

Governor Phil Murphy

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Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everybody. With me today is the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. I can't say you're to my right, Judy, but in this moment, you're to the right of my screen. Also the Department of Health's Communicable Disease Service Medical Director, another familiar face, Dr. Ed Lifshitz; great to have you, Ed, with us as well. A guy who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police Colonel Pat Callahan. We've got Chief Counsel Parimal Garg. We are under the tutelage of Mahen Gunaratna today. And with that, let's jump in.

I want to start with an announcement that I know many athletes and many moms and dads have been waiting for. I'm signing an Executive Order today, effective immediately by the way, to allow a limited number of spectators for all indoor and outdoor high school and other youth sporting events. Basically, all non-collegiate and non-professional sports. These youth sporting events may choose to allow up to two parents or guardians per athlete under the age of 21 to attend practices and competitions, as long as the attendance of those parents and/or guardians does not cause our indoor events to exceed the 35% of the room's capacity or 150 people in total, whichever is less. Besides the two parents or guardians per athlete, I'm sorry to say that no other spectators may attend. All spectators must follow the guidance from the Department of Health regarding sports activities, which includes requirements to wear a mask, observe social distancing, and most importantly, stay home when you're sick or you think you've been exposed. Should a positive case arise from an event, all spectators will need to cooperate with contact tracing efforts.

Also, school districts retain the ability to be stricter and not allow any spectators at all should they choose. They can also choose when to implement this new spectator policy if they don't feel that they're ready to do so immediately for this weekend's games.

I know many parents, especially those of our senior athletes, have been anxious to get back into the stands to cheer on their student athletes in what may, for many, be their final season of competition. And as the metrics in our hospitals and elsewhere continue to trend more positively for us, we feel confident in being able to allow them to do so. This is something I have been wanting to do for our student athletes and their biggest fans. I urge everyone to take the proper precautions. I do not want to have to reverse course, no one wants to reverse course on this but should we see trouble spots, we will have no choice and we'll respond as needed. But that said, we welcome our parents, after all, our kids biggest fans back into the arena and we hope your athlete has a successful season.

Let me switch gears and turn our attention to the ongoing vaccination efforts. Our dashboard is showing a total of 1,244,224 total vaccine doses administered. That's as of mid-morning today. That breaks down into 933,160 first doses and 310,529 second doses. At the rate that we are going at the moment, roughly 30,000 first doses a day, we should anticipate exceeding 1 million first doses over the next couple of days.

We read the stories that you all did about the speed at which the available appointments at both CVS and Rite Aid, which received their own separate doses through the federal retail pharmacy partnership, were filled once they became available yesterday and this morning. Again, whether it be at our state operated or locally operated vaccine sites or with the public vaccinations at CVS and Rite Aid, everyone is being pinched because of the scarcity of vaccine supply. I have to say that we had a very good call, Judy, I think you'd agree, you and David Adinaro and I yesterday with the Rite Aid senior management, and I want to give them a shout out for really doing the right things. We had previously spoken to new CEO Karen Lynch at CVS and had a good call a couple of weeks ago with them.

Additionally, we are preparing to launch the first of our community-based vaccination sites being supported by a host of sponsors: the Department of Health, the Office of Emergency Management's All Hazards Incident Management Team, FEMA, our federal partners, the US Department of Defense, faith leaders, community organizations, and local officials and health departments. These locations are being strategically placed in communities that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, in some of our most diverse and socioeconomically challenged communities.

This program will be operated by five teams, and will serve 10 communities starting next week, with Franklin Township in Somerset County, Trenton and Elizabeth, with Vineland and Patterson in line to quickly follow. These sites will operate seven days a week for two weeks, and then they will return to administer second doses. To stay on track toward our goal of equity in these high-need communities, these sites will be closed points of distribution for members of the immediate community only. Appointments will be required for vaccination at these sites and will be handled directly through partnering community organizations, places of worship and local community leaders.

Sheila Oliver and I were on Open Line on WBLS, a favorite of ours, on Sunday morning and Jennifer Jones raised the point that in New York City, you had instances where a predominantly Black church was vaccinating and you looked at who was in line, and it was a lot of folks who are not from that community. We want to avoid that reality here again, particularly given the equity challenges that we face. The actual location of these sites will not be released until they are closer to their openings, but when they are closer, they will be released.

I'm grateful for the federal partnership, especially as we begin this new phase in our vaccination effort. We are always striving to ensure equitable access to appointments and vaccinations. It is among our very highest priorities. And to that end, we applaud the efforts of the many other vaccination sites which are conducting direct outreach in their communities to make appointments for seniors and others who may have limited internet access, in particular.

Overall, though, while our allotment from the federal government is increasing, and that's good news, it is not at the point where our mega sites in particular can operate to the capacities to which we have purpose-built them. I'm extraordinarily pleased by the Biden administration's announcement yesterday about securing an additional 200 million doses by the end of July over, that's all in addition to what had already been ordered. But again, these doses will take some time to get to us.

And, we are still awaiting the federal government's formal review of Johnson & Johnson's emergency use authorization application. While I know so many of you are focused rightfully on getting vaccinated, one thing that I would -- and I know Judy will join me on this one -- I want to urge everyone, don't give up getting tested. Getting tested is really important. I got tested again this morning. We still have tremendous testing capacity and we still need the data that comes from testing to ensure that we identify potential hotspots and take proper action to

prevent further spread. Being tested and knowing your COVID status is also important before you attempt to schedule a vaccination appointment as well. So please go to that website, we haven't put it up in a while, covid19.nj.gov/testing to find a testing location nearest to you and go get tested.

Winning this fight isn't just or only about vaccines. Vaccines are a huge step in the right direction, a huge weapon at our disposal, but they're not the only weapon at our disposal. Look what we did, folks, and Judy will remind us, in the spring into the early summer where we cracked the back of the pandemic's first wave without any vaccines. So it's also about using every tool at our disposal to fully track this virus' movement and snuff out hotspots before they become another flare up, and that is where testing has stood big for us since the pandemic's beginning. I know Judy will have more to say on this in her report.

Let's turn now if we can to our overnight numbers. I want to start today with our hospitals, because these are perhaps the most significant numbers, as we've been saying, that we consider when we further consider steps like allowing spectators back into high school basketball games or expanding indoor dining, to give just two examples. Our overriding concern has been to maintain the capabilities of our healthcare networks to tend to those who are sick enough from COVID to need hospitalization. This, more than any of the other raw numbers, has been the biggest driving factor. And the trend of these past two weeks continues, let's hope it continues into the weeks ahead.

The total number of patients being treated in our hospitals dropped again yesterday to a recent low of 2,565. That breaks down to 2,370 known COVID-positive patients and 195 others who are awaiting their test results. And as usual, that's all as of 10:00 p.m. last night. Of this population, there were 525 in intensive care and 336 ventilators were in use. Across the day yesterday, 367 live patients were discharged, another 261 new positive COVID patients were admitted. At the risk of comparing apples and oranges because these are not yet confirmed, hospitals reported 36, three dozen losses of life.

Overall, we are reporting a total of 3,285 new positive PCR test results and 775 presumed positive rapid test results. That adds up to 4,060. The positivity rate from Monday – and Monday, by the way, 59,741 PCR tests were conducted – the positivity rate came right back down to 7.19%. Again, we encourage everybody to get tested and, Judy, as we predicted the weekend – and we see this on Saturday, Sundays and holidays – fewer people getting tested. Probably not getting tested on a weekend unless you've got a reason to. Positivity rate jumps up and we get back to a weekday, a more typical testing reality and the positivity rate in this case happily back down.

Statewide rate of transmission remains at 0.81.

With the heaviest of hearts, we are reporting another 64 confirmed COVID-19 related losses of life from our extraordinary New Jersey family. That brings our statewide confirmed total to 20,147. The number of probable deaths remains at 2,246. As we do each day, let's remember and honor the lives of three more of our fellow New Jerseyans this pandemic has taken from us.

This is a particularly tough one. We begin by remembering Donald and Susan Love, father and daughter, both pillars in our South Jersey community. I want to thank my dear friend and our dear friend Karen Elcas for bringing this tragedy in the Love family to our attention. Donald on the left was a longtime leader at both Congregation Beth El in Vorhees and the Jewish Federation of Southern New Jersey. He was a successful businessman who turned his boundless energies to helping others.

At the Federation, he served in numerous roles and offices and was the founder of the its home care agency, Alpha Home Care. For his years of service, he was the 2015 recipient of the Federation's H. Richard Dollinger Community Service Award, and that's its highest honor. Don spent his time working to create a true philanthropic culture in South Jersey, and was one of the leading figures in the establishment of the Jewish Community Foundation. He split his time between his home here and in Boca Raton, Florida. Don at his death was 82 years old.

A month later, unfathomably, Don's daughter, Susan, also a resident of Vorhees and also as much a pillar of the community as her dad, also passed. Susan dedicated her life to assisting older New Jerseyans and their families, first with Jewish Geriatric Senior Housing, and later as the CEO of Lions Gate Community Care Retirement Community. At every stage, she built strong personal bonds with each of the residents she served and poured herself into ensuring they received the level of care they deserved.

Get this, folks. For the past 11 months, she was singularly committed to protecting the residents in her care at Lions Gate. After suffering tragic losses in the first wave, Susan made sure Lions Gate was a safe place and it only recorded one loss of life due to COVID after May of last year, and it was her own passing.

They each leave behind Don's wife of 61 years and Susan's mom, Judy, who continues her own recovery from her battle with COVID. She was hospitalized, please keep her in your prayers. They also leave Don's other children and Susan's siblings, Sylvia, with whom I have the great honor of speaking on Wednesday, and Roberta, and their families, including Don's grandchildren, among them Susan's daughter, Ashley, and Susan's nieces and nephews, Rebecca, Abby and Drew. Don also leaves his sister and Susan's aunt, Joan. Their losses leave a huge hole in South Jersey. May their memories be blessings to all who mourn them, and may their legacies of service to others be a guiding light for future generations. God bless you both Donald and Susan.

Today we also honor the life of Paterson's – there he is on the right – Anthony Tony DeMarco. Tony was 87 years old. A trained recognized expert in the use of hypnotherapy to counteract many personal challenges, for the past nearly 30 years, Tony served on the Board of the Council on Compulsive Gambling, and he gave 18 of those years to directly helping countless fellow residents free themselves from gambling habits that threatened their wellbeing. He was a leader in his field. He served as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Council of Professional Hypnosis Organizations of the United International Association of Counselors and Therapists for over 14 years. He received numerous professional awards and accolades both in the United States and in Canada, and wrote not only numerous journal articles but was a regular columnist for The Journal of the National Guild of Hypnotists. Tony also cofounded the Union Township-based Academy of Professional Hypnosis, which became the first state-approved school of hypnosis. His career achievements earned him induction into the International Hypnosis Hall of Fame in 1996.

Tony now leaves behind his wife, Joan, on the left. Bless you, Joan after 60 years of marriage. Joan hails from Liverpool in England, and her son Frank with whom I had the great honor of speaking yesterday reminded me that she was a big Liverpool Football Club supporter. Joan, in that spirit, you will never walk alone.

Tony is also survived by his children. I mentioned Frank with whom I had the great honor of speaking yesterday, Michael, Ann and Francesca. He was predeceased by another son, bless him, Ade. He leaves his six grandchildren, Emily, Anthony, Jake, Isabella, Thea and Mike, and he is survived by his sister, Francine. By the way, Tony's funeral was on Wednesday and I want to thank my dear friend Levon Johnson for bringing Tony's passing to my attention. We thank Tony for all that he did for those who sought his help so they could achieve more in their lives. May God bless him and watch over him, and may he too be an inspiration for all those who follow.

I hope every life that we have lost over the past 11 months inspires each of us to keep digging deep within to keep up the practices we need to protect our families and communities and to save lives.

Meanwhile, switching gears but in a broadly speaking similar vein, we're also working hard to save our small businesses who have experienced tremendous hardships throughout the pandemic. Through the hard work of the New Jersey Economic Development Authority and the New Jersey Redevelopment Authority, among others, we have put hundreds of millions of dollars directly into protecting our Main Street businesses so they can remain strong and help lead us into the recovery.

Today I want to give to Omar Simmons on the left, the owner of Accents Unisex Salon and Salon Duo, which are both located in Willingboro in Burlington County, one of the 64 communities, by the way, served by the Redevelopment Authority. Thanks to Omar's partnership with the Authority, he was able to receive two direct grants through the small business lease emergency grant program that allowed Omar to keep up the rents at both locations. And because of this support, today both of his locations are open and serving their clients.

I had the honor of speaking with Omar on Wednesday, had a great conversation and I thank him again for creating jobs and providing an essential service to the people of Willingboro. I at least have the address for Accents Unisex Salon, check them out, by the way. Omar is the best. 498 Beverly Rancocas Road in Willingboro.

Finally, before we turn things over to Judy, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the passing recently of a true legend in our legal field, not from COVID to the best of my knowledge, United States Third Circuit Judge Morton Greenberg, who passed away recently, at the age of 87. The Judge was raised in Atlantic City, spent his early career in South Jersey, and called Princeton home for the past half-century. After working in private practice and in the administrations of both Governors Robert Meyner and William Cahill, he was appointed in 1973 by Governor Cahill to a seat on the New Jersey Superior Court. He held that post for 14 years before being elevated to the federal bench by President Ronald Reagan.

He never retired from the job he loved. He authored thousands of opinions. He was a New Jersey legal giant. Across a judicial career that spanned 47 years in both state and federal service, he holds among the longest tenures of any New Jersey judge, ever. I had the honor of speaking with his widow earlier this week, Dr. Barbara Ann Greenberg, and to the Judge's son Lawrence, and to send them and their family not just condolences on behalf of our state, but our sincere thanks as well. Judge Greenberg summed up one of his philosophies this way, and I quote the Judge, "The more power you have, the more restraint you use." That's good advice. Wise words from a wise man. Sage advice for all of us, and may his memory be a blessing.

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

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Well, as the Governor shared, the number of doses administered in our state continues to increase. Our total dose administered as of this morning is over 1.2 million doses. This is an incredible scientific achievement that a vaccine became available in the same year as the pandemic reached our state. It has given us all hope for a much better future.

While a vaccine is important, it is just as important to continue following public health measures to help reduce the spread of this virus. Thanks to the hard work you all have done wearing a mask, physical distancing, staying home when sick, reducing social gatherings, our case numbers and hospitalizations are all heading in the right direction. But we must remain vigilant.

Part of that vigilance includes testing, which remains a critical part of our strategy in prevention of further transmission. CDC modeling finds that 60% of COVID-19 cases is transmitted from individuals experiencing no symptoms, so testing is vital to identify this illness. If you believe that you may have been in a situation that put you at risk, getting tested will help you protect those around you. Even if you don't have symptoms, you should get tested. Until all your family and friends and yourself have received vaccines, knowing your status can help protect all of you.

There are two types of tests available to diagnose COVID-19. There is the molecular test, which is usually performed using a technique known as polymerase chain reaction PCR, which works by rapidly making millions to billions of copies of the viral-related DNA. PCR tests are very sensitive, and they are also very specific. Tests can be done on samples taken by nasal or throat swabs, and even by saliva. However, since molecular tests are almost always performed in specialized laboratories, it is a relatively slow process. However, at this time, most PCR tests are returned in less than two-and-a-half days.

The other viral test is an antigen test, which is much simpler and can be done in many doctor's offices, and actually non-medical settings as well. It's a nasal or a throat swab. An antigen test is fast, perhaps around 15 minutes, and it provides those results in a short period of time. However, it is less sensitive than the molecular test. There needs to be more virus present before that test will turn positive. This means that an antigen test may sometimes be falsely negative, meaning a negative result cannot always be trusted. However, a positive test suggesting that the virus is present is usually reliable.

For people with symptoms, the most important thing to do is to get one of these viral tests. If you have symptoms, get the quick antigen test if it is available. If it is positive, you can start isolating right away to protect those around you from the spread of the virus. But if it is negative, you should get retested using the molecular test and be sure to isolate yourself until you receive that result. For most people who do not have symptoms, but want to be tested because they may have been exposed, the molecular test is a much better choice. It can find very small amounts of the virus that might be seen before symptoms start.

Right now, there are more 400 sites to get tested in our state. The department continues to collaborate with local officials and health departments to enhance testing services across the state. We've been focused on increasing access to communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the virus, which includes locations in Atlantic City, Trenton, New Brunswick, the City of Passaic and several locations in Hudson County. These locations can be found on our website, [covid19.nj.gov/testing](https://www.covid19.nj.gov/testing). Getting tested is a vital part of controlling the spread of COVID-19 in our state, along with staying home when sick, and quarantining if you have been exposed.

On Wednesday, the CDC released new quarantine guidance for individuals who have been vaccinated. The guidance states that most individuals who have been fully vaccinated – that's two doses – do not need to quarantine if they are exposed to someone with COVID for up to 90 days following that vaccination. An individual is considered fully vaccinated if it has been two weeks or more since they received their second dose. Dr. Lifshitz's team is currently reviewing these guidelines as to whether any further recommendations will be developed for our state.

Finally, before my daily report, I want to provide some information on the number of agents who can assist callers at our vaccine call center. There are 1,026 New Jersey residents, including 295 bilingual agents either working at the call center or in training. Since February 1st, over 785,000 calls have come into the center with a 74% completion rate.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 2,565 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients or patients under investigation; 525 are in critical care and 64% of them are on ventilators.

Fortunately, there are no reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome and children. There are 88 cumulative cases in our state. Three of those children are currently hospitalized. The breakdown of race and ethnicity of these cases is White 43%, Black 43%, Hispanic 41%, Asian 6% and other 8%. In New Jersey, there are no deaths reported at this time.

We are reporting five new cases of the B-117 variant. That is the variant which emerged in the UK. Two of the new reports are in Ocean County, one in Morris, one in Hudson and one in Passaic. There are now a total of 38 reports of this variant in New Jersey.

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

The daily percent positivity as of February 8th in New Jersey as a state 7.19%. The Northern part of the state 7.62, Central 7.52, and the southern part of the state 5.48.

That concludes my daily report, stay safe, continue to mask up, socially distance, stay home when you are sick, get tested. 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 again, underscoring – I touched on it, and you dove into it. Get tested. We've got the capacity, per capita among the highest capacities to test of any state in America. As they say, if you build it, they will come. In this case, we've built it, get tested. It just is so much more informative in terms of your own personal circumstances and frankly, the broad health picture that Judy and Ed and colleagues look at to make the sort of decisions that we need to make, particularly in the positive sense of opening things up. The more we know, the better informed we are. At a personal level, you'll know whether or not you have to take yourself off the field, quarantine or otherwise, or maybe feel good because you tested negative. But in the aggregate, it helps us, particularly the health experts, make better decisions. For all those reasons, get tested. Judy, thank you for that.

Pat, I'm not sure what you got on compliance. I do not have a meteorological degree here but I swear to God, in the winter in particular, you get into a good groove and you look back after a number of weeks or months and you realize you had very little or no snow, and that's what we had last year. This winter, you feel like every day is Groundhog Day. Every single day we're talking about more snow than either we've just had or that is coming, or in today's case, with multiple systems potentially before us. With that, over to Pat Callahan. Thank you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Other than that. Thanks, Gov. Good afternoon, everybody. Just one issue with regards to compliance, and that has to do with the Shamrock Beef and Ale which is in Wildwood. They were cited multiple times, actually four times. Because of their repeated instances of non-compliance, ABC is seeking the revocation of that establishment's liquor license. That process got underway this week.

To your point with regards to the weather, we were on with the National Weather Service this morning. We're activating the State Emergency Operations Center tomorrow night, Gov, at eight o'clock through into Sunday. That's probably going to be a wintry mix. We're looking at another one Monday into Tuesday, and even one at the latter part of the week. What's not on our side is how cold it is, and the cold ground temperatures which makes it a little difficult for DOT to be out there. Certainly doesn't look like plowable events, but they will be spreading a considerable amount of salt, I'm sure, within the next week.

And just one other item to follow up on with regard to Dustin had asked Wednesday with regards to fatalities. We did reach out to the National Highway Traffic Safety which is under the US Department of Transportation. Their statistics for the first three quarters, January through September, have fatalities across the entire nation up 4.6%. Our entire 2020, we are up 5.7% so certainly in line, a hair above the national average. We'll see where the whole country comes in when they finish compiling that last quarter.

But the other piece that we discussed Wednesday was speed as a critical factor. I had asked our traffic staff to look into that. Compared to 2019, our speeding summonses over 90 miles an hour were up from 15% to 24%. That's a pretty sizable increase. That's a lot of motorists traveling in excess of 90 miles an hour. We did that little bit of deeper dive to show that that correlation of speed, the lighter traffic and then obviously that correlating with an increased number of fatalities, which obviously, we'd like to see that number go down each and every year, because every one of them is certainly a tragedy, Governor. That's all I got.

Governor Phil Murphy: Pat, thank you. I mean, that's a combination of open road, and those are the consequences. Thank you for that. A couple of things, wintry mix on Saturday into Sunday, that's a little bit of a question as to what the temperature is going to be, presumably, right?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Yes, and I still think it's going to be under freezing, Governor, and the same similar type storm from Monday night into Tuesday. We're in constant contact with the National Weather Service to see if those models change. Certainly, from our perspective, we have to stay on top of that and make sure that we're in lockstep with DOT, with warming centers, with Human Services and Department of Health, especially making sure that if high winds come with that, we can't have people standing outside in line for long periods of time waiting to get vaccinated. We've had some sites even shift up logistically so people are waiting inside, socially distanced. They are not outside in those brutal temperatures and winds.

Governor Phil Murphy: Got it. It's a little bit of an interesting – obviously, ready.nj.gov is my favorite place to go in terms of an all-encompassing website, njtransit.com if it's specific to transit. 211 is for warming centers. It's also a unique number of days before us. Let's just lay this out. We have Valentine's Day on Sunday, Happy Valentine's Day to everybody, be safe. Monday is President's Day and that's a state holiday. As it relates to roads and cleaning roads, that's probably a good fact as it relates to storms. I also raise it because we will not be with you on Monday. Unless you hear otherwise, folks, we will be on a Wednesday/Friday set up next week. Whether we're virtual or in person I think will depend on how we're all quarantining and testing. So far, so good on my side but we want to make sure that we're being extra careful. But again, we will be communicating therefore folks with you virtually for the next four days.

Assuming that I continue to test in the right direction and am able to get out there again, I'll probably on Tuesday, assuming all that happens, I'll be at an event on the road somewhere and we'll have updates, God willing, on the COVID front at that event. And then unless you hear otherwise, we'll be back together at one o'clock on Wednesday.

With that, I think we'll take some questions. We'll try to get to the top of the hour if that's all right, and we'll jump right.

Q&A Session

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Hi, Governor, thanks for doing this. I hope you're doing well. Any thoughts on the prospect of adding more funding to the EDA for COVID relief? I know there's a bill for \$300 million extra in grants and loans.

Any thoughts on the cleanup bill introduced today for marijuana? Have you read it? If that is sent to your desk presumably on Thursday, will you sign the three bills next week?

Your Budget Address is in less than two weeks. Can we expect to see any tax cuts or tax increases or spending cuts or anything with the pensioner healthcare reforms that the Senate President has sought?

Governor Phil Murphy: Daniel, thank you. We had a really good leadership meeting yesterday and I want to give the Senate President, the Speaker and their teams a big shout out. Good discussions about more small business relief, as well as comparing notes on getting to that common ground and good place on marijuana. Nothing specific to report on either, Daniel, but good discussions. I think the needle continues to move in the right direction. We want to get as much money on the street as possible for our small businesses, including restaurants, and frankly, our arts organizations and food banks and directly to the folks who have food and security. We discussed all of that yesterday and had a really good discussion, but nothing specific to report.

No news on the budget. We also discussed that yesterday. Our teams have a meeting tomorrow to continue discussions on the budget. I have no specific news, but you should probably assume that we're going to continue to pound away on that stronger, fairer New Jersey and continue to fund aggressively the core attributes of our state as well as to address head on the inequities that existed long before this pandemic, but which this pandemic has laid bare. Many thanks.

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Good afternoon. Thanks, Colonel Callahan, for following up on that. I appreciate it. I have just got two quick questions for you, Governor on the order on sports. What would you just say to parents of students who may be frustrated? They have limited access to school, but parents of athletes can now go to sports games?

And then on Tuesday, which I'd asked you about the other day on that bill that you signed, will you or won't you use your executive power to require the hospitals to submit to the same levels of transparency and accountability on staff tests and positive cases as required of long-term care facilities? That's all I have. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thanks, Dustin. I'm glad Pat was able to follow up on the traffic question. Listen, I think we all recognize these are not either/or. By the way, just looking at the updated numbers, 502 school districts or schools are hybrid, 96 in-person, 37 are a combination, 176 remotes, so you've got plus or minus just over, if my math is right, over three-quarters of the school districts or schools in the case of a charter or Renaissance or developmentally disabled school, over which we have stewardship. Just over three-quarters of them have some amount of in-person instruction.

But I don't think it's either/or in this case, in the following respect, Dustin. We know that the mental health toll has been enormous. That is not just, I'll be the first to say this, it's not just in the realm of sports and being able to play them and being able to have your mom and dad see you play them. But we do know that that is something that a lot of folks are just desperate to do. And by the way, again, I've got my three guys play on a team I've not been able to watch in person for many months. That's a source of sadness in our own household.

I don't think it's one or the other. I think it's both. Let's safely and responsibly get as many of our schools to in-person instruction as soon as we can safely and responsibly do so in this extraordinary stressful year. But also, if we can safely and responsibly, and Judy and Ed feel that way, that we can allow moms and dads in to watch, that's also a good thing.

I've got nothing new on the question on hospital and the data so I think if he hasn't done so already, Parimal, could you follow up with Dustin after this call and you guys can connect. But nothing new on that since we spoke on Wednesday. Thank you.

Meg Baker, WCBS: We're hearing from people who booked an appointment through the state's hotline and then they received an email canceling their appointment. First of all, what caused this? There's a lot of confusion out there. Will they automatically be rescheduled, or will they have to go through the booking process all over again?

The second part, some of these same people who booked through the hotline had it cancelled, showed up anyway and after some confusion inside, ended up getting the vaccine. Should people show up anyway? Should they listen to those emails saying that their appointment is cancelled? What's going on here?

Governor Phil Murphy: Listen, we've stood something up out of whole cloth only a number of weeks ago and we have not ever once said that it was going to be in a straight line. It is better and better by the day. We've had very significant vendor issues which, depending on the day you ask me, is in either better shape or not so. Judy can go through the possible reasons as to why they were canceled, but I do believe the answer is they will automatically be rescheduled, and Judy will correct the record if I got that wrong.

I personally would not show up anyway. I don't think that's a smart thing to do. Particularly, I'm looking out my window here on February 12th, bitter cold snow on the ground in places that we may or may not be able to accommodate you, socially distanced, etc. on the inside. But Judy, I defer to you on that. Any

color as to why they may have been canceled? Do you agree with the point in particular that they'll automatically get rescheduled?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: My understanding on the cancellations, there was a delay in getting actual cancellations out and they passed the midnight timeframe. And as people know, with computers, when you pass that timeframe and you send out a message, it routed to the next day so people got cancellations. I got a text at 4:00 a.m. in the morning from someone who said, "I just got a cancellation call, what should I do?" Most of them were rectified the same day. People were told to show up. If they were not, they would get a phone call or another message. It had to do with when the first message went out past midnight so it routed to the wrong day.

On the other hand, we have had some glitches with the scheduling system that people are working 24/7, along with Microsoft, to work them through.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, what about showing up just without an appointment? I don't feel good about that terribly. But how do you feel?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Well, I don't feel great about it. They should call, because if it is one of those cancellation notices that went out – and most of those went out and canceled same day. That's why I know, we then sent out an alert and told everybody show up for your appointment. I have not heard that that's continuing to occur. I will look into it, but you should call the site and find out if you should show up.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, I mean, we saw the states with lines around the block and people camping out and we don't want that. Could you get lucky and get the vaccine? Yes, you could but there's probably a bigger chance you won't and that's probably not good at many levels. Thank you, Meg.

Matt Arco, Star-Ledger: Governor, you've repeatedly called on people to get tested, as you have today, but you need to meet criteria to be tested for free, whether having symptoms or being in contact with somebody who had COVID. Otherwise, I just clicked through as you were speaking, and since I don't meet any of the criteria I'd have to pay, for example, \$139. You're saying people should get tested, but what's the advice for somebody who wants to get that test but doesn't either want to lie on the form or shell out that \$139?

Commissioner, again, what do you know about the prevalence of the UK variant in Ocean County? It seems a little higher there than other places. What percent of positive tests are being sent for typing to find that and other variants?

Lastly, DOH said that there are 669 agents working for the vaccine hotline, up from 485. Commissioner, you gave new numbers today. Can you clear the breakdown on how many of those are in New Jersey versus other states?

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, I will start and Parimal, you may want to weigh in on the mechanism by which you get tests reimbursed, etc. I do think that we remain of the opinion, and Judy and Ed should – Ed, we've got to pull you in from the bullpen here at some point before the top of the hour, so you may want to start warming up.

We want you to get tested. But I think we still remain, even with the big capacity we have, we lean on the side of folks especially getting tested who have a reason to get tested, whether they be symptomatic or have been exposed. But I'll let Judy or Ed address that. Judy, I'll also ask you to address the UK variant Ocean County question.

The numbers, by the way, I should have said that myself up front. The numbers had been updated and I had those same numbers earlier today. To give you a sense of how fast the call center community is growing, they're up meaningfully from the numbers that you just raised, which were 669, up from 485. We started with 250. Those numbers are now, as Judy said, over 2,000 with over 1,000 New Jerseyans, including I think Judy, almost 300 bilingual of those operators. The numbers that Judy addressed are the operative ones and we will update the website with that.

Judy or Ed, any comment, either on criteria to get testing, UK variant in Ocean County, or numbers at the call center?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: I'll talk about the criteria for getting testing. If you go into an urgent care center, your criteria is that you've either been exposed or you're having symptoms. If you're going to one of the county sites, you can go without either those criteria being met and there should not be any out-of-pocket expense.

In fact, most of the county sites do testing for free. So again, go to a county site, because the county sites are supported by funds from the Department of Health that come from the CDC. Ed, maybe you can talk about Ocean County and the variant.

DOH Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Sure, thank you. I appreciate the warning to warm up. Certainly at my age, it takes me longer and longer to warm up the arm.

Governor Phil Murphy: No spinners, Ed. No spinners. Let's keep this clean.

DOH Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: My fastball ain't what it used to be. Talking about the variant, so when we're talking about the UK variant, which is the most prevalent variant in the United States and certainly is one of concern, we find out about this in a couple of different ways. Let me start there. One of the ways that we find out about it is there is something about the UK variant that sometimes, on some tests when you do the PCR, you can get a hint that the UK variant might be present. That's only on some places that do that PCR test; every place that does a PCR test does it a little bit different and some machines will return that hint and others will not.

The first thing is when we see an increase in numbers in cases such as we're seeing in Ocean County, and yes, we're reporting out that 14 out of the 38 total UK variants that we're seeing in the state are in Ocean County, one of the first questions we had, is that just an artifact? Meaning is that happening because more people who are getting tested there are getting tested on that machine that just happens to be able to give you the hint that that might be there, and therefore additional testing is being done? Or, is it really that there is something spreading in that community?

We get to an answer in a couple of different ways. We do our epi investigation, meaning we have together with local health departments who do most of the work, we go out and we interview people and we see if they are connected. That investigation is ongoing. So certainly we are looking for those sorts of connections and we see a few. Members of the same household, for example, but we're not seeing, as of now, large groups of people who look like they got infected together.

The other thing that we do is we do further investigations to try to get a sense as to whether, again, we're just picking up more cases there because there are more PCRs that could give us that hint that happened to be run in that area. For that, I don't have a definitive answer, but that is something that we're looking into as well.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Ed. Thank you, Judy. Thanks, Matt.

David Wildstein, New Jersey Globe: Governor, you tweeted your support of a bid by Gannett reporters to form a union. Do you believe that journalists from other large newspaper organizations should follow suit and unionize?

Also, Peg Schaffer told Andrew Zwicker that he could have the organization line for Senate if he moved to Somerset County. In your opinion, should a candidate be asked to move out of their home so that a County Chair can exercise Senatorial courtesies over a Gubernatorial nomination?

Also, a bipartisan group of women legislators are seeking to impeach Commissioner Hicks. Do you have any comment on that impossible impeachment and do you have any insights as to the timeline for the completion of the independent investigation?

Finally, will in-person Election Day poll workers in the April school board elections and the fire elections, May Municipal, June Primary be required to be vaccinated? Will election workers be considered essential workers for the purpose of obtaining that vaccination?

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay. Also, I can't speak for every organization but I did tweet out my support for the folks who are attempting to unionize. That's very simply because I believe in unions, and I believe we're the quintessential organized labor state. I believe the strength of the middle class is correlated. If you look at history in post-World War II over these seven or eight decades, you see a very almost perfect correlation between rise of union membership and other metrics for the strength of the middle class in our state. The general answer, I'm a big union guy and believe in it.

Listen, I was asked by your colleague, Nikita, the other day, I guess a lot earlier this week or last week, I'll just say this. I'm a big Andrew Zwicker fan. I'm frankly a big Peg Schaffer fan as well. Peg is the Vice Chair of our statewide party, not just the Chair of the Somerset Dems and she does an extraordinary job. This is not a political forum. But I'm just say I'm a big believer in each of them.

Listen, I looked at the folks who have made those statements about the Commissioner and it is filled with folks who have been on the right side of history at so many moments in so many instances in so many realities and I applaud all the work they've done and stand for. I would just repeat, however, that there are two investigations ongoing. One is a criminal investigation. The Attorney General had some developments on that already. But caution does all of us well, with his words that that investigation is ongoing. I have asked for an independent investigation by one of the smartest, toughest guys I know, former State Comptroller Matt Boxer. I think we need to let each of them play out.

I don't have a sense of timing other than to say that on Matt's case, I asked it to be done on an expedited basis. So let's figure out what happened. And then, again, I'll repeat what I said. Regardless of who they are, if they are deemed to have been responsible in some way for this awful event, then they will pay the consequences for that.

Without question, David, your last question, poll workers are essential workers, period. That's a no brainer, black and white. I don't have any specific news for you as it relates to the vaccination reality, therefore, as it relates to those workers, but there's no question that would be deemed to be essential workers. I hope that by the time April and May comes around, we are in a dramatically different and better place as it relates to vaccine supply. Thank you for that.

Mike Pavlichko, WCTC-AM: Governor, thanks for taking my question. Two questions. What input from the NJSIAA and local districts did you have in making this decision?

Second question is, where does this leave us for outdoor sports? I know baseball seems like a long way away but one thing I've heard anecdotally is that wrestling competition, well that starts in April and is a winter sport. There are some high schools that are planning outdoor events at high school stadiums. We had 500 – we had a significant number of fans allowed at high school football games in the fall. Is it possible that that will change? What are the guidelines for outdoor sports at this moment?

Governor Phil Murphy: Mike, on the first one, our team is back and forth. At times, it's me personally with NJSIAA on any decision like this, so the consultations are wide open and back and forth. We got a lot of incoming input on this one. We don't make a move like this without Judy and Ed and their colleagues putting their holy water on it most importantly. But we had a lot of inputs, most of it with the passion around trying to get at least mom and dad into the arena and that's what we've been able to accomplish.

Mike, and Parimal will correct me if I'm wrong, the Executive Order applies, at least at the moment, to both indoor and outdoor sports. That's number one. But number two, you're right. We did allow bigger crowds in the summer. You'll remember the Last Dance Baseball Tournament, fall soccer games, football outdoor sports. We brought those limits down in the midst of the second wave, not happily, but we brought them down both for indoor gatherings and outdoor gatherings. For the moment, Mike, this is the way I'd answer your second question. The Executive Order that I signed today is both indoor and outdoor.

But I will just go on a limb here. I will be stunned if we're not into a dramatically different and better place with outdoor sports in the spring. Again, the numbers have to dictate that but if you look at the way the curve rose, crested, and we crushed it in the spring into the early summer and you look at what's happening right now, you add

to that warmer weather, vaccines in more supply. We all know, and Judy and Ed and I would want me to add, that the virus is still real outdoors but it's a lot less lethal outdoors than indoors. That combination would lead me to be pretty optimistic about having some amount of increased capacity for outdoor spring sports.

Tom Davis, Patch.com: Two questions. First of all, many people are glad that Rite Aid was added to the list of sites that offer vaccines, but it seems a little confusing because it's actually listed, but it says coming soon. And then you actually go to the Rite Aid site itself and it seems you can get a chickenpox shot, and something for diphtheria, but it doesn't say anything about COVID. I was wondering if that was going to be addressed or straightened out?

My second question is, what is being done to bring vaccines to the elderly, if anything, who can't drive themselves or don't have access to transportation to mega sites? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Tom. On the first, I can't speak to Rite Aid, I don't have firsthand knowledge of Rite Aid's website but I'm sure that will be addressed. I would guess in short order. Mahen, perhaps if you could reach out to their folks, your counterparts there to make sure that that is addressed.

Separately, I'd like Judy to come in on both of these. As it relates to the elderly, that's a multipart answer. We've got a massive long-term care program that is many weeks underway, led by CVS and Walgreens. While they got off to a slow start, especially Walgreens, that has picked up dramatically. They're still not done. They've committed to three clinics at each of the long-term care centers, nursing homes, but far beyond that, remember, this goes back to December, Judy and Ed and team deliberately submitted to the feds, this is a federally run program, a much broader definition of long-term care than any other American state, so they're in that journey.

Secondly, obviously, the closer we can get to communities, I should say each of the six mega sites were picked deliberately because there's mass transit access. That's significantly because of elderly and others who will have a hard time getting there on their own steam. The call center was born overwhelmingly because of the senior population. You've heard me talk about what's coming soon in those communities. Those are programs, in particular in communities of color and the elderly and seniors within those communities, deliberately to get at where people live, whether it's community centers, such as the Mary McLeod Bethune Life Center Judy and I were in on Wednesday or the houses of worship that are going to start to vaccinate with FEMA.

Then I would say, lastly, if Johnson & Johnson is approved, please God it is, because it's a one-dose regular refrigeration and appears to be -- although the feds have to sign off on this -- safe and efficacious that allows you to be a lot more nimble with how you deploy that vaccine. That's going to allow us to get to hard-to-reach places, including folks like seniors who can't get out under their own steam. With that, Judy, please come in with any thoughts you've got.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: The first thought I have is to remind everybody that we have over 1,000 actually 1,308 congregate living facilities in our Federal Partnership Program. Some of them are the IDD and DD homes, but many of them are senior housing, HUD senior housing, all of the assisted living facilities. There's over 50 long-term care and assisted living facilities serving our seniors.

Additionally, we have a team here that is developing plans, when vaccines are available, developing plans for what we call vulnerable and specific populations. Some of the specific populations are definitely seniors that are homebound. We're looking toward building up a community corps and working with home health agencies and community agencies and mobile sites to bring a vaccine directly into the communities.

As the Governor stated, the two vaccines that we have right now are what we'd call, they don't travel well because of the vaccine storage that's required in terms of refrigeration and constitution and things like that. But the J&J vaccine, we hope, will travel very well and will be able to go deeper into communities. We will have plans for homebound, homeless, seasonal workers, meatpacking employees, food service employees, the list goes on. We are developing them right now. I can only assure you that we plan to get into every community that we have.

Governor Phil Murphy: There we go. Amen, Judy, thank you. I want to thank Judy, Ed, Pat. I know Jared Maples was on, Parimal, Mahen and a cast of thousands. I want to thank everybody for being so patient and willing to be flexible as we've had to go to virtual. We'll be with you electronically tomorrow, Sunday and Monday. Assuming my tests keep going in the right direction, I hope to be on the road Tuesday and we'll be able to have some amount of reporting as it relates to the pandemic. Then we will be, unless you hear otherwise from us, Judy, Pat and I at a minimum, I think Eddy Bresnitz will be with us because it's a Wednesday, we'll be together again at War Memorial in Trenton at one o'clock on Wednesday. Wishing you a great Valentine's Day. Please celebrate it responsibly with your loved one or loved ones. Here's to our presidents as we honor them on Presidents Day.

Again, continue to do the right things, folks. The basic stuff still matters, social distancing, face coverings, washing hands with soap and water, take yourself off the field, getting tested. And then as we go forward in the weeks ahead, we're going to get increased vaccine supplies. That will be ultimately, combine all that with God willing better weather, that adds up to game-changing realities here in the state. Take care, everybody. Be safe. See you soon.

Governor Phil Murphy

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