

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: January 3rd, 2022 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Michelle: Governor Murphy, when you're ready.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thanks, Michelle. Good afternoon, everybody, and happy New Year. Starting the year 2022 with the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. Her colleague, another familiar face, the Communicable Disease Service Director at the Department of Health, Dr. Ed Lifshitz, and a who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan.

Speaking of Pat, he'll give us a weather update. We've been at it on the weather front intensely since before yesterday but really since yesterday. State of emergency in a handful of counties. The state's Emergency Operations Center under Pat's leadership was activated at midnight. Just to be safe rather than sorry, state workforce came in late today at 10 a.m. I've been back and forth with Mayors Paul Hodson of Egg Harbor Township comes to mind, Lenny Desiderio, Sea Isle City, Albert Kelly in Bridgeton, Gary Quinn County Commissioner Director in Ocean County, Danny Levinson, County Exec in Atlantic County among others. This is a little bit – I'm in central Jersey in Monmouth County. A tiny, tiny bit of snow here, but they are getting clobbered in the south. Could be as much as double-digit inches when this thing is said and done, so if you're down there, stay strong.

We expect little activity in central and northern Jersey. That's not to say we won't have anything, but it won't be remotely what we're seeing in the south. Ready.nj.gov, if you don't have to be out, don't go out. If you lose your power because there are high winds, don't assume someone else is calling it in. You should call it in. If you see a downed line, don't go near it. Call that in as well. Probably Pat will get into this in more detail. Expecting some coastal flooding as well as a part of this, so a storm that's significant and it's principally a south Jersey storm, but everybody out there be careful and keep your eyes peeled.

I want to thank everybody who has reached out both to the First Lady and to me to get to the First Lady over the past 24 hours with well wishes since her positive test yesterday. She continues to be asymptomatic and in good spirits and God willing will remain so, but certainly this occurrence necessitated that we move today's briefing to its virtual format. I have tested negative. I tested today negative, yesterday negative, a handful of days ago – I think three negatives in six days. We'll both continue to test regularly, and we'll closely continue to adhere to all CDC guidelines during this time. A couple of lessons pop out from Tammy's experience, which I'll come to at the end of my remarks. With that, we've got a lot of ground to cover.

First of all, again, happy New Year. On Saturday, January 1st, I formally notified leadership in the senate and assembly respectively to extend for an additional 90 days our administration's emergency powers related to vaccine distribution and administration, testing, and ensuring adherence to CDC guidance, particularly as it relates to masking in vulnerable settings, including our schools and childcare centers where we know there are large numbers of unvaccinated individuals. I also requested a 90-day extension for a number of administrative orders, directives, and waivers that have been issued by our departments and agencies in response to the pandemic. This request is, by the way, in accordance with the law I signed last June that allowed for the formal declaration of a public health emergency to expire while ensuring that our administration had the necessary authority to continue to fight the pandemic. I'm grateful for the attentiveness and partnership of senate president Steve Sweeney, assembly speaker Craig Coughlin to this request, and we will continue to work closely with them and with their leadership teams.

This Omicron tsunami has changed the game yet again. We cannot summarily give up the fight. We need to remain on a war footing to ensure that we can get resources to where they need to be and when they need to be there, and yes, this means that we anticipate our kids having to wear masks in their schools for now in order to protect their health and safety and ensure that they can continue in-person learning. This brings us absolutely no joy. No one wants to see our kids' smiles more than I do, but this is what is necessary now to keep our schools safe, and I'll have more on those efforts in a few minutes. With the exponential surge in our numbers, it would be the height of irresponsibility to lift these basic public health requirements at this time, and I and we will not let that happen.

Let's now jump to those numbers and start with a look at what is happening in our hospitals. As it has been throughout the pandemic, ensuring the ability of our healthcare system to serve those who are the sickest is among our very highest priorities. Over the past week as you can see, we have seen more than 50% increase in the number of individuals hospitalized for COVID-19 along with significant increases in both ICU and ventilator counts. That's one half of this equation, albeit, as I said, the half that we're watching the most closely. The last thing we can allow is for our hospitals to be overrun. The other half, of course, is the staggering numbers of new cases that are being reported every day as you can see here. Today the Department of Health is reporting 22,625 new cases in total, but we know that this is a dramatic undercount as most cases – or as most people, rather, testing positive through at-home test kits are not reporting their test results to local health authorities, so look at this number as a floor.

Let's start with this man, Dennis Mikula Sr. He's called North Caldwell home for 21 years and passed on December 14th last month. A stand-out football player at Clifton High, Dennis was president and owner at Mikula Contracting Inc., which his father had founded and which Dennis had elevated to being named and I quote New Jersey Family Business of the Year of the year 2020 by Fairleigh Dickinson University's Rothman Institute of Innovation and Entrepreneurship. He also supported Clifton's youth football and baseball programs. He left behind his wife Cynthia – I'll come back to her in a minute – and his sons Dennis, Jr. and Ryan, and I had the great honor of speaking with Dennis last Thursday. He also left Dennis's wife Diana and three grandchildren, Lucy, Ryan, and Jeremy. As we speak, Cynthia is currently fighting her own battle in the hospital against COVID. Please, please, please keep her in your prayers. He is also survived by his brother Andrew among other extended family. We are grateful to Dennis for a lifetime spent in service to his community, and may God bless and watch over him. At the urging of his son Dennis, Jr., please get vaccinated and continue to follow guidelines to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, and keep that Cynthia in your prayers.

Today we also remember Joseph and Charles Sculla of Hasbrouck Heights. We lost them both in the pandemic's early days. They were father and son. Joseph on the right, Charles on the left. They were 101 and 71 years old, respectively, when we lost them. Joseph was a proud army veteran and found a career in accounting after his service days concluded. Charles worked as a manager for the Bergen Record newspaper. They passed within a month of each other. Joseph's wife Madeleine with him on the right, and that's Charles's mom, passed away last September. She had COVID early on, but she did not die from COVID. I'll come back to that in a moment, and you can't make this up. Today would've been Joseph and Madeleine's 80th wedding anniversary, January 3rd. Unbelievable.

Charles left his wife Cathy on the left – I'll come back to Cathy in a moment – his children, their children, Michele and Michael, and I had the great honor of speaking with Michael last Thursday. Also, Joseph's – they were Joseph's grandchildren as well as the next generation, Alyssa, Jenna, Drew, Connor. In the early days of this awful pandemic, back when these folks passed in April and May of 2020, Cathy had – on the left, had a double knee replacement. Her husband, father-in-law, mother-in-law were all in the hospital at the same time. Can you imagine? Michael reminded me of something which was poignant. All three of the losses of lives, none of them ever knew that the other had passed just by the way it worked out, and sadly, his grandmother had pretty severe dementia at the end, so the combination of timing, the severity of the illness, and his grandmother passing in the way she passed, they never knew that the other ones had passed, which is probably the way it should've been. They are also survived by daughter and sister Joanne, Joseph's other grandchildren and nieces Lynne and Lori, and their collective kids Christina, Melissa, and Michael. God bless all of them. We pray for them, and keep them in your prayers.

Finally for today, let's give a quick shoutout to Warren based Spinelli Financial Advisors, another of the small businesses that has partnered with the Department of Labor through the Return & Earn program to get our state back working. Founder, this guy, Mark George Spinelli recognized a need to hire another employee for his growing firm. Through Return & Earn, he was able to not only find that new team member but also offset the costs of their onboarding and training, and that new employee received a cash bonus as well as the opportunity to work toward a professional certification and a fulfilling new career. That's exactly how Return & Earn is supposed to work. We are grateful to George for being an early adopter. He and I spoke last Thursday. Check them out on the website, by the way, spinfa.com, SPIN, F as in Frank, A as in apple, .com.

That's what I've got for this Monday. Again, we urge everyone to take the steps necessary to protect themselves and their families during this Omicron tsunami. Get boosted. Wear a mask. Use common sense. Get tested and stay home if you feel ill. With the winter weather today, please take it easy on the roads, particularly in the south, and let the plows and spreaders do their jobs. The state of emergency declared for the counties of Ocean, Burlington, Atlantic, Cumberland, and Cape May remains in effect, but wherever you are, let's all stay safe. With that, please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor, and good afternoon, everyone. The simultaneous spread of the Delta and highly transmissible Omicron variants as well as increased holiday travel and indoor gatherings have caused a tsunami of infections in the state. We are reporting record high COVID cases and test positivity rates. Emergency department visits and hospitalizations for COVID-like illness are also increasing for adults and children. The COVID activity level is very high in the northern and central regions of the state, and the southern part of the state is reporting hospital census higher than our peak in April of 2020.

Also, we are seeing the highest number of pediatric hospitalizations that we have seen either with a principal diagnosis or admitted for another illness and testing positive for COVID. As of today, 102 children are hospitalized. 76 of those children are confirmed COVID and 26 are persons under investigation. That number has literally doubled over the last seven days. The demand for COVID testing has skyrocketed, and emergency departments are experiencing high volumes of individuals seeking non-emergency COVID-19 testing. The emergency rooms are not COVID-19 testing sites. Please go to the website covid19.nj.gov to find one of the thousand testing sites available around the state.

Hospitals and long-term care facilities throughout the state are experiencing large staff shortages due to COVID. As a result, the Department and the state Office of Emergency Management are working with FEMA on requests for federal strike teams to support hospitals and with the New Jersey National Guard for strike teams for our long-term care facilities. We are getting many inquiries also about setting up field medical stations as we did in April of 2020. Our experience and lessons learned from the first surge taught us that expanding capacity off the site of hospitals actually strained the clinical staff, so we will keep the staff close to the hospitals by adding capacity in and around our existing hospital campuses allowing us to manage the volume of patients more effectively and efficiently with the goal of assuring that all patients get the care they require.

We must do everything we can to reduce the spread of this unrelenting virus and protect those returning to work and school. Our greatest tools remain vaccination and testing. To ensure that access to testing is widely available for students, teachers, and staff returning to the classroom, the Department took a series of additional steps last week. We asked all school testing vendors to be in as many schools as possible today and to be able to test staff and students. I've sent letters to local health departments, the FQHCs and testing site partners asking them to prioritize appointments and walk-in availability for children and their families this week. Sites were also asked to expand hours dedicated to testing children. I also held a call Thursday with the pharmacy retail chains asking them also to prioritize testing of children, and as Governor Murphy mentioned, on Friday, we visited a new federal testing site that can test 1,000 individuals a day at 90 Halstead Street in East Orange.

The state has also partnered with Vault Health to offer free at-home saliva tests. To order a test that can be shipped to your home, visit learn.vaulthealth.com/nj. As of today, 463,457 residents have ordered test kits. However, due to a nationwide inventory constraints of test kits overall, Vault has capped the number of daily requests for New Jersey to 30,000 per day. If you try to request a kit and get a message stating that the cap has been reached for that day, please try again the next morning.

We welcome the news that the United States Food and Drug Administration, the FDA, has authorized a Pfizer booster dose for children between the ages of 12 and 15. Additionally, everyone who received a Pfizer primary series is now eligible for a booster at five months rather than six. In New Jersey, more than 256,000 12- to 15-year-olds have received their primary series. Starting next Monday, January 10th, over 155,000 of them, or 61%, will be eligible for booster doses. We are awaiting similar approvals for the Moderna booster vaccine as well. Also, based on FDA action, today children between the ages of 5 and 11 who have received a solid organ transplant or are considered moderately or severely immuno-compromised are eligible for an additional dose of Pfizer 28 days after they have completed their initial series.

We know that the unvaccinated remain most at risk of severe illness or death from Omicron, so please get vaccinated if you haven't done so. If you have gotten the primary vaccine series at least five months ago, please get a booster shot as soon as possible. Only 45% of eligible New Jerseyans have received a booster. We must do better. We encourage everyone to wear a mask, wash your hands frequently, stay home if you're sick, and get tested. As Governor

Murphy mentioned, the Department has issued guidance regarding the Test to Stay option for keeping students in their classes. Test to Stay allows asymptomatic, unvaccinated students who were exposed to a person with COVID-19 in any school setting where students are supervised by school staff indoors, outdoors, or on school buses to continue in-person academic activities that are part of the regular school curriculum and provided during school hours. Students participating in Test to Stay are required to comply with enhanced testing and masking recommendations and should quarantine when not in school. If schools are considering implementing Test to Stay policies, they should have robust contact tracing in place and access to testing resources.

They should also obtain advanced consent for testing of the students. Schools must report individual test results to local public health officials and to the individual who provided consent. This Test to Stay option does not apply to exposures that occur outside of school and in the community. We've also released new guidance for timelines for quarantine and isolation in exposed not-infected individuals. For unvaccinated individuals are those more than six months out from their second mRNA dose or more than two months after the J&J vaccine and not yet boosted. Five days of quarantine and an additional five days of strict mask use is required. In very limited circumstances when a five-day quarantine is not feasible, it is imperative that an exposed person wear a well-fitting mask at all times when around others for the ten days after exposure. This guidance does not apply to the schools. CDC will be releasing quarantine and isolation guidance for K through 12. The current guidance should be followed while we await CDC's new guidance.

Boosted individuals are those who have completed the primary series of an mRNA vaccine within the last six months or the J&J vaccine within the last two months, there is no need to quarantine following an exposure, but you should wear a mask for the ten days after the exposure. The best practice would also be to include a viral test for SARS, CoV-2 at day five after exposure. If the test is positive for COVID-19, the individual should isolate for the five days from the date of the positive test result. If symptoms occur, the individual should immediately isolate and get tested for COVID-19.

If you are infected, the time frames are, regardless of vaccination status, ten days total. Isolate for five days. If asymptomatic or symptoms are resolving after five days, you can end your isolation. However, you must wear a mask around others for an additional five days.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported a high of 4,715 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients and persons under investigation. We are reporting three new cases of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children since our last briefing. There are 155 cumulative cases in the state, and one of these children is currently hospitalized. At the state veterans' homes since the last briefing, there have been nine new cases among residents and three COVID-related deaths at the Paramus home, 22 new cases among Menlo Park residents, and 1 new case among Vineland home residents. At our state psychiatric hospitals, there are 75 new cases among patients; 28 at Greystone, 27 at Ancora, 9 at Trenton, and 11 at Ann Klein. The percent positivity in the state as of December 30th is 32.2%. The northern part of the state reports 33.33%; the central part of the state, 32.15%; and the southern part of the state, 28.22%. That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe. This virus is unrelenting. It searches and finds vulnerable individuals, and that includes individuals who are not vaccinated or are not boosted, so let's get vaccinated and boosted to protect ourselves, our family, our friends, and most importantly, our children. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you for all. You mentioned this. You and Pat and I were together Friday in East Orange at the opening of a mega testing site. I want to thank President Biden and the federal team for standing that up. I was asked on Friday whether or not we'd be open to more, and the answer has got to be yes. Pat, I'm sure, will back that up as well. I think particularly if we can get one in the southern part of the state.

Secondly, we had a good call with the regional hospital coordinators and then separately with the long-term care association leadership. You've really gone through a lot of the challenges that are being faced in each of those venues and God bless our veterans; let's just say that, as we should every time we gather. Pat, we'd love in particular for you to, if you could, comment on two things. One is the weather and where it is and where you see it going. I mentioned earlier, and I know you know this, but the south has been getting clobbered this morning with snow.

Secondly, Judy, something you and Pat and I were discussing earlier, and Pat, you may want to throw a little color on this. People ask us a lot about hospitalization capacity, and back in the spring/summer of 2020, one of the weapons was a separate field medical station unto itself. That model is probably not going to be the model we're going to be pursuing this time around for the simple reason that staffing is a huge challenge. Well, remember in the spring of 2020, we had a lot of people volunteering, healthcare workers from Florida and other places, nurses, doctors, even in some cases from outside of the country, to come into New Jersey and New York City at the time and be the bullpen, basically. Those days are over. We're all getting clobbered. There's nobody coming in that's not already in here. Potentially, National Guard support, which is one area we are hoping that FEMA can help us out perhaps beyond that. I say that because any more color, Pat, you can add to the notion that Judy and you and I were discussing. The model this year, as long as this surge lasts, is going to be on campus, trying to find ways to get another 50 or 100 beds into an existing campus or perhaps to set a tent up on campus at that particular hospital as opposed to some unto itself field medical station. Any comments you've got on any of the above? Again, Judy, thank you for your comments and leadership. Pat, over to you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor. I will start with the weather. As predicted by the National Weather Service, the southern part is getting clobbered, as you would say, Governor, over six inches so far. The National Weather Service just came out with predictions of 12 to 18 inches expected in southern parts of the state. I also know that Atlantic County and Cape May County coastal communities are under coastal flooding advisory. To that end, US 40, both eastbound and westbound, are closed right now and traffic is being detoured because of the flooding down there. Upwards of a foot above ground level is expected. That advisory will go into early Tuesday morning. I did have a call with all the county OEM coordinators and state partners yesterday. We activated the SEOC last night, as you said, Governor, at midnight, and our urban search and rescue staff remain ready with high water vehicles as well as snowmobiles.

As of about noon today, troopers had handled about 114 accidents and 185 [inaudible 39:07]. President Fiordaliso let me know that Atlantic ACP was dealing with about 2200 outages, which is now I think under 1,000, so that's trending in a good direction, but we may see that increase given the high winds and the expected snow, again upwards of another possibly 10 to 12 inches of snow down there. I do recommend that anybody should stay home if you can. If you have to go out, 511nj.org is a good place to go before heading out. I also stress to our citizens with disabilities or access and functional needs to go to registerready.nj.gov, which is a phenomenal resource to let us first responders and emergency managers know where you are and what your needs may be during a disaster.

With regards to the COVID response, Governor, certainly that East Orange site is phenomenal and as you said, if we had our druthers, we'd have one down in southern part of the state as well. That hospital capacity expansion, based upon what we're seeing in reality as well as modeling, leaves us to believe that a lot of hospitals are going to be asking for that. Again, that point, to your point, about building those out in the existing footprint is key because of the nature of where we are with staffing as a state and as a nation. We are still pushing for those 10 strike teams of 15 members each, which would be able to literally go and do those rounds. We hope that that 150-person request that we put through through FEMA and HHS will review and hopefully come to an approval on that because we can set up all the beds we want. If we don't have the medical staff to go out there and take care of patients, it's really going to be all for naught. That is almost an hourly conversation between Judy's team and certainly our All Hazards Incident Management Team, and whether that's beds, the equipment to support it – I think we had upwards of 2,000 beds last year from both the mothballed hospitals that we renovated as well as the field medical stations and that we're in the process of just making sure that we're ready to go. Our urban search and rescue folks, along with EMS task force, are – it's our primary concern, Governor, as you well know.

Continue to monitor the storm on the weather front and continue to monitor the COVID storm as well, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, redefining multitasking here on Monday, January 3rd. Thank you for all of the above. A variation on my comments and your very good color on densifying bed capacity on campuses is the fact that – and you made the point and Judy's made it as well. Staffing is likely going to be our biggest constraint here. Folks need to get their mind around that as opposed to – we'll continue, obviously, to show you the bed counts and the ICU counts and the ventilator counts. Obviously all that's important, but we cannot say enough things positive about the heroism but also fatigue and level of infection and illness right now among healthcare workers, not just in New Jersey, around the country.

Judy, I don't want to put words in your mouth. Before we take a couple questions, the modeling, which I know you're constantly updating – I'm – wouldn't call this a silver lining, but the modeling – this thing comes to a head based on the models here within the next week or two. Is that fair to say? I know you're going to update that, but that's the time frame that we're looking at right now?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah, we're looking at our peak, Governor, around the 14th. That might move up a little bit because we're exceeding what the model shows, so we're updating the model today. Then we take our model, we compare it to the University of Pennsylvania CHIBE model, and we're looking at the peak between 6,000 and it could be as high as 9,000 hospitalizations. Hopefully the trajectory goes up as fast – it comes down as fast as it goes up.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, which it's done in places like South Africa and the UK, so God willing that happens to us. Those are big numbers, folks. The peak reached in April of 2020, just to remind folks, 8,270 total beds. Again, the good news is we're a ways from that at 4,715, but we're going up a little bit by leaps and bounds every day, overwhelmingly unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated folks. Thank you for that.

Michelle, let's take a few questions. I know there's a lot of balls in the air, so we're not going to be on here forever, but let's take a few. By the way, unless you hear otherwise, we're going to be together a week from today. We obviously wanted to be in person today, but that was not to be, but we'll be together unless you hear otherwise a week from today at the War Memorial at 1 o'clock in our normal venue. We will be revisiting venue frequency, other means of communication in this intense period, as you can imagine. We'll be – health providing if I continue to test negative, I'll be out there around the state in one form or another I hope beginning tomorrow.

With that, Michelle.

Q&A Session

Michelle: Okay, we're going to start with Matt Arco.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hey, Matt.

Matt Arco, NJ.com: Good afternoon, Governor. Vault Health said it can't release positivity results for the free at-home tests because of its contract with the state. Why is that and what is the positivity for those tests? Also, why can't people find out what variant they have for a positive Vault test? They said they don't give that out. Also, we spoke on – you were speaking a lot about this today, but again, obviously hospitalizations have increased dramatically since the last time I asked you whether you were considering bringing back a ban on all elective surgeries. Given where we are now with the dramatic increase and even on regular divert status, there are four hospitals that are on full divert; six are on emergency divert. How close are you to banning elective surgeries, and what – if you're still not there yet, what is that benchmark?

Governor Phil Murphy: Got it, all good questions. I'll let Judy and maybe Ed will come in from the bullpen on the question of what variant. Judy, I'm assuming that the rate of positivity – if you're doing an at-home Vault test, you're probably not doing it for the fun of it. You're probably doing it because you've got some level of concern, and your level of positivity is at least what the state's level is, which is right now in the low 30%, but I'll let you comment on that. Also, Ed, in terms of the variant and why or why not they may be not disclosing that.

On elective surgeries, again, Judy, you should add color here. At the moment, we have no plans for that because hospitals are doing that on their own basis. There's a level – and Judy can go through this. There's a level of urgency. I think it's one through five. You've already got a bunch of hospitals that are taking level four and level five procedures off the table and that is the – it is both what's happening and what we think is the right mix. Obviously we reserve all options if we have to, but that – it is happening as we speak. With that, any comments on Vault, Judy, or electives and then Ed, any comments on variants and why or why not they may not be willing to disclose?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah, on the first question about Vault positivity, we just make the assumption that it's the same as the state. Over 400,000 tests have been requested but about 40 or 50,000 have been returned, so sample size right now is small. At the end of the day, the positivity of Vault only is just de minimis and in terms of what we're seeing every day in terms of overall test positivity.

On elective procedures, elective surgeries, we have levels, as the Governor shared, one through five. Levels one and two are trauma and significant surgical emergencies that cannot be delayed. Levels three, four, and five are less severe or intensive. Level three requires a case-by-case evaluation on whether a delay would have subsequent deleterious effects on the individual and four and five are truly elective procedures that can safely without any consequence be delayed.

For hospitals that are in crisis, standards of care and/or on divert, they have already curtailed levels four and five. For hospitals that go on divert but it's for periods of time as they perhaps clear out their emergency room so they can bring in other people, other individuals, temporary divert does not require them to curtail as long as they have capacity and staff within the hospitals. All of the hospitals are evaluating. They have pretty rigorous evaluation teams that look at this every day several times a day.

Governor Phil Murphy: Any color on variants and why or why not they may not be willing to disclose?

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Sure, Vault like the vast majority of clinical laboratories out there are running a PCR test. They're running a test to see whether you have the virus or not. They're not running the sequencing testing on most or almost all the samples that have been provided to them. That's why people aren't routinely getting that result because that test isn't routinely being run. As part of the state's and the CDC's overall surveillance systems, we do take a sub-sample of clinical labs and do sequencing on them. I don't know specifically if or how many we take from Vault, but it would not be a test that would routinely be done every time you send in a PCR test to Vault or anywhere else, Labquest or Quest, Labcore or Quest wouldn't give you those results either because they're not being done.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Ed. Good to see you. Happy New Year. Michelle, what do you got?

Michelle: Alright, we will go to Ken Burns.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hey, Ken.

Ken Burns, WHYY: Happy New Year, Governor. How are you?

Governor Phil Murphy: Are you wearing my mask?

Ken Burns, WHY: Yes, I am.

Governor Phil Murphy: Just checking.

Ken Burns, WHY: One for you and one for the Commissioner. Starting with the Commissioner, you mentioned the staff shortages at hospitals. I was wondering if you could provide some color on how bad it is for New Jersey since you mentioned putting in a request for federal strike force to come in to help out with the medical capacity. To the Governor, this is more of a technical question as far as the administrative extension that you requested from the legislature. For those who are not familiar with it like you and I, could you describe what that would mean for the everyday New Jerseyan?

Governor Phil Murphy: Good questions. I'll ask Parimal to come in after Judy on the second one, but I would just say this. The staffing challenges, to use a technical term, bad. It's bad in both hospitals and long-term care. There's just no other way around it. Judy can give you more specifics.

Frankly, Ken, I think the biggest most visible reality – again, it brings us zero joy – is masking in schools and childcare facilities for an extended period of time and I hope for not that long of an extended period of time. That, to me, is the most visible piece of this, but I'll ask Parimal to come back in after Judy. Judy, how tough is it? How would you quantify the staffing challenge?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: The conversations that we've had with both long-term care and with our hospitals is to plan for and anticipate that 30%, at a minimum, of their employees may be out sick at any given time. That follows the positivity that we're experiencing throughout the state. In planning for 30%, there's three levels of staffing. There's conventional staffing, which is your everyday staffing models. There's contingency staffing where you stretch those models, maybe increase ratios a bit. You stretch the hours of operation of individuals, meaning they work more than a 8-hour shift; they may work 10 or 12 hours as we saw last April. Then there's crisis standards where you totally change the way you take care of patients, making sure that all of the necessary and immediate needs are taking care of patients with the right skill mix. You develop teams of specialist that visit patients every day. They round every day. Rather than teams of people having 6 to 8 patients, they may have 15. The skill level is at the highest level to be able to take care of the most immediate needs appropriately.

All of the hospitals are aware of conventional, contingency, and crisis staffing, and all of them are planning for a 30% decrease in staff complement. They're redeploying administrative individuals to help out on the front-facing, direct patient care activities. We have signed a waiver allowing our EMTs, a very valuable and extensive group of individuals, to be able to go into the vaccination sites and help with vaccination so that the clinical people that are manning those sites can go back into the hospitals and long-term care facilities. We're trying to cover all bases for what we call crisis standards.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Judy, for that. Parimal, what else would the man on the street feel or see by the extension of these directives?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Yeah, and I think the Commissioner just pointed out that the Department of Health has issued a whole series of administrative orders, directives, and waivers to facilitate the government's response to the pandemic. That's everything from vaccinations to testing to resource allocation to data sharing. Much of that is done through either changing the rules and regulations that are in place or relaxing them to allow greater flexibility, particularly with regard to healthcare facilities and healthcare personnel.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said. Good questions, Ken. Thank you all. Michelle, let's do a couple more if we can.

Michelle: Great, next question will come from Joey Fox.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hey, Joey.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Good afternoon, Governor. I've got a few non-COVID questions here. I'll try to talk as fast as I can. First, can you provide one last lame duck update on Rachel Wainer Apter as Supreme Court nomination, and do you have a timeline for the process to replace Justice Faustino Fernandez-Vina who'll be term limited out pretty soon? Next, right before the holiday season, you endorsed Bob Menendez, Jr. for Congress. Do you see it at all problematic for the son of a powerful politician to be anointed as the front-runner for a seat? Do you support affirming or eliminating the party line system that allows politicians like Menendez, Jr. to become such dominant front-runners? Do you have any comment on redistricting commission tiebreaker John Wallace's reasoning that he picked the Democratic congressional map this time around because their public Annapolis picks last time? Finally, do you agree with the New Jersey Supreme Court's decision to overturn the conviction of Michelle Lodzinski? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Joey. No update on either of the Supreme Court justices you asked about other than to say we've got – we've enjoyed and continue to enjoy very good partnership and deliberations with our legislative colleagues on these cases obviously in the Senate side of the house. Yeah, I'm confident that we'll have a good result and no news to break on Justice Faustino. I happen to know Rob Menendez independent of his dad. I'm obviously a huge fan of his dad, but Rob I know of on his own merits, and I'm a huge fan. They are, indeed, father and son, but I know them each as their own person and as their own public service. Rob, I think in the early days in the port, has been an outstanding commissioner and I've known him well before that as well. I'm honored to have endorsed him and I think he will, assuming he is – he wins, he's going to be an outstanding representative for our state and for that district.

No comment specifically on the map other than I've got unlimited regard for Justice Wallace. I think he was the right person to be in that seat, and I'm very gratified that Chief Justice Rabner put him in there. I think the commissioners each did an outstanding job. Obviously the six on our side of the aisle are the ones I know best. We shall see. I'm mostly – we don't talk about this much, but I'm mostly gratified that New Jersey is growing, that people are moving here, not just because of the pandemic but that the census showed that and that we're going to be in the happy position for the next ten years of retaining 12 representatives in the House of Representatives regardless of which side of the aisle they come from. That, to me, is the big news, and I hope that number goes up in the decades ahead.

I've got no comment on the case. I would not have any reason to other than God bless that little guy who we know sadly is – was taken from us many years ago. Thank you for that.

Michelle, let's do one more if we can.

Michelle: Okay, then you'll last question will come from Dan Munoz.

Governor Phil Murphy: Who is it, sorry? Daniel?

Michelle: Yeah, Dan Munoz.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hey, Daniel.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Hey, can you hear me?

Governor Phil Murphy: I can.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Hi, Governor. Hope you're doing well all things considered.

Governor Phil Murphy: Same.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Yeah, thank you. I guess one off-topic, with the state bank that you proposed, where do you see that going in your second term, and is that something that you could see happening in these next four years? Do you think the pandemic and its recession have demonstrated the need for such an institution, or are there better alternatives? With many towns enacting mask mandates and many businesses and hospitals doing their own quasi-restrictions, do you think it's going to fall to the state to do new restrictions, or is it going to be up to these individual entities or towns, counties, businesses, and hospitals? I guess what would we need to be seeing in terms of hospitalizations, intensive care utilization in order for you to declare that there is indeed a shortage and that something more needs to be done in terms of state restrictions? I guess given how the situation and COVID has deteriorated and just how the sheer anxiety and fear that New Jerseyans have had, do you think that vacation you took might not've been the best, time thing to be doing just given how the pandemic has worsened so much and how people – how scared and anxious people are right now? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Let me go through these in order. The state bank, I think some version of that is going to come to pass. We had a good meeting on that just before the Christmas holiday. There is an outline of a way forward, and I think you're going to see real progress on that front. That's been one of the harder ones for us to get done for a lot of legitimate reasons. It looked like it was easier from the outside to get into the office, and you realize some of this stuff isn't as easy as you had hoped. That's on that list, and I do think the pandemic and the challenges that individuals, families, businesses, municipalities, particularly students with college loans – I think it has sharpened the need for this as opposed to lessened the needs for it.

Parimal will correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe it was last June I signed an executive order that, indeed, explicitly allowed individual communities to take steps, as you are seeing in communities around the state, because we had a lot of folks legitimately asking us for that ability. Early on in the pandemic, we were worried about unintended consequences. That's when we knew little. In other words, if restaurants were open on one side of the Hudson versus the other or in Essex County but not in Hudson County, or you had mandate here and not there, would you have a tilt and have unintended consequences and capacity issues, etc.? I just – that's just something we're just not as concerned about. Folks understand overwhelmingly the need to wear a mask. They understand that it's not going to be the trigger in most cases whether I go to Restaurant A or Restaurant B or Hospital A or Hospital B. That's the way we have wanted it. The fact that you're seeing these mandates being put in place is something we had anticipated. We, in fact, I'd say more than anticipated; frankly, welcome because we thought this was the right – we make the decision based on the local reality.

I think you asked about on what basis would you see a need, any numbers or – listen, we leave all options on the table, but I do want to review a couple of numbers. We have – this one I went through earlier. We have 4,715 hospitalizations as of last night. The peak in April of 2020 was 8,270. We have in our ICU units 644 as of last night. The peak also in April of 2020 was 2,080, so you're, in one respect, less than half of that capacity and the other, less than a third, just to put some perspective around this. Obviously you keep all options on the table. I frankly – this is echoing two exchanges we've had already in this call. Number one, you're going to see much – number one, staffing is going to be probably the constraining factor here as opposed to hard beds or PPE or ventilators. Secondly, that's going to inform a strategy that you heard us talk about a little while ago, which is densification on our hospital campuses to allow us – that's one way, not the only way but one way for us to address the staffing challenges.

Listen, Daniel, given it's been about 650 days of this pandemic, I've gone away for two eight-day periods, so that's 16 days out of 650. Why? You got to, at some point, spend time with your family and reboot. Secondly, I've got the best lieutenant governor in America as my partner with great leadership around her and around me, including Judy, Pat, Ed, and many others. Invariably in today's day and age, I'm in my home in Middletown but if I told you I was somewhere else, the fact of the matter is we run a state today overwhelmingly remotely on phones, on Zooms, and trust me, we're never far from where we need to be. I promise you that. By the way, I would say that to everybody. The reward for spending time with your family is worth it. Do it responsibly, safely, you stay in touch. You get a lot back from that.

With that, I want to thank on behalf of Judy, Pat, Ed, Parimal, the rest of the team, including our outstanding sign language folks who've been with us from moment one at every single one of these press conferences, and they deserve a huge shout-out. Thank you, folks. Get vaccinated. Get boosted. Have your seat belt on for the next week or two. We will be together again in person unless you hear otherwise in Trenton a week from today at 1 o'clock. We will be, God willing, at health providing around the state for one reason or another over the course of the days between now and then. Obviously if we need to report to you, we will report back to you as and if and when we need to. Please stay safe. Do not underestimate for one second how transmissible this is. Ed would want me to say that. Judy would want me to say that. This thing is crazy transmissible, but if you've done the right thing – double-vaxed, boosted, wear a mask, preferably double masks, keep social distance, you use your head when you're indoors particularly, you wash your hands with soap and water – Judy would want me to say that. You do all the above, you may get it, but God willing overwhelmingly the evidence says you're not going to a hospital or you're not getting severely ill. Let's hope it stays that way. God bless, everybody. Take care and stay safe.

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