

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: July 26th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everyone. With me is 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. Good to have you both. To my left another guy who needs no introduction, Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have Chief Counsel Parimal Garg and a cast of thousands.

Before we jump in, I had a very emotional visit to Carteret yesterday. I had spoken, I think, minutes – I lost track of time on Friday – minutes after the awful fire at the Bristol Station Apartment Complex started. I spoke with Dan Reiman, the great mayor of Carteret. The police and fire – I think the fire department was there within three or four minutes, Pat. I was with the chief of police yesterday. Both the chief of the fire department and of the police were literally going through the building all weekend on their hands and knees obviously looking for any casualties, and thank God, there were none, which is extraordinary. You can imagine the building's going to have to come down. I just toured the building and then met with a lot of the residents. They're not surprisingly somewhere between their lives being ruined or upended, somewhere in between, wondering if they can get their possessions out. Just a really tough situation. I want to give Mayor Reiman and – I was with Middlesex County Commissioner Director Ron Rios. I want to give them a shout out, both chiefs and their brave colleagues for dealing with a really tough situation, and I promised the state would stay in there with the community and the county over the next weeks and months, and this will be something that will take a fair amount of time to recover from, so keep them in your prayers, everybody.

No policy-related announcements for today, so let's dive right into the numbers. First, the communicable disease service at the Department of Health under Dr. Lifshitz's leadership has updated its counts of the fully vaccinated residents who have since tested positive for the coronavirus – either tested positive, entered the hospital because of a severe case, or God forbid who have died due to COVID. This update now covers the lived experience of 4,758,520 people who achieved full vaccination since mid-January. That's when the first recipients reached full vaccination 14 days after their final doses all the way up, in this case, through to July 12th.

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First, in terms of vaccine efficacy, we continue to see that the vaccines are proving extremely effective across the board. The effective rate of the vaccines is protecting a fully vaccinated individual against testing positive for coronavirus. It's roughly 99.9% effective, and of those who do test positive after full vaccination, their cases are overwhelmingly proving to be minor, thank God, in scope. The efficacy of the vaccines against a case of COVID that would require hospitalization continues to exceed 99.99% and against death it remains at 99.999%. These numbers are, as I said, based on the real-life experiences of that number of folks there, 4,758,520 fully vaccinated individuals.

Let's put this, if I can, into a little bit different color. Of the nearly 32,000 COVID-positive hospital admissions reported between January 19th and July 12th, more than 99% have been of unvaccinated individuals. In this span, we have also reported to you nearly 5400 deaths from confirmed COVID complications – confirmed complications from COVID. More than 99% of these were of unvaccinated individuals, and of the 49 fully vaccinated who did pass, God rest their souls, many had other complicating factors, which kept them vulnerable to a COVID infection. The one that stands out for me is someone we memorialized a few months ago, and that, remember, was a transplantee, and her family – remember that Judy – had wanted us to underscore the fact that she was a transplantee and to make the point that others who were transplantees were under particular – were at particular risk. Again, when you add all this up, you conclude – you have to conclude the vaccines work. The vaccines turn COVID into a preventable disease. Because of the vaccines, this is a pandemic, as we've been saying now for many weeks, among the unvaccinated. The protections they afford to the fully vaccinated cannot be contested.

Now looking to our other numbers, as many other states are experiencing, the spread of the coronavirus among the unvaccinated is increasing, and we are seeing the same upticks in our numbers due to the rapid spread of the highly transmittable and contagious Delta variant. Again, based on what we just reviewed regarding the effectiveness of the vaccines, the numbers we're about to review are almost exclusive to those who are unvaccinated. We are today reporting an additional 594, as you can see, positive PCR tests and other presumed positive antigen test totaling 162. As a couple of points of comparison, two weeks ago we were reporting a combined total of 292 additional cases, and on June 26th, a month ago, that number was 272. We're really beginning to see the increases over the recent term. This is the first time, in fact, since mid-May that we are adding this many cases a day.

Throughout the past week, we added 4,875 PCR and 1,678 presumed positive antigen tests to our totals. That average, by the way, about 936 cumulative positives per day over the past week. Positivity rate continues to creep up as well. The one-day positive rate for last Thursday you can see is 3.84%. Over the entirety of the last week that average 3.95%. Again, if you go back a couple weeks to July 12th, the positivity rate was 1.7%, and a month ago it was 0.88%, so in just one month, we're seeing essentially a quadrupling of the positivity rate. The rate of transmission, as you can see, likewise remains high relative to recent experience at 1.44.

However, as unnerving as this increase has been, the increase in hospitalizations is what we are watching most closely. As we have noted since the start of the pandemic, these are the metrics that speak to the ability of our healthcare network to treat those who have COVID-related illness that requires hospitalization. We have the most amount of people in our hospitals with COVID since June 9th. Over the past week, the number of confirmed COVID-positive patients in our hospitals increased roughly 30% over two weeks ago. Today, the confirmed number is 357. To give you a sense, last Monday that was 274, and two Mondays ago it was 249. There are also 62 persons under investigation currently hospitalized. The ICU count is 78. That number is also up from last week, up by about 35%, and the number of patients requiring a ventilator is now 33, and that's up modestly from 29 a week ago. Over the past week, 366 COVID-positive patients entered our hospitals, an increase of about 30% from two weeks ago, while 343 were discharged.

The trends we are seeing over the past several days suggest we are not done seeing these numbers continue to rise. Thankfully, because the number of fully vaccinated New Jerseyans is so high, we are relatively hopeful we will not return to where we were even a little more than a couple of months ago. In mid-May, we had ICU counts that were hovering around 200 persons, and the ventilator count was hovering at around 100, but we cannot return to where we were in early April when our spring uptick peaked. That was with nearly 2400 in our hospitals and 4,000 cases a day. I beg you. Unless more of you for whatever reason have not been vaccinated, step up and receive your doses, these risks will remain. As I noted, we're among the leaders nationally in terms of vaccinations according to the CDC's data, more than 76% of our vaccine eligible population – that's everybody age 12 and up – has now received at least a first dose, and this morning, we can report that a total of 5,000 – 5,240,590 individuals who live, work, or study in our state have now completed their vaccine courses.

By the way – and Judy would want me to say this, and I know she will address it as well – it is absolutely imperative that if you have gotten your first dose of either Pfizer or Moderna vaccines is you go back to get your second because that's the only way you're going to reach full vaccination and full protection. When we talk about those 99.9, 99.99, 99.999, those are folks who are fully, fully, fully vaccinated. However, as we all know, no vaccine is yet approved for any child age

11 or younger, so the greater you remain unvaccinated, the greater the possibility that a child – by the way, your own child or one of their playmates, a niece, a nephew, a cousin, a neighbor – can then transmit this virus to you with potentially, sadly deadly consequences.

That brings us to our next set of numbers. Today we are reporting with a heavy heart an additional three deaths that are confirmed to have been from COVID-related complications. Over the past week, we have confirmed the loss of 37 more New Jerseyans, and from what we are seeing in terms of the effectiveness of the vaccines, the majority of the recent deaths were preventable. The number of probable deaths has been revised to two – as you can see – 2,719, so between confirmed and positive, we have lost a staggering 26,579 brothers and sisters from our New Jersey family. One of these blessed souls we lost was this guy in the middle, Jorge Hernandez, Sr., age 73 of North Arlington. We lost him back on December 3rd, before we had a vaccine. A native of Columbia, he came to Paterson in 1969 to join his father who had arrived several years prior after Jorge's mother passed away to earn money to send back home to support the family. He would make his professional home at a pasta factory in Fair Lawn where he would spend several decades before retiring in 2016.

Jorge married another Columbia immigrant, Fabiola, and they would have two sons of their own, Jorge, jr., and Oscar. Oscar's a policeman, by the way, Pat, in Englewood. I should also say I had an incredibly powerful conversation with both sons, Jorge and Oscar, and that Fabiola, the mom, Jorge, jr., and Oscar were all COVID-positive, and they are, I believe at the moment, in much better shape. In 2013, the couple moved into a new home in North Arlington with enough room where they could live on one floor, and Jorge, jr., and his family with his wife Paulina and their sons Jacob and Noah would live on the other. In retirement, Jorge loved spending his time with his grandchildren, both Jacob and Noah, and Oscar's daughter Oriana as well as Valeria, the daughter of Oscar's fiancée Marcela. He would teach them soccer in hopes that they too would root for his favorite club Atletico Nacional from Medellin. Jorge left that wonderful family behind. They remember him every day, and today we honor him. He came here for a better life and found his American dream right here in New Jersey. May God bless and watch over him and his family he leaves behind.

Today we also remember these two guys, Gus Karageorge on the left and Manny Macancela on the right. They passed away six days apart in March, and they weren't blood relatives, but they shared a bond as long-time employees of Linwood Pizza in For Lee and much of that time literally working side by side. Gus, again on the left, was the pizzeria manager and had spent more than 30 years at Linwood Pizza. Manny, the beloved main pie guy, had dedicated roughly 25 years to the business. Manny passed on March 5th at the age of 63. He lived in Hackensack and had come to New Jersey from his native Ecuador several decades ago. He loved being Linwood's head pizza maker, but when he had time away from the oven, he enjoyed a good soccer match and time with his family, and that included his wife Blanca and their children Diego – and I had the great honor of speaking with Diego last week – as well as Cecilia, Nancy, Juan, and Ana.

Only six days after we lost Manny, Gus lost his own battle with COVID. Gus was born in New York and raised on our side of the Hudson. He was a graduate of Fort Lee High School. He loved cars and football, but moreover, he loved his wife Cindy, with whom I had a very emotional call last week, and his children Michael and Nicole. He left them all along with his son-in-law Mike, his granddaughter Ariana, as well as his parents Patrick and Georgia, his sister Mercina, and his aunt Mary. By the way, Gus was only 55 years old, and of all the calls – the many hundreds of calls I've been apart of, with his wife Cindy, this was among the toughest. We cannot help but think and hope that Gus and Manny are side by side again as they were for so many years at Linwood Pizza. Our thoughts are not just with their families but also with the Missiris family who owns Linwood Pizza and who organized a successful GoFundMe campaign to help both Gus and Manny's families. God bless them all.

Before I close, I want to acknowledge another one of the small business leaders who partnered with the New Jersey Economic Development Authority to remain strong even as the pandemic raged on around us. Ron Gresco is the owner of Randolph's Soccer Evolution. Soccer Evolution is more than just a soccer store. Ron and his team, all of whom are players, coaches, or fans, are working to build a love of the beautiful game among his customers and create fans for life. Thanks to the EDA, Ron was able to secure a grant that allowed him to pay the store's expenses, meaning that when the soccer fields of Morris County filled back up, Soccer Evolution would be there to provide everything from uniforms to the ball. I had the great honor of catching up with Ron last week, and I thanked him for all he's doing to keep his community figuratively and literally, and as you know, I'm a huge soccer fan myself, so I know where I'm going to be stopping by the next time I'm up in Randolph.

You can see both his street address and his email address on there, 500 Route 10 in Randolph and then the website is soccerevolution.com. Check him out. I don't know why we got to this, but I determined on the call how old Ron was because he teed up by saying I'm older than you think I am, but I promised not to give his age out, but he did tell me this. He was married the day after President Kennedy was killed, so this guy's been married since November 23, 1963, to give you an idea. he's been around here. By the way, they started out as a broad sports store and over time have focused down explicitly on soccer.

Speaking of broad sports, the Buffalo Bisons have pulled up stakes and are returning to Buffalo. They wore for several months this summer with great pride the Trenton Thunder uniform as the Toronto Blue Jays triple A team, and remember, the Yankees switched their affiliation from the Trenton Thunder up to the Somerset Patriots where I had the great honor of going last week, and the Trenton Thunder were left without an affiliation. In one of these crazy fallouts from COVID and the Canadian government not allowing sports travel across the border, the Blue Jays themselves started in Dunedin, Florida, and then they moved up to Sahlen Field in Buffalo. Of course, the triple A affiliate, the Buffalo Bisons had to find an affiliation, and they came to Trenton, so they pulled up stakes, and if you get a chance, we're going to retweet some of the stuff they said. They were extraordinary – extraordinarily laudatory toward Trenton as a community and toward the Trenton Thunder team, and it's richly deserved, so we should all hope that the Thunder – and they richly deserve it – find another affiliation sooner than later and we get baseball back into Trenton as it should be. By the way, that was the first time triple A ball had been played in Trenton, which made it particularly cool. The Yankees affiliate was a double-A team.

Finally, August is just around the corner, and August is also National Immunization Awareness Month quite appropriately, National Immunization Awareness Month has been commemorated since long before COVID-19, but this year with the vaccines toolbox, it takes on a special meaning. As I said at the beginning, the vaccines are proving to be safe and highly effective. By getting vaccinated, you are not only protecting yourself from a potentially deadly virus, you are protecting your family and your community. In New Jersey, we have administered the vaccines to more than 5.9 million people, more than 5.7 million eligible folks who live here and another 150,000 who work or go to school here. They have taken responsibility to helping us end this pandemic. They've taken the step to give themselves more than 99% protection against COVID. If you have not yet joined them, do so. Please do so today. Go to covid19.nj.gov/finder to find a place where – near you where you can walk in today and get your first dose. The vaccines are safe. They're effective, and they are free, and Judy, I'm showing today that we have 1,479 locations in our state. There's a location, folks, near you. Let's celebrate National Immunization Awareness Month the right way by getting every New Jerseyan vaccinated against COVID. Let's not lose one more member of our family, and with that, please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction, the commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor, and good afternoon. As the Governor covered, the COVID-19 vaccines available today are very effective in preventing hospitalizations and death. To reverse the increases in the hospitalizations that we're seeing and the cases in our state, we need even more New Jerseyans to get vaccinated. As I have mentioned before, we want to see more younger individuals taking advantage of vaccination. In the age group 18 to 29, 62% have at least one dose. We need that coverage to be higher. Among those 12 to 17, only 44% have at least one dose. Again, we need that coverage to be higher. I want to thank the parents of those younger individuals who are vaccinated who obviously understand the value of this vaccine. The best thing parents can do to protect the health of their children is to vaccinate them against this virus. Getting their children vaccinated allows them to safely return to schools, to the sports that they enjoy, and other activities that they missed out on over the past year.

To ensure young adults are fully protected against COVID-19 virus when they return to school, they need to get vaccinated now. I encourage any parent of an unvaccinated 12- to 17-year-old to make an appointment for their child today so that they can be fully vaccinated when the school year begins. Visit covid19.nj.gov/finder or call 855-568-0545 to schedule an appointment, 80545 to schedule an appointment. To build greater protection for our state, we need more of the individuals in the younger age categories to get vaccinated.

As the Governor mentioned, August is Immunization awareness Month, which highlights the importance of being up to date on vaccination to prevent serious diseases such as measles, meningitis, and whooping cough. During the pandemic due to child well visits being delayed, New Jersey saw a drop in immunization rates for young children of about 9% compared to 2019. As children return to school and other extracurricular activities, parents should make sure their children are caught up on all childhood recommended vaccines. Children can get a COVID-19 vaccine and other vaccines at the same time. Routine immunization is vital to reducing the spread of infectious disease in our state. Among children born between 1994 and 2018, vaccinations will prevent an estimated 419 million illnesses, 26.8 million hospitalizations, and 936,000 deaths over their lifetimes.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 419 hospitalizations of COVID-positive and PUIs. Over the past two weeks, that is a 26% increase in patients in our hospitals. Fortunately, there's no new reports of multi-system inflammatory children – inflammatory syndrome in children. There are 130 cumulative cases in our state. At the state veterans' homes, no new cases among the residents of the homes, and at the state psychiatric hospitals, no new cases among patients. As of July 22nd, the percent positivity in the state is up. It is 3.84%, the northern part of the state, 3.57, the central part of the state 4.67, and the southern part of the state 3.05. That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe. Let's get vaccinated to protect ourselves, our families, our friends, our children, and enjoy a safe, healthy summer. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. As always, powerful statistics around vaccinations and what they can prevent. Ed, I've wanted to ask you this a couple of times over the past couple weeks, but as we adjust the number of probable deaths now on Mondays because that's the day, at least for the time being, that we're gathering here, what is the most common reason of late – say over the past couple months – that you're adding a loss of life to that list?

Department of Health Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Probable deaths at this point in the pandemic are almost always those people who've been tested by an antigen test so they become a probable case and end up dying without having a PCR confirming it, so if you're a probable case and you end up dying, you end up being a probable death, so that's what we're seeing now.

Governor Phil Murphy: Got it. Thank you for that. Good to have you. Judy, thank you again. Pat, good to have you – looks like we have some – it's warm but decent weather. Any other concerns you've got out there? Any other items you've got? Great to have you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Not much to report, Governor, which is a good thing. I'm always knocking on wood. We have a relatively quiet week with a chance of some showers Wednesday – and thunderstorms Wednesday through Friday, but as always, us and the National Weather Service will be watching that closely, and we'll certainly put out any alerts should anything rise to that level. Thanks, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: If we're going to be in the same rhythm that we've been in of late, we'll start with Matt Arco here in the front row. We'll be here with you on Mondays, and we will be virtual, and I think we'll be – I'm not sure whether or not we're on the road together or not. You and I were on the road for a fantastic event last week on lead pipe – lead service line removal and lead paint removal, which is a game-changer, and Judy, thank you for that. It was a little bit unusual to be with you on a non-COVID topic, but it was a huge step, and we're going to be the only state in the nation that does what we signed into law last week, which is I think a badge of honor, but if we're out there, we'll give you reports from the road. Otherwise, we'll be with you electronically. Matt, good to see you. Good afternoon.

Q&A Section:

Matt Arco, NJ.com Good afternoon, governor. Last year, many school districts said they could only offer half days in elementary schools because they did not have big enough cafeterias or the staff to keep students socially distanced while they ate lunch. Given those students can't get vaccinated yet, will you again allow school districts to offer half days this year if they can't figure out how to do lunch safely? The fully vaccinated who died, can we have a breakdown of ages and preexisting conditions? Governor, any consideration of following New York City's lead in requiring vaccines or weekly tests for public workers? Last, from NJPBS, with no black bear hunt this year, what's your plan to control the bear population, Governor?

Governor Phil Murphy: Whoa, loose ball. As we sit here – Matt, I'll go through, give you my quick answers, and then – I was going to say I'll turn it over to Ed for the last one. I realize that's on black bears. I don't think – I'm not going to do that to Ed. At this point as we sit here, our recommendations that we put out at the end of last month just about a month ago are recommendations, and importantly, if a school is not able to abide by those recommendations, that is not reason enough for them to not be fully open, so the answer is we need full days. Again, I suspect this will be an answer to a number of questions as it has been. The virus dictates the terms here. We do our very best. We make our calls based on the science, the data, the facts. We do our best to stay out ahead of this, but we have to keep that in the back of our minds. I saw what New York is doing, and I would just reiterate what I just said a second ago. If you make your decisions based on science, data, medical facts, you have to have all options available. That's just the reality. We'll continue to. What work looks like when we're all back together continues to be something that we're meeting on and weighing, etc. No news on that yet.

I'll switch gears, to say the least. The budget that I signed includes – Parimal will correct me – from a \$1.5 million of nonlethal management of the black bear population, everything from hiring more folks to more education to more science associated with this. When I say hiring more folks, I mean literally in law enforcement or safety enforcement. That's something that we have said from the get-go. We couldn't just end that hunt and not have a plan in place.

This is led overwhelmingly by the Department of Environmental Protection. Shawn LaTourette, its commissioner, and I had a good discussion and exchange on this last week. As they say, it's about a \$1.5 million of the budget directed a number of different programs to address the black bear population. Anything you'd add, Judy, specifically to the – this is something I think we've promised, but I don't know that we have it yet. Anything on the demographics of the fully vaccinated folks who have lost their lives, comorbidities, ages, race, ethnicity?

Department of Health Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: I'll have to get back to you on the exact numbers. I will say that the breakdown is more or less as you would expect, all towards the older groups. I do not believe that anybody under the age of 50 died. The majority of them had coexisting conditions as well. Like I said, the exact numbers I'll have to get back to you.

Governor Phil Murphy: That's something that I think a lot of people are interested in, so we will do that. Sir, behind the camera; do either of you guys have any? No? Thank you.

Reporter, CBS3: Good afternoon. This is my first time in person, so it's nice to see you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Are you from Philly?

Reporter, CBS3: From CBS3, yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, welcome.

Reporter, CBS3: Thank you. Thank you very much. I just have one question, Governor. I know there's an effort on the part of some parents to push for you to reconsider having a virtual option for parents this coming school year. Is that something you're reconsidering and why, yes or no?

Governor Phil Murphy: Again, welcome. Good to have you. The answer is as I sit here on July 26, 2021, the answer is no. We fully expect to be back to school Monday through Friday, full days, as close to a normal school year as possible. We put out a very substantial guidance with Judy's input with lots of recommendations. We've also said that as it relates to things like masking or other things of that nature in the public health realm that superintendents could choose to be stricter than we are.

We fully expect that kids will be full time in person. Again, I'll repeat what I've said. I suspect I may say it again. Having said all that, the virus dictates the terms here. We do our best to call balls and strikes based on the facts and to stay out ahead of it, but that's a reality that we're living with. Nice to have you. Alex, good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12 NJ: Good afternoon. Dr. Lifshitz, a point of clarification. You said a moment ago that probable deaths, if you are a probable case of COVID and you die, you end up as a probable death, counted among those 2,719 folks. Are you telling us that out of all of those 2,700 people counted as probable deaths, none of them ever received a positive COVID test or is that a just a portion of that population?

For you, Commissioner Persichilli, obviously we have an increased amount of cases of COVID-19, but I saw just 33 people on ventilators. My memory might be faulty, but I remember a time back during the first wave when we had as many as a quarter of hospitalized people on ventilators. What do you attribute that to, and does that show that we have some success in treating the virus now that we have almost 18 months of experience with it? For you, Governor, what's the red line at what you would re-impose the indoor mask mandate?

Governor Phil Murphy: Indoor what? Sorry.

Alex Zdan, News 12 NJ: Mask mandate.

Governor Phil Murphy: Masking, okay.

Alex Zdan, News 12 NJ: What's the specific metric that you would say gets us to X or Y that you would say that's it. We're putting masks back on. Finally, your message to unvaccinated folks, talking about a pandemic of the unvaccinated, it sounds a lot like scare tactics and fear mongering. How are you going to reach out to people to try and get them to become vaccinated? You tried the beer. You tried the wine. You tried dinner with you. Obviously, you're not getting the amount of vaccination you want to. Is it time to use the carrot or the stick?

Governor Phil Murphy: I'll start at the top. Very good question, Ed, on the probable deaths. Does that mean that these folks have never had a COVID positive test or at least not at the time of their illness, I would think, right?

Department of Health Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Right. To be a probable death you first had to be a probable case and then died. Earlier on in the pandemic, most of the probable deaths, essentially all the probable deaths where people died in outbreaks in long-term care facilities and other places who had symptoms that were compatible with COVID and never got tested because testing wasn't readily available at that time, as we've gone forward in time and testing has become more readily available, the large majority – and I don't know the exact break down because there are going to be some still in other groups as well – but most of what's happening is those probable deaths are probable cases because they've had an antigen test when they subsequently died. There still will be some of the other types of people mixed in there as well. As I said, I don't know the exact break down. Certainly, the majority are going to be there.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, that was a good question. The question on vents I think is a good question. We're at a dramatically different place 16 months ago. Even today the percentage – you said this on our call earlier – has dropped.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Perschilli: The percentage of individuals on ventilators today is 42%, which is one of the lower percentages that we've had in quite some time. We have about 78 individuals in intensive care, but only 42% on vents. That's a real difference from even a short time ago when our cases were lower. We are seeing the impact of vaccinations on severe disease. It's not as severe, although they are in intensive care. They wouldn't be there if they were not extremely ill. Only 42% on ventilators, I think that's a fairly good number.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good questions. I think on the red lines, Alex, it's a collection of data points. It isn't one. It's the ones that we talk about every day. The one that we were discussing on our call earlier and Judy alluded to this is we just cannot remotely run the risk of our healthcare systems getting overrun. That's the big one.

We're not close to that, thank God. We're not even close. Parimal was reminding me we're dramatically better than we were in April, and we're even more dramatically better than we were in January. While the numbers are up and we don't like that, they're up from a very low level. I think you mentioned that Florida has 6,000 people in the hospital. God bless them all with COVID right now.

I'm knocking on wood that it stays that way. That's partly why national solutions, for the most part, make sense. You've got very different realities, depending on where you are in the country right now as it relates to vaccination rates. It's not scare tactics. I mean that. We're not trying to do that.

We're trying to be very blunt though about what the data is. The data is overwhelming. When you're talking 99.9%, then 99.99% you won't go to the hospital or 99.999% then you won't die, folks have to hear that. That's the reason why we're saying this. They have to understand what they're dealing with here.\

As it relates to other efforts, we continue door knocking. We're in 33 communities. We continue to need to make progress, as Judy reminds us always, on both black and brown communities. While we're making progress, we're not where we need to be. I think 26 of those 33 communities off the top of my head are black or brown majority communities.

We had a meeting on other contests, other incentives earlier today that we might put back out there. We'll continue to play with that. The door knocking program has been a huge winner. My guess is that at a certain point – and we may be there – that it has some amount of diminishing returns. We're still getting take up by the thousands every day.

The State Park, the Free Vax Pass has been the overwhelming contest winner. Dinner with Tammy and me was not a bad distant second place. We'll continue to look at that stuff. Thank you. I assume you're good. Ashley, is that you? Good afternoon.

Ashley Gallagher, NJ Globe: Good afternoon. In regards to the Delta variant, are you comfortable with New Jersey's stockpile of PPE and is the Department of Health monitoring the PPE and hospitals and other healthcare facilities? On the bill that requires census data to be adjusted so that incarcerated individuals will be counted in their hometown and not the municipality where the prison is located for congressional redistricting, are you prepared to say that you're going to sign or veto the bill before August 16th when the US Census releases its data? Is New Jersey ready for early voting? Are electronic poll books working and being tested? Terry McAuliffe promises broadband internet to every Virginian by the end of 2025. Are you prepared to make the same promise?

Governor Phil Murphy: Pat, tell me, or Judy, if you disagree, but we feel very comfortable with our stockpiles across the board right now. Would you agree?

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: I would agree with that, Governor. Yes, sir.

Governor Phil Murphy: Everything from vaccine supply to PPE to ventilators, beds, we still have the field medical stations in the warehouse ready to go, God forbid. Please, God, we don't need them. No insight on the census bill other than I continue to be extremely thankful that we put the amount of energy and money into getting as complete account as we got. Nothing on that yet.

No update on early voting, but I think the key point will be will we be ready to go when we need to be. The answer to the overwhelming best of my knowledge is yes. I don't know that I've got any other insights into that.

I had not seen Terry McAuliffe's commitment, but that is at least conceptually something that we like a lot. As you know, we put an enormous amount of energy into closing the digital divide. We closed it from 231,000 to 0 mid way through the school year. I was up in Sussex and Warren County a few weeks ago talking about broadband access for everybody. Even though we are the most densely populated state in the nation, there are still too many pockets in our state where the internet connectivity is unacceptable or even unavailable.

Conceptually that's something that we like a lot. We'll stay on it. I have to ask my friend from the Phillies. Do you have a question or are you good? You're good, okay. Hi, good afternoon.

Trish Hartman, 6ABC: Hi, Governor. Trish Hartman from 6ABC.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hi, Trish.

Trish Hartman, 6ABC: Hi. This weekend Dr. Fauci said –

Governor Phil Murphy: Can I just say a big Philadelphia presence here today? I just want to make that point. Please.

Trish Hartman, 6ABC: Go Phillies. Dr. Fauci said this weekend that the CDC is actively considering recommending that vaccinated people wear masks in public. If the CDC makes that recommendation, will New Jersey fall in line in recommending their residents to do the same? You mentioned that kids 12 and under cannot be vaccinated yet.

You also mentioned that schools are required to be open for full days this fall. Why not require those unvaccinated students to wear masks in school? Then finally, in light of the Delta variant, are testing efforts going to be ramped up as numbers continue to climb? Do we need more testing in the state?

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. Good to have you here. I saw what Dr. Fauci said. Obviously, the CDC matters a lot to us. I think I said this at the tail end of my answer, Alex, to you. We largely look to the CDC for a lot of the guidance.

Sometimes we'll slow roll something. For instance, when they announced in early to mid May they were going to lift the indoor masking mandate, we held onto that for another 15 days and I think prevented a fair amount of illness. The answer is we always take that into consideration. I also said in the tail end of my answer to Alex, I also think you have to take into account the reality of what your state looks like, and a national recommendation may or may not be consistent with the facts on the ground. That's something that we always consider and look at.

Again, may I just go back to this, please get vaccinated. The more people we get vaccinated, the easier these decisions are going to be and the fewer public health parameters we're going to have to put in place to allow us to live our lives as normally as possible. I'd say the same thing probably, Trish, as it relates to under 12 masking. I'd love Judy and Ed to come in on all 3 of these. We feel comfortable, again, with our recommendation.

We have allowed – I would use New York City as the example here – one monolithic school district for hundreds of thousands of kids. We have over 600 districts, and that has served as well in this pandemic. It serves us well generally, but in the pandemic you can allow a district to be based in the local realities. You can allow a district to lean in more strongly than our recommendation.

Testing capacity is pretty high as it is. I just looked. Last Thursday we had, Judy, 25,433 tests. It's running the mid to high 20,000s a day on week days and 10 to 15,000 on weekends. I think we've got the testing capacity that we need. I guess, Judy, anything you'd add to either masking generally or kids and then lastly, anything else you'd recommend or observe on the testing front?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I think on testing, overall average is 32,000 a day. That's down from about 45,000 during our peak. We really do want to get that up again. In the last week each region of the state increased their testing between 6 and 10%. That's north, central, and south. It's going in the right direction.

Testing is the best thing we have in anticipating isolation of individuals that, perhaps, need to be isolated or quarantined, depending on what the contact tracers do. We have good level, but we'd like to get it higher. As far as masks are concerned, we feel that at this point it's individual responsibility. You know who you're with. If you're around a lot of unvaccinated people, just try to protect yourself.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, on masking, by the way, I should note that we have recommended that if you're not vaccinated, you should be wearing a mask inside. Secondly, let's not hold it against folks – we've said this many times – who choose to wear a mask. We're wearing masks in this building because it's a state building, and that's the requirement. It is on planes, trains, buses, hospitals, long-term care, prisons, other vulnerable locations. I was in Newark, Judy, both days this weekend. I was struck by the amount of mask wearing, voluntary mask wearing, including folks who were outside.

Let me ask you one on testing. Good question from Trish about do we need to have more testing? We're still testing among the highest of any American state. It's always better to know what the facts are. Then you can make more intelligent decisions. When you say we want to get testing up, that's less that we don't have enough capacity or that we don't have enough locations. It's far more individual decisions, I assume in particular if they're symptomatic or they think they've been exposed to a group of unvaccinated folks. They should go get tested.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Especially if you've been in a group. If you've been vacationing and you've been with a group that you don't know, get yourself tested. I really recommend everybody get tested before they go back to school. We know that a lot of the colleges and universities are mandating vaccinations, which is a good thing, just personal responsibility. We know enough about this virus at this point to be able to do that.

Governor Phil Murphy: I would also add a different way to say that, common sense. If you're with a bunch of people, particularly if you are indoors, and you're not sure of their vaccine status – by the way, if you choose to wear a mask, we shouldn't hold it against you. If you haven't and you want to check it out, get tested.

I'm doing a lot more in-person stuff. I'll give you my own personal example. I'm doing a lot more in-person stuff, campaigning, things like that. Now I'm getting tested every Monday. I just got tested.

I'm negative, by the way, this morning. I should have probably told you that before I got in, Pat. I think people just using their head would be great. Dave, take us home here. Good afternoon.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Good afternoon. Thank you, Governor. One comment before the questions; Alex did sound slightly like Darth Vader, so I would like to know if there is any consideration to seeing what kind of mask he's wearing.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'll have no comment on that, Alex.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: With regard to the – oh, boy. With regard to the last comment about testing, should people who don't feel sick get tested at this point? Would that be a good idea? Would that be something that you guys would recommend?

Governor, on the point that was made about your being blunt versus scare tactics, we've had a couple of people who have said the Governor is trying to pit one group against the other. There are other people who might suggest that you're actually trying to save people's lives. Could you comment on what your motivation is and maybe flush that out a little bit more for us?

With regard to schools, there is some data that suggests that younger children not only very rarely get sick with COVID, but they're not passing the virus nearly as much as older people, and that illness may be extremely mild and that the adults there around are not getting sick. Maybe Dr. Lifshitz, you would want to comment on what we know and don't know about kids, COVID-19, and wearing a mask? Then also, Governor, you had mentioned that with regard to this group – there's a group, I believe, called New Jersey Parents for Personal Choice. They want to have the right to do a virtual versus an in-person situation. Could you explain why you feel so strongly that this is not a good idea? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I will have no reaction to the *Star Wars* theme at the outset. Remember, this feels like five lifetimes ago. Early in the pandemic, so March, April, May of last year, we said the worried well – remember that phrase? We haven't used that in awhile. The worried well should not be getting tested because we had enormous constraints nationally, frankly, globally on testing supply.

Judy, I'm going to answer this. You and Ed have to come in and either validate or disagree. I think it's different now. This is one guy's opinion. Tell me how you react to this. I think if you're symptomatic, that's reason to get tested.

Why is it different, by the way? We know a lot more and more importantly, we have a lot more supplies than we had then. We do not have a testing supply shortage, which we had last spring. I think you get tested for two reasons; one is if you've got symptoms.

By the way, if you've got symptoms, whether you've got COVID or not, you should be taking – just like the old days, take yourself off the field if you've got a fever or whatever it is. The other is the example we just used. No symptoms.

You know what? I was inside with a packed room full of people. I'm not sure many of them were vaccinated. In fact, when you look at the Yankees a couple months ago, The White House, I believe, last week, and there are other examples of summer camps or parties where folks were testing positive just because they were on a regular rotation, not because they had symptoms. Are you generally okay with that?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah, I think we have to own the fact of what we know. The Delta variant is highly transmissible. That alone, if you're under those circumstances that the Governor just articulated, get motivated, get tested so you don't pass it onto anybody else.

Governor Phil Murphy: Again, in my own case, that's why I'm doing it just because I was out there a lot over the past number of days. I'm definitely not trying to pit one group of people off against another. That's not the point here. I don't want to get political, but we came out of, at least as Governor, three years of dealing with that every day. Thank God we're not having to deal with that every day, at least to the extent we did.

This is absolutely about keeping people healthy and saving lives. I don't want to have to make anymore phone calls to families. We don't have to talk about it. We just want this thing to end. There's one way it ends right now, one way and only one way, and that is to get vaccinated.

Again, there are some people who are relying on talking heads or social media who are just wrong about this. That's costing people their health and, please, God, their lives. There are a lot of people – I'm going to use a number, tell me if I got this number right – of the remaining unvaccinated in New Jersey, over half – I think you said 57% – are open to getting vaccinated. There's a big hard to reach, legitimate population.

Of the whatever it is 25% left in the state that's eligible, there's a block of folks who I just don't agree with, but we want to keep them alive, whether we agree with them or not. There's another block that don't speak English. They think it costs money. They think their immigration status will be outed. They work three jobs. They don't know where the location is, which is why the contests are helping, but the grind of just going door-to-door.

I'll let Ed and Judy either add or correct that, but also address the question that you asked about kids. I think from this guy's perspective, you've got it right. Kids are just not getting sick at a level adults have been, although the needle has moved a little bit south and also transmission.

Dave, the last thing on virtual, assuming we have confidence that we can keep people healthy, whether that's kids, educators, staff, moms and dads and family when they go home at night, if we have confidence that we can keep them healthy by going to school the regular old-fashioned way, we know the results on virtual learning. There's enormous learning loss. There are some exceptions where I've heard stories, anecdotes. My Johnny or Sally did better. Those are the overwhelming minorities of experiences.

In particular with underserved communities where there was already an embedded institutional due to all the reasons we know of learning loss and needing to catch up, it was even more acute. Assuming we can keep everybody healthy, and we do have that confidence right now, again, we're watching this like a hawk. There's no question where the richer educational experience is, and that is full on in-person. Any comments, Judy or Ed, about kids or any of the other questions Dave had?

Department of Health Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Sure. Let me start by talking somewhat about what you've been talking about here as far as I'm vaccinated. If I'm vaccinated, I'm protected. If I'm protected, why should I have to wear a mask? Why should I get tested? Isn't that what the vaccine is supposed to do is protect me so I don't have to worry about those things?

My answer to that is we've talked over and over again about how the vaccines are excellent. They are indeed excellent, but they're not perfect. I saw a good analogy in *The New York Times* over the weekend where somebody was talking about being vaccinated is a lot like having an umbrella out when it's raining. I expect an umbrella is going to keep me dry on most days but if there's a hurricane out there, it's not going to keep me dry.

Similarly with the vaccine, I'm fully vaccinated. In a room like this, I'm comfortable. I do not think that I'm putting myself at risk. If I was in an area where I thought it was raining a whole lot heavier like in an indoor area where I think there may be a lot of unvaccinated people around me, I'm going to be concerned.

I'm going to do two things. I'm going to tend to wear my mask. If I'm in that situation, I'm going to attempt to get myself tested. I'm going to attempt to get myself tested in addition if I'm going someplace where I'm really concerned about the person I'm going to see in addition to myself.

The very good news is that most people who are vaccinated, if they get ill, do not get very sick. It doesn't mean that they can't spread it and it doesn't mean that if they're around somebody who is more vulnerable, they might have a much worse outcome. Certainly if I'm going somewhere where I think I might be putting other people at risk, I'm much more likely to get tested.

Similarly when we talk about who should get tested, that's when I'm going to get tested. Unvaccinated people, they're not having that umbrella. They're at risk every day of becoming infected. What wasn't mentioned here is we've always continued to recommend that on return to travel outside of the Tri-State Area, unvaccinated individuals should quarantine themselves and should get themselves tested because they've put themselves at greater risk despite the very active travel.

That's kind of my general philosophy as to who and when should get tested. As it has been mentioned, any time where you're not sure, if you think you're nervous, I've been going out to the clubs and next week I'm going to visit my grandmother in the nursing home or I'm going to this big wedding; if there's a doubt in your mind, go ahead and get tested. That's always going to be the better way to go.

As far as children go, it's been said over and over again that yes, the good news is that in general they do very well. They tend not to get as ill if they do become infected. In fact, we still don't have a great idea exactly how many, if ever, have been infected because they tend not to get tested as often because they tend not to get as ill. We often don't know about them. That is the very good news when it comes to children.

When it comes to children and protecting them and whether it's protecting them by wearing masks and whether that mask is in the classroom or that mask is at gatherings or supermarkets or other places, we protect them for two reasons. We look to protect them because we don't want them to get ill and because we are concerned that they can pass that illness onto others. While it is still not entirely clear as to whether they pass it on as often as older people do, it is clear that they certainly do sometimes pass that along.

We do want to protect the children as much as possible so that they can't pass it onto other people. They also need to live lives. They also need to be able to go to school. They also need to balance those things out and do it as safely as possible.

I'm going to kind of end on that middle group. You have those adolescents, those people who are now eligible, the 12-year-olds up through the 20-year-olds, many of whom don't get vaccinated because they basically feel invulnerable. In particular they know that when they get ill, they probably won't get as ill as others. They do worry sometimes about side effects and other things related to the vaccine.

First thing is what I've been talking about before, by protecting them, you're protecting the other people out there. I know I would feel awful if one of my kids who could get vaccinated now did not get vaccinated, they got ill and ended up passing it along to somebody else who had a bad outcome. Again, the inconvenient truth is that every one of these people that we show every day up here who has died got infected by somebody else. That person had no intention of infecting them. They themselves may not have been very ill to have passed it along, and they probably wouldn't have gone to see them in the first place.

That's what happens. By protecting yourself, you also protect the other members in your community, the much more vulnerable members of the community. That's extremely important. The single biggest endorsement I can give to that group is I have 3 children, 18 and as of yesterday up to 24 years old. As soon as the vaccine was available, they got it. There was never any question that they would.

There's never been any question in my mind or in their mind that that was the right thing to do. Again, we can talk about exactly how vulnerable, exactly how likely younger children are to get sick, how sick that they get, but the bottom line is still the same. We want to do everything we can by getting everybody who is eligible to get vaccinated now. When the vaccine becomes more widely available, I hope they will get vaccinated as well, testing frequently, particularly if you're not sure, and protecting yourself as much as possible.

Governor Phil Murphy: Ed, thank you. That was a tour de force. I just want to add a couple quick points as we break. You heard Ed say this, so folks where there should be a real blinking yellow light to think about testing or however you behave in any of the public health parameters that we talk about all the time, if you've got someone in your or you're going to see somebody who is immuno-compromised, that probably should be a blinking yellow light.

We didn't discuss because it feels like the jury is out. Again, back to Trish's question about Dr. Fauci, he also talked about the discussion of the so-called booster shot, which is to be determined. In the places where they're doing the booster shot, Israel being the prime example, it's folks who are older or with comorbidities. That sort of tells you – and Pat reminds me there's still people out there who think because they had COVID, they don't need to get vaccinated.

The fact of the matter is – unless you disagree – the science is extremely and complete on that in terms of antibodies and protection. You should still get vaccinated even if you've had COVID. We can't say that more strongly enough. I assume you all agree with that. Judy, thank you.

Ed, I'm going to mask up here. Pat, as always, thanks for that reminder. Parimal, Mahen, cast of thousands, Sarah had the mic today, thank you. Again, thank you all. We will be back here unless you hear otherwise a week from today at the same time.

Again, our plea continues to be – by the way, by overwhelming numbers and majorities, everybody out there is doing the right thing. I was in a few restaurants this weekend. Thank God they're back to normal. There's a real energy all over the state and folks getting vaccinated. Before that or now are still getting tested and just doing the right thing, overwhelmingly incredible behavior unlike any American state.

We desperately need more of you to get vaccinated. It's not an us against them. I'm glad you asked that. Please believe me, whether we agree with you or disagree with you, you name it, we're trying to keep as many people healthy and alive as we can.

I'm begging you, please get vaccinated. I promise you it'll be a great payoff for you, your family, your friends, your coworkers, your neighbors. They work. They're safe, and you're going to be protected. Thank you, all. God bless.

Governor Phil Murphy

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