

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: October 20th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

10/20/2021



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon.

On your screen with me for today’s episode are my usual co-stars, Health Commissioner Judy Persichilli, Department of Health Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz, and State Police Superintendent Colonel Pat Callahan.

Before we get to the numbers, two quick items.

First, today I am signing an executive order requiring all new state contracts, solicitations for a state contract, extensions or renewals of an existing state contract, and exercise of an option on an existing state contract to include a clause requiring workers employed through those contracts that enter, work at, or provide services in any state agency location to show they are fully vaccinated, or they will be required to undergo weekly testing.

This will bring new contracted workers in line with the requirements set for all direct state employees.

Quite simply, we must ensure that everyone providing service to the people of New Jersey – whether they are direct or contracted employees – is being held to the same public health and safety standards.

Next, I want to just highlight the news from the Department of Human Services that the federal government has granted its approval to the Department’s three-year, \$634 million planned investment to strengthen and expand home and community-based services to older adults and individuals with disabilities through both Medicaid and NJ FamilyCare.



Alongside a total state investment of \$304 million, the federal government will be matching that total, and then some, with \$330 million from the American Rescue Plan, for a total state and federal investment of \$634 million in these programs.

Access to quality and affordable health care has always been a right, but the pandemic has underscored the importance of making sure every New Jerseyan can be reached. And with this plan in place, we will be well positioned to deliver on that promise.

I thank Acting Commissioner of Human Services Sarah Adelman and Assistant Commissioner Jennifer Langer Jacobs for their efforts. I know they are working with our federal partners in other areas, and I am hopeful this is not the last time we'll be able to make such an announcement.

Now, let's move on to today's numbers.

Here are the vaccination totals as of this morning.

While we've been seeing increasing numbers among those eligible for their booster shot from Pfizer, right now only about 20 percent who are in the queue have stepped forward.

If you are not sure if you are eligible, go to our information hub at covid19.nj.gov and simply do a quick search for "boosters" and you'll get all the information you need and you can also schedule your booster at a site near you.

And we continue to prepare for the decisions regarding boosters for those who have received the Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines, as well as a decision related to vaccination eligibility for kids under age 12, which could come in early November.

As you can see below, .9 is now at .89, which is a good sign. I would also note that today's positivity rate while higher than the past few days reports PCR tests recorded on Saturday. We haven't said this in a while, but we generally see both fewer tests and disproportionately higher positivity rates on the weekends than we do the rest of the week.

While we're on this topic, let's check today's update to the dashboard for coronavirus outbreaks in our schools, so for the week October 12th through October 18th, we are reporting an additional 30 outbreaks that have been determined to have originated from in-school transmission. As you can see, that gives us a total of 126 cumulative outbreaks across 105 municipalities since the start of the school year. In total, again as you can see, cumulatively 564 students and 94 staff members have tested positive in these outbreaks. That's an increase of 120 students and 17 staff respectively over the past week. Do keep in mind, by the way, when you look at those numbers that we have a total of more than 3,500 schools statewide serving more than 1.5 million students. Not to make light, and we never will, of the in-school transmission numbers in any way, shape, or form, but it is important to weigh them against the breadth of our entire preK-12 education system. While we take every single case with the utmost seriousness, these numbers are well within the range that we had anticipated. We came into the school year with eyes wide open, and we have worked with districts and school leaders, educators, and other stakeholders to ensure a layered approach to safety.

Next let's turn to our – from our schools to our hospitals. Here are the numbers from last night's report. As you can see, still below 900 patients overall, which is good to see. Fewer folks getting admitted than being discharged, which is a good thing. Now let's flip with the heaviest of hearts to today's newly confirmed COVID-related losses of life. Seven of these deaths occurred this current week, by the way. Seven are from last week, and one is from the week of October 3rd. Let's take a moment like we do every time we're together to honor several more of those precious lives we have lost.

We'll start with Lodi's Allen Alejandro, a proud immigrant from the Philippines, a marine engineer who had called New Jersey home the first time he stepped off an ocean spanning vessel to set foot in our state, 1978. He was an avid bowler with multipole 300 games to his credit. Wow. In fact, he met his wife Yvette, who I had the great honor of speaking with on Monday, while he was bowling, and the two would soon also be found on the golf course together. Allen also traded in a love of the sea for a love of the open road on his Harley Davidson. Allen leaves behind his four children, two of whom he had with Yvette, his six grandchildren. Prior

to the pandemic, Allen and Yvette purchased a home in the Philippines that they had hoped would be a place they could visit in retirement. I'm sure Allen's spirit will always be present both in his native country and in his adopted home state. May God bless and watch over him and the family he leaves behind.

Next up, we'll stay up in Bergen County to honor this woman, Oakland's Ann Kelly, who was 81 years old. Her fight against COVID was complicated by her two prior battles with lymphoma. For 17 of her working years, Ann was a recognizable and friendly face at Oakland's MVC agency where she served as the head clerk and was one of the first employees to join the agency when it opened. Her family jokes that after her retirement she started working at Lord & Taylor as everyone in the family came to anticipate a gift from her in one of their signature boxes. In passing, Ann was reunited with her beloved husband Frank, with whom she enjoyed life from their wedding in 1968 until his passing in 2013. She left behind their daughter, Terese, who I had the honor of speaking with also on Monday, and their son Francis, III, and their families including her grandson DJ. We thank Ann for her years of service to the people of Bergen County. May God bless her memory and her family.

Finally today for this Wednesday, let's remember this guy Michael Fessler. He lived in Lumberton in Burlington County but was a native and long-time resident of Haddonfield. Michael was the past president of the Stewart's Rootbeer company, and along with his dad, he helped build the iconic orange sign restaurant into a truly national brand. There were probably not many New Jerseyans who don't recall seeing a Stewart's stand or many Americans who haven't tasted their iconic root beer. That's all because of Michael, but aside from building Stewart's, Michael was also a good friend to many, a philanthropist who supported a number of local initiatives, and a mentor who was always willing to provide guidance and help other entrepreneurs achieve their dreams, and he was a patriot as well. He was a past honorary commander of the 6th US Air Force Airlift Squadron, a group named Bully Beef. Fitting for the owner of Stewart's.

Michael left behind to carry on his legacy his wife of nearly a half century, Jacqueline, with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Monday, as well as his daughter Mickelle and Jacqueline, and their spouses and grandchildren, Mickaelyn, Saylor, Brielle, Grant, Ireland, and Scout, and great-grandson Carson. He was predeceased, sadly, by his son Michael. He also leaves behind as you can imagine legions of grateful customers. We thank Michael for all he did to bring joy to the communities where Stewart's operated and to support small businesses. He will be missed, and may God bless his memory and the family he leaves behind.

Speaking of our business community, let's turn our attention to all that the New Jersey Economic Development Authority is doing to ensure that our Main Streets remain strong and bustling as we continue our economic recovery. First up, let's meet Lisbeth Probus. That's Lisbeth on the left, the owner and operator of Glamour Pet Salon and Vanity in Jersey City. Glamour Pet Salon was one of the first grooming businesses certified by the American Kennel Club as an AKC safe business meaning Lisbeth and her team meet higher standards of pet care and health. The pandemic hit Lisbeth and her salon especially hard. Thankfully, the EDA was able to work with her on a grant award that was crucial to supporting her employees, paying the bills, and ensuring that Glamour could reopen to serve its four-legged clientele and their humans. I was able to catch up with Lisbeth on Monday to thank her for her commitment to her business and her employees and to her clients. Check them out, 247 Marine Boulevard in Jersey City, and their website glamourpetsalon.com.

On a related note, the EDA is today rolling out applications for its new small business lease grant program, another facet of their 100-million-dollar Main Street recovery program. Through the small business lease grant program, the EDA will provide two grants, each totaling 20% of a recipient's annual lease payments to small businesses and non-profits that entered new or expanded market rate leases for street-level commercial or office space. 40% of the program's funds will be set aside to support businesses and non-profits opening shop or expanding their existing leases in our state's designated urban opportunity zones. As I mentioned, the application window for the small business lease grant program opens today. Grants will be awarded on a rolling basis as applications are approved and funds are available, so don't delay. Go to njeda.com – that's the website at the bottom of the screen, njeda.com – for more information and to apply today, and I thank EDA CEO Tim Sullivan and his team and their great board for once again stepping up to support our small business community and ensure their place in our recovery. 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. Today I want to provide an update on the in-school testing program for students and school personnel. Testing strategies in schools are part of a comprehensive layered prevention approach that includes masking, physical distancing, frequent handwashing, and staying home if you're sick. When schools implement testing combined with prevention strategies, they can detect new cases to prevent outbreaks, reduce the risk of further transmission, and protect students, teachers, and staff. WE all want the safest and healthiest school year possible for students and staff. Testing for COVID-19 is a key mitigation strategy to keep our schools open for in-person instruction. The Governor's executive order number 253 requires all personnel in pre-school through 12 to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 or be subject to COVID-19 testing at a minimum one or two times per week.

In September, we announced 267 million federally funded screening testing program in public school districts and non-public schools to enable access to full testing services from designated vendors or funds to support programs already in place. School districts had two options to participate in a program. Option one was to use a state contracted vendor for an end-to-end testing program including test kits, diagnostic lab services, staff, personal protective equipment, and full turnkey testing services. Option two allows districts to receive funding to support testing programs that they already have in place or that they contract with a vendor of their own choice. For the school districts that opted to use state vendors for testing in schools, four vendors have been selected to provide end-to-end testing for the 625 schools and districts that selected this option. Those districts include approximately 1.2 million school personnel and students. Districts have the option of three kinds of testing: pool testing, antigen, or PCR testing. Districts that selected option two will receive funding from the Department of Education to support testing programs that they already have in place or can contract with a vendor on their own. 124 districts chose this option.

This week we are reporting 30 additional outbreaks as the Governor shared related to in-school transmission. The total number of outbreaks since the beginning of the school year is 126. Testing is an important component of the layered approach to reduce the spread of COVID-19. A similar layered approach will be vital to enjoy a safe holiday season. The CDC released their holiday celebration guidance, which emphasizes the importance of being vaccinated in advance of the holiday season. Getting fully vaccinated is especially critical to protect those who cannot be vaccinated such as for right now young children. For indoor gatherings, individuals should still wear masks in public, indoor settings, especially the unvaccinated and especially in areas where high transmission of the disease is present. Outdoors is still considered [12:52]. Individuals should avoid crowded, poorly ventilated spaces, and individuals who have a condition or are taking medication that weaken the immune system may not be fully protected even if they are fully vaccinated. They should continue to take all precautions recommended for unvaccinated people including wearing well-fitted masks. This makes the vaccination status of those around them all the more important.

If you are gathering with a group of people from multiple households and potentially from different parts of the country, you could consider additional precautions such as getting tested in advance of gatherings to reduce the risk. The CDC recommends that those who aren't fully vaccinated delay their travel plans until fully vaccinated. Although precautions are still recommended, we are in a much better place than we were last year when the CDC was advising against gathering and traveling for the holidays. As you remember, vaccines were not available last year at this time. We are very fortunate to have three safe, effective vaccines. The CDC data shows that unvaccinated adults in the United States face an 11 times higher risk of dying from COVID-19 than fully vaccinated individuals, and if eligible, receiving a booster is the number one step that you can take for a safe holiday. Again, visit covid19.nj.gov/vaccine or call 1-855-568-0545 to get assistance scheduling an appointment for your primary vaccine series or your booster.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, we're reporting 880 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients or persons under investigation. There are no new reports of multi-inflammatory syndrome in children since September 7th. At the state veterans' homes, there are no new cases among the residents, and at the state psychiatric hospitals, there are no new cases among our patients. In New Jersey, the daily percent positivity as of October 16th, which is a Saturday, is 5.02%. The northern part of the state is 3.61%, the central part of the state 6.14%, and the southern part of the state is 6.86%. That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe and get vaccinated. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. Well done as always. Deep appreciation. Great to obviously have you and Ed with us today. Pat, welcome. Would love it if we could get a quick sense of where we are with the post-Tropical Storm Ida/FEMA progress where I know you've been working long and hard on. Welcome. Please.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. As far as all that, we're just beyond six weeks since Ida came through New Jersey, and so much has been done with all of our stakeholders. I'll give a quick sense and overview. Individual assistance has 71,137 total registrations of that \$145.2 million in individual and household program assistance has been awarded. Our small business administration have received 2,385 loans that have been approved, and that totals \$114 million. Our public assistance unit, which sits in our recovery bureau, currently has 364 requests for public assistance, and we're assigning grants managers to those to make sure we get those applicants, whether that's a town, a county, a state department reimbursed based upon any of the costs incurred as a result of Ida. I think just to end on a light note, we have 30 members from our homeland security branch, which is emergency management staff as well as special ops, that are supporting our six AmeriCorps volunteer teams this Friday. They'll be up in north Jersey helping to clean out residents that were impacted, so just good to see troopers supporting our communities in a different way. Thanks, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Pat. As always, I could add to the end of that sentence always there for the state. Well done. I want to salute our partners at FEMA. Well done to you and your colleagues, Dan Kelly and his team in my office, and remember, if you're in one of those counties, disasterassistance.gov is the website, disasterassistnace.gov. I meant to mention a minute ago – I mentioned up front, but we had some streaming issues. We've been streaming on Facebook and Twitter since 1:06, so we didn't miss too much. It was just the first few minutes. That is good news. Before we take a few questions, I think unless our friends in the press hear otherwise, Dan Bryan is on, and he'll follow up if need be, if I had to predict, we probably will not be with you on Monday of next week. Obviously, we'll communicate electronically and if something merits getting together, we will get to you. We'll do that, but unless you hear otherwise, let's assume we're back a week from today at 1 o'clock in Trenton at the War Memorial as usual. With that, we'll take a few questions.

Q&A Session

Michelle, thank you for everything. Why don't we turn to you to queue up those questions?

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

Governor Phil Murphy: Hey, Matt.

Matt Arco, NJ.com: Good afternoon, Governor. On the state contractor portion, how many people will that affect? Do you have a handle on the number of state contractors at any given time? I imagine the answer is yes, but just to be clear, would this affect any construction worker or working on a state project or contracted cleaning staff that work inside of state office buildings? Also, what do you make of lawmakers who are upset about the delay in all state workers returning to work, especially those still seeking help with unemployment?

Governor Phil Murphy: Matt, I don't have a specific number. It's a prospective executive order because we can't undo contracts that already exist, but I would bet unless Parimal corrects me that this order will ultimately build, assuming that we keep this order in place, to I would bet hundreds into thousands would be my guess over time. It does apply unless Parimal corrects me to construction and cleaning and other contracting of that nature. Thirdly, listen, I would like a magic wand and we all get back in position in office safely, responsibly, at one moment in time. We think this is the most responsible way to do it, and we're doing this over a period of weeks not months or years. You see this being done in the private sector. There are examples all over the map. I spoke to a CEO yesterday that delayed their back to office to January. We will be ahead of that unless this virus takes a turn that we're not expecting it to take, so listen, we just want to do this responsibly and safely and obviously deliver services to our residents to the very best of our abilities. Thank you. Michelle, please.

Michelle: Great. We're going to go to P. Kenneth –

Governor Phil Murphy: I missed who. Sorry.

Michelle: P. Kenneth Burns

Governor Phil Murphy: Oh, Ken, okay. Hey, Ken.

1. **Kenneth Burns, WHYY-FM:** Hi, governor. Can you hear me?

Governor Phil Murphy: I sure can. I can't see your mask, but I can hear you.

1. **Kenneth Burns, WHYY-FM:** Very good. You answered the question I had about the number of people this EO affected, but I was wondering if you could provide some color on how you arrived to this executive order. I know that you do not do these things haphazardly, and you made mention that you always follow the signs and you always plan these things out. That's my only question.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. That's all you got?

1. **Kenneth Burns, WHYY-FM:** That's all I got.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, I think this one was a matter of time, Ken. We came to the conclusion that the virus does not know whether or not you're a full-time employee or you're a contractor. We want to make sure particularly this week as we have gone back much more full bore into back to the office in three of our big departments and the front office as well that this is the right time to do this. Again, it's prospective. We can't undo contracts that exist, but we can mandate going forward that you've got to be vaccinated or subject yourself to tests. Again, it's in the category, Ken, a matter of time. It's just that with the beginning of getting people back in the office and thirdly with the principle and Judy and Ed would want me to abide by that the virus does not know your employment status, and therefore, we should not have some artificial distinction as a result. Thank you for that. Michelle?

Michelle: Next we'll go to David Wildstein.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hello, David.

David Wildstein, New Jersey Globe: Hi, Governor. How are you?

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm good. How're you doing?

David Wildstein, New Jersey Globe: I'm well, thank you. Protesters were arrested this week at the home of an elected official. Is it ever okay to protest at someone's home? Is it ever okay to scare children inside their own home, and for Colonel Callahan, should local law enforcement be intervening before protesters have a chance to actually set foot on someone's driveway or lawn? Governor, my second question is fall school play season begins soon. Students are being told that your executive order requires student actors to wear masks while on stage during the performance. Are you looking at exempting actors the way you did for wrestlers or trumpeters before that school play season begins? And I have to ask this, Governor. Would your performance as Oscar in *Sweet Charity* been quite as legendary had you been wearing a mask on stage?

Governor Phil Murphy: I'll have no comment on that last comment, but I appreciate the very good investigative work on my theatrical career. Listen, I get protested at my home, so here's what I think is not okay. Trespassing is not okay, and Pat should weigh in here if he sees differently. I want to give a shoutout not only to Pat's colleagues at the state police but to Middletown Police Department who do an outstanding job of, I think, balancing first amendment rights with law enforcement. The answer is if people want to protest and they're not trespassing, as a general matter, they have that right, but there is a line that I think folks have to make sure they don't cross when they are protesting even if they're not trespassing, and I think language is on that list, and I think folks have to – people have a right to protest, but they've got to do it the right way. They have a right to be heard even if we don't agree with each other, and for the most part the folks who protest me don't agree with me, and I don't agree with them, but I do agree with the fact they have that right, but we've got to make sure we balance that right with smart law enforcement.

Listen, on the school plays, we were having a conversation about this. Technically, if you're in – this is a – this is one where I think folks have to use common sense here. Technically, the answer is it does apply if you're inside a school building, but – and here are the butts I would say, a couple that occur to me, and Parimal might want to weigh in. Is it a one-man show? Are you able to social distance? I think that probably should be a factor. Are you doing some serious aerobic activity as it relates to a high level of dancing, for instance, where

I think you'd be eligible for a carve out because – for the similar reason that we would have if you were doing an intense amount of aerobic activity in the context of an athletic engagement. For the most part, the answer is it technically applies, but I think I'd just ask folks to use commonsense here.

Particularly, we don't have a vaccine for kids under 12, so particularly for kids in those grades, that reality – I think Judy and Ed would agree with me – that's going to change pretty soon, we think, and that would give us another step in the right direction. By the way, wearing these in school, none of us support that with a – with any amount of joy. We're doing it because we know that's the right thing to do for public health, but we also know this is not forever and always. God willing, we're going to get – we're going to continue the progress we've seen in the numbers over the past couple of weeks, and we'll get to a better place soon. Pat, anything you want to add on law enforcement and protests?

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Let me just really echo your remarks, Governor. I think that early contact with law enforcement and the protest organizers and protesters to basically lay down – explain what those rules of engagement are, understanding and respecting their right to protest while also not trespassing or violating any other of our criminal laws, so communication is key, and that's pretty much all I have to add to that, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Pat. Parimal, are you okay on school? Okay. Thank you. Michelle, please.

Michelle: Great. We'll go to Joey Fox.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Hello, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Joey, you get two for the price of one for you guys today. Please.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: I know. We're really spoiled. Just two questions. One, reports came out yesterday that SALT may be removed from the house reconciliation bill. I know you said in the past that you want both, but a reconciliation bill without SALT is seeming like a pretty realistic possibility now. Do you still support it if that's the case? Then this is a repeat of a question from Monday, but it's been two more days. Do you know how you're voting yet, like what method, and more specifically, do you think you have an obligation to vote early since it's a policy you fought pretty hard for?

Governor Phil Murphy: On voting, I've got no news to report, but I wouldn't call it an obligation, but you should assume that we're going to find a way to shine a very big spotlight on New Jersey's first ever ability to vote in person and more details on our own voting will be forthcoming. We need the SALT cap lifted, period. It's the single biggest tax increase on the middle class in the history of our state in a state we all discuss all the time is – we inherited as I mentioned many times an affordability mess, and we've made a lot of progress, but this is a huge step in the wrong direction. The Trump administration did it. It's directed overwhelming as a political hit, and it's got to get lifted. We speak constantly with members of our delegation. I had long conversations a couple of times yesterday, one in particular. It is a huge deal for New Jersey, and it has to be lifted either directly as a part of whatever compromise is reached or alongside of it, but it's got to get lifted. Thank you for asking. Michelle, let's do a couple more.

Michelle: Gov, next we're going to go to David Matthau.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor, how're you?

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm good, Dave. How're you doing?

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Very good, thank you. As you mentioned earlier, the White House is getting ready for younger kids ages 5 to 11 to be approved for the Pfizer vaccine starting next month probably. How is this program going to be run in Jersey? Will kids mostly be directed to megacenters or county sites, or will these vaccines be offered at family health centers and pediatricians' offices? Obviously, you guys are still working on this, but what's the focus going to be? Will this be different from what we've done previously, and what do you think is the best way to encourage parents to get their kids vaccinated? How important is this in the grand scheme of things, also, Governor, because as we all know, research that is recent suggests the risk of COVID in younger kids is very low. Second and final question, only 20% of those eligible as you mentioned have gotten boosters and if more people don't step up and get them, do you think we risk going backwards? Perhaps Dr. Lifshitz and Commissioner Persichelli would like to weigh in on this as well. Do people who were

vaccinated maybe either or nine months ago – do these folks have a false sense of security, perhaps? I mean, is this COVID fatigue? How do you reach these people? Is it just maybe that they're spaced out, or is there some other problem? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Dave. I'll give a couple of thoughts and then turn it over to Judy and Ed. We will be ready, as we have been at every step of the way in terms of the vaccinations. This will be somewhat unique because it's a different dose. We expect it will be a different dose for the standard adult or 12 and up vaccinations. We'll be ready, and maybe I could ask Judy to give some color on that.

On boosters, again, maybe get Ed to come in on this. I think you're really asking two questions there. Why is the demand not higher and two, if the demand doesn't get higher, do we risk going backward? I think there are a number of reasons for the demand not being higher. I think there was some mixed messaging out of the feds, who's eligible, disagreements or healthy discussions between different branches of the health organizations. Probably some false sense of security by some, so I think there's a number of reasons as it relates to demand. One guy's opinion, boosters would not have been approved if folks – if the federal – in the science and medical communities did not conclude that they added meaningful extra protection. The answer has got to be we're less well off with fewer eligible people being boosted than we are if they are boosted. It's got to be the case by definition. Judy, any color on how we're going to vaccinate the kids and maybe Ed on how he sees the world with a lower demand for boosters versus a higher demand for boosters.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Sure, our goal is to make it as accessible and convenient as possible, so we will be making sure that the vaccine appropriately gets to pediatricians' offices, primary care offices, FQHCs. We will have several megasites in addition to large county sites, retail and independent pharmacies, and school clinics. We're going to have as many outlets as possible, to make it as convenient, particularly for the kids and the families, as possible. We will be aggressively encouraging 5 to 11 boosters. As you know, 57% of kids in New Jersey between the ages of 12 to 17 have received their primary doses; we want that to increase. We want boosters for adults to increase, and we want and need kids from 5 to 11 to get vaccinated. That's the way we're going to keep kids in school, and keep them safe, and keep them able to play sports, gather with their friends in safe environments.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you for that. Ed, any color on how you see the world differently between a fully boosted population that's eligible versus one that's only partly boosted?

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Sure, I get the tough question because there's a lot about this that we don't know yet, and as we keep saying, this is a novel virus and we do keep learning more. One of the things we don't know is exactly how long immunity lasts. We do not yet know how often we need to be boosted, whether this'll be a one-time thing, whether it'll become a yearly thing. These are all things that we're all listening and learning about in real time as this goes along.

Clearly what we have seen is that the primary series works for all three of these vaccines, so all very effective. We also see that over time, there is some waning of immunity. You do see some decrease in antibodies. Luckily most of what happens when people do get sick, even if they haven't gotten the booster, is illness tends to be mild, and we don't see very much in the way of hospitalizations or deaths, although there are, unfortunately, some of those, as well. The CDC and the FDA have looked at this closely, and they have decided – and I agree looking at their data – that for those groups that they talk about, which is a large segment of the population, mainly older and immunocompromised people, because the fact that immunity wanes over time and because the fact that if they do get sick, they tend to have more serious illness than younger people, it does make sense for them to boost. I do agree with that and I do recommend that those groups get boosted.

Whether we will be talking about boosting everybody in six months, I don't know. I mean, basically we'll see what happens over time as far as immunity waning. Clearly, again, the vaccines are working very well, and they're very protective, particularly against those most serious parts, which is hospitalizations and deaths. In fact, just yesterday we talked a little bit about younger people. Just yesterday, CDC published the MMWR that said that 97% of all adolescents who were hospitalized for COVID had not been vaccinated, 97%. Again, even in that young group, which doesn't often get very ill, that's just more proof of how well these vaccines are working.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said. Dave, thank you for those. Michelle, let's do one or two more. Is that okay?

Michelle: That's great. We're going to go to Steve Burns.

Steve Burns, WCBS 880: Hey, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hey, Steve.

Steve Burns, WCBS 880: WCBS 880, how are you?

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm good. How are you?

Steve Burns, WCBS 880: I'm doing all right. Appreciate you taking the time. A couple of topics I wanted to touch on here. First, vaccine rules in general – I'm sure you've seen the direction that New York is going. They have full-on mandates, no test option for healthcare workers, teachers, the city. Mayor today just announced a full mandate for all city workers. Given that New York and New Jersey's trajectories on the pandemic have largely mirrored each other, do you see going that direction any time soon with a full-on mandate? If not, why not at this point?

The other topic, congestion pricing, I know you said you have some bones to pick with it. Do you oppose the entire concept of it, or are there some more specific changes you'd like to see? Overall, how do you balance this with climate being one of your top priorities? Seems like this would largely align with your climate goals here. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Steve. Listen, we think we have it in place, the package that gets all of the important considerations, Alex, as it relates to the vaccine. Our numbers are very high to begin with, and that's a good thing. I'm talking now about state workers or educators or other communities. Do we take anything off the table? We never take anything off the table, particularly given, as I've said many times, as we have all said, this thing is humbling. This virus takes a turn with some regularity that you don't expect. The moment we like where we are, we don't rule anything out.

On congestion pricing, yeah, I think you said it right. Conceptually, I've got no issue with congestion pricing, but it cannot be at the expense of New Jersey's commuters, and it will not be. Right now, the simple fact is if you go into New York City under the proposed or the draft proposal, if you go into the Holland and Lincoln Tunnel, you're not double-taxed, but if you go in with the George Washington Bridge, you are. That's just not going to work. We've had – so it's not necessarily opposition to congestion pricing and I do agree with you. Congestion pricing seems, if they're done well, are good for the environment, and that's something we support. We've said no double taxation. We want a seat at the table and preferably, some amount of the proceeds from this to go towards benefiting New Jersey's commuters.

I was asked the other day by someone, could that include money for NJ Transit to make the rail reality a more compelling one for a commuter who would otherwise take a car. The answer's got to be yes. That's got to be on the list. That's where we are on that Steve. Again, we're not going to allow our commuters to get double-taxed.

Michelle, let's do one more. Is that alright?

Michelle: Sure, your last question today then will come from Stacie Sherman.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hey, Stacie.

Stacie Sherman, Bloomberg: Hi, Governor, how are you?

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm good. How are you doing?

Stacie Sherman, Bloomberg: Good, thank you. You said the – your vaccination numbers are very high. I think I asked this question Monday, but I'm going to ask again, hope for an answer. Do you have the rate of vaccination among your public workers and do you know the vaccination rate among state police? Also with regard to schools, the 3500 schools you said – do you know many have closed because of COVID?

Governor Phil Murphy: Is that it?

Stacie Sherman, Bloomberg: That's it.

Governor Phil Murphy: I think we're going to probably have to get back to you on all of these. I do not know off the top of my head how many have closed. Judy, do you have that information?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: No, don't have it.

Governor Phil Murphy: Stacie, that's a fact that we can get back to you. Dan, will you help me out on that? I want to come back to you as well, unless Pat's got the number off the top of his head, with both public workers generally and state police specifically.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Have to get back – we can get back to her, Gov, once I have those.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yep, so Stacie, Dan Bryan will get back to you on both. Judy I think mentioned this on Monday. We're getting much better data on the status of educators and staff from the districts that are self-reporting now in response to Judy's directive. We know anecdotally they're high and the early returns from those districts verify that. We'll come back to you with more specifics.

Okay, I think that's it. On behalf of Judy, Ed, Pat, Parimal, Dan, the rest of the team, to everybody, thank you again. Unless you hear otherwise from us, my gut is telling me as we sit here, we will not be with you on Monday, but we'll be with you again one week from today in Trenton at the War Memorial as we usually are. Appreciate your patience bearing with a virtual briefing today. Just would say to folks, keep doing the right thing as you have done by the millions out there. Get vaccinated, get boosted if you're eligible, do the right thing, and we're going to come out of this as strong, God willing, as any American state, notwithstanding the overwhelming toll that it's taken on our state. Take care, folks.

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