

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: December 28th, 2020 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Holding a COVID-19 briefing. WATCH:



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everybody. Hope everyone had a safe and enjoyable Christmas and that Santa was good to you. I'm joined by 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 Department of Health's Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz, great to have you both. Guy on my left who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Patrick Callahan. We have Parimal Garg, Chief Counsel, and a cast of thousands.

This morning Judy and I were in Old Bridge, in Middlesex County, at the Roosevelt Care Center to look on as the first vaccinations of our long-term care residents and staff got underway. It was pretty special; got a little bit damp and cold, but it was a pretty special bipartisan event. We had Old Bridge Mayor, Owen Henry, who's a terrific leader, Senator Sam Thompson, Freeholder Director, soon to be Director of the County Commissioners Ron Rios, Judy and myself. CVS was represented and of course, the Roosevelt Care folks and their executive and frontline team. The first Roosevelt Center resident to receive a vaccination was 103-year-old Mildred Clemence, that's Mildred to the left, and the first caregiver was nurse Esther Moody on the right. Judy and I were there to see both of them and two other residents and two other staff members, so we saw a total of six folks get vaccinated.

Quick note on Mildred on the left -- and she's, by the way, in fine form. She was born the year before the flu pandemic of 1918 and today, more than a century later, she was vaccinated against the current pandemic. Unbelievable. Her strength and resiliency, as well as Esther's, mirror that of our state. So I'm grateful to the

staff and residents at Roosevelt Care Center for their very warm welcome on a chilly and damp December morning. And I also again thank the pharmacy partners at CVS for the management and administration of this morning's vaccinations.

CVS has already coordinated and scheduled visits to 277 long-term care centers across the state over the next six weeks to provide roughly 80,000 vaccinations to residents and staff. By the end of this week, CVS will have visited 85 long-term care centers and provided more than 27,600 vaccinations. Judy and her team are currently working as well with Walgreens, our other pharmacy partner, to receive their full schedule. For the week, Walgreens is currently scheduled for 15 site visits and more than 4,100 vaccinations, and we'll keep you updated on the progress as this program unfolds.

With each passing day, our vaccination program is growing a little larger and a lot stronger. With the new year, we are looking forward to the opening of our six vaccination mega sites, and the further expansion of our vaccine efforts and the continued movement through each priority group. I think, Judy, you're going to talk about the priority groups in a little bit of detail in a minute. We are ready for this moment and we know countless residents, more importantly, are as well.

So before I move on, this is another story of symmetry that's particularly striking. I want to give a shout out to this guy, Dr. Richard Watson. He's been a doctor for more than 60 years, and has volunteered his time at the Zufall Medical Center in Dover, in Morris County, for the past 20 years. You may recall, we highlighted his service to his patients in late April, it might have been April 30th. Even in the darkest days of the pandemic, he kept going in to help those in his care, and over the past eight-plus months he has not stopped. Last Wednesday, Dr. Watson -- by the way, age 88 -- received his first vaccine dose. He is a character study in commitment and dedication, and nothing short of a New Jersey hero. Dr. Watson, hats off to you.

Next up, with the President's signature now on the latest federal coronavirus relief bill, the Department of Human Services is extending several of its COVID-19 related childcare assistance programs for families and providers through the end of January. The department will also continue to waive copays in the state's childcare subsidy program for parents who request it due to impacts from COVID-19. For more information, please visit that website, childcare.nj.gov.

As it pertains to the federal stimulus, while I am relieved that the President signed the bill, because of his delay, it is possible an estimated half-a-million New Jerseyans will not be receiving vital federal unemployment benefits this week because they lapsed on Saturday while the bill languished on his desk. The Department of Labor is working to implement these benefits, but the actual timing for these benefits to be resolved and being received will be made in Washington. Commissioner Robert Asaro Angelo and his team are currently waiting for necessary guidance from the US Department of Labor. Claimants will be updated and notified as soon as more information is received. Believe me, folks, we are on it.

I agree, as I said last week, and have continued to say, I agree with the President and Congressional Democrats that more stimulus was and remains needed, but this was the wrong way to go about it. For many families across New Jersey, this delay was a failure. This bill should have been signed immediately as a down payment, and further assistance taken up, and hopefully it will be.

So with that, let's turn to our overnight numbers. Today we're reporting an additional 2,745 positive PCR test results for an updated statewide total of 463,965. And, Judy, I know you're privately working on both PCR and antigen and hopefully in the new year, we'll be able to have, at some point in the new year, a combined showing of that. We want to make sure, as we do at every turn, that we get that exactly right.

The positivity for the 22,288 PCR tests recorded on Christmas Eve was 10.98%, statewide rate of transmission is currently at 0.96. Across our healthcare networks, 3,684 New Jerseyans are hospitalized. That breaks down to 3,482 who are known COVID positive and the balance of 202 are awaiting confirmed test results. Throughout yesterday, 286 live patients were discharged while 396 patients were admitted. There were -- and again, this is apples to oranges because these are not yet confirmed -- 73 in-hospital deaths. There are currently 715 patients in our intensive care units and 505 ventilators are in use.

A quick note on these numbers. We had some hospitals come in with their numbers a little later than usual, so these may not be currently reflective on the online dashboard. Some of the hospital numbers have moderated a bit over the past several days. However, we're not ready to call that a trend. We also don't know

where these numbers may go as we are just now coming out of Christmas and then we will have New Year's Eve standing on deck. Hopefully more and more of you are taking to heart the need for doing things differently and much smaller this year, and we won't see a post-holiday spike.

Today we are reporting an additional, with a very heavy heart, 21 confirmed COVID-related deaths for a statewide total of 16,706, and the number of probable deaths remains at 1,945. So as we do every day, let's remember a few more of these blessed souls we've lost. We want to start today in Nutley with Tillie Quinn. Look at that smile. Tillie had a long nursing career, Judy, starting from her education at St. Michael's in Newark to her advanced learning from Jersey City State College and Kean University. Her career spanned from the US Army Cadet Corps to private duty to summer camp nurse and for 25 years, serving as a school nurse in Newark. After hanging up her stethoscope, Tillie focused on enjoying life with her husband Jack, travelling across the nation and around the world, and she found plenty of quiet time to pursue her love of reading. Those closest to her noted she always had a book in hand.

Her nursing career aside, Tillie's legacy rests with the family she and Jack started. She leaves behind her six children, Patricia, Diane, William, Susan, John and Lisa and their spouses, and I had the great honor of speaking with John last week. Along with she leaves behind 18 grandchildren, 17 great-grandchildren. Tillie was 95 years old. We celebrate Tillie's commitment to the health and wellbeing of her fellow New Jerseyans. May God bless and watch over her and her extraordinary family.

Next, this one hits close to home. We recall Angela Craven, a lifelong Trenton and Hamilton area resident who spent 46 years with the Department of Community Affairs where she was most recently Human Resource Manager. When she wasn't helping her colleagues at the DCA, Angela was most often found in the company of her family and friends, making the most of life, whether it be cooking and dancing, vacationing down the shore, or spending time with her beloved grandchildren. She also kept close to her Hamilton community and volunteered with the Nick and Jim Friends in Heaven Memorial Foundation, a local nonprofit organization that provides scholarships to graduates of Steiner High School and financial assistance to families in need.

Angela is survived by her daughter Jamie, with whom I had the great honor of speaking, and son-in-law Michael and her two granddaughters Mia and Ariana. She also leaves behind her companion, Joe Torretta, and that's Joe there, and stepson, Joey. She's also survived by her sisters, Patricia Denise and their families, as well as many other relatives and close friends including those made over more than four decades at the Department of Community Affairs. So on behalf of the DCA Commissioner and Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver, I think Angela for her years of service to our state. She helped make a difference. God bless and watch over her.

And finally for today, we remember Sewell's Paul Conklin. He was 83 years old when he passed on December 19th. A graduate of Pitman High School, Paul went away to Tennessee to attend Maryville College, but returned home after earning a degree in biology and marrying his college sweetheart, Carol. Paul served for two years in the Army National Guard Reserves and worked for 37 years as a sales and service representative in the Glasper offices of the glass manufacturer, Owens, Illinois Company.

Sadly, in 1982, Paul lost Carol to breast cancer. She was only 55 years old. But soon thereafter, he met a widow named Adine, and together they both found love again, marrying in 1993. They celebrated their 27th anniversary just two months ago. He was an active member of the Glasper United Methodist Church, where he was an usher and served as the church's financial secretary for over 20 years. Paul took on a number of hobbies in his retirement, including learning to become both an accomplished chair caner and nature photographer, both pursuits that required patience. He also spent countless hours in his garden growing flowers and trying to find new ways to grow the biggest and best Jersey tomatoes. Paul leaves behind Adine, and keep her in your prayers. She was also COVID positive but I'm told she's doing okay, and his children Kathy with whom I had the great honor of speaking, and Stephen and their spouses, his grandsons Connor and Ian, his brothers Jim and David, and numerous nieces, nephews and friends.

I mentioned I spoke to his daughter Kathy, are you ready for this, guys? Kathy coordinates the sign language interpreters for our daily press conferences. She said it has been quite the roller coaster responsibility. So I want to salute those folks who do such a good job every day and Kathy for coordinating. May God bless her dad Paul, and we thank him for so ably representing our New Jersey values. God bless each and every one of them.

Switching gears to another of our regular acknowledgments, the businesses and organizations who have teamed up with the New Jersey Economic Development Authority to receive grants and other funding necessary to make it through these past months and remain on a solid foundation for the future. And today, we recognize Princeton Junction's Westrick Music Academy, led by Executive Director Hilary Butler, that's Hillary on the upper left, and Artistic Director, Dr. Linell Joy Jenkins on the upper right. Westrick Music Academy, which is quite renowned, has been providing a supportive, inclusive and joyous environment where children can focus on the love of music for over 30 years since its founding as the Princeton Girl Choir. Over the years, Westrick has become one of Central Jersey's premier performance and training choirs for girls and boys, and serves upwards of 400 students through Princeton Girl Choir and Princeton Boy Choir, along with other music education classes.

Westrick Music Academy worked with the EDA and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts to secure grants that have helped them keep their teaching artists and staff employed, provide technology and facilities to keep their young musicians safely engaged in learning, and to continue providing needs-based scholarships for their students. I had the opportunity to check in with Hillary last Wednesday, I think, and I know they're committed to seeing Westrick Music Academy through these unprecedented times and to keep instilling the love of music in their students. Check them out, it's WestrickMusic.org, a really special organization.

And finally, we'll be together one last time before the end of the year, and that I think will be virtual, by the way. I do not believe we'll be live here, but I believe we're going to be virtual at one o'clock on Wednesday, December 30. We'll have one more chance to get this message out, but we know that many of you are making plans for New Year's Eve and we urge you to keep it to a small gathering of only your immediate household. This is not the year for a wild New Year's Eve party. I hope that year comes again soon. Even Times Square in New York City will be empty. We hope you take every precaution to safely and responsibly drop the ball, drop wherever you are, as we usher in 2021.

We have a lot to look forward to in the new year, but it must start with our staying focused on the practices that have gotten us through most of 2020: social distancing, wearing our face masks, washing our hands with soap and water, using common sense meaning if you've been exposed, take yourself off the field. If you don't feel well, take yourself off the field. Wait the requisite number of days, get tested. We've got the capacity, go out there and get tested. But make no mistake, better days are ahead. Let's make sure that we make it to those days together.

And that said, 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, and good afternoon. New Jersey has been allocated over 405,000 vaccines in the month of December. Of that, approximately 120,000 doses have been reserved for long-term care facilities. 280,000 doses have been allocated to hospitals and community sites. And of that, 220,425 have been delivered and the remainder is expected to be delivered at the end of this week. So far, in terms of the reporting that we have received, 46,217 vaccinations have been administered. We are still awaiting updated reports from over the Christmas weekend. Therefore, when we look back at the first week, December 14th to December 21st, over 44% of the 55,000 Pfizer doses allocated to hospitals have been administered.

This morning marked the start of vaccinations at long-term care facilities in the state. 299 facilities are already scheduled to receive vaccinations, 277 with the CVS Pharmacy, and 23 with the Walgreens Pharmacy. In addition to vaccinations that will be ongoing at our long-term care facilities and hospitals, 134 community-based sites have received or will receive vaccines this week. This includes 36 FQHC locations, 21 county sites, 38 Shoprite pharmacies, 26 primary care urgent care sites, and Rowan University School of Medicine that just set up Operation Saving Lives. Once we move through the 1A category, we will begin vaccinating those in the 1B category, which includes frontline essential workers who are in sectors essential to the functioning of society and are at a substantially higher risk of exposure to COVID-19. Additionally, persons 75 years and older are included because of their increased risk for severe illness and death.

Our Professional Advisory Committee continues to work through the prioritization of essential workers, which will be the Phase 1B. They are guarded by several principles. One, to maximize benefits and minimize harm. This aligns with the goal of preserving services essential to the COVID-19 response and the overall

functioning of society. Promoting justice, recognizing that those unable to work from home have the highest exposure risk, and also recognizes the need to increase access to vaccine and reduce barriers for workers with low vaccine uptake. And lastly, mitigating health inequities, acknowledging that racial and ethnic minority groups are disproportionately represented in many essential industries. About 25% of our essential workers live in low-income communities.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 3,684 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients and persons under investigation. 715 of those individuals were in critical care, and 70% of those individuals are on ventilators. No hospitals reported divert status last evening.

There have been no new reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. There are 67 total cases in the state.

At our veteran homes, Vineland reports five new positive residents and 34 positive employees. They are reporting two COVID-confirmed deaths and one COVID-confirmed pending. Menlo Park reports three new staff and one resident, and Paramus reports no new cases.

The daily percent positivity as of December 24th for the state is 10.98%. The Northern part of the state 9.84, Central 11.76, and Southern part of the state 12.63. That concludes my daily report. Continue to mask up, socially distance, wash your hands frequently. If you are ill stay home, call your provider and get tested. Stay safe, ring in a safe 2021 Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Can't wait for 2021, ma'am. God bless our veterans. I mean, this thing, like other long-term care facilities and it's not just a New Jersey fact it's around the country, they've been clobbered and God bless. So we went from June 10th until not that long ago with not one -- every loss of life, there's no silver lining to that, but we went a long time without losing any one of our vets, we've now lost three. Interestingly enough, Vineland was really largely spared, not entirely. They had lost three early on, but now this has kind of flipped and Vineland is getting crushed, so bless them.

Pat we had, it feels like a million years ago, but we had a fair amount of weather since we last were together. Any postmortem on that? Compliance, I heard there was some knucklehead behavior in large scale. I hope you had a good Christmas and welcome back.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. On the compliance front, since we last met, Zuluba Bar in Newark was cited for the third time for an EO violation, several people not wearing masks. Also to the Governor's point, yesterday in the early morning hours, Newark responded to a large warehouse party, more than 200 people eating, drinking alcohol and participating in illegal gambling. Two subjects were cited and issued summonses for alcohol sale violations and I trust that the Executive Order violations are forthcoming.

As far as a postmortem on the storm Christmas Eve into Christmas, Board of Public Utilities advised that at the height of the storm there was 110,000 without power. By eight o'clock Friday morning, that number was already down to 61,000 and then by the afternoon to 16,000, and by yesterday afternoon, there were no customers with a storm-related power outage. We did also have the Liberty State Barge suffer some damage and it is partially submerged and we're working with all the stakeholders there to see how that's going to impact anything. We don't believe that's going to impact any of the cruise ships or commercial traffic on the waterway there.

And as far as more postmortem on the weather, in that overnight from Christmas Eve to Christmas noon, troopers responded and handled 198 accidents, 241 motorist aids. Sadly, we did have one fatal accident on the New Jersey Turnpike up in Teaneck.

And just one more point, I know we talked about small gatherings, immediate family and I just take this opportunity to remind everybody that the troopers will be out there in full force, additional patrols, additional DWI patrols, additional checkpoints. I don't want to jinx it, Governor, but last year, New Year's Eve, we did not have one fatality on our highways and we're hoping that that is the case as well and just remind people not to drink and drive and that there's so many options out there with regard to the various means of transportations and the Ubers and those like them. So we just want to get through this New Year's Eve weekend unscathed. Thanks, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said, well said. Some things are brand new this year and other things are everlasting, and not drinking and driving is on the latter list. Good words of wisdom. The weather this week looks decent, right?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: It does look decent. Right now it's gorgeous out and we hope that it remains that way. We may see some precipitation, but I think the temps are going to be warm enough that it stays rain.

Governor Phil Murphy: I bounce between technology where I'm a middling performer and having a physical newspaper in my hand and Judy, as God is my witness, before we went outside of the event this morning, in between seeing the vaccinations, I went back in the car because I neglected to look at the weather in the upper right hand corner of the paper and it said sunny, high of 48 and we proceeded to go out and 10 minutes later it was raining on us. I hope our prognostications are better than that.

I mentioned we'll see you at one o'clock on Wednesday. That'll be virtual unless you hear otherwise, which is a format we used a couple of months ago for a few of these. Unless you hear otherwise, again, we'll be back in person next Monday, January 4th, right here at one o'clock. That's somewhat depending on whether or not there's a White House video conference. Tomorrow, we'll be virtual or electronic with you and again, Wednesday at one o'clock. Dustin, we'll start with you. Happy Holidays.

Q&A Session

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Happy Holidays. So just for clarity on the unemployment benefits, do you know if the claimants will still be able to get paid for the week that lapsed or is that money just lost now? And is the bill on your desk to extend unemployment benefits now obsolete because the federal relief package has passed?

On marijuana, Politico just reported today that there's a technical dispute over decriminalization penalties for people under 21. Are you planning to sign the legalization bill before January 1st? If not, what practical effect would any delay I have?

And then from Brian Thompson at NBC, there seems to be confusion over what Englewood Health is doing with the COVID vaccine. It's telling trustees that they are hands-on volunteers and eligible for the vaccine, but it seems the state may be disputing that. Can you clarify or provide any additional insight into what's going on there? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah. So on the first one, make sure, Dante, that I got this right. Your question is, have you lost the benefits or you will ultimately get them? The answer is, to the best of my knowledge, and I know Rob Asaro Angelo is probably watching so he will correct the record if otherwise, you'll still get them but there's going to be a gap, a potential gap, and that's a Washington matter.

I don't have any further comment on the unemployment bill other than to say if it's duplicative, we will likely end up where you suggested.

Yeah, there's some important, I want to say technical, but important things we're trying to wrinkle out on the decrim bill. I had very constructive, and I want to give them a shout out for their continuing spirit of cooperation, good conversations with the Senate President and the Speaker, and their teams and ours are trying to iron through those as efficiently as we can.

Brian asked me this this morning, I had not heard this, in fact Judy was with me and then I turned to Judy and said to the best of my knowledge, trustees aren't on the list in 1A. I don't have a lot more color than that, but I'll give you my answer and Judy, I'd like you to weigh in here. Listen, we're not getting vaccinated. I mean, this is pretty clear. We want the folks who are truly frontline healthcare workers, long-term care residents and staff, the disabilities and other homes that Judy was able to include in the federal program. There's a reason for that rhythm, there's a reason for that priority and I would say with all due respect, folks like us are not on that list. That's going to include folks, as good hearted as they might be, trustees and people like that. But Judy, any more color on that?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: There has been confusion on the definition of 1A, with the inclusion of paid and unpaid healthcare personnel. It's paid and unpaid health care personnel who are serving in healthcare settings, who have the potential for direct or indirect exposure to infectious material. So for example, trustees are not working in a healthcare setting. They come in for meetings. They don't have either direct or indirect exposure to infectious materials. There's been some valid confusion because of unpaid. I've been asked, well, what who's an unpaid worker? Well, a volunteer is an unpaid worker. Also, an attending physician who is in private practice that comes in to see their patients is not paid by the hospital, is an unpaid healthcare worker. The confusion is real. People have good intentions, but it's the exposure, the risk of exposure, which separates out a lot of people.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, it's possible a medical doctor who's on the front lines of a hospital who happens to be on the board is someone who would be in the 1A, so again, I mean, not only is there a pretty preordained or will ultimately be preordained levels of priority but there's also common sense, and I think you said it well.

Dustin, just as I thought Rob would be listening, and I'll quote him, "Unfortunately, it is likely that there will be a lost week of UI benefits, not just a delayed week because of the delay on the signing. We have a call at two o'clock with the US Department of Labor for guidance." Mahen, keep me honest on that. If it turns out after that guidance from Rob it's different, if you could get to Dustin that'd be great. Alex, good afternoon.

Alex Napoliello, NJ.com: Good afternoon. I actually wanted to follow up on both of those things. You talked about the trustees, I guess, getting vaccinated. For both the Governor and the Commissioner, when do you think you should get vaccinated? How do both of you balance the fact that while you're not in the immediate line of fire like some healthcare workers are, you want to increase public confidence in the vaccine. Not to be impolite, you're both over 60 so you're in a more vulnerable category.

To follow up about what Commissioners Asaro Angelo said, so do you have any reports of people having to basically – because in other states, some people who filed for unemployment, their claims lapsed and they had to reapply? Have you received any reports of people needing to reapply for unemployment?

I guess for the Governor I'll ask again about the report of your administration directing potential discipline for workers at veterans homes early in the pandemic for wearing masks. You've said before that it was an effort to keep PPE stocks up. How then does that explain the home in Paramus telling emergency workers arriving on ambulances not to wear masks? How does that fit?

Lastly, for the Colonel, if you have any information on this 5g Bomber, apparently from Nashville, and the security of 5G facilities in New Jersey, I would just appreciate hearing that.

Governor Phil Murphy: I literally just got a text from Jared saying if any Homeland Security – he's doing daycare for his son, Jack, so I suspect we'll hear from him. When vaccinated, someone asked me earlier today and again, Judy, you should weigh in. Do we think things were going as planned? And I said yes, to the best of our knowledge they are and we've got a very good plan in place. But there's an enormous supply-demand imbalance right now. And I recognize as role models, as public officials, however you might describe us, that there's some benefit to being seen to be taking it which is a point I think we also accept, but when there's a supply-demand imbalance as great as it is and you still have not gone through healthcare workers, long-term care residents, essential workers, folks meaningfully older than we are, I just can't justify it. That's my personal opinion. You're in the same, I think, same boat.

Rob again is studiously watching and has weighed in on your second question. No to that question, you do not need to reapply, but someone may have to, quote-unquote, reopen a claim based on when their original claim was filed. I don't know what that means, technically but we'll get back to you with that.

I don't have any more insights on the mask. It's pretty clear we all believe, without a question that we ought to be wearing masks, particularly if we're with highly vulnerable, susceptible communities. Again, I repeat my answer from before, including that there's a lot of legal issues and investigations and whatnot. I do believe, at least early on, and this was the case in other long-term care settings, there was a legitimate point on how you access it, when you access it, because there was again, a huge supply-demand imbalance. I don't have any color on it beyond that, other than God bless our veterans and they have paid an enormous price.

I've not heard from Jared. yet but Pat, any insights on lessons from Nashville and concerns that we may have?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: I was actually at the ROIC this morning, Alex. Again, no nexus to New Jersey with regard to that. That's a federal investigation at this juncture but we remain vigilant. The concern of copycats is always a concern for us so from a critical infrastructure, intelligence sharing standpoint, that's a 24/7 operation for us.

Governor Phil Murphy: As promised or as predicted from Jared, "We have been monitoring the National Incident with the federal, state and local partners, we remain in constant contact with our critical infrastructure partners, including the entire telecommunications industry to pass on awareness, potential issues and to ensure safety, infrastructure is protected. There is no known credible threat to New Jersey at this time as it relates to Nashville." Thank you for that. So we were able to do that kind of a one-two punch there. You good, sir? I appreciate that. Please, is that Amada?

Reporter: Yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hey, how are you?

Reporter: Good. How are you? Regarding the illegal bar in the Newark warehouse with 200 people, is that being considered a super-spreader event? What are officials doing to track and test the people who were there?

The MVC said today that it won't be able to implement the process for undocumented people to get driver's licenses by January 1 due to the COVID-19 burdens. Is there any response to that?

And with religious services picking up around this time of year, is there a worry that people will be massless or overcrowded in places of worship? Is there any action being taken against anyone for that or enforcement of social distancing rules there?

Governor Phil Murphy: Based on your description of the Newark warehouse, it certainly feels like we should get out of the bullpen for this one. 200 people in close quarters indoors, presumably not wearing masks? That's not a good fact set. Is that fair to say, Ed?

DOH Communicable Disease Director Ed Lifshitz: That's fair to say, yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay. I mean, now, how they are able to contact trace coming out of something like that, that's going to be hard, I would think, Judy, right? It's going to be very hard, to be honest with you. It's incredibly irresponsible, without knowing more about it than I know.

Listen, COVID has clobbered a lot of plans. I don't have to tell you that, to people's and individuals' as well as to state priorities. The Motor Vehicles Commission is working and we're working constructively, Legislative sponsors of that bill, which I was proud to sign, to other advocates to try to get as expeditious a resolution to this as possible. It's clearly due to COVID, so the reasons are understandable but we want to get that done as fast as we can. I would hope and I'll go out on a limb here, I would hope no later than spring, so that this is not a meaningfully longer delay.

Your question, I guess, Amanda on religious services, are we concerned that with the frequency of them, that people basically let their guard down?

Reporter: Yeah, there's some social media reports that people in some have been maskless, you know, very crowded.

Governor Phil Murphy: That's not good. I mean, I don't know how else to say it. That's unacceptable. It's quite clear what our capacity limitations are. It's the lesser of 150 people or 25% of capacity. That's been challenged, but I'm happy to say it remains the case. It is quite clear what our social distancing requirements are, Judy, as promulgated by you, that you must wear a face covering. I mean, it's crystal clear. Now there's a lot of fatigue in all parts of life right now, understandably but that cannot continue. Whether it's a party that shouldn't be going on, or God forbid worship, which we want to go on, people have to do the right things. Thank you for that. If you have specifics, and it's literally on social media, I would be curious to get those specifics. Mahen can follow up. We'll do Charlie and then Dave. Charlie, hello.

Charlie Kratovil, New Brunswick Today: Hope you all had a good holiday. First question for the Commissioner, all hospitals are required to hold an annual meeting open to public comments and questions. Robert Wood Johnson in New Brunswick failed to provide proper notice for their meeting. The year is almost over and they have not scheduled a public meeting to make up for it. Will you require Robert Wood Johnson hospital to hold a properly noticed annual meeting?

Governor, why did you appoint Gary Taffet to the Redistricting Commission? Were you aware of the AG currently investigating his company? And were you aware of the six-figure civil penalty he paid to the SEC over allegations of insider trading?

Finally, when you were running for this office, you said it would be really smart to nominate a Rutgers student to serve as a voting member on the university's Board of Governors? You've made several nominations so far, but have not yet nominated a student. Why haven't you done this? Why did you recently nominate a white politician to replace the only Latino member of that board?

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, I was surprised you didn't ask me about the school, so I'm still recovering from that? RWJ, I have no insights on that and obviously, we expect our hospitals to do as they are chartered and as the state requires. Do you have any more insight beyond that? I've known Gary for 20 years, I have to say, and he's a good man and a good friend and I'll leave it at that. I think he and the rest of the appointees will do an outstanding job.

I still like that idea on Rutgers. I still like the notion of a student being involved. My wife is a former member of the Board of Visitors at the University of Virginia, and they have that as a standing reality. I think I mentioned that as well, in the same set of quotes that you referenced, I continue to like that idea. You know, I also want to see a public bank take place. Our batting average is in the high 990s but we're not at 1,000 and I'd still have that on the list. That's all I've got. Thank you. With that, we're good. Oh, Dave, we need Dave. I forgot about Dave, we normally go right to left here.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Thank you, Governor. First question, any update or what specific information do we have with regard to the new strain of COVID that was first found in the UK? I know we have one airline that's coming into Newark Liberty that has requirements about testing and so forth, but what good is it if it's only one airline? Maybe the health folks could talk about the fact that we do have some concern from people contacting us about, you know, do we know that the vaccines that we have work against this new strain? Is there any indication they would not work?

Governor, with regard to the rollout of the vaccines and the significance of starting long-term care, you had also mentioned that the mega sites will soon begin around the state. Could you refresh our memory about how that's going to work, where they'll be? Who goes to the mega sites? How do people find out when they're able to get vaccinated and so forth?

Final question, you signed an Executive Order almost a month ago pausing indoor hockey and other indoor youth and adult practices and competitions. My understanding is this is due to expire on Saturday. Will the pause be lifted? What's your sense about how much these activities really pose a threat to us? Is it possible you're going to continue the pause on hockey but lift it for other activities, because I know there was some question about whether especially the hockey parents and some coaches were following the directives. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. I'll start with the third one. We know that the deadline on indoor sports is on Saturday and we will likely have guidance when we're back together at latest, I would think on Wednesday, even though it's virtual. I think the bias is going to continue to be and with Parimal here he will either back me up or correct the record, you can't distinguish one indoor sport from another. I do think we're going to continue to be, at least I continue to be concerned and I haven't completed a discussion with Judy and her team on this, with interstate activities because of the adjacent realities that they bring. You're, by definition, you've got travelling parties, you've got people congregating etc. But we know we owe an answer on that.

The mega sites, Judy, I want to make sure I say this in a way that's precise, will be up and running when they're up and running. As I said, I think by early to mid-January, but they will exist at that point for the populations that are at that moment up to bat. So for instance, if it's January 15th and we're still in 1A, as I

suspect we will be, it'll be for healthcare workers and whatnot, and long before they're open we will give guidance as to how you access it.

Listen, Ed should also weigh in here. We're operating assuming that this strain is upon us, right? United Airlines, effective today, is doing their triple checking that you've had a negative test within three days before flying. I believe that's now going to be US national policy. There's no evidence that there's any different efficacy with the vaccine but I want you all to address this, more importantly, as it relates to this strain. The other point that I believe we're seeing pretty regularly here is the scientific data is incomplete but that it relates more to aggressive transmission than it does necessarily to the severity of the virus when you get it. Ed or Judy, could you react to any of that?

DOH Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: I'm not sure I need to be here. Excellent job, Governor. He's correct on all phases. This new variant, you know, the virus is always mutating. Most mutations mean very little. Occasionally, some mutation may happen that may do something to where might transmit more effectively, or it could conceivably be more serious or less serious in different ways. Yes, there is the variant in the United Kingdom which has several mutations to the spike protein. The spike is the part of the virus that that grabs onto your cell like that gets into the cell, that appears to make it easier that you can get into the cell, which is why it's more transmissible. The vaccines work by creating antibodies to that spike protein. They create antibodies to several different parts on that spike protein. The chances are the vaccine will continue to work fine. The reason for that is because for a virus to mutate enough that the antibodies from the vaccine aren't likely to stop it, it would also likely mutate enough that it wouldn't grab on well to the cell in the first place. I know that the cell vaccine manufacturers are looking at this and certainly, we're always want to pay attention because we never say never when it comes to viruses, but I would expect that the vaccine would be as effective or nearly as effective against the new variant as the current variants.

Governor Phil Murphy: And Ed, the notion more easily transmitted but not necessarily more severity in reaction. Is that a fair assessment?

DOH Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: That's certainly what we're hearing now and it's very hard to know exactly how much more transmissible something is because you're not putting people in a room and exposing them and seeing how easily they become exposed. But yes, there's nothing to suggest that this variant causes any more severe disease, but it does appear that it is likely more easily transmissible.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. The journey continues. Thank you all. Judy and Ed, as always, thank you, Judy, it was good starting the day and also seeing you again. Ed, thank you for coming in. Pat, as always. Parimal, Rob and Jared who are remote helped us out today, so I want to thank them. Mahen, again, tomorrow electronic, Wednesday unless you hear otherwise, one o'clock virtual, then we'll be electronic on New Year's Eve through the weekend and we'll be back to the Monday, Wednesday, Friday rhythm beginning next Monday, January 4.

Again, in the meantime, folks, please keep doing what you've been doing. Stay small, do the basic stuff. And again, there's light at the end of the tunnel but we've just got to bridge ourselves for a few more months and especially when you look at New Year's Eve. Please, God, do the right thing. Stay small, stay within folks that you've been with. If it's going to be anything beyond that, remember we have a 10-person indoor limit, 10, and stay away from each other even with only 10 people. Thank you all. God bless.

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