

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: February 7th, 2022 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon. Joining me to my right is the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, we welcome back the Department of Health's Communicable Disease Service Director, Dr. Ed Lifshitz. Great to have you both. To my left, another guy who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan, counsel Parimal Garg, Alyana Post, and a cast of thousands.

First and foremost, and with the heaviest of hearts, our thoughts and prayers are with the family of this guy: Kyle Mullen, the Navy Seal candidate from Manalapan who tragically died while in training in San Diego on Friday. He represented the very, very best of our state and our country. I can't tell you. He was a guy that my family knew remotely by reputation. I never had the honor of meeting him to the best of my knowledge, but he was a legend in athletics, in all walks of life. He was just 24 years old. I will be directing all state flags to be lowered in his honor and memory. More on that when we have a better sense of the way forward. I spoke with his mom this morning. She's going through, as you can imagine, an unspeakable period and just describing how special her guy was. He's got an older brother. Keep the whole family in your prayers. He was literally a legend. God bless you, Kyle.

Before we get to the big news for the day, I want to put a reminder out so it doesn't get lost. Tomorrow the registration window will open for the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency's 325-million-dollar emergency rescue mortgage assistance program or ERMA, E-R-M-A. Through ERMA eligible homeowners can receive up to \$35,000 to cover mortgage arrearages, delinquent property taxes, and other housing cost delinquencies for those who were negatively impacted by the pandemic, protecting homeowners from foreclosures and neighborhoods from being impacted. Free housing counseling will also be available to assist homeowners in applying for assistance as well as guiding them through all available options and even working with their mortgage companies to get the best possible outcome. Again, the ERMA opens tomorrow, so I encourage you to visit the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Financing Agency at njhousing.gov. That's njhousing.gov and click the link for the Homeowner Assistance Fund, or you can call that phone number that's up there, 855-647-7700. Again, 855-647-7700.

With that said, here is the announcement I know many of you have been waiting to hear. Because of the dramatic decline in our COVID numbers, effective Monday, March 7th, the statewide school mask mandate will be lifted. Additionally, we will lift the statewide mandate in all childcare settings. Later this week, we will extend the public health emergency by 30 days to allow for this mask mandate to continue until then and then be responsibly lifted. As we have with other similar actions, we're announcing this with plenty of advanced notice for our schools and childcare settings, for our students and their families, our educators and support staff to determine how this will impact them and to finalize any steps they may need to make in preparation.

Masking continues to be an important tool to prevent the spread of COVID and should be used in many circumstances. In the coming weeks, the Department of Health will also be updating – under Judy's leadership – will also be updating its guidance to help school districts make the best decisions as to whether and when masks should be worn. I must thank the overwhelming majority of students

parents, administrators, educators, and support staffers who stood tall as role models even as our schools returned to in-person instruction by wearing your masks day in and day out without problem or protest. You truly represent our highest New Jersey values of selflessness, community spirit, collective responsibility, looking out for others. You are the reason why we're ready to take this step.

A couple of things to note. We are removing the statewide requirement that all students, educators, staff, and visitors wear masks while indoors, again effective March 7. We are not removing the ability of individual district leaders to maintain and enforce such a policy within their schools or any private childcare provider from maintaining such a policy within their business should community conditions require. Likewise, any student, educator, or staff member, or visitor who chooses to continue masking up while indoors may freely do so, and we expect schools will take swift disciplinary action against those who may try to demean or bully anyone who chooses to wear a mask. We will not tolerate anyone being put down by exercising their choice to mask up.

We can responsibly take this step given the continuing drop in new cases and hospitalizations from Omicron and with all the evidence projecting a continued decline over the coming weeks. We are also buoyed by the continued growth in vaccinations and the expectation that the vaccines will be made available to children under the age of 5 in early March. We strongly encourage parents of school age children to have your child vaccinated. Additionally, although I was quoted as saying it's not the 4th of July, I admit, but early March traditionally means the weather starts to warm up at least a bit – and Pat, you'll make sure that that happens – which will give schools a little bit more flexibility to increase ventilation, be more creative with that, and further decrease the risk of COVID spread.

Perhaps most importantly, this is a huge step back to normalcy for our kids. As I mentioned last week, I had the honor of being with Arkansas governor Asa Hutchinson on *Meet the Press*, and by the way, alongside Governor Hutchinson, I'm honored to help lead the National Governors' Association. We're not – and I've said this many times here. We're not going to manage COVID to zero. We have to learn how to live with COVID as we move from a pandemic to the endemic phase of this virus. To be sure, we've known this for a long time, and we are optimistic that given the decreased severity of this new variant and the continued increase in vaccinations that we are finally nearing this inflection point.

I've said many times that we would act deliberately in all we do in response to the pandemic. The mask mandate has been part of a many-layered approach to being able to safely keep our schools open because we know that remote learning is an inadequate substitute for learning in person. We have tried, as we've said many times, to meet the moment, not to undershoot it putting lives at risk or to overshoot it only adding to mental health and stress that we know exists up and down the state.

The numbers bear out the effectiveness of this approach you can see here over the past number of weeks. Yes, the overall rates of infection among all students and educational staff, regardless of where that exposure occurred, has dropped off significantly over the past month, and by the way, this is not with regard specific only to in-school. This is all COVID as it relates to students and staff, but since the beginning of the 2021-22 school year, there have been roughly, as you can see – not roughly, exactly 2,635 student cases, 503 staff or educator cases, and those were all spread across 465 specific outbreaks. Keep in mind, by the way, 2,635 students out of 1.4 million students, 465 outbreaks out of about 3,500 school buildings.

While we didn't want to keep any mandates in force for a moment longer than necessary, at the same time, the last thing that we wanted to do was to pull back too early, endanger our students and their families or educators and staff and make it more likely that outbreaks would force schools to close. Again, as I said last week, every time you think you've got this thing figured out, it humbles you, but we are confident that four weeks from now we will be able to be at the point with regard to the statewide school mask mandate that we have announced.

One of the things that I am most proud of – and Judy and her team including Ed deserve a lot of credit here, a lot of the credit. One of the things I'm most proud of in our overall pandemic response is that we're the state that did not ride the rollercoaster, on again, off again, two steps forward, one step back restrictions that many other states have been through. I think in every case across the board, we have not reimplemented any significant restrictions after they've been limited. Decisions like these, balancing public health with the need to get back to some semblance of normalcy, are not easy. If we are to err, I would much rather be it on the side of protecting public health. There are issues that are and must always remain above politics, the health and safety of our residents and especially our kids is not just among them, but it is arguably the most important of them. Again, Monday, March 7th, the indoor masking requirement in our schools and daycare settings will be lifted.

Now with all of that said, let's quickly get to the rest of the numbers for today. First let's look at the numbers of newly recorded cases. We see the rate of transmission. Judy, how nice is it to see, 0.5 something for seven in a row there? It's holding steady at well below 1, and the case numbers are down by more than 50% from where they were a week ago. A quick note, by the way. One month ago today on January 7th, we reported more than 39,000 cases with a positivity rate of 34%. That's one month ago. As we cross over to the numbers in our hospitals, we see these numbers continue to tail off as well. Overall hospitalizations have dropped by another one third over the past week. Again, going back one month ago today, we had more than 5700 people in the hospital, and we were four days from our Omicron peak.

We also see the ICU numbers and ventilator counts tailing off considerably, although we know that some of those numbers are due to that number on the bottom now, the number of deaths, sadly, reported by our hospitals. Those are not confirmed. Again, those are the numbers they report each of the previous 24 hours, and subsequently, these are the newly confirmed deaths. God bless each and every one of them. Again, those aren't – I'll just pick today. That is not 15 people who passed today. Those are the numbers of deaths, Ed, that have been confirmed today regardless of when they occurred, although increasingly and sadly as we've gone through this pandemic, the team has picked up a lot of expertise and are much more quickly confirming these deaths, so these are, I'm sure, overwhelmingly from recent times.

Finally, in terms of numbers, here are this morning's vaccination numbers, which as I mentioned are a significant reason why we can now prepare for the expiration of the indoor mask mandate in our schools. With more than 90% of eligible residents having received a first dose, we are among only six other states to have reached this milestone according to the CDC, but again, while all the signs continue to point in a positive direction, we have to keep it that way. None of us should be taking anything for granted, and none of us should be ready to let up. We are moving steadily to a return to a real sense of normal, and let's get there.

Alyana, can you go back to the booster slide, the vaccination slide, Judy, that I'd be remiss – you'd be mad at me if I didn't say it. The booster penetration continues to be way lower than it needs to be, and this is not folks, by the way – it's an interesting piece this morning that I read. This does not break down on political lines like we've seen sadly the original courses have broken down on political lines. This is – the 49% in our state who aren't boosted – and by the way, we're a lot better than most of America – looks a lot like our state, and I'm not sure yet I can understand why the lack of uptake is not stronger and better, but it is what it is, and that's the one area I think you'd want me to say we need a lot more progress. Okay, thanks, Alyana.

As we get back to normal, we have to always remember those who will not be there with us when we do, and here are a few more of their stories. Today we honor two members in the same family. I alluded to this last week. Vincent Apicelli, Sr., he's on the left, the guy on the right, and Vincent Apicelli, jr. They both lived in the West – bless you – West Belmar section of Wall Township in Monmouth County. They were 81 and 52 respectively. Vincent, sr. – by the way, I found out about this because I knew this barbershop was an institution, and I read about it in the paper. Vincent, sr. was the longtime owner and operator of the Belmar Barbershop, the Main Street mainstay, considered an institution in the community. Vincent learned his barbering skills while in the United States Navy.

His loss left a huge hole not just in his family and among his friends but in the fabric of downtown Belmar where nearly everyone knew him and at one time or another he had cut nearly everyone's hair. He passed on December 28th. Vincent, sr., met his wife of 53 years Ellen – where else – at the barbershop, though she admitted she's probably the one person whose hair he never cut. They had three children together, daughters Tina and Kim and a son, as you know, on the right, Vincent, jr., who everybody called Vinnie.

Ten days ago on June 29th, Vinnie passed away from complications of COVID, his battle against the virus made harder as he was also undergoing treatment for stage four multiple myeloma cancer. He was just as recognizable a figure locally as his father was. A gifted baseball player in his youth, he was described as having a cannon for an arm and could hit the ball a mile. He spent hours on the diamonds in Wall Township as a volunteer and umpire with the North Wall Little League. In addition to his mom and sisters, Vinnie also left behind his three children, two daughters of his own, Alana and Ashley, and his son little Vinnie. He also leaves countless friends.

I had heard about Vincent Apicelli, sr. and spoke to daughter Tina who lives in Mississippi, and she mentioned to me at the time that her brother was battling this, and as we were getting ready to honor the father last week, sadly we got week that Vinnie died, and then I spoke to his mom and Vincent, sr.'s wife Ellen, and you can imagine how busted up they all are. May God bless both Vincent and Vinnie, and we thank them both for the tremendous contributions they made to their community, in Vincent's case to our country. May God bless each of their souls and watch over the families they leave behind.

Today we also remember East Brunswick's Susan "Sue" Tisiker who passed from COVID at the age of 78. For many in Trenton, Sue will be remembered as the long-time chief of staff to my friend, our friend, State Senator Sam Thompson, but her career in public service reaches back across nearly 40 years, and it began in service as an educator. Sue left the classroom to enter the insurance industry and would own and operate her own agency. That change in career would open up numerous new doors within the community. She would go on to become the East Brunswick Regional Chamber of Commerce President, the chair of the East Brunswick Zoning Board of Adjustment and a commissioner on the Middlesex County Board of Elections.

In political life, Sue was the founder of the Middlesex County Republican Women's Club and served as the president of it for over ten years. She would also serve over time as the East Brunswick republican municipal chair, as a regional vice chair of the Middlesex County Republican Organization, and as treasurer of the New Jersey Federation of Republican Women. Sue shared the last 35 years with her husband Donald Katz, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last week. She also leaves her brother Michael and her sister Anne among other family, and Donald told me some great stories including about their wedding. We know that God has blessed her for a lifetime of service to her community and our state's civic dialogues. She will be missed by many. May God bless her memory and Donald and the family she leaves behind. By the way, God bless all – every one of the roughly now 32,000 New Jerseyans we have lost. May God watch over each and every one of them and their families.

Next I want to give a shoutout to this guy, Alex Habbaz, the owner of the logistics company Fleet Distribution Centers. For nearly 20 years, Alex and Fleet Distribution Centers have provided warehousing and distribution services to numerous companies utilizing the ports of Elizabeth and Newark. With business growing at a rapid pace, Alex recognized the need to make a significant addition to his team, and the Department of Labor's Return & Earn program helped him not only find that needed employee but also helped cover his onboarding and training costs, and that's – and by the way, the new worker also got a 500-dollar signing bonus when they began, a valuable incentive for joining Alex's team.

I had the opportunity to catch up with Alex last week, who by the way, is as busy as ever, to thank him for partnering with us through Return & Earn to help Fleet Distribution Centers prepare for a strong and prosperous future. Check out their website. It is fleet3 – the number 3 – pl.com. Fleet3pl.com. I asked Alex, by the way, if he had any advice. He said yeah, you can market this program more. I can't believe how good it is, but I stumbled upon it. I said you know what, that's good advice.

From the Department of Labor, by the way, to the Economic Development Authority, we've invested now nearly a billion dollars in the businesses we're going to rely on in the long term. These are truly innovative and winning partnerships, and I say the same about the many other partnerships that have carried our state throughout the pandemic and are now positioning us as we begin to return to a real sense of normal. Again, we'll take another big step forward four weeks from today March 7th when the school mask mandate will be lifted. 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. As the Governor said, the Department will be developing guidance that incorporates all aspects of safety in schools while the children are unmasked. We know that every parent wants to do what's best for their children, so there may be parents who will want their children to continue wearing masks, and we want to respect those decisions as well. School districts will also have the right to maintain a universal masking policy after March 7th. In the event of a school outbreak, it will be important for the districts to work with the local health department to determine what preventive measures are best for the children and the staff in their school.

Also, last week, the department's communicable disease service issued a public health considerations for COVID-19 home-based self-tests. The recommendations from CDS provide updated guidance for local health departments and public health partners for reporting and interpreting self-tests in order to determine public health actions. Testing, as you all know, is a critical component in tracking the spread of COVID throughout the pandemic. Home testing procedures are an easy and accessible alternative if you are feeling unwell or if you have been exposed. Over 640,000 at-home saliva test kits have been ordered through our at-home testing partnership with Vault. Also, the federal government is sending at-home tests to those who request them online at covidtests.gov or by phone at 1-800-232-0233.

Home-based tests include those where the specimen is collected at home under the supervision of a healthcare provider and processed in a lab like the Vault saliva test as well as those over-the-counter antigen self-tests like BinaxNOW which are performed by individuals without any professional interaction. While home-based tests offer accessible testing and produce rapid results, these results may not be reported to public health authorities, which places the responsibility on the individual to self-isolate for the recommended period of time and notify their close contacts.

Results from self-administered tests are also not included in the state's overall count of COVID cases, which makes it important that individuals who test positive on a self-test notify their healthcare provider or local health department if they do not have a provider, and if they have concerns and questions to make sure they reach out to their health department or their primary care provider. Getting tested if you are not feeling well or may have been exposed to someone with COVID is a responsible thing to do, as is reporting your positive self-test results to a healthcare provider to ensure that you take the steps necessary to protect yourself and those around you.

I'm also reporting that there have been a total of 182 cases of multi-inflammatory syndrome in children, MISC, in New Jersey to date, including an additional seven reported cases since our last briefing. Five of the children are currently hospitalized. Parents should contact their child's doctor or clinic right away if their child is showing symptoms of MISC such as an ongoing fever plus more of the following: stomach pain, bloodshot eyes, diarrhea, dizziness or lightheadedness, skin rash, vomiting, or confusion. Not all children will have the same symptoms. Please call a medical provider if your child is experiencing any symptoms that are severe or concerning to you. Additionally, the US Food and Drug Administration Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee, VRBPAC, is meeting on February 15th to consider emergency use authorization of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine for children six months through four years of age.

Now moving on to the daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 1,910 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients and persons under investigation last evening. At the state's veterans' homes since our last briefing, there have been five new cases among residents and one COVID-related death at the Menlo Park home. Our state psychiatric hospitals, we have one new cases among residents in Trenton and one new case at Ann Klein. The daily percent positivity as of February 3rd for New Jersey is 6.76%, the northern part of the state 5.08%, the central part of the state 7.95%, and the southern part of the state 9.22%. That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe. Let's get vaccinated, get boosted to protect ourselves, our family, our friends, and our children. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you for all. In the interest of time, we'll move right along. We've got a big crowd with us today. Pat, any postmortem on the storm on Friday? Any color on what's out there now, and what have you got at the end of the week, and any other matters you've got? Good to see you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. With regard to Friday's into Saturday's, we had troopers handle the 168 accidents, almost 400 motorist aids. We did have a couple tractor trailer accidents for those drivers that failed to heed the commercial travel restriction. That was lifted Saturday morning at 8:30, and I have confirmed that those drivers were issued summonses for being in here against the travel restrictions. As far as today, we're still watching rains, sleet, and snow. Concerned about the ground temperatures for tonight, but DOT is doing a phenomenal job out there. Also looking at a possible cold front Friday and Saturday which hopefully doesn't bring with it any precipitation. I just wanted to thank the CDC, HHS, and FEMA for their efforts on both the Galloway and East Orange testing sites in supporting our testing, and I'll just end with the acute care strike team that's in helping University Hospital has about two more weeks left supporting University Hospital, and we don't anticipate extending that.

Governor Phil Murphy: Please, God.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Hope we don't have to. The winter weather advisories across the state have all been lifted with the exception of western Bergen and western Passaic counties which are in effect until 3 o'clock this afternoon.

Governor Phil Murphy: Anything at the end of the week, or is it too early to tell?

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: It looks like it's going to be cold, but as far as precipitation, it looks like hopefully nothing to be concerned about.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay. Thank you, Pat for everything. We'll start over with Matt. Before we do, unless Alyana tells me otherwise we'll be back here a week from today at 1 o'clock, and as we've got things to report throughout the week, we'll find ways to get to you either virtually or on the road.

Q&A Session

With that, Matt, good afternoon.

Reporter: Good afternoon, Governor. So you're dropping the requirement for masks in schools, but what do you recommend students and staff do? What can you say more about the timing? I know if I ask if there was an political calculation, you'd dispute the premise of the question. Why March 7th? Why not the end of February? Why not March 15? To be clear – I think I know the answer to this but just to be clear, will school districts be allowed to actually ban masks in schools if they want to?

Governor Phil Murphy: I think the answer on the last one is no; it's the opposite. The state is lifting the masking requirement but in the positive, as Judy said, if a district chooses to, but we're not allowing anyone to ban anything. Your first question was what would make you wear a mask?

Reporter: What do you recommend students and staff –

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, I'm – we wouldn't be doing this if we didn't recommend that you can lift it, but you also – you have to know your own health situation. If you've got some, I would think, Judy, a comorbidity or if a district thinks that there's a particular outbreak in that community, but all other things being equal, healthy child going to school, they're going without a mask on March 7th. Again, two things; you got to reserve the right as a district reserves the right to keep something in place and secondly, I think most importantly, an individual based on their own health reserves that right. We cannot stigmatize a decision like that.

Listen, we're trying to get – given all the unpopular decisions I made when politics was really on the front burner, I think we can – I would agree with you. We'll disavow the premise of the question. You're trying to get a whole bunch of data streams together and make the best call you can. It's a combination of cases, hospitalizations, positivity rates, rates of transmission all going dramatically in the right direction. It's trying to project out what those data streams look like weeks ahead of time. It's acknowledging that vaccination rates continue to creep up among kids who are more recently eligible, not as fast as we'd like but getting slowly but surely. It's the acknowledgment, Judy mentioned, that the committee is likely to meet and approve vaccines for kids under five years old, so that combination has given us the sense that plus or minus a month from now is the right time to do it.

Again, we're dealing with a pandemic. It's like dealing with Mother Nature. You do the best you can but – and as I've said, it's humbled us so many times in the past. This feels right to us. Thank you.

Dave, you get to bat second here.

Dave Matthau, NJ 101.5: Thank you, Governor. Yes, I moved seats on account of the possible questionable fire alarm that took place last week. Point of – this is not a question but just to make sure I understand, it's daycare as well as preschool and schools, all facilities for children.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yep.

Dave Matthau, NJ 101.5: What about – what would your advise be for colleges, universities, community colleges, and so forth? You mentioned the fact that bullying and teasing and so forth would not be tolerated in schools if a kid, or a member of the faculty, or whoever in the school wants to wear a mask. Why not just decide this is a statewide mandate that's being lifted and end it for everybody so that we don't open the door to these different situations? I think I know the answer, but I'd like to get your sense of that.

If we're dropping the school mask mandates, what about the executive order that forbids people to return products at supermarkets? Apparently there's some question about this over the weekend. I was with someone who attempted to return an unopened tube of toothpaste to a supermarket and were told that because of your executive order, they couldn't do this. Someone else reported they went to another supermarket and they could return a product, so could you please clarify that?

Finally, what suggestions would you offer – and I know this is very important to you, Governor, in particular – to towns for St. Patrick's Day parades that will be coming up in March and also the occasional indoor celebration that you may be attending and others as well? Should we cancel parades? I mean, a lot of towns did cancel them for the last couple years. Now that things look like they're going in the right direction, what would your sense be of that? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: We'll start with the back and go forward. Again, I'm going to try to – let's all be as brief as we can. There's no reason to cancel them. I still think you have to use your head. If you're inside and you're with a bunch of people, Judy, whose vaccination status you don't know, but there's no reason whatsoever to cancel them. The last thing Callahan and Murphy are going to do – and by the way, Judy, you too as well as Ed O. Lifshitz at the end of the table there, we're not going to – no, you should go ahead. Be responsible Be smart, particularly when you're indoors, but by definition a parade is outside.

I thought we had dealt with the return products. Someone raised that I think quite smartly many, many months ago. Parimal?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Yeah, the Governor never issued any type of executive order on returning products to supermarkets. That was a law the Governor signed in the opening weeks of the pandemic, and I believe we signed a law repealing that a number of months ago, but we can follow up with you offline.

Governor Phil Murphy: I believe that's no longer and has not been for a while. I think you can't mandate lifting it, Dave, for the reason you would guess is – and Judy would want me to say this, I would think. You've got a particular health issue, in particular you're going to want to wear that mask and mandating you to not wear it is not on, so that's the real reason. Again, I mention the districts' ability to make a decision locally depending on what the dynamic is in that particular community, for instance.

Childcare, I answered, and colleges and universities, my view is we can responsibly – we are making a statement today that inside of education communities that you can responsibly, we believe a month from today, all other factors being equal – in other words, you don't have a particular health issue or there's not a raging situation going on in your town or at your school – that you can take that step. I would think the same goes for colleges and universities. Again, Judy would probably want me to remind everyone of this. They are, by definition, a more vaccinated reality because they're older populations and they've not been more recently become eligible. That's the only wrinkle.

Mike, is that you?

Mike Catalini, Associated Press: Yes, good afternoon, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon.

Mike Catalini, Associated Press: I believe in January there were almost 2400 deaths from COVID, which I think is the highest point or highest number since May, 2020. Keeping in mind that deaths can be a lagging indicator, did that give you any pause in lifting that mandate and if not, can you talk about why not? I think also one of the slides you showed showed school cases rising in January. How did you

account for that in reaching your decision today? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: So January – Ed, I don't want to overstep my bounds. You should weigh in here. January – I mentioned what it looked like on January 7th. That might've well been ten years ago. I mean, the numbers are dramatically different in both as it relates to schools, cases, hospitalizations. Sadly, deaths are a lagging indicator, Judy, right? They're going to come in as the last sad tragic data point in what a period of this pandemic looks like. That's my – is that fair as it relates to losses of life? Thank you for that.

Alex, is it just you back there or either you guys asking questions? Just Alex? Okay, Alex, we should give you some respect given we – Pat arranged for a fire alarm to go off in the middle of your questioning.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Well, it's Pat, so I'll forgive Pat. For Dr. Lifshitz, I'd like to ask why is the school mask mandate being lifted one month from now? How do we know what conditions, for better or worse, are going to be in regards to COVID one month from now? Why not lift the mandate today if conditions are improving? For Commissioner Persichilli, I'd like to get your reaction to the Controller's report that examined nursing homes that showed that 15 of the worse nursing homes in the state continue to operate without any repercussions virtually including receiving millions and millions in Medicaid dollars? Is your department unable or unwilling to crack down on intransigent nursing homes? I'd also like to ask you a clarification about something you mentioned before about the school mask mandate. You said that in the event of an outbreak, certain procedures might come into place. Is there any mechanism in the executive order or in the health department regulations to order masking in schools again on a district level if there is an outbreak reported, or is that not in the regulations you have right now?

For you, Governor, I definitely would ask if this also means you might lift the mask mandate in state buildings, including at this briefing where we're all vaccinated, far apart, masked, whatever? In general when it comes to school masking, you've said very consistently over the course of last year into this year that you would be looking at the rate of vaccination amongst juveniles, among students, to make your decision. Now today suddenly, you're talking about case numbers and you're talking about hospitalizations. When did you change your metrics on when to lift the school mask mandate? Was it before or after legislators, including members of your own party, moved to try and limit your executive authority? Just in general on that executive authority, you did say that you're also going to be extending the public health emergency. Why? Why not end that public health emergency at the end of this week along with the mask mandate? Do you expect any sort of blow-back from legislators including from your own party as you continue to extend this pandemic executive order?

Governor Phil Murphy: So I'll start and Judy or Ed, if you want to weigh in as you see and Ed, we definitely got to get our money's worth out of you being with us today. I'm just going to predict – preview, I should say, what Ed, I would bet, would say, which is we see numbers going dramatically in the right direction. Having said that, it's February 7th. It's miserable outside. We want to make sure we're going in the right direction. We're proud of the fact that we have not gone two steps forward and one step back. We don't want to start that now. A few more weeks gives us more confidence in that respect, so that's – again, let me go through a few things here and we'll come back to what Judy or Ed adding.

I don't know what the action is yet, but I will – I feel I can confidently put words in Judy's mouth but they're in my mouth, as well. That report on the 15 nursing homes is unacceptable. We're – she and I and the teams are looking at possible options on how to deal with that. Completely unacceptable.

No, mandating a district is not part of this. Allowing a district is part of it, and that's the way we want to – that's the, we think, the right place to settle. Again, Judy and Ed can come in here.

State buildings masking, nothing to report now, but we started talking about that just generally this morning, so that's no news to make there. At a certain point, if you really continue to think you're in the right direction, you want to be able to keep taking steps. Most of what's left at this point, Alex, is federal, so planes, trains, buses, any healthcare setting, Judy, long-term care. That's all federal masking requirements. The one really big one left is the state – our state buildings, and that's something that I'm – you can assume we'll be looking at.

No, rate of vaccination, it isn't an either/or. It's a whole series of data points that we been looking at, and that is one of them. By the way, the additional one, which is – Judy referred to, the expectation that the federal committee would approve a vaccine for the under five. They're meeting again when, Judy?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: February 15th.

Governor Phil Murphy: Feb 15th, so that's a week from tomorrow. So there's not a change it's just sort of – we always say this. There's a series of data points that we look at, data streams that we look at, and that's one of them.

The executive authority was not – that's not a factor here. We had a good – I had a very good discussion with legislative leadership, the Senate President, and the Speaker, Parimal, Thursday night? That sound right? Very, very good discussion as a general matter. I think we have all, including yours truly, we have all – again, we want to – when the dust finally settles, we want to do a comprehensive, independent, smart post-mortem and part of that is clearly did Judy, did I, did Pat, did we have the right tools at our disposal? Was the balance proper among various branches of government? We are very much open to all of the above, and I think they've indicated they are anxious to do that as well. I don't know how – we have to at least let Ed say something here. Ed, how did I do and anything you want to add?

Department of Health Medical Advisor Ed Lifshitz: I think you hit the nail on the head there. Yes, while we do not have an entire crystal ball and do not know for sure exactly where we're going to be in a month, certainly the past, the way that Omicron has surged through other counties, how we've seen it surge through New Jersey, with the warmer weather and other things coming, how we've seen things happen in the past, it is a reasonable assumption that cases will continue to decline, at least for the near future. I do want to add as we've been talking here about lifting mask mandates and so forth, it doesn't mean that the virus is going away. Nobody's asked the question about animosity or those such of things of what that might look at or what that might mean. I do think it's important for people to realize that while it's appropriate to begin doing things like loosening up so that people can go about more normal lives, the virus will not have disappeared. It will still be around. People still need to make reasonable decisions and take reasonable protections, first among those

getting vaccinated, also sometimes wearing masks in appropriate situations, ventilation, all these other things that we've been talking about for years. We're certainly in a whole lot better place than the state was – well, much, much better than two years ago and much better than a month ago. We're heading in the right direction. That's all good news. I hate to be a little bit of the Pollyanna, but we do have to pay some attention to the fact that our actions do influence this virus going forward as well.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, this is not a declaration of victory as much as an acknowledgment that we can responsibly live with this thing. Judy, is that fair?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah.

Governor Phil Murphy: Anything you want to add or you good?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I think it's important that we start operationalizing all of the techniques that we've mandated over the past year into our daily lives so that we can move fast, constantly responding, or reacting, I should say, and hoping that people respond appropriately.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said. Thank you for that. Sir?

Reporter: Good afternoon.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon.

Reporter: Governor, what is your response to school superintendents who've said they don't feel qualified to make health-related decisions at the district levels and would prefer that the state make the rules? Doesn't this new mask guidance put the burden on them instead of the state? Apologies if this is similar to an earlier question, but you said you're confident that COVID cases will continue to decline and we'll be able to lift the mask mandate. Specifically what models or information gives you that confidence?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, on the latter, I've answered that. The best of our abilities most importantly with the medical experts such as the two folks to my right and other folks, just the stream of data that we think we can best project where that's headed. I would just say to the local superintendents who have done, by the way, across the board an outstanding job. They are used to dealing with their local health authorities. We're getting to the point – and Judy just used the word, which I like a lot, operationalizing some of the things we've been doing as a pandemic response now to be a part of how we figure out how to live with this thing, and that is at least as far as we can tell at the moment best done with their local health authorities.

Reporter: I have one more for you, too.

Governor Phil Murphy: Real quick.

Reporter: From our friend, David Cruz, the Senate President said he supports an effort to look at the emergency health powers enacted in 2005. Would you support having to get approval from the legislature to declare and maintain an emergency declaration?

Governor Phil Murphy: yeah, again, don't be mad at me. I think I just answered that. We all want to look at this and figure out whether or not we have the right tools in our – at our disposal, whether or not it's the proper balance among branches of government, not just the Senate President; count me in. We want to have that and really assess in the – hopefully when the dust has settled – how many times have we said that, Judy – that those of us up here as well as the legislative leadership had that as precise and as in balance as possible.

I can't see who's in the back. Please, yes?

Reporter: Is the state going to provide guidance to the schools for other COVID-related restrictions such as quarantines and testing? Do you see any obstacles to mask policies on the local level? You've mentioned vaccine rates as a reason for lifting the mandate, but only 1 in 4 children ages 5 to 11 is fully vaccinated. How is this a justification? Does visitors in schools include spectators at events? If not, when will that requirement be lifted? For the Commissioner, is the state concerned that their recommendation to follow CDC guidance that says children and staff who are not boosted should quarantine if exposed will lead to more absences?

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, I think I got most of that. To the last question as well as the first, there is guidance that will be – that Judy and her team will be formulating over the next number of weeks. That'll be quarantining. It'll be things like barriers, social distancing, all the stuff we know are in place. Is that fair to say?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Exactly.

Governor Phil Murphy: I think I understood you. It does apply to visitors. Is that – was that your question?

Reporter: So does that include spectators at sporting events, plays, and things like that?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, the answer is yes. Again, I think I answered this from Alex. Vaccine progress is a data point, a data stream, that we look at very carefully, but it's one of many. It's not just progress where we know we need to make more, but it is also the fact that we are expecting the under 5 cohort to get – to become eligible for vaccine. I get most of what you said? You good with that? Okay, thank you.

Daniel, how are you?

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Good, how are you doing, Governor?

Governor Phil Murphy: Good.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Good. Any thoughts on – this is off topic. Any thoughts on New York overtaking New Jersey last month for sports betting and predictions that'll do better than New Jersey for the Superbowl? Does New Jersey risk losing its status as the de facto leader of sports spending in the mid-Atlantic?

Governor Phil Murphy: Who do you like in the game, by the way?

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Whatever team wins.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay. Whatever you do, don't go out on a limb.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Alrighty. You previously –

Governor Phil Murphy: It's Rams by four, by the way, is the line.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: You previously mentioned potential action in your budget on taxes and affordability. What are those, and do you intend for taxes or spending to go down in the upcoming budget? You touched on St. Patty's Day, but that's in a month and the Superbowl is in a few days. COVID, even though Omicron is getting better, it is still a big presence. Is it safe to do pre-COVID celebrations for the Superbowl? That's it. Thanks.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, I think we thought from moment one that assuming New York legalized sports betting that it would take a chunk out of our book of business. That was always our expectation, and that's what's happening. You have – and you know this because of the unique angle you have. You have countless folks who literally had been crossing the George Washington Bridge, placing a bet inside the four walls, maybe at the Meadowlands or in their car online and going back to New York. Presumably a good amount of that traffic will cease. That does not mean that we still won't have a very good book of business and I think more importantly, we have gone out of our way aggressively to try to attract as many of the jobs related to that industry in New Jersey. We've had pretty good success at that. It's basically a thin tech business. New Jersey's the thin tech capital in America. A lot of middle and back offices are in New Jersey of the big Wall Street firms, and that's allowed us to piggyback off of that.

No news on the budget other than affordability. First of all, I've committed to not raise taxes, and we will not raise taxes. Can we find ways to make the state even more affordable as opposed to not just go up but you can do some things to press them to go down? We hope we can. No news to make, but that's something we're constantly looking at.

Judy, a year ago, it was a big part of our pattern. I'm glad Daniel asked it. I guess it's like an indoor St. Patrick's gathering. Yeah, and Ed said this. It's still in our midst, so use your head. Use your head, right? If you're with people indoors, have fun. No reason to ban anything. Enjoy this thing, whether it's Superbowl, St. Patrick's Day, whatever it might be, but be smart about it. That's I think what we can ask folks, right?

Okay, Carly, is that you?

Carly Sitrin, Politico: Yeah, thank you, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: How are you?

Carly Sitrin, Politico: I'm doing well. The CDC is still recommending school masking. Why deviate from their recommendations now when New Jersey's been in lock-step with the agency during this pandemic? Just to put a finer point on a question some other folks asked, why make this announcement today without any accompanying guidance from DOH or DOE that lays out how this decision will impact quarantine timelines, social distancing, and contact tracing? What can we expect that guidance to say when it comes out and when can we expect that guidance? Along with that, will there be any kind of mechanism to reinstate the mask mandate if cases start to rise again like we saw with Omicron? New Jersey is one of the few remaining states keeping the mask mandate through this month. We're seeing Delaware follow suit today through the end of March. Keeping in mind your position as the Vice-Chair of the Democratic Governors Association, how much was your decision to lift the mandate influenced by the decisions of other governors across the country? Do you think your decision today will make it more difficult for other governors to justify keeping their mandates in place? Then one off-topic question: Charter school groups have been critical of your administration's decision to block expansion requests, and the DOE's planned charter school law study has been put off indefinitely. What do you plan to do about charter school expansion in your second term?

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, so that is off-topic. Here's the challenge we have. By the way, thanks to Judy's leadership, we have been in virtual lock-step with the CDC. Here's the reality, and I saw this up close last weekend in Washington with 39 or 38 other governors. This – the experts should weigh in. This thing rages, goes up like it's going to go to the moon, this variant, and then it comes down. The fact of the matter is we got hit among the first handful of states. Our reality is dramatically different than a lot of other states right now because we were so early on. This is one where we feel like we can responsibly – because we've gone through it first, we can responsibly take this step.

The guidance very simply is because we've got time on the clock and there's no reason that we have to have it ready for now. Judy has the luxury with Ed and team to be able to war game this now over the next several weeks, right? More time on the clock on this is always good news. You have to leave any option on the table. I've said this many times. We've said it many times. If this thing takes a crazy turn six months from now, you've got to leave options on the table and we do.

To what extent were we influenced by others? Was – that was your question? Zero. Literally zero. We're influenced by the reality in the state right now. Obviously we take – if there are best practices elsewhere – obviously the feds matter to us greatly. This is being done because the collective – we believe it is the right, responsible thing to do in New Jersey.

I don't understand. You'll have to – Carly, at some point, I'll have to ask you offline why all of a sudden there's this big buzz around our posture on charter schools. It takes my breath away. Sometimes folks write the article before they bother to check the facts. I believe 23 charter schools requested renewal. Every single one of them was approved. I believe that's 20 – something like 20,000 seats. I believe – and I don't have all this exactly but ballpark, of the 23, 11 not just wanted a renewal but wanted expansion. Eleven of the twenty-three, we approved six of the eleven, another plus or minus thousand seats. The fact of the matter is we have, from moment one, said we're not about labels. We want to make sure the data that we all make these decisions on across the spectrum of schools, whether it's charter, district, magnet, private, whatever it might be, that we're all reading from the same set of facts. We're not into labels. It's a – if it's a high-quality top-performing school, regardless of what type of school it is, and we're getting our kids educated in by the way the state with the number one public education system in America, we're not – we've never, ever been hell no, charters. We just don't get it. We're not in the

middle of that. We call on the things that we see them. For the life of me, I don't get it. It is – some folks have an agenda and they want to write about it and talk about it. I will tell you, we do not. We want to educate kids the very best way possible in America, and that's what we're committed to.

Okay, I got to get off the soapbox, Judy. Judy, thank you. Ed, thank you. Pat, as always, Parimal, Alyana, the whole team. Ruth had the mic today. Big step. This is a big step. We believe it is a step that we can take responsibly, that the runway is a responsible runway in terms of time. Judy and team will be working on the guidance and again, the more time they've got on the clock, the sharper and better that guidance will be and more consistent what we'll be with meeting that moment when we get there. Please get vaccinated. Please, please get boosted, please. By the millions, you've done the right things, folks. Hats off to each and every one of you. We'll be back a week from today at 1 o'clock. Thank you.

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