

Governor Phil Murphy

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everybody.

Welcome to our 223rd briefing. We've hit the total number, Pat, I hope you're paying attention, of at that's the Joe DiMaggio head during his 56th game hitting streak 80 years ago. We haven't yet run into our Ken Keltner. So, unlike Jolting Joe, our briefings will go on. And I'll give you all a minute to Google that one. With me as always, the woman on my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, another familiar face, the State's Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan. Great to have you both with us. To my left, another familiar face who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police Col. Pat Callahan. We have Chief Counsel Parimal Garg, and the cast of thousands.

Across the past now, what is coming on to 19 months, we have always recognized that on the other side of the pandemic, we must have a state economy that is stronger, fairer, more equitable and more inclusive than the one that we had pre-pandemic. An inclusive recovery with broad and far-reaching impacts requires economic and workforce development strategies that address the needs of both workers and New Jersey's businesses. Most specially, the small businesses that are not just the cornerstones of our communities, but in fact, the backbone of our state's economy.

On the worker side, we recognize that we need to do a little more to help job seekers who are the most vulnerable, such as the long-term unemployed and those switching to new industries and careers, regardless of whether or not their economic dislocation was due to the pandemic. We recognize that we must have



resources available and at the ready for the workers to reconnect to work and overcome obstacles to gain full employment. Meanwhile, employers, especially small businesses also face challenges as we all know in the recovery.

They face a challenge in finding the workers they need an investing in training them. We know that generally, but job seekers have better outcomes in training programs to combine work and learning. But many small businesses, especially, startups simply do not have the resources to support new hires who need on-the-job training. So, to attack these twin sets of challenges, again, on the one hand, the employee, on the other, the employer. Today, I'm proud to announce the new Return and Earn program. Return and Earn is a win-win solution. It will assist unemployed workers in their return to work and it will help small businesses fill the positions they need to fill to grow, thrive and lead our economic recovery.

Return and Earn is a two-track program with parallel rails. For employers, up to \$10,000 in wage subsidies to hire and train new employees with identifiable skills gaps. And for new employees, a direct \$500 return to work benefit. So, first, for employees, getting jobs through Return and Earn, they will receive a \$500 return to work bonus in their first paycheck. And this bonus will be on top of any other hiring bonus or benefit provided by their employer. We know that returning to work comes with some of its costs. For instance, the cost of transportation or child care. And this benefit is designed to help workers meet these costs.

Additionally, the Department of Labor will also coordinate its wraparound service programs with Return and Earn to provide additional supports for workers where they are needed. For employers, the \$10,000 wage subsidy is there to help cover wages for a new employee for up to their first six months on the job, a time when employers are providing the on-the-job training to onboard and upskill new workers. Eligible businesses are those with 100 or fewer current employees, and the positions to be filled must pay at least \$15 per hour.

During the employer provided-training period of up to the first six months of employment, Return and Earn will reimburse employers for half of the wages paid for regular hours worked. The total reimbursement again will be capped at \$10,000 per new employee and at \$40,000 per employer. And this reimbursement will be valid whether this training occurs in-person at the job site or virtually. The New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development under Commissioner Rob Asaro-Angelo and his team stands ready to help connect businesses with job seekers.

Those are the broad strokes of the Department of Labor. We'll be following up soon with all the other vital details for both interested employers and workers. We know that there are good jobs out there just waiting to be filled. Our hope is that Return and Earn will make it easier and faster for employers to connect with potential employees, and to bring them on board. You can see the website's a little smaller print, so I'm going to repeat it. It's nj.gov/labor/returandearn, nj.gov/labor/returnandearn.

I haven't said this out loud in a while, but we used to say it all the time. But the words on the table before me remain public health creates economic health. Those still ring true. We've worked hard together over the past 19 months to protect public health. Now, we have a new way to work together to create our long-term economic health. Now, before we turn to today's numbers, Judy, I wanted to briefly note that the research that released by the Centers for Disease Control late last week, which showed rather conclusively, the wisdom of our requirement for all students, staff and visitors in our schools to wear face masks.

The CDC looked at outbreak rates, from both Arizona specifically, and then more broadly, from more than 520 counties nationwide. In the case of Arizona, they found that schools without masking policies were three-and-a-half times more likely to have a school-based COVID outbreak than those schools, which had universal masking protocols in place. And in the second study, the CDC found that after a return to school, the rates of pediatric hospitalizations were more than double in counties where masks were not required in schools versus those where masks are required.

As I've noted before, none of us, I promise you, none of us take any joy in requiring universal masking in our schools, and that these requirements are not permanent. But these data prove that until we get to a point where all of our school age students are eligible to be vaccinated and they in fact get vaccinated, the benefits of masking as part of a layered approach to safety are inarguable. While we're on the topic, I want to reiterate one important point regarding the data we discussed last week pertaining to school-based outbreaks and the associated numbers on our dashboard.

And Tina and Judy will correct me if I don't get this exactly right. These data track the number of outbreaks in cases, which have been traced back to in-school and in-classroom activities. We are aware of additional cases among students or staff that had been traced to activities which have taken place outside of the school building and after school hours. And by the way, this is no different than it's been all along. To be sure, we take every newly identified case regardless from where it comes seriously.

But for the purposes of our dashboard in our reporting, again, these are outbreaks in cases, which local health departments, working with school officials, and the Department of Health were necessary, have identified as having been due to exposure occurring within the classroom setting. Now, here are this morning's vaccination totals and starting today, both here and on our dashboard. We are reporting out the numbers of third doses and boosters that have been administered statewide.

As for boosters, and reiterating the announcement Judy's office made on Friday, all individuals ages 65 and over, who completed their initial two-shot Pfizer, Pfizer, Pfizer vaccine program at least six months ago, are now eligible for a booster as our individuals living in a long-term care center, who received Pfizer. Additionally, those ages 18 and older, who are likewise, at least six months out from their last Pfizer dose, and who have underlying medical conditions, which may make them more susceptible to the virus, or whose employment situation may also put them at higher risk are similarly now eligible for boosters.

Again, at this time, only those individuals who have received the Pfizer vaccine are eligible. If you received either Moderna or J&J, please sit tight for now, but the Pfizer booster is likely to cover many older persons or older adults, rather persons with disabilities, health care workers and others at greater risk. And I think Judy is going to go through a couple of examples of lines of business, which would qualify you if you're 18 and up to be eligible.

So, if you meet the eligibility standards, go to covid19.nj.gov/vaccine to find a place near you to get a Pfizer booster. And by the way, this also includes the Gloucester mega site that is reopened to the expected demand for boosters and more sites across all counties are also ramping up capacity. I can predict a question we might get from our friends in the press. How many people are we talking about here?

Judy, it's my understanding that as of April 1st, which is the six months ago, approximately six months ago number, all Pfizer recipients about 1.2 million. Does that about match what you've got? It will be somewhat less than that because it isn't literally everybody who got it. But that's the high end of the total Pfizer universe that are six months out after their second. We also have updated today, a data on breakthrough cases here or the overall totals for all individuals who were fully vaccinated as of September 13th.

These overall totals are the best measure of the power of the vaccines, as they encompass all individuals over time. This is the complete apples to apples data. And what we're seeing is clear of everyone in New Jersey was fully vaccinated by September 13th. By the way, that's more than 5.4 million people, not even one-half of 1% have since tested positive. Put it another way, of the 485,388 positive PCR and antigen test results returned between January 19th, that was the day when the very first people who have received a vaccine reach full vaccination, and September 13th, breakthrough infections make up only 5.4% of that total.

Yes, we have seen, we've said this before, an increase in positive tests among the fully vaccinated as the Delta variant has marched across the state, but they remain a distinct minority of cases, and there is nothing in the data that suggests a failing among vaccines. This holds true through the other metrics, a total of 537 fully vaccinated individuals have been hospitalized due to Covid, but since January 19th, our hospitals have reported more than 38,000 COVID-positive admissions. And the same can be true and can be said for those, sadly, who we have lost between January 19th and September 13th.

The Communicable Disease Service confirmed just shy of 5,900 deaths due to COVID-related complications. Fully vaccinated individuals have accounted for 126 of these. Unvaccinated individuals have made up 96% of our deaths over the past nine months. Here are the preliminary numbers for the week of September 7th through 12th, and the story is the same. Getting vaccinated makes you far less likely to contract the Coronavirus and even if you do, you are far less likely to develop a case of COVID that would land you in the hospital, or please God, no, in the morgue.

So, to everyone who has gotten vaccinated and continues to do everything to keep yourselves, your families, and your community safe, let's take a look again at these cumulative numbers. You are all countered in here in the overall success of our vaccination program. And to all of you, I say on behalf of all of us, thank you. Now, let's move on to the rest of today's numbers. Here are today's newly reported positive PCR and presumed positive antigen tests. Notably, the rate of transmission over the past seven days has, again, dipped close to one.

So, that is at long last, a positive sign, though I think we'll all feel better once it is below one and stays there. Here are yesterday's hospital reports. The overall total hospitalizations are down by more than 100 since last Monday, and the numbers in our ICUs have dropped roughly 13% since their high last Tuesday, and those are both good signs. But we're still losing people to COVID, and here are today's newly confirmed COVID-complicated deaths, and the updated number of probable deaths. God bless them all, but as we do every day, let's honor several more of those we have lost.

We'll begin this week with this gentleman dying at Lake Como by us in Monmouth County, which was the home since 2009 of Robert Daugherty, who we lost on January 6th, at the age of 78. He had called Monmouth County home since 1972. A native of Staten Island and a graduate of Jersey City St. Peter's college. His career took him from teaching chemistry at New Dorp High in New York City, to practicing chemistry at the former Westwood Chemical Corporation in Middletown. And then, to once again, teaching at Red Bank Catholic, Matawan and Freehold Regional High Schools.

But what was most important to Bob was his faith, and he was a Eucharistic minister among other duties at St. Catharine's parish in Spring Lake. He was also a member of the Elks and was an inveterate fan of the Fighting Irish Notre Dame football team. He would have been happy with the win over Wisconsin, and anticipating the game against Cincinnati next week. He is survived by his wife, Jerelyn, his children Julia, Jennifer, Rachel and Dan, and their respective spouses, and 13 grandchildren.

Kelly, Anna, Jack, PJ, Timmy, Sarah, RJ, Mary Rose, Henry, Lily, Aidan, Conall, and Finn. I had the great honor of speaking with both Jerelyn and his son Dan last Wednesday. He also left behind his older brothers, Paul and George and their families, along with numerous cousins and incredible friends. We thank Bob for teaching his passion and living his faith. May God bless and watch over him and his memory. And I will use a nickname that many called him, Farewell Bobby Doc.

Twelve days later on January 18th, in a nearby Manasquan, Lisa Melon-Hughes, passed after her fight with COVID at the age of just 66 years old. Lisa had retired from a long and successful career as an accounting supervisor in the transportation department at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. And in her memory, and in recognition of her long service, Rutgers University lowered their flags to have staff in her honor. But those closest to her will remember Lisa for her love of entertaining, and cooking, and her talent of stained glass and jewelry making.

With her passing, Lisa was reunited with her biological mother, Eleanor, her adopted parents, Genevieve and Miguel, and her sister Maria. She left behind her husband of 23 years and her best friend Richard, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last Wednesday, and she left behind her daughter Jessica and her grandchildren, Tobias, Caleb and Evelyn. She's also survived by her brothers, Gary and Miguel, and their families, countless nieces, nephews and cousins. And of course, she left behind a tremendous and grateful Rutgers University family.

We thank Lisa for her years of service to our state's flagship public university, and may God bless and watch over her and her family.

And finally, for today, we honor NYPD Lieutenant Tim Coyne, who passed away at his home in Holmdel on August 12th. The Delta variant exacerbated what had been years of suffering from respiratory ailments linked to Tim's heroic service at Ground Zero on the day of and of the days that followed 9/11. Law enforcement was not Tim's first profession. He started as a stock trader on Wall Street. But the call to serve overcame him, and he traded what was looking to be a lucrative career for the chance to protect the City of New York.

On September 11 2001, Tim was a sergeant at the 1st precinct in lower Manhattan. As the towers fell, he was helping people to safety, and in the days and months to follow, he logged countless hours, and extended shifts around Ground Zero, including managing the makeshift morgue to collect the victims whose bodies

could be recovered. And within months, sadly, his health began to deteriorate. Over the past 20 years, Tim's health had its ups and downs, but his love of life and his desire to help and serve others never dimmed.

Unfortunately, I could not be there, but on 9/11 this year, Mayor Greg Buontempo of Holmdel honored Tim at their annual 9/11 ceremony. So, I want to thank the mayor for that. Tim is survived by family, friends and many former colleagues. I had the great honor of speaking with his brother Jim, last Wednesday. For all Tim did in the line of service, we are forever grateful. May Tim's example shine on, not just in the family he left behind, but in the officers, he served alongside, and may God bless, and watch over him.

We remember Robert, Lisa and Tim as we remember all who have been lost. They each lead lives that were extraordinary and worth remembering. And we will remember them. Now, moving on, before I turn things over to Judy, I want to introduce you to these folks, Amar Gautam and Amanda Maher, the husband-and-wife duo behind the Princeton restaurant, The Meeting House. It's just up the block on Witherspoon Street from the Homestead Princeton home goods store, which we highlighted last week.

The Meeting House is Amar and Amanda's first restaurant, and they opened less than four months before COVID hit our state, timing not good, in November of 2019. Instead of welcoming customers to their dining room, they had to quickly shift to serving takeout and delivery. But they also knew there was a greater need for hot meals in homes hit hard by the pandemic. And they partnered with the Princeton nonprofit Share My Meals to fight food insecurity.

To keep the meetinghouse open, Amar and Amanda turned to the New Jersey Economic Development Authority. And with a pandemic grant in hand, they were not only able to keep their lights on and their ovens hot, but also their staff on payroll. And today, The Meeting House continues to serve takeout and delivery meals. But their dining room is once again wide open and inviting, please check them out, 277 Witherspoon Street in Princeton, 277 Witherspoon Street in Princeton.

I had the great opportunity to catch up with both of them last Wednesday, and thank them for their commitment to doing right, not just by their employees, but by their entire community. The spirit of The Meeting House is the true spirit of our state, always looking forward, and always extending a helping hand. And that spirit is what's gotten us through, all of us through the past 19 months. A little more of it will get us through the days ahead, pandemic and post-pandemic. With that please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Well, as you know, last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended a booster dose of Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine for certain groups who have received their first and second doses at least six months ago. Specifically, to reiterate what the governor shared, the CDC recommends people 65 years and older and residents in long-term care settings should receive a booster shot at least six months after their Pfizer primary series.

People aged 50 to 64 years old with underlying medical conditions should receive a booster shot at least six months after their Pfizer primary series. And people aged 18 to 49 with underlying medical conditions may receive a booster shot of Pfizer at least six months after their Pfizer primary series based on their individual benefits and risks. So, underlying medical conditions included in this booster authorization are similar to the ones that we followed last year.

Cancer, chronic kidney disease, chronic lung disease, dementia or other neurological conditions, diabetes type one and type two, Down syndrome, heart conditions such as heart failure, coronary artery disease, cardiomyopathies, or hypertension, HIV infection, immunocompromised situations, liver disease, overweight and obesity, pregnancy, sickle cell disease, or thalassemia, smoking current or former, solid organ or blood stem cell transplant, stroke or cerebral vascular disease, and substance use disorders.

This list does not include all of the potential medical conditions that could make an individual more likely to get severely ill from COVID-19. Other medical conditions may put people in more danger from COVID-19. So, individuals who want to get a booster, but are not sure if the definitions outlined by the CDC apply to them should talk to their health care provider to determine if the benefits of receiving the booster outweigh the risks.

The CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky also added a fourth category to those who can receive a booster. People aged 18 to 64, who are at increased risk for COVID-19 exposure and transmission because of occupational or institutional settings may receive a booster shot at least six months after their Pfizer series based on their individual benefits and risks. As Dr. Walensky explained over the weekend, those who are at increased risk because of occupational or institutional settings are those who live and work in high-risk settings.

That includes people in homeless shelters, in group homes, in prisons, people who work with vulnerable populations. It also includes healthcare workers, teachers, grocery store workers, and public transportation employees. So, I want to encourage anyone who is eligible under any of these categories to line up and get a booster. As of this morning 106,542, 106,542 booster and third doses have been administered, including 14,592 doses administered over the weekend.

Third doses were authorized last month for immunocompromised individuals, because the two-dose vaccine may not provide the same level of immunity as it does to non-immunocompromised individuals. On Friday evening, the Department of Health directed our vaccination partners to begin administering booster doses immediately. Individuals are not required by vaccination providers to provide proof of a medical condition or a note from a medical provider to receive a booster dose.

So, the department continues to emphasize the need for those who are not yet vaccinated, to do so as soon as possible. It is especially important for those between the ages of 12 to 17 to get vaccinated, to prevent COVID-19 transmission. Currently, 59.7% of those between the ages of 12 and 17 have received at least one dose, but we need to see that number increase. Currently, there are 23 in-school transmission outbreaks with a total of 102 cases.

Today, there are 11 children hospitalized with COVID in our hospitals in New Jersey, including three in the intensive care unit. While we have had no new reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children, we have had cumulatively, 133 cases. All of those children have had COVID, and the majority of them were in the hospital at some point in time. And sadly, in New Jersey, there have been seven pediatric deaths due to COVID. So, I want to encourage parents to schedule appointments for their children to be vaccinated.

There are more than 1,600 vaccination sites active in New Jersey right now, including more than 1,000, which offer the Pfizer vaccine. Many have walk-in availability and evening hours. To find a vaccination site and book an appointment online, visit COVID-19.nj.gov/finder or call the state's vaccine call center at 1-855-568-0545. For those who received Moderna or Johnson and Johnson vaccines, the CDC announced that it is evaluating the available data with urgency to make the additional recommendations for those individuals as soon as possible.

For my daily report, as the governor shared, 1,047 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients and persons under investigation, there are no new reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome. At our state veterans' homes, there are two new positive cases among residents in the violent home and at the state psychiatric hospitals, two new cases among patients at Ancora. The daily percent positivity in the state as of September 23rd, 4.60. The northern part of the state reports 4.08%, the central part of the state 5.22%, and the southern part of the state 4.93%. So, that concludes my report. Please continue to stay safe, get vaccinated, to protect ourselves, our family, our friends, and our children. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. Very helpful color on the booster in particular, and thank you for everything. Pat, I thought we had a really productive virtual town hall with folks trying to get back on their feet after the Ida, the storms with FEMA with Senator Bob Menendez, with yourself, other members of the administration, and several 100 residents with a lot of good questions, so much so that we're going to probably do this again. Is that right?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Yes, sir.

Governor Phil Murphy: What have you?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Thanks, Governor. Yeah. To your point, the Governor hosted the virtual town hall on Friday morning. And just having our partners with FEMA, particularly the Federal Coordinating Officer Patrick Cornbill on there, to answer any and all questions that came up and to

also push information out. It was extremely productive. I got a ton of positive feedback on that. And I think we're tentatively scheduled to do one next Monday as well in further details on that weather, pretty decent week. But there will be some rain and potential thunderstorms tomorrow, but not being deemed severe at this point by National Weather Service. But as always, always keeping an eye on not only here in New Jersey, but the things that form out off the coast of Northern Africa and in the Atlantic. So, always keeping an eye on that, Gov. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Pat, thank you. One thing, if somebody was not on the call on Friday, and you may be watching today, and you're in one of those 12 counties with the major disaster declaration, pretty resounding advice, go to [disasterassistance.gov](https://www.disasterassistance.gov) as your first stop. Even if you ultimately go to the Small Business Administration, which is [sba.gov](https://www.sba.gov), go to [disasterassistance.gov](https://www.disasterassistance.gov) as your first port of call. And then, secondly, you may end up getting to [sba.gov](https://www.sba.gov), depending on whether it's a mortgage, or in fact, you've got a small business, and you may well then get routed back to [disasterassistance.gov](https://www.disasterassistance.gov).

So, there's a real potential for a round trip. And the other thing that I heard, Pat, is, if you get rejected, get right back in there and figure out how you may be able to cure your application. It may have been just one data point that you may have left off or filled in the wrong field by accident. Don't take that first rejection as an ultimate resolution. And please buy flood insurance, whether you're in a flood plain, or flood zone, or not going forward, that's just got to be good advice.

With that, we'll take questions. We'll start with [Matt], we'll be back. I will stay with this cadence, I think for the next couple of weeks, at least and see where the variant takes us. So, we'll be back together Wednesday at one o'clock, unless you hear otherwise. With that, Matt, Good afternoon.

Matt Arco, NJ.COM: Good afternoon, Governor. And you answered my questions about –

Governor Phil Murphy: [Sophia] has got the mic for the first time. So, I wanted to make sure I made that point. Sorry.

Matt Arco, NJ.COM: No problem. So, you answered one of my questions about the mega site. But what's the current feeling about the demand that there will be for boosters? Are you able to track the number of people looking to book appointments compared to eligibility? On Return to Earn, where's the money coming from? And is there a limit on how much the state will dole out? Does it take effect immediately? And from Carly from Politico, hundreds of kids are still without transportation in school. How many districts have reached out to your administration about bus driver shortages? And what plans does your office have to address the problem?

Governor Phil Murphy: We believe we'll be at – Judy, you should weigh in here. We believe we'll be able to manage the demand. But we have said for quite some time that we expect a supply-demand imbalance at least early on. I mentioned 1.2 million is the sum total plus or minus of folks who got both Pfizer vaccinations by April 1st, which would put them on pace later this week to be at the six-month mark. Anything you want to add to that, Judy?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: We have all the numbers broken down by county, and we are encouraging every county, and we expect every county with support from the Department of Health to open up a static vaccination site to be able to accommodate their county residents in addition to the Gloucester mega site, which will open this week. Appointments will be able to be scheduled at the end of this week. And we're also encouraging walk-ins to your federally qualified health centers, your acute care hospitals, your local department of health, and any existing sites. So, we will be tracking it as usual on a daily basis.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that. Return to Earn is coming from American Rescue Plan money. We're pretty excited about it, but I would characterize it as a pilot. We're going to put \$10 million into it, and get it off the ground, and see what the uptake is, and if it is as significant as we anticipated maybe. We'll find ways to amp that up. I don't have the district number but Alex Altman is with us, we can get back to you. We know that at the peak, there were 7,000 students impacted. Or Dan Brian, can one of the two, 7,000 students impacted by shortage of bus drivers.

We have worked literally matchmaking between the Department of Labor, where folks are looking for jobs, where we know that they're out there, and with districts. Like a lot of things in life, there are some answers that folks think are really easy, magic wand, why don't you just do X or Y? And this is a profession, an occupation that is far more complicated due to this very specific licensing requirements. So, we're working, and we'll continue to work with districts. It's no question it's an issue, but we are directly involved matchmaking, trying to get this as solved as fast as possible. Thank you. [Joey], is that you? Good afternoon.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Good afternoon. So, two things. One, I believe you mentioned last week about a learner's permit pilot program in Wanaque on Saturday. I just want to know how did that go? And more generally, what is the hesitation to fully reopen the MVC for all transactions, as some people have called for it to do? And then, second, you have expressed support in the past, both for lifting the SALT cap, and also for the Democratic plans currently being discussed in Congress? Would you support a Democratic plan if it comes out this week, that does not include removing a SALT cap? And what have you generally talked about with the state's congressional delegation as it relates to these matters?

Governor Phil Murphy: I'll get back to you on the learner's permit in Wanaque, if you all could help me with that. So, bear with us on that. Listen, like everything else in life, we want to do things as safely as possible. So, safety is a big environmental issue as it relates to get everybody back to work. I think we started in early July, encouraging folks to come in, depending on what department of government you're in, for a couple of days a week. We're full on, I think on October 18th.

And we've had success after getting hit by a tsunami in both motor vehicles and unemployment insurance benefits. We've had success with motor vehicles on doing a lot of this stuff by remote. And that's probably, again, I don't think you can say silver lining to something that's been as tragic as this. But that's probably a muscle memory that we've picked up faster than we otherwise would have that we'll use going forward. Listen, on behalf of New Jersey, I'm a pig. I want it both ways. I want the infrastructure money, and I want the SALT cap lifted. And I will keep fighting until we get both.

It's the single biggest tax increase on the middle class in the history of our state. And it was political, it was the Trump administration, it was directed at states like ours. And we're not going to quit until we get it lifted. And at the same time, it's the most densely populated state in the nation. Clearly, as a state, it's going to be impacted by climate change as much as any state, given our extraordinary location. We need the infrastructure dollars, and we need them as soon as possible, in many cases, to scale up and accelerate stuff that we're already doing. In some cases, there'll be new programs and new impulses, but in most cases, it's taking what we're doing, and make it bigger, stronger and faster. Thank you, Alex. Good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12: Good afternoon. For the commissioner, for Dr. Tan, are you aware of a report that there's a seventh grader in Haddon Township, who unfortunately passed away, who was previously diagnosed with COVID? I was wondering if this is a COVID death, or could this have been multi-inflammatory syndrome in children? For the Colonel, you mentioned that Zoom call on Friday about Ida relief. During that call, you mentioned reports of looting in Manville. Can you talk a little bit more about that and explain what happened? Also, today, the FBI crime statistics came out that show a 30% increase in homicides nationwide, did New Jersey experience a similar surge? And why do you think this rise in crime happened last year in 2020? Governor, for you on Return and Earn. Why do you think that you need to coax people to come back to the workplace with these \$500 incentives? And is this a slap in the face to those who earlier in the pandemic, took jobs, perhaps even lower-paying jobs, despite the fact that they were laid off? And finally, who's going to supervise the doling out of these payments? Is it going to be the Labor Department? And how can you be confident that they'll be able to do this well, after the debacle that unemployment became in the first few months and continues to be for some?

Governor Phil Murphy: I love the way you ask these questions. I think for privacy, we never respond to privacy questions, of questions about a particular patient or sadly, a loss of life, but I would just repeat, Judy, what you said. Sadly, we know with a heavy heart, there are pediatric cases in the hospital, and we have lost the lives of children. Thank God, not many, but we've lost lives, and one is any loss is too many. But certainly, particularly mournful when they're kids.

Pat, I'll kick it to you. Let me address the last two first. Yeah, your question on why do you think we need to coax people is a fascinating one right now. And you see this not just in New Jersey, you see it around the country. Lots of job openings. I haven't been in a restaurant, a bar, a small business, where literally, not one where folks said they couldn't hire the folks they wanted to hire. And at the same time, you've got a lot of folks over here, who are maybe looking for work, made a life decision, there's a whole combination of reasons why you've got this mismatch.

We think cash on the barrel alone is interesting. But it's even more interesting when you put a workforce development and upskill component to it. I think I've said this before, you get a lot of people right now who are washing dishes, just using that as an example for \$12 an hour, who are saying, "Wait a minute, I could go down the street and get 18 bucks an hour to do X or Y." This is hopefully some way to accelerate that process. And get the match matches made between the openings and the folks who are either unemployed or want to upskill themselves to a different and better job.

The Department of Labor will be overseeing this program. And I will just say that all things considered, they were hit with a tsunami, and this is not to make anybody who's out there frustrated, still awaiting adjudication on a claim. I don't blame you for being frustrated. But I would put our state's record up against any in the country. Pat, the law enforcement, I don't think we're immune to an increase in violent crime. That's an American reality. You could get into the details of it. And I think the pandemic is probably a big factor in terms of the stress, the mental stresses that are put on so many folks. And as I recall, the mayor of Manville reached out to me, and I went to you immediately. And you guys were on the scene that afternoon. So, take it away on this.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Yes, sir. Thank you. With regard to that, I know we have a tendency to use the term looting. I think in this case, though, Alex, it was more of a rummaging complaint. So, all those homeowners that had bought their damaged belongings out to their curb. And there were outsiders coming in all hours of the night, parking, blocking traffic, and in on the heels of experiencing one of the greatest tragedies in our lives, that became not only a nuisance. So, not really sure that that was criminal behavior. But it was certainly behavior that we wanted to put an end to. And that's why I talked to the chief there. And that's why we sent the state troopers in for a few nights there. And that almost immediately dissipated.

So, just a clarification on the term looting there. And as the governor said, yeah, we have not been immune to the increase in homicides. I could probably have the exact figure for you in our increase. I'm not so sure it's as high as 30, but I don't want to underrepresent our reality. I do think the pandemic, the stressors caused by that. And I think at the heart of it lies illegal crime guns in the hands of violent recidivist offenders. And that weapon used in Newark, we've seen it used in Trenton, we've then seen it used in Atlantic City, in our ability to focus in on not only those violent offenders, but also in getting those crime guns off the streets is where we're working with all of our federal, state, county and local partners.

Governor Phil Murphy: And I would just add to this last point, we are proud to have in the top couple of strongest gun safety laws in America, we continue to have no issue, and stand by the Second Amendment. But of those crime guns, tell me at least 80% of them are coming in from outside of New Jersey. That's the issue here, which is maddening.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: I could see, I won't get into specifics, but just yesterday up on Interstate 78, we had a stop, where nine illegal handguns were recovered. That's one motor vehicle in one traffic stop, and probably one of the greatest traveled states in the United States of America. So, our efforts with the ATF and again, all of our other partners continue.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah. Amen to that. I'm told, [Joe], you asked about the pilot, told it went well, and they were looking for more remote opportunities. And I should have said in my earlier answer, notwithstanding all of the frustration, and challenges to get reopened, and back on our feet. The MVC, as we sit here today, is clipping along at somewhere around 20% or 25% more transactions process per week than pre-COVID.

So, for all the frustration again, like an unemployment benefit. If you're out there waiting for your appointment, or the process to take, and you're frustrated, I don't blame you. I am on your behalf as well. But there's no question we've made progress, and specific to your question about the Wanaque experience. We're going to

look for more opportunities to do remote activities. Good afternoon.

Reporter: Good afternoon, Governor. Two quick questions. What is your reaction to PennEast saying it's stopping all development of its pipeline project? And second question, is New Jersey considering a test and stay program for schools? Other states like Massachusetts and Georgia are using the model, which allows students who are exposed to someone with COVID to remain in school, as long as they have no symptoms, wear a mask and test negative for seven days. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Very gratified by the decision to pull out permanently on the pennies front. We analyze and assess these projects one at a time. We want to make sure we fairly call balls and strikes to make sure all sides are heard. And that we make decisions. We've got an overall 307-smoehting page plan to get us to a 100% clean energy economy. By the middle of the century, there's no question where we're going to end up. But there are legitimate questions at how you get there. Project X versus project Y.

This is one that has stuck out since before I was governor as incredibly egregious. The need was always questionable. But more importantly, it would have ripped up preserved lands, private lands, some incredibly valuable ecosystems, and done irreparable harm. And this one was just way out of bounds. And it's the one, it's the singular one that I've said for a long time. Again, this probably goes back at this point, five years. This is one we just cannot have, and even think about in this state, and that we would do whatever it took to prevent that from happening.

And I don't think you've heard me say that about other projects. But that's just a blanket. This one was bad. It would have wrecked our state. And as long as I'm here, that's not going to happen. I think we are, Judy, tell me if you have insight on this, or Tina, we got to make sure we get Tina get her money's worth here. We're comfortable with the current protocols we have in school. We're going to go with that. And we always leave lots of different options on the table. But now, we're three weeks in, and we think what we've got, it isn't foolproof in the sense that we've got outbreaks, but we knew that would be the case. But I think we're comfortable with where we are. Is it fair to say? Okay. Last but not least, [Dave], you can take us home here.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Thanks, Governor. I'm sure you're aware New York will not extend unemployment benefits to healthcare workers who refuse to get vaccinated unless they present a doctor approved request for a medical accommodation. What is your opinion of this? And would you consider the same kind of situation for us here in New Jersey? Even though the new CDC data shows that students wearing masks have fewer outbreaks in schools, some parents have expressed concern about masks limiting oxygen for youngsters, and masks collecting potentially dangerous bacteria on the surface of the mask. I think Dr. Tan this is maybe where you're going to get your money's worth.

Governor Phil Murphy: You're helping me out here, Dave.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Please remind us what studies about this we have, what has been found? And what do you say to parents who have these concerns that they believe are legitimate? And finally, now that the booster shot campaign has been launched, I know you guys said that you're going to track this and so forth. And initially, demand may outstrip supply. But what are you hearing from around the state? Are there long lines, big waits, delays in getting an appointment? And how different is the situation we're in now in terms of supplies and locations for giving shots compared to the first couple of months of the vaccine rollout? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: All good questions. I'll take a shot, and then we definitely get – we need Tina to come in here from the bullpen. No, I don't know that I've not read and completely to the New York situation. And by the way, I should say I had a very good sit down with Eric Adams, who was candidate for mayor of New York City in the election. But I don't think we've got any plans to do that here. You're required to be vaccinated, but we continue to have that option. Not an option, I don't want to make it an option. We want you to get vaccinated.

But for whatever reason, we'll leave the anxiety out of it for a minute. If you're not vaccinated, you need to be subjected up to multiple tests per week. We think that package is the right package, unless Judy or Tina, think otherwise. Listen, I met one of these parents, a husband and wife, I think, lit me up in Millville yesterday

down in Cumberland County, where I spent several hours, very special community, and special County. This is stuff that, again, I'm putting aside the kid who's got a very particular medical issue, where we need a doctor or a health care professional's note to attest to that.

I'm leaving aside, we're not going to have any more of these days, even with global warming and climate change, 100-degree day with 100% humidity. So, let's put those carveouts. This is stuff that they're reading the stuff in places, and they're believing it sadly, from talking heads and others who claim that they've got some amount of medical expertise, and it's putting their kids and putting others into harm's way with their health. But I'll let Tina come in with a more scientific answer on again, limited oxygen or bacteria that may build up on the mask.

Anecdotally, on the booster. First of all, the feds had a little bit of a back and forth, as you noticed over the past number of weeks. And I think that created some amount of, at that level, some amount of confusion. So, that's what we're trying to be as explicit as we are today to dig out of that confusion and make it as crystal clear as possible in New Jersey. We also, for a moment, one, and I give Judy and her team, including Tina, a lot of credit for this.

We de-bureaucratize this process. So, we never asked you to prove that you had X, or you worked in Y, or give us your driver's license, or any of that. Our view was the more shots in arms, assuming you're eligible, and you're doing the right thing at the faster, we get that done, the better and safer we'll be as a state. That's our same mindset for the boosters as well. Anecdotally, and again, I'll defer to you all, I haven't heard at least as we sit here, the stories that we heard on December 15th through Easter, where you had a huge amount of supply demand imbalances.

And my guess tells me we'll have some of that, but not remotely at the same level. Is that fair to say? Tina, how about I can't breathe, and/or bacteria on my mask? Somebody in Congress said that that's how they got COVID. They thought they got it, this as a couple of months ago because of bacteria on their mask. Please. Nice to have you with us.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Thank you, Governor. First, just to take a step back. When CDC issues guidance, what they usually do is that they review a whole breadth of literature, and studies, and analyses, and come out with these scientific briefs that support everything that they put in their guidances, and the recommendations. So, several months ago, CDC had issued a science brief looking specifically at any adverse events that might be associated with masking in light of these particular questions and concerns that have been raised.

And to cut to the chase, the short answer is that there are no adverse events that are associated with masking. So, for example, the issue of lower oxygen. CDC, for example, looked at a very specific study that showed that there was no impact on oxygenation, for example. That said, to those individuals who are still concerned about masking, we have the CDC, the American Academy of Pediatrics, that's the association that represents professionals, medical professionals that take care of children. All highly and strongly recommend masking as a very important piece in layered prevention to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among not only the pediatric population, but among the community in general.

Governor Phil Murphy: Anything you want to add to that, Judy? And again, we're going to monitor, as you could imagine, Judy said something on the distribution, which I want to come back to make the point. We have over 1,600 points of distribution, but not all of them are Pfizer. And I think you said over 1,000 of them have Pfizer. So, there's a lot of places you can go, and that's a point, plus we opened Gloucester, as you mentioned backup. And Judy also mentioned something I want to underscore. We're working with all 21 counties so that there's at least one significant hub location in all the 21 counties to go to. Pat, I don't know if Alex's question was about 2020 or 2021 on homicides. Yeah. Pat's got some numbers on 2021, but –

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Yeah. In 2021 year or year-to-date, our shooting murder victims are up 15% since 2020. I think our hit victims are up 20%. But we could really offer you offline, a very deep dive on comparisons, not only with last year, but in the last five or 10 years, Alex.

Governor Phil Murphy: Again, up, but not up at the level of a national – seeing similar reasons and trends, but not at the level.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: It's still half the national average. But it's a concern, part of our mission every day on the public safety front.

Governor Phil Murphy: We'd like that to be going down 15% a year. So, that's it for today. I want to thank Judy, and Tina, Pat, Parimal, Sophia with the mic, Alex, Dan, the rest of the team here. Again, we'll be back, unless you're otherwise Wednesday at 1:00. If you're eligible for that booster shot, and again, Pfizer only that you're six months after you've had your second dose, which would be late March going into early April this week. That would be the equivalent.

And you're in the age group, or you've got a medical condition that makes you eligible, you've got an occupation that makes you eligible. Get out there and get it. We'll monitor that like a hawk in terms of making sure we've got the supplies as close to you and as ready for you as possible. If you haven't yet been vaccinated period, please go and get vaccinated. Get that first shot and get that process going. We know it is the number one thing we can do to prevent this, and to the millions of you who have done the right thing from the bottom of our hearts, we say thank you. God bless.

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