise, his daughter Linda, they were both COVID -- Linda's husband was in the hospital for six days, this virus went through their family in a big way. He's also survived by his three brothers Anthony, Joseph and Ross, and his sister Rushel. It's a small world network, He and the family also had deep relations with Mayor Joe Pannullo who is a dear friend, Eddie Covington, one of your

colleagues and one of the guys in the Executive Protection Unit. So from the port to the softball diamond and beyond, we thank Matty for all that he did to make life better for those around him. May God bless and watch over him.

Three more members of our New Jersey family taken by this pandemic, so even as we undertake the massive efforts to vaccinate millions across our state, Pat, Donald and Matty remind us that we cannot just sit back and wait to get our shots. As I said a few minutes ago, we have to remain vigilant doing the basic stuff, and we have to keep fighting.

Switching gears, for the past about six months we've been highlighting some of the nearly 55,000 small businesses and community organizations that have turned to the New Jersey Economic Development Authority for grants, loans and other supports that have been critical to their survival. But the EDA is not the only agency within state government working to protect our small businesses.

So too is the New Jersey Redevelopment Authority which, under the leadership of the fabulous singular president and CEO, Leslie Anderson, the Redevelopment Authority set up a small business lease emergency assistance grant program to support small businesses in the 64 eligible municipalities where it works. One of the redevelopment authorities partnering communities is Plainfield, and in the downtown there you will find LiVay Sweet Shop, a cupcake bakery owned and operated by that woman, Stacey Welch, who happens to also be a councilwoman in town, and she wanted me to remind everybody she's on the ballot this year. They've been running this place since 2009. Stacey has done more than just bake cupcakes, however. For the past five years, she has also run Your Cupcake Lady Cares, which has operated annual sock drives for those in Plainfield and the area in need of warm socks. With the pandemic impacting downtown Plainfield, Stacey worked with the Redevelopment Authority to secure a grant that has ensured that her rent is paid up so she can continue to see to the needs of our community, whether it be to their sweet tooth or for greater needs. I had the opportunity on Friday to catch up with Stacey and thank her for her commitment to Plainfield's future. I told her I look forward to stopping by and seeing her soon on one of my future trips to Plainfield, and I also thank the New Jersey Redevelopment Authority for telling us about Stacey. Go online and check them out there, livaysweetshop.com.

Also from our business community, I wanted to give it an acknowledgement and thanks to DoorDash which is donating $500,000 to the New Jersey Restaurant Association that will be converted into individual need-based grants of either $2,500 or $5,000 for some of our restaurants. Moreover, restaurants do not have to be a member of the Restaurant Association to apply. I want to give a special shout out to another dear friend, Senator Vin Gopal, who helped spearhead this partnership between DoorDash and the Restaurant Association.

And finally today, with a heavy heart. I know on behalf of all of us up here and many others, I want to acknowledge the tragic passing over the weekend of one of our state's unsung heroes, that guy, Dr. Andrew Brooks. Born and raised in New Jersey, Dr. Brooks, known by most as simply Andy, was a Rutgers University Research Professor in the department of genetics and for the past decade he served as Chief Operating Officer and Director of Technology Development of RUCDR Infinite Biologics. Now, you may remember that name. Why? Because last year, in the frenetic early days of the pandemic, he led the development of the Rutgers COVID-19 diagnostic assay, the so-called spit or saliva test, which was one of the first rapid response tests to be put into use anywhere in the country and which has undoubtedly saved lives.

Across his career, he coauthored more than 70 scientific papers and garnered more than 1,000 citations in scientific literature. He served as an advisor to the Food and Drug Administration and helped guide the work of multiple research laboratories. He is survived by his mom Phyllis, by his wife Jill with whom I spoke this morning, and you can only imagine how busted up everybody is. It's Jill Watson Brooks, by the way, and his three daughters Lauren, Hannah and Danielle, and by his sister Janet. I'm reaching back to my State Department network and trying to help Jill see if we can get her mom, who's in Germany, over for the memorial service.

And of course Andy leaves behind a tremendous legacy at RUCDR Infinite Biologics, which over the summer he helped take private and which is today known as Infinity Biologics LLC with more than 550 employees. We cannot thank Andy enough for all he did across his career. He will be sorely missed by many, most importantly by his blessed family. He was only 51 years old. God bless you, Andy and watch over you and your family.

With that, I want to introduce another one of Andy's biggest fans, 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. Today, as the Governor shared, the New Jersey Vaccine Call Center is open with live agents assisting callers. As of today, callers can speak to agents to get more information on frequently asked questions about the vaccine, vaccine eligibility, assistance with registering on New Jersey Vaccine Scheduling System, NJ VSS, and identifying local vaccination sites. We continue to have a tremendous imbalance between the demand for vaccine and the supply of actual vaccine. We do know that more vaccine will arrive in coming weeks and months. Additional vaccine manufacturers like Johnson & Johnson will likely be approved in the coming weeks, adding to our vaccine supply. We urge everyone to be patient. Other states are having similar vaccine shortage issues. This is a huge undertaking, not only in New Jersey but across our nation, unlike anything we have done before. Everyone who wants to get vaccinated will eventually have the opportunity to be vaccinated. Additional slots will become available for people to make appointments as more vaccine supply becomes available.

Today we are reporting a total of 565,401 doses administered. 76,697 doses have been administered in long-term care facilities. 1,262 long-term care and congregate living facilities have their clinics scheduled through CVS and Walgreens. The call center, available at 855-568-0545 will be open from 8:00 to 8:00, seven days a week. Today, as of 12:00 noon, over 58,000 calls were received. The call center operates virtually to comply with safe social distancing measures, and has more than 250 trained individuals staffing the call center initially, with plans to add additional agents to meet call volumes. The call center is staffed with a mix of English and Spanish-speaking agents, and is actually able to communicate with callers in more than 240 different languages. Due to scarcity, callers are not guaranteed an appointment when they call. As supply increases and more appointments become available in NJ VSS, the call center will be able to assist callers in making appointments through NJ VSS but right now, very limited appointments are available.

Not all sites that are vaccinating are currently using the New Jersey Vaccine Scheduling System so we continue to urge sites to open up more of their appointments through NJ VSS so hotline callers can be scheduled while they're on the phone with one of our operators. In the near future, the call center will assist consumers to look up registrations, scheduled appointments and edit appointments in the system. We are also exploring streamlining registration and scheduling at all of our sites that do not currently participate in NJ VSS. Our attempt is to make appointment scheduling easier and one-stop shopping.

Currently, the Gloucester site is participating in NJ VSS, however the Gloucester mega site is awaiting its next shipment of vaccine so it is unable to vaccinate individuals today. That site is scheduled to begin vaccinating again tomorrow, January 26th.

The department uses an allocation framework to determine vaccination sites weekly allocation. It's based on a multitude of factors, including the current inventory at the site, throughput at the site, access to all eligible individuals -- that is population density -- and disease burden along with equity. Although allocations to sites may vary each week, our goal is to provide as much predictability and steady supply as possible, but we must continue to balance efficiency with equity in this time of scarcity. Individuals can continue to register through the NJ VSS system. They can also check their local vaccine sites at covid19.nj.gov/vaccine. As I've stated, not all sites are participating in NJ VSS, so please check your county site as well.

As part of the efforts to vaccinate those who live in high-risk congregate settings, we have negotiated with Walmart and they are working with the state to vaccinate individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in our thousands of group homes. Currently, these points of dispensing are closed to the public and only available at this time, for this population. Retail footprints of Walmart and other pharmacy chains will come on board in the coming weeks and months as vaccine availability increases.

For questions about COVID-19 generally not related to the vaccine, residents can still call NJ 211 or NJ's call line at 800-962-1253. It has been a year since the call center was established and the health professionals there have spoken to more than 80,000 individuals during this past year. We are so grateful for their assistance during this public health emergency.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 3,254 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients and persons under investigation. 598 of those individuals are in critical care and 292 of them are on ventilators.

Thankfully, there's no new reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. There are currently 81 cumulative cases in our state.

The Governor reviewed the new cases and deaths. In terms of deaths, the breakdown by race and ethnicity is as follows: 55.4% White, 16.8% Black, 19.2% Hispanic, 5.1% Asian and 3.5% Other.

At the state veteran homes, the numbers remain the same and the state psychiatric hospitals report four new positive staff cases, two at Ancora and two at Greystone. The New Jersey daily percent positivity as of January 21st is 9.62%. The Northern part of the state, 9.12, Central 9.64, and Southern part of the state 10.94.

That concludes my daily report. Stay safe. Please continue to mask up, social 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. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you, and thank you for everything, not just today and that report. Also, I think you have used the word and I'll use it again, patience right now is going to need to be our watchword for the next number of weeks, I think probably at a minimum. But I have to say this. The number of calls, the number of folks who have pre-registered, the number of folks who have already gotten their vaccine, I'm not suggesting my concern has gone to zero but the anti-vax concern that we all had going into this feels like it is fading down rapidly. That's very good news, because that will allow us -- the question is not just when do you get to 4.7 million adults? The question is, can you get to 4.7 million? I still think we get there in the six-month window, but it's going to be more middle and back filled because of lack of supply through the federal channel. I'll say, speaking for myself, my confidence level that we can get to that number has gone up meaningfully. Let's hope it stays that way. Let's hope I'm right that it stays that way.

Pat, we've got compliance. I know we had some knucklehead behavior out there. We also have weather and any anything else you've got. Great to have you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Since we last met, just one EO violation. Newark Police responded to a large gathering at an indoor soccer club. Several members were charged with illegal gambling and drinking. There was again 50-plus, no social distancing or no facial coverings.

With regard to the weather, we are watching that. I do have a call this afternoon with the National Weather Service. It looks like the southwest part of the state starting as rain but as it moves north, changing over to sleet and snow. I would caution, I do think that tomorrow morning's commute as well as the evening commute is going to bring challenges for a good portion of the state, and would strongly recommend if people have the ability to work remotely that you do so tomorrow; even some chance of snow going into Wednesday as well. So we're watching that closely. Again, even as it impacts our mega sites, each mega site operates under its own protocols, but we're asking them to give six-hours' notice for a decision if they make to shut down a site due to inclement weather, to make sure that everybody who has an appointment is appropriately notified via phone or text. As of tomorrow, we don't think any are closing due to weather, although the Meadowlands Bergen site was already not scheduled to open just due to the vaccine allocation. Anybody who has appointments, just be mindful that they may be getting notified. But as of right now, all of our mega sites will be open, including tomorrow morning.

I do believe I'm scheduled to go with the First Lady to Atlantic City.

Governor Phil Murphy: That's right, you're going to Atlantic City.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: We'll be down in Atlantic City to make sure that one's up and running too. That's all I've got, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: That was a hollow invitation by me to invite you to Kearney because I already knew you were going to Atlantic City, so apologies for that. So you think, Pat, the summary, messy in the morning, rain central and south, and a little bit of snow in the north?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: I think the predictions are 1-3 in that corridor north of Interstate 78, which is kind of a typical Jersey storm, but then we do worry about temperatures dropping for the evening commute. DOT, we're in constant contact with them. They've brined just about all the major arteries already today and we'll be on with DOT, their operations folks and Commissioner Scacchetti's team this afternoon and through the overnight.

Governor Phil Murphy: Great, thank you for that and for all. Calling a quick audible before we start over here with Nikita. I got a note from my Mayor, Tony Perry, longtime Middletown resident Charles Domino passed away on Friday, sadly. His daughter Donna reached out to Tony and asked that I mention his passing to today because today, January 25th would have been his 83rd birthday. God bless Charles and his daughter Donna, his entire family and know that we are with them in spirit and prayer.

I still think we're going to be in the Monday, Wednesday, Friday mode. I have heard nothing out of the White House in terms of any other engagements such as these broad VTCs that we've been so used to having over the past almost year. We're obviously in touch with the Biden team constantly on a bilateral basis. So, unless we hear otherwise, we're going to be Monday, Wednesday, Friday at 1:00 and I'll say tomorrow, virtual, Wednesday at one o'clock. With that, Matt's got the microphone today. We'll start with Nikita. Good afternoon.

Q&A Session

Nikita Biryukov, New Jersey Globe: Good afternoon, Governor. So we've learned that your reelection campaign is making plans to seek organizational lines. Should I take that to mean that you will run for reelection on organizational lines? And then thank you for announcing positions, I planned to ask about that. I'm just wondering, are there any procedural changes to how that'll work as compared to last year?

Governor Phil Murphy: So I missed, what was the premise of that, sorry?

Nikita Biryukov, New Jersey Globe: On nominating petitions, are there any procedural changes as to how they'll be handed in, any limits on online collection, or anything like that?

As Finance Chair of the DGA, do you have a reaction to Sarah Huckabee Sanders seeking the Governorship in Arkansas?

Then I also have a question from Carly Sitrin over at Politico, who asks, why weren't changes to the Department of Health's CALI report publicized last week? She says that that is the second time changes have been made without being announced.

Governor Phil Murphy: Rather accusatory on that last question. I am running for reelection and I will seek the county lines. Nothing, to the best of my knowledge, in terms of the change of the protocols as it relates to nominating petitions and Parimal is agreeing with me.

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Yeah, nothing to report there. The Secretary of State's office will be in touch as the election season progresses on how to hand in petitions.

Governor Phil Murphy: As it relates to the Arkansas Governor's race, I've not given that much thought. But I did see the same thing and I assume, is Asa Hutchinson term limited? Otherwise, it looks like they're setting up a primary in Arkansas, which I was a little surprised by. I did not know that he was term limited, but I've got no insight beyond that. I think it's fair to say, as a Democratic Party matter, that's a tough state right now for us so that'll be a challenge. I have no insights on the DOH CALI changes, but thank goodness we have Ed Lifshitz with us. Ed, come on down.

DOH Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Thank you. Thank goodness. The CALI Report, or the COVID-19 Activity Level Report is a report the Department of Health puts out every week that talks about COVID activity levels in different parts of the state. Every week, we put it out. That report hasn't changed since it has first started. I'm assuming the question isn't related to the report itself, but possibly related to guidance that goes out to schools, part of which talks about how to use that report in there.

If that's the case, we do routinely make typically minor updates, revisions, answer questions, change minor things. There was a revision that went out sometime in the last couple of weeks, I don't remember exactly what, that dealt with a couple minor issues. If there was some particular concern or something, I can address that.

Governor Phil Murphy: I've just been notified that in fact Asa Hutchison is term limited. Beyond that, nothing. Good to see you. Matt, good afternoon.

Matt Arco, Star-Ledger: Good afternoon. Governor on the hotline, or Commissioner, is that a place where people can go who haven't been able to get their second dose scheduled and have that problem fixed? If not, is it worth maybe having a separate line for that hotline, given the large amount of people that we're hearing from that have this issue and they have an urgent need to schedule that second dose in a certain amount of time.

Gloucester County, which is run by the state and uses the state site to book appointments said over the weekend that the state's website doesn't allow for second-dose appointments. What is the state doing to rectify this? And again, given the high number of people we're hearing from daily, how can people who have not been given a second dose get those appointments?

Commissioner did Gloucester have to cancel any appointments that were set for today? And if yes, how many were cancelled? Were those people automatically rescheduled or will they need to go through the state online system again?

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, I think I'm going to turn all of these over to you, if I may.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Sure. Let's start with the second dose scheduling. The recommendation for a separate line is a really good recommendation so whoever gave that, thank you, because we have a lot of questions about second dose appointments. Most of our sites schedule the second dose appointment before you leave after your first dose. We did find, and I can attest to particularly the Gloucester site did not do that. But everyone that is due for a second dose will be contacted for appointment scheduling for their second dose.

Additionally, the second dose appointment application through NJ VSS will be up and running this Friday, so people again will be noticed if they're due for a second dose and that appointment will be scheduled to those sites that are connected to NJ VSS.

I don't know how many visits were cancelled at Gloucester today. I can find that out for you and get back to you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Mahen, can you help us follow up on that? And the other question, part of that last question was, will they be rescheduled?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: They should be, yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: We'll come back to you on that. I would also make two other quick points, Matt. Today will be the all-time high, would be my with great conviction, prediction of the amount of calls that are coming in to the call center, and it will come down to some sort of, just with the passage of time, you're going to get some sort of an normalizing.

Secondly, I'm told the following is happening consistently. I mentioned this earlier, to the tune of many hundreds. I know it's at least 500 and I suspect that that information is stale, Judy, already. That folks are getting help preregistering on the phone. The preference is still to get an email back, an email address back from the person on the phone so that when they're up to bat, an email will automatically be sent. But I am told, because you've got some folks, as we mentioned, part of the animating reason to set this call center up is you have got folks who are not email savvy, that if need be, they will accept a phone number, but the preference is to get an email address, phone number if need be.

Thank you. Sir, please.

Reporter, News 12, New Jersey: I have two from News 12's Alex Zdan. First for the Health Commissioner, you mentioned at an earlier briefing that the vaccination call center was contracted out to a private company. Which company is it and how much are they being paid?

And also, to clarify you said 58,000 calls were received as of noon. How many people were scheduled for vaccinations as of noon?

And for the Governor, are you satisfied with the performance of the call center today? What is being done to improve call center performance? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'll start, Judy. I do not know the number of how many have been scheduled but we can come back to that. I do know the pre-registered number is over 500. I don't know the scheduled number but we can come back and let you know that. There's not a lot of open slots here at the moment, so folks have to realize that we continue to be going back to early December, over promised and under delivered by the last team. We are going to be digging out of that for a while.

Am I satisfied, day one, 17,000 calls in hour number one, how many by noon? 58,000, did you say? We expected this, so I think the answer has to be yes in the context of everybody's on one side of the boat and the boat is leaning over on the water. I mean, that's an overwhelming amount of incomings, but I think they've done a really good job getting this thing off the ground. And as I say, I can say with great conviction today will be the all-time top tick of the number of calls we're going to get and it will go down from today. I can't promise you how fast or how far, but it will go down.

I have no insight on the private contract arrangement but over to you, Judy.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, I'll have to get back to you on the name and the number, maybe by the end of the --

Governor Phil Murphy: Maybe even by the end of our time together today. So thank you for that. Sir.

Reporter: All right, just one quick question for you today.

Governor Phil Murphy: Music to my ears.

Reporter: Governor, with the entire state in the orange category, can you tell us why it was the right decision to relax guidelines for schools? Things like no longer shutting down classrooms for COVID-like illnesses but waiting until a positive test result? Why do districts no longer have to close if the entire region turns red?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, first of all, please God that the entire region doesn't turn red. This question of regionalization has come up a fair amount across the whole spectrum of how we conduct ourselves as a state. Judy and her team have led, I think quite sensibly, with the notion that that really does matter as a healthcare hospitalization matter, healthcare and hospitals, as well as by an education matter.

I get concerned, I think we've said this before many times, you didn't ask this but I want to -- if I want to go out to dinner, first of all, if I live in Middletown, New Jersey and I'm in a public school, the chances are 99.9% that I'm in a Middletown school. If I'm in a local healthcare reality, the chances are overwhelmingly, unless the hospitals in the area is on divert, that I'm going to be cared for locally.

But if I have the choice to go to dinner, or to go shopping, that tie-in is not hard and fast. I can drive up to Bergen County if I wanted to. That's why the regionalization piece has been helpful, but also in a state as small and dense as ours, also has potentially unintended consequences.

I think the school decisions continue to get made. Judy, the healthcare parameters that you've established with the six , not just three but the six regions that you look at, two in the north, two central and two south continue to be the guiding reality and the districts are making their decisions with their local health officers within that context, in that district. There's a natural migration. By the way, it started as we predicted, more remote, and then got more hybrid in particular. It then went back to more remote as the second wave really started a surge and you're now starting to see there's now a swing back from remote to hybrid. Each of those decisions gets made in consultation with the Department of Education and the Department of Health's input, but they ultimately get made at a local level.

Please God, we don't get to red zones. It feels like the numbers, again with the footnote of the second variant which we're watching carefully, appear to be beginning to go in the right direction. Anything you want to add, Judy, to the school reality?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Also I think, and Dr. Ed Lifshitz can speak to this, that the Communicable Disease Service is in constant communication with the Department of Education to review the results and what's going on regionally. I don't know, Ed, if you want to talk a little bit more about how that occurs.

DOH Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Sure. This also refers back to, I think, the CALI report question from Dustin earlier. Every week, we put out a COVID Activity Level Report. For the last several weeks, New Jersey has been overall in orange. As the Governor mentioned, I think it is very likely that we're going to continue in orange and hopefully begin to move down towards yellow, at least if current trends continue. I don't think it's likely that we're going to be moving up to red anytime soon. When we talk about red or very high level activities happening, it probably won't be happening, certainly not in the near future. As the Governor mentioned, any changes to that just kind of reference the fact that we talk all the time with Department of Education, with our local health departments, to talk with the schools and they make those decisions about whether school should be closing or not.

One of the things that we've noticed from the beginning is that both the amount of in-school transmission that has occurred, while it does occur, it is certainly lower than we had feared going into this, and the disruption of keeping out people who were exposed to somebody who had symptoms that very likely were due to something not related to COVID was high. So it came down to a question that people are asking about, why are we now saying that some people can return to school where earlier we would have had to keep them out? These are people who aren't sick, but were exposed to people who were mildly ill, we didn't know have COVID. And essentially, the probability that they would be contagious in school and transmit to other people is very low, and the disruption that we were hearing from the schools, that it was causing to the schools by having these large number of students staying out was high. That minor change was made in the guidance.

Governor Phil Murphy: The other striking thing is, Ed and Judy, Judy, every day go through and mention not just the positivity rate for the state, which again to remind folks is 9.62%, I'm happy to say three days in a row under 10. I hope it stays that way and keeps going down. But when you break it down by region, it's remarkably tight these days. I mean, this virus is in the state. We're a small state. We are the densest state in America. Parimal was making this point to me earlier. It is sort of equally distributed. As usual, our team has jumped to the forefront. In this case, I want to give Chris Ryan, who my kids call Chris Pine…

The contract, this is for Alex's question, the contract was with a company called XTEND. It was competitively bid. I don't know the amounts, but we'll come back to you with that. The vendor has been performing very well and has drawn compliments from all parts of our organization. I think you would endorse that, Judy, right? So, so far, so good. Again, in the context of a tsunami, we use the word tsunami a lot, this is another very appropriate use of that. Thank you, sir. Dave, good afternoon.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi. Follow up with regard to the questions about the second shots and people not being able to get them. I know, Commissioner, you had said Gloucester is getting back to people but we've heard from several people, one that went to the Monroe Senior Center, another person went to Rowan University to get their first shots, and they were told you have to go to the online site to make an appointment. They've tried, they can't do anything, they're panicked, they're older. Why don't we have a system where all of these sites are required to set up a second appointment for somebody before they can leave? I would only think that, I mean, I know we're talking a lot about there's a limited amount of vaccine, but you're going to have a lot of older people panicked who have gotten the first shot, and it's like, what the heck do they do? So why don't we have a system where automatically these places are told, look, you know, you give them one shot, give them an appointment for the second one.

Point of clarification with regard to the Walmart giving shots, I believe you said to group home residents. Will this be expanded to other pharmacies? Specifically, do you know which ones? Will this open up in terms of people being able to go to these sites besides just them going to group homes?

Final question and it's sort of related to the first one. We've heard from several people who have expressed a great deal of frustration about trying to get an appointment. They get an email from the Department of Health saying, "Congratulations, you're now eligible, please go online and make an appointment." And there are places individually listed that they can click on the website. They go, there's no appointments. So, why are they getting this email to tell them congratulations, go make an appointment but there's no availability through August and May? Again, I understand, you know, we can only do what we can do in terms of getting the shots but why is our system set up this way? It doesn't seem to make any sense. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. I'll say a couple things, Judy, and ask you to weigh in. We've said this mostly about unemployment claims over the past 10, going on 11 months. But if you've got specific, Dave, either locations or individuals, Mahen, can we get these from Dave assuming that they have no problem with our knowing their identity? We can make blanket statements about the system generally but as it relates to specifics it would really be helpful, not just for their case but if it's a location, that's a number of cases, but also we may learn something in doing so,

We believe best practice is that, in fact, to your first question, you do get signed up for the booster shot before you leave after taking the first shot. I'll let Judy weigh in on that. Could we see Walmart extending beyond the remit that Judy just talked about, or to others like them? Absolutely. But I've mentioned this, the President has talked about

FEMA setting up, Pat, 100 locations around the country. We welcome that but please, we've said, please bring doses with the setup. Just more locations right now, that's not our constraint. That's not our shortage right now, it's doses. I'd have to get on the email piece because I don't have a crisp, specific answer. With that, Judy, over to you.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Best practices, and we've advised to all points of dispensing to make the second appointment before the person leaves on their first appointment. I have heard from many individuals over the weekend, by email, about Monroe, about Rowan. I have all of those emails. We're following up on everything single one of them. I had about 30 emails in relation to Gloucester, Rowan, and Monroe and a couple of other sites that did not make the appointments. We will follow up on every single one of them.

The second doses are set aside, so people will get their second dose. We have to make sure that they have their appointments to get their second dose. That is the best practice; get your second dose appointment before you leave, after getting your first dose.

Governor Phil Murphy: I assume you agree -- you don't have to, by the way -- on the Walmart remit the extent to which they can broaden that?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, I think Walmart would be very interested in broadening and becoming what we call an open POD, points of dispensing, an open one but right now it's closed so that we can get as many individuals who are in our group homes, and there are a lot of them throughout New Jersey, we want to make sure we get those individuals vaccinated.

Governor Phil Murphy: So we have, just as a point of background, we have as of this morning 268 points of distribution, 19 of which are closed, 249 are open. The closed number would have been a lot higher, and they made this observation a month ago, because all of our hospitals would virtually have been closed at that point dealing with their own staff. This is not including the CVS or the Walgreens long-term care program. Please.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Just this idea of mandating, you talked about best practices, obviously it makes sense they should do it but why not just say you have to do it? This is the way you're going to do it from this point forward. Would you consider that? And if not, why not?

Governor Phil Murphy: I think essentially we have, right?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yes, and they have all received an email today outlining all of those procedures once again.

Governor Phil Murphy: We went from zero to 268 in basically six weeks and the call center opening today. This will get to the place we need it to get to and in fact, it's getting there. Thank you. Stacey is that you?

Stacey Barchenger, The Record: Yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: How are you?

Stacey Barchenger, The Record: Good. How are you?

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm good.

Stacey Barchenger, The Record: CVS and Walgreens have said they will have administered first doses of a vaccine to every nursing home resident and staff member who wants one by the end of today. But Commissioner, if I'm hearing you right, that's not the case in New Jersey? If I'm understanding that correctly, can you tell me when you expect everyone in long-term care to get the vaccine, if they want it? How many staff and residents have gotten their first shot as of today?

With the high school basketball season getting underway on Tuesday, is there any chance that parents will be allowed to attend games before the season ends on March 6th?

Governor, nearly 90% of people who were released from prison a little bit early with those public health emergency credits were let go without NVC ID cards, despite a law that you signed that said they should have them. Are you satisfied with that?

Governor Phil Murphy: Walgreens, we were on with Walgreens on Friday at the end of the day. They made the same commitment. As of this morning, at least Judy, I'm looking at between the two channels 76,697 administered, but with still a significant balance of first doses to be administered. They made that commitment. They further made another commitment, which I think was by this Sunday, they would complete their extended living obligation.

The exceptions were, it sounds like a couple of long-term care nursing homes had switched providers and/or asked to step back for some reason.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: The reason primarily was if they had an active outbreak, they did not want individuals coming into the nursing home until that calms down, and that's a best practice. Additionally, some of the nursing homes prefer to go to make an arrangement with their local pharmacy that has been servicing them for years. But we have 1,385 facilities totally in the long-term care pharmacy partnership so scheduling will be through February, there's just so many.

Governor Phil Murphy: I show that they've gotten to 838 as of this morning. And again, the nursing homes were prioritized over others.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Nursing homes first. That's Phase A, and then our other congregate living facilities, assisted living, congregate senior housing, HUD 202, our state developmental disability homes, and some continuing care retirement communities.

Governor Phil Murphy: Again, this to Judy's credit, I want to reiterate something we haven't spoken to in about a month. We submitted a much bigger, broader plan in terms of the definition of the 1A long-term care category than any other state in the nation and they accepted with the exception, I think, of the psychiatric hospitals, they accepted the entire plan.

The answer is that the numbers -- I'm going to call an audible, Judy, because you and I haven't had, we've had informal discussions but this is not signaling a formal position. The answer to your question about allowing some amount of folks in to watch the games if the numbers continue to get better, I think the answer to that is yes. We just can't say when. I would certainly think whatever we did, whenever we did it, it would prioritize senior families, I would think, without having spent a lot of time talking to Judy about it. I want to say this, again, most of the gyms would be in this category, most of the restaurants in this category, most of the moms and dads are in this category, very compelling but respectful input coming to us, including to me personally, making the case to allow us to do that.

I think the key thing, folks, if you're watching and you've got a daughter or son who plays an indoor high school sport, the one thing you could do right now is to make sure everybody in your life -- your family, your friends, your neighbors -- is wearing one of these to help us continue to drive the numbers down. And if we do that, the chances go up meaningfully that we'll be able to take a step. Listen, I've got a son right now who plays sports, I mentioned all three of them are on an indoor team and I can't go to their games and that stinks for me, I have to say, so I completely get it.

I've got no insight or no crisp answer on the folks who have been out of the system, but can we come back to you on that? Parimal, will you help me with that? Thank you.

Okay, I'm going to mask up. With that, thank you, everybody. Judy and Ed, thank you, as always. Pat, likewise. Jared, Parimal, Mahen. Unless you hear otherwise, we'll be virtual tomorrow, here at one o'clock on Wednesday.

I'll be very brief. Just keep doing what you're doing, folks. Wear face masks, stay away from each other. Be particularly careful when you're inside, wash your hands with soap and water. Take yourself off the field if you've been exposed, you don't feel well, and at the right point get tested. We keep doing that, you add vaccines on top of that, this thing is going in the right direction. Will it be tomorrow? It will not be tomorrow or next week, but it is going in the right direction and we will get there together. God bless you all. Thank you.

Copyright © State of New Jersey, 1996-2023

Office of Governor PO Box 001
Trenton, NJ 08625
609-292-6000