

Governor Phil Murphy

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, a little bit of weather out there, sorry to be a couple minutes behind. Joining me today is the woman to 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 here. Far left, Superintendent of the State Police, we welcome him back, Colonel Pat Callahan. And a real treat to have the guy to my left, not just any Congressman, but my Congressman and the Chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which is one of the most consequential and powerful in all of Congress. Great to have you with us, Frank.

Before we begin today, on a sad note, as you look outside today, you will note that our flags are at half-staff in honor of the late Bergen County State Senator Gerry Cardinale, who passed away on Saturday. I know hearts are heavy today in the Senate. For more than a half a century, 54 years in total, unbelievably, he served Bergen County, first on the Demarest Board of Education, then as their Mayor, then in the Assembly and then since 1982 in the Senate. All in all, he was the second-longest serving State Legislator in our long history, and authored a number of landmark laws including Megan's Law and historic casino reform legislation.

I had the great privilege and honor this weekend to speak with both his wife Carol and daughter Christine. He also leaves four other children Marissa, Cara, Gary and Nicole and four grandchildren. Carol and Gerry were together for, I don't have the exact number in front of me, it's 60-something years, I believe. An extraordinary relationship and God bless each and every one of them. Jerry was 86 years old, a giant in our state's not just Legislature, but in our state's history.

If that weren't enough, I would be remiss if I didn't also send condolences to the family of the late Essex County Assemblyman Harry McEnroe, who passed away earlier this month at the age of 90. He served 16 years in the Assembly from 1980 until 1996, long enough to author many vital laws, including the one that created New Jersey's recycling program. He was also a US Army veteran. He leaves behind his wife Margaret, also after decades of marriage, in their case 65 years. He also leaves seven children and 12 grandchildren. Thank you, Harry, for your service to our nation and to our state, and God bless you.

And finally today, if this weren't enough, yesterday, Toms River lost a legend with the passing of its former mayor, Tom Kelaher. Tom was 88 years old. He similarly had a long career in public service going back to when he was appointed as Deputy State Attorney General by former Governor Richard Hughes. We are grateful for the service of Senator Cardinale, Assemblyman McEnroe and Mayor Kelaher. May God bless them all and look after all those left behind and served alongside. I think considering they were three extraordinary public servants, let's all take a moment here and have a moment of silence in their memory.

God bless them all and the families they leave behind.

We're also joined today, by the way, by the Director of the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, Jared Maples is with us, Chief Counsel Parimal Garg is also with us. We're gonna switch gears here in a big way. Within the past hour plus, I signed three bills that will fulfill the promise of the Constitutional Amendment the people of New Jersey overwhelmingly supported three months ago by legalizing adult use cannabis and decriminalizing marijuana possession in small amounts, limiting the use of previous marijuana convictions and creating the carefully regulated cannabis marketplace that can be an economic boon to our state. I'm grateful to all of our legislative partners who put so much into this process and who kept working and talking even when things ground to a halt. To the Members especially of the Legislative Black and Hispanic Caucuses and their Chairs, Senator Ron Rice and Senator Nellie Pou, to Senator Nick Scutari, Senator Teresa Ruiz, Assemblywoman Annette Quijano, Assemblywoman Shavonda Sumter, Assemblyman Benjie Wimberly, and every Legislator who either put their names to these Bills or who supported it. A special shout out to Senate President Steve Sweeney and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, and all Members who voted for them in Committee and on the floor.

I also want to thank all the allies across the spectrum of social justice and the many leaders of our communities of faith who joined us in this work, I do not know where we would be without you. As of this moment, New Jersey's broken and indefensible marijuana laws, which permanently stained the records of many residents and short-circuited their futures, and which disproportionately hurt communities of color and failed the meaning of justice at every level, social or otherwise, are no more. In their place are laws that will usher in a new industry based on equity, and will reinvest dollars into communities. Laws which promote both public health by promoting safe cannabis products and public safety by allowing law enforcement to focus their resources on serious crimes.

And yes, we are fulfilling the will of the voters by allowing adult use cannabis, while having in place common sense measures to deter its use among kids. There isn't anyone who has supported these efforts who wouldn't acknowledge that this process has taken much longer than anticipated. But certainly it is better to get things done

right than fast, and to ensure that all voices are heard and all views are considered. This process may have had its fits and starts, but it is ending in the right place. And I firmly believe this process has ended in laws that will serve as a national model.

And finally, I also thank every New Jerseyan who supported the Constitutional Amendment this past fall. Your overwhelming support spurred us to keep working, to keep talking, to keep our eyes on the goal line. Thank you. Over the coming months, our new cannabis marketplace will begin to take shape; businesses will be formed and jobs will be created. And starting immediately, those who had been subject to an arrest for petty marijuana possession, an arrest that may have kept them from a job or the opportunity to further their education, will be able to get relief and move forward. This is how we move forward. And again, I thank everyone who stood by us.

Now moving on to other business, today I'm pleased to announce that our houses of worship and religious services can now operate at 50% capacity with no cap, effective immediately. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have strived to accommodate our communities of faith to the greatest extent possible. We know that for many of our residents, the ability to worship together plays a central role in wellbeing and mental health. As our numbers continue to decline, we believe we can safely take this step. It is important to remember that masks will continue to be required, unless they must be briefly removed for religious purposes, such as taking Communion. Additionally, members of different households must be at least six feet apart at all times.

Because of these safeguards, we are allowing houses of worship to welcome more congregants and faith leaders can, of course, choose to limit services to a smaller number than 50% capacity if they feel that is best for their community.

I am also announcing that also effective immediately, indoor and outdoor collegiate sports practices and competitions will now have the ability to allow two parents or guardians per participating athlete as spectators, as long as these numbers do not exceed 35% of the indoor room's capacity, and as long as social distancing and mask wearing can be maintained in any outdoor area. This mirrors what we put in place 10 days ago with youth sports. We have seen this step implemented responsibly and believe we can expand it as our collegiate sports move into the spring season. As a reminder, today's order only speaks to what is allowed under state rules. Collegiate athletic conferences retain the discretion to impose stricter protocols regarding spectators.

Again, those are both effective immediately. Houses of worship, 50%; collegiate athletes can have mom and dad or two guardians present effective immediately at practices and competitions, as long as they don't violate capacity limits.

And third, this one is effective next Monday. I am announcing that large sports and entertainment venues with a fixed seating capacity of 5,000 or more people will be able to welcome a limited number of spectators beginning next Monday, March 1st, at 6:00 a.m. Judy will be there at all the venues to check at 6:00 a.m. on compliance, Ed will help out. Indoor venues will be able to operate at 10% capacity while outdoor venues will be able to operate at 15%, because we know the virus is more transmissible indoors than outdoors. Face coverings will be required, except when eating or drinking, and all groups must be seated at least six from six feet from each other.

Other states have recently taken similar steps including New York, and we are pleased to be able to join them. One reason we can take this step is because fixed seating means spectators are largely confined to their seats, which minimizes congregating. And should the numbers we track every day continue to go down. We hope and expect to be able to continue to raise these capacity limits as we approach the summer and fall.

I'm also hopeful that as we move forward, we'll be able to open up more of our economy as well. And the New Jersey Economic Development Authority is laser focused on ensuring that our small businesses across every industry are in a stronger position. One such small business is Tamroc Homes, a recently created Somerset County real estate investment firm that is owned and operated by those two, Jen Tamedl and her husband Brian. Together with their team, Jen and Brian specialize in purchasing rundown yet inhabitable multifamily properties and converting them into quality rental apartments.

To keep their workers protected as they do construction, Tamroc Homes look to the EDA's small and micro business PPE Access Program, which has provided them with deep discounts on the personal protective equipment that is required on the job site. The EDA is open for more small businesses like Tamroc Homes to join the PPE Discount Program, which can provide discounts of up to 70%. So far, roughly 9,000 small businesses have collectively saved more than \$7.6 million. In fact, I think it's more than that now, and I encourage every small business owner to visit that website, [covid19.nj.gov/PPEAccess](https://www.covid19.nj.gov/PPEAccess).

I had the pleasure to check in with Jen on Friday, and to thank her for her and Brian's work to create more of the housing we need, and for also ensuring their workers are protected. Check them out. That's how you spell it, TamrocHomes.com. Check them out, you're going to like what you see.

And with that, Judy, I think we're ready to look at the all-important numbers. Is that okay? First, as of mid-morning today, we have administered a total of 1,676,496 vaccine doses statewide. That breaks down into 1.14 million first doses and 509,000 second doses. Many of last week's backlogged deliveries from both Pfizer and Moderna are scheduled to arrive today. We are also expecting this week supply from Moderna for about half of our sites to arrive today as well.

Next, we are reporting an additional 2,847 positive test results. That breaks down into 2,165 PCR positives and 682 presumed positives from antigen rapid tests. The percent positivity for last Thursday's PCR test, by the way, 23,904 of them, was 6.35%. The rate of transmission currently sits at 0.86. The rate of transmission has been below one for some time now and we're seeing the subsequent decrease in new cases that we would expect to follow.

The picture emerging from our hospitals is also continually improving. As of last night, 2,023 total patients were being treated statewide, 1,888 confirmed and another 135 awaiting their tests. There were 438 patients in our intensive care units, and 289 were requiring assistance of a ventilator.

Across yesterday, 186 live patients were discharged, another 198 COVID-positive patients were admitted. And it's comparing apples to oranges because these are not yet confirmed, our hospitals reported 31 fatalities. However, we can report with a heavy heart an additional 17 confirmed COVID-related deaths from among our New Jersey family. The total deaths statewide when you add confirmed and probable is a staggering 22,874. Let's take a couple minutes, as we do every day, to remember three more of the blessed souls we have recently lost.

We'll begin by remembering this guy on the right, Professor Scott Nelson of Plainfield, and Scott was just 59 years old. A native of Jamaica, Queens, he was both a gifted athlete and student at Plainfield High School before going on to gain the skills to become a licensed professional counselor by earning a bachelor's degree in counseling, and a master's degree in psychology, both from Indiana State University, where he was also a proud member of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity.

A longtime member of the New Jersey Counseling Association, early in his career, Scott served as the director of an agency that provides counseling services to North Jersey's children and families and also educated the next generation of counselors as an adjunct professor at Kean University and New Jersey City University, among others. According to his former colleagues, Scott had a special gift of connecting with parents and children, which encouraged them to continue the mental health counseling that they deserved.

Scott was active in the life of Plainfield Congregational Church, and enjoyed time spent with family and friends. He leaves behind his wife Julia, his former companion Maria, his son Javial, and that's Javial on the left, and his son Justin, as well as his sister Karen, among many friends. I had the great honor on Friday of speaking with Maria and Javial, and needless to say, they're busted up. We thank Scott for a career spent in the service of others and may God bless him and his memory.

North Brunswick's John Pellicchia similarly dedicated his life to his community. In 1973, with a degree as well, we mentioned Kean University, it was then known, by the way as Frank knows, as Newark State College back in the day. He began a 30-year-career in East Brunswick Public Schools as an educator, a journey that would conclude at the Churchill Junior High School, where he taught seventh grade science, math and computer science. After his well-earned retirement, John continued to support others in their educations, helping those who had been incarcerated earn their GEDs. He helped everyone and anyone who came to him and fostered lifelong relationships with them.

Even throughout his teaching career, John maintained a second job working nights and weekends to further support his family, most notably in IT support for the Dow Jones News Service. John leaves behind his wife, Carol, and that's Carol on the left, after 47 years of marriage. He also leaves behind his children, Heather and Brandon, and his three beloved grandchildren, Abby, Maddie, and I believe that is Maddie right there in the middle, and Max who simply knew him as Pop. John is also survived by five brothers. I had the great honor on Friday of speaking with Carol and their daughter, Heather. Carol wanted me to make sure I said that he was a great husband, father, grandfather and brother, he had outstanding worth that ethic. There wasn't a blood drive he ever missed. And he was so smart and curious, and by evidence of that, she said he just decided to self-teach himself French. We are extraordinarily grateful for all John did throughout his long career to educate and prepare future generations. May God bless and watch over him and his family.

And I should note that in John's memory, his family, through the group COVID Tech Connect, donated three iPads to the hospital where he was being treated. By the way, they only had one iPad in the entire hospital when John was sick, so more families can remain in contact with their loved ones. So we also thank Heather, with whom I spoke about this very program, and the Pellicchia family for their generosity.

And finally for today, we celebrate the life of this guy, Richard Paul Sr. of Lindenwold. A proud graduate of Haddonfield High School, Rick had a long career in the oil services industry, with jobs that would take him from refineries of South Jersey all the way to the Alaska pipeline. But Rick's real legacy is in all that he did for his community. He was a member of both the Lindenwold Board of Education and Borough Council. He coached football for the Linden Borough Chargers, and he served as the Disaster Director for Camden and Burlington Counties for the American Red Cross. I thank the Red Cross for bringing Rick's passing to our attention.

Rick was 75 years old. He is survived by his wife, Ruth Ann, and by his children, Richard Jr., who goes by Rich, and I had the great honor of speaking with Rich on Friday, Christopher, Catherine, John, and by his grandchildren, Sarah, Alexis, Christopher Jr. and Natalie Ann, and great-grandchildren, KJ and Aiden. He also leaves behind his sisters Marguerite and Evelyn, and his brother Robert, and numerous nieces, nephews and many friends. Rick, for all you did for the Borough of Lindenwold, thank you and God bless and watch over you. May your service be long remembered.

And we will remember Rick and John and Scott, we will remember every member of our New Jersey family who has been lost to this pandemic.

Before we leave today, I have to tell, Frank, you would love this. I had an incredible conversation this morning with Lucia DeClerck. And that name, Judy, Ed may or may not mean anything to you but here's the story on Lucia. She's 105 years old. She lives at Mystic Meadows in Little Egg Harbor. I want to thank her supervisor there, Michael Nieman, for connecting us. Lucia got COVID on her 105th birthday, and she beat it. So this woman has lived through the Spanish Flu, COVID-19, two world wars and God knows what else in between. What an uplifting conversation, and boy, she has a voice that is crystal clear. So God bless you, Lucia, and may you log in another 105 to come.

That's where we'll leave things for today. And a reminder that even though we're continuing to see good trends in the numbers that are allowing us to take further steps forward, we cannot let up one bit. So folks, keep doing all you're doing to fight and defeat this virus and we will get there.

One final note that at one o'clock tomorrow, my Budget Address for the upcoming fiscal year will stream online VR official social media channels on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. I hope you'll join me as we chart a stronger and fairer future for our state.

With that, please help me welcome the guy to my left who has been a friend for 20-odd years. He's been my Congressman for every step of the way. He chairs, as I mentioned, one of the most consequential Committees in Congress and it's a great treat to have him here to update us on healthcare matters, of the general rescue package and any other matters. Please help me welcome Congressman and Chairman Frank Pallone.

Congressman Frank Pallone: Thank you, Governor. Thank you so much for inviting me. And let me just start out by saying, just listening to you today, you know, it's all the things that I admire so much. First of all, you're bringing everything down on to a personal level. You, more than anybody else that I've met in elected office, you're just always worried about the average person and telling stories that relate directly to people and their lives and I think that's one of the reasons you're so successful as Governor.

But in addition to that, you've just done a great job, along with your Health Commissioner, Judy, Colonel Callahan and others, in really trying to crush this virus. You know, again, I look at other Governors and I'm not looking to take away from the others. Obviously, I'm a little prejudiced, because I like you so much. But the bottom line is, I think more than any other Governor, you have really tried and been successful in trying to crush this virus and deal with it effectively. And I want to thank Judy, the Health Commissioner, constantly in touch with all of us at the Congressional level, giving us statistics, transparent. Colonel Callahan, anytime you need anything, you can call him up and he immediately responds. It is just a great team, Governor, led by you.

But I wanted to say that the reason I came today is because we are doing a new COVID package. It's called the American Rescue Plan that was put forward by President Biden almost immediately after taking office. And one of the hallmarks of this is that Governors and states should not have to be on their own. And I know I've tried to be positive rather than negative but I have to tell you since last March, it's almost a year now since this COVID crisis became a pandemic, myself and others in Congress were constantly trying to get President Trump to take this on nationally. To have a national plan, to have a national strategy, to coordinate with the states, and that just never happened.

And so basically, you know, Governors and Health Commissioners were left on their own to try to get the supplies, to get the testing, to get the ventilators and it just was not the way to operate. And it's one of the reasons why I think, as a nation, we got very far behind in our effort to crush the virus and help people. But that didn't mean that you as a Governor didn't do an excellent job. You really did. But it shouldn't be; it should be that there is a national plan.

So what is happening now with President Biden is that there is a national plan from day one, either through Executive Order or through pushing out things through the federal agencies, he's developing a national plan for everything, whether it's the vaccine, it's the testing, it's the contact tracing. All these things are being done nationally. And what the American Rescue Plan is, which Congress is enacting, is basically to provide the resources and the tools to accomplish that national strategy.

We, in our committee, a couple weeks ago, passed the healthcare and some of the energy and digital divide aspects of this. But the whole bill has been put together by the budget committee and we expect to vote on it. I'll be going back to Washington after this press conference, and we expect to vote on this in the House on either Friday or Saturday. And I don't want to spend a lot of time but I just wanted to go through it, if I could, particularly stressing the healthcare aspects.

Now I would explain to everybody that it's assumed that this is going to be primarily focused on crushing the virus in healthcare. And then that'll be followed in April or May, hopefully by a larger economic package that deals with infrastructure and stimulus, things like Gateway, I know I always have to mention Gateway, would be in that next package, primarily.

But there are some things that are very important to the state in this package, and I'm not going to spend a lot of time on them. But obviously, the most important one is the direct state aid, the direct aid to the state and counties and the localities. And so for New Jersey, that means about \$6.5 billion in direct state aid and for the towns and the counties, it's almost \$3 billion, and then for the schools about \$2.5 billion. So that's not what I'm focusing on but I do want you to know that this package includes that, which is so important to the state and to the towns. And it also includes money \$1,400 for people who were eligible for the last \$600, so they're brought up to \$2,000 in direct contributions, and also an extension of unemployment until the end of August, which goes from an extra \$300 a week to an extra \$400 a week.

But let me just talk about the effort to crush the virus. First of all, with regard to vaccines, there's about \$7.5 billion that's going to go back to the states for vaccine distribution. There's an additional \$5 billion for vaccine and therapeutic supply chain, to get those supplies out to the states in a coordinated national effort. And then there's about \$1 billion for a vaccine confidence activity because as the Health Commissioner knows, part of the problem is that people, particularly low-income people or minorities are not confident to take the vaccine. And so we have to have a public relations campaign.

In addition to that, we have another \$46 billion to fund testing, contact tracing and mitigation because it's still important to do that. It's not just enough to do the vaccine. Also, for genomic sequencing, we have a \$1.75 billion. This is for the variants so that we can fight the variants. There's \$7.7 billion to hire 100,000 people for the public health workforce. As you know, we don't have enough people to do all this, whether it's a vaccine, whether it's contract tracing, so we're going to hire another 100,000 people as part of this American rescue plan.

And most important, I think, because I know that all of us continue to be concerned about disparities, there's \$25 billion to address healthcare disparities. This is to get out the vaccine, the testing, for people of low income, but also people who are African American or Latino and others that just aren't being addressed effectively. And one of the things that I spoke to Judy about particularly is direct vaccine is going to go to community health centers, which is so important in addressing those disparities.

And finally, I wanted to mention mental health. We have another \$4 billion for mental health programs for treatment. We know that during this crisis, that a lot of people are stressed out, there's more problem with opiates, these things need to be addressed.

Now I wanted to mention again, I'm being very, I have to say, Governor, you've been great. New Jersey now has its own state plan for the Affordable Care Act. You also extended the time when people can sign up until May. But we need to help more people with the Affordable Care Act. Healthcare costs are going up. So what we've done is expand, in this bill, the level of subsidy that a person gets to help pay for their premium if you're already eligible, and then remove the cap on who is eligible. So people, regardless of income, would get some help to pay for their healthcare premiums. And I'm not going to go into that because I know there's not a lot of time.

But the last thing I did also want to mention is because again, this deals with my committee, is we're also helping people in significant ways with some other needs. So for example, with our Federal Energy Assistance Program, we have an additional \$4.5 billion to help low-income people pay for their energy bills. We have additional money to help people pay for their drinking water and sewer bills. This did not exist before, this is brand new.

And then last is for the digital divide, because we know a lot of kids are still using virtual learning rather than going to school in person, and so there's \$7.6 billion to help kids connect to schools and libraries from home. I just wanted to mention these things, because I do think, Governor, I don't want to say, you know, help is on the way. That's, I guess, kind of trite. But I really think that what we're seeing now with this new Biden administration is an effort to coordinate crushing the virus nationally, to coordinate help for the states through this rescue plan, and make a difference so that you guys at the state level are not on your own, the way you really have been, for the most part.

And with that, I'll turn it back to you. Thank you, again, for inviting me, Frank.

Governor Phil Murphy: Frank, it's a treat to have you here. All of the items you listed are going to be music to our ears, assuming they get through this. You know, for instance, we're doing a lot to subsidize, as you know, in our own marketplace, folks to be able to acquire health insurance, who heretofore had not been able to do it. But, you know, we've had to limit the income levels on this to make sure that we had enough money to get it to the folks who needed it the most. And the fact that you lift income limits is a huge deal.

May I ask you one overarching question, and that is the prospect that this gets through? I assume the prospect is largely, I wouldn't say a foregone conclusion but the House, it's quite straightforward. How do you see your Senate colleagues in terms of prospects of getting this through?

Congressman Frank Pallone: You know, I make it a habit of not having press conferences or coming here unless I can report something that's actually going to happen. So that is, I would not worry about it. I mean, of course you will, but the bottom line is, the process is so bureaucratic. We actually passed the budget reconciliation several weeks ago, both Houses, right? And the instructions were to the various committees. For me, it was mostly healthcare and energy and the other things I mentioned. But this is all done, everything I mentioned was done in coordination with the White House and with the Senate.

There may be some things on the edges that might change, but not the things I mentioned to you. And the deadline to have this all wrapped up and on the President's desk and signed is March 14th, and I think it might even be earlier. And then, as you know, the money's supposed to go out very quickly. So yeah, it's pretty much baked, I guess. Is that the word?

Governor Phil Murphy: Well, in light of the announcement I made earlier, I think that's a good word to use today. But March 14th, folks, today's February 22nd.

Congressman Frank Pallone: And that's the absolute deadline.

Governor Phil Murphy: That's 20 days from now and that date is tied to the unemployment benefits clock running out. So great to have you here and that is great news. And God knows we'll take every penny of that and put it to good use. So bless you and thank you.

With that, please help me welcome the woman on my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor and Congressman Pallone, thank you for your kind words and most importantly, your great support. Good afternoon. After the passing of the extreme winter weather, the federal government has started resuming vaccine shipping. All six mega sites received deliveries of Pfizer vaccine on Saturday. We expect the additional backlog doses of Pfizer vaccine to be delivered to the vaccine sites today. We are still awaiting an update on this week's allocation of Pfizer doses.

The department has also received a shipping update on the backlogged Moderna doses. Most sites will receive deliveries of Moderna first doses today. Additionally, we expect about half of the vaccination sites to receive this week's allocation of Moderna first doses today. As the department receives more information on doses that are arriving in the state, we continue to update the vaccination sites so they can resume vaccinations.

We know that these shipping delays have caused some appointments to be rescheduled and we certainly understand how disappointing that is for residents. The scarcity of vaccine, as I have said, is a national issue and the delayed shipments were also felt nationwide because of the significant icing and freezing conditions in the United States. We continue to ask for your patience.

As shipments are rolling in today, sites will be working hard to ensure all those who had appointments be rescheduled and vaccinated. The good news is that we know that the federal allocations of vaccines will be increasing, and that will allow us to ramp up vaccinations in our state. We are making progress however, in vaccinating our most vulnerable populations in the state. About 33% of adults aged 80 and over – now aged 80 and over account for about 47% of our mortalities. About 33% of adults aged 80 and over have received at least one dose of vaccine; 13% of those 80 and older have received their two doses. And 33% of those aged 65 to 79, they account for about 35% of our mortalities in the state, have received at least one dose of vaccine.

So moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 2,023 hospitalizations, and 438 individuals in critical care, with 66% of those critical care patients on ventilators. There are thankfully are no new reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. There are 95 cumulative cases in the state.

There's one new confirmed case of the B-117 variant. As you know, that variant emerged in the UK. There are 53 total reports of this variant in the state.

The Governor reviewed the new cases and deaths reported. In terms of deaths, the breakdown by race and ethnicity is as follows: White 55.6%, Black 16.6%, Hispanic 18.9%, Asian 5.1%, other 3.8%.

At the state veterans homes, there is one new positive resident case in the Paramus home. And at the state psychiatric hospitals, there are no new reports among their patients.

In New Jersey, the daily percent positivity as of February 15th was 6.35%. That's the lowest it has been in a while. Northern part of the state reports 6.01, the Central part of the state 6.55, and the southern part of the state, 7.14%.

That concludes my daily report. Stay safe, continue to mask up, social distance, stay home when you're sick, get tested. And remember, for each other and for us all, please take the call and download the COVID Alert NJ App. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. Looking for the past week or so, for each of the past six weekday positivity rates, we've been 8% or lower; the past couple of days have been in the sixes. The only time it's spiked up, at least over the past week or 10 days, has been from the weekend test which you and I have discussed frequently. You're probably getting tested on a weekend, smaller number of sample size, and you probably are doing it for a reason. So let's hope that trend continues. Thank you for everything.

Pat, great to have you back. You and the family have been in our prayers. What do you have on compliance? We appear to have had more weather today. I assume we're going to put the trip to the beach off this afternoon, off for a few days.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: That's right. Thank you, Governor and to echo the Governor's and Commissioner's remarks, Congressman, thank you. It's always good to have you here and certainly your support is greatly appreciated.

Regarding the weather, to the Congressman's point, to report on something that's actually going to happen, the foul weather has certainly been here for the last month or so. Compliance we only had two since we last met, one was the Fire and Ice Nightclub in Woodbridge was cited for being well over capacity, and no facial coverings; as well as the Sear House Grill in Little Falls was cited for similar EO compliance issues.

The weather today, I think we're out of it. On the way in here you saw it transitioning from that snow into a wintry mix, but the rest of the week, Governor, it looks like we're going to see sun for the rest of the week, which is going to be a welcome change, and even upwards into the high 40s on Wednesday, which may help us on one front but we have to keep an eye on standing water in the roadways. I know our partners at DOT are on top of that, as are our local road department in making sure those storm drains are clear. Thanks, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that. Great to have you back. I'm calling an audible here because it's a family that Frank and I both know well, just a tragic, non-COVID-related Alex Roberts, son of Nancy and Doug Roberts, who live in Frank's district, Alex grew up there. We were together when he got his Eagle Scout, remember that? Just an awful tragedy, not yet 21 years old. Sister Elizabeth, I believe, is his sister's name. So keep Doug, Nancy, Elizabeth and Alex's memory in your prayers.

I think, this is not official, but I think we're going to be together tomorrow virtually. Wednesday, we're going to push it to three o'clock out of respect for Gerry Cardinale's funeral which is midday. That'll be here, unless you hear otherwise. Again, three o'clock on Wednesday.

Tomorrow is the budget address, which is going to stream at 1:00 p.m. and I know you won't miss that. With that, let's start with Brent. Good afternoon.

Q&A Session

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: Good afternoon. My condolences to Mr. Pellecchia's family, that was one of my high school science teachers at Churchill Junior High.

Governor Phil Murphy: Are you serious?

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: Yeah, I went to Churchill Junior High, so my condolences to Mr. Pellecchia.

Governor Phil Murphy: Sounds like he was an incredible guy.

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: A great guy. So on to the questions. Our residents are saying the vaccine hotline is telling them the entire scheduling system is down and has been since February 9th, which is when you said there would be a pause in scheduling appointments as people are trained and the system is updated? What is the status on that?

Will your budget contain money to seriously upgrade the computer mainframe, among other things, for unemployment claims and motor vehicle commission transactions? And from Brenda Flanagan of NJTV, when will the FEMA vaccination sites be in New Jersey?

Governor Phil Murphy: Will they be what? Sorry.

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: When will they be opened in New Jersey and where will they be?

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, we will come back to you in a second on the scheduling question for the call center. I won't get into any budget details today, but needless to say Motor Vehicles and filing unemployment benefit claims are a major focus. Those are areas which have been, and this is not withstanding the extraordinary leadership by the folks there but they were neglected for a long, long time and so that has been a particular focus.

The FEMA sites have begun to open. I'm going to be at one of them with my friend Reverend Buster Soaries, I think on Wednesday, at First Baptist of Lincoln Garden. I'm going to swing by another church tomorrow. I don't know if that's in a FEMA program or not. But I can get you – Dan, can you follow up with Brent and give them the locations and the openings? But this is up and running already. I can't say that it's up and running in every location, but it is up and running in some and we will get you the details. Judy, call center, scheduling what's your outlook there?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: I don't have a hard date on when they'll start scheduling. I hope to have that by the end of the week. We're still having some system issues, but they're being worked out. There was a new release at the end of last week, it went fairly well, so that bodes well for the call center.

I do have some information on the FEMA sites.

Governor Phil Murphy: Please. Why am I not turning to you immediately to answer that? I don't know what got into me there.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: The Somerset site, Franklin I guess it is, that is up and running. And this week, we're having what we call soft openings in Trenton and Paterson.

Governor Phil Murphy: And we'll get you the details on those. Thank you. Let's go back. Dustin, good afternoon.

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Good afternoon. A couple questions on marijuana. Just speaking generally, were you ever worried that this would have fallen apart? A lot of people, especially marijuana patients, say the law is incomplete without language allowing people to grow cannabis at home. Do you support that? Now that you've signed the bills, what happens to all the people who've been charged between voters approving legalization in November and now? Will you pardon people who have been on the receiving end of what you just called the state's broken and indefensible laws?

And then going back to your announcement on Friday on the \$1.2 billion in education money, is your administration going to probably break down where that money eventually goes? Thanks.

Governor Phil Murphy: Dustin, on the last one, the answer, I think, is a resounding yes. But because there's – so you've got about 90% of that education money is per capita based, Parimal will correct me if I'm wrong. And then about 10% of it is in two different programs. One focused on learning loss, one focused on mental health. And so those processes have to play out because those are competitive programs, but I think the answer is resoundingly yes unless you hear otherwise from me.

Was I concerned that it could have fallen apart? It could have fallen apart, which is why I wanted to give a huge shout out to our Legislative colleagues, as well as folks in their teams as well as our team. People stayed at it. You know, this stuff is not easy. Frank referred to the federal legislation is complicated, and the marijuana road was complicated, without question. But thanks to the spirit of a lot of folks, we got it done. That required perseverance and willingness to find common ground, and folks did.

I think on the cannabis from home or any other, we're going to go with the bills I just signed. We'll leave it at that. I appreciate the folks who have reached out on that front but we're going to go with what we have got. Parimal, help me out with folks who are in the system, either before November or since November. There's a process that will start to take place immediately. Am I right?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Yes, that's exactly right. There's a process in the Bill that provides for people with pending marijuana charges, for those charges to be dismissed. Also, with respect to people who have been arrested since Election Day, but not yet charged, the Attorney General announced a moratorium the morning after the election on any charges being filed in anticipation of this legislation. But I'll leave it to him to make any further announcements on that front.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. Thank you for that. Sir, have you got anything? Okay. Mike, is that you? Mike? I don't know what it is. You've changed masks or something.

Mike Catalini, Associated Press: Good afternoon, Governor, thanks. So you signed these bills. How soon do you estimate that the marketplace will be up and running? What's your message to people? I mean, can they just start, you know, using marijuana if they want to now under these bills or is there a timeline? Can you just talk about that so it's clear for people?

Can you go into a little bit of detail now that you've signed the bills about what specifically was the holdup with the Legislature? Was it the third Bill that you signed today, was that something that you specifically, and your office, crafted and wanted to see?

Governor, could you just respond to, we heard concerns today from Republican lawmakers during debate on the floor about giving underage people a free pass, the third Bill giving them a free pass. Can you address that criticism and why you disagree with it? I assume you do. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: How soon? It's going to take some number of months. If I had to put a number on it, plus or minus six months, Parimal, unless you tell me I'm wrong about that.

Secondly, what message? Listen, people still need to be responsible. The words adult use have been associated with this from day one, including on the referendum that the voters voted overwhelmingly to support. My message is it's adult use and it should be treated like any substance like this, alcohol or other, with responsibility. I don't know that there's any – again, I can't thank enough the folks who stayed in this fight and the Black and Brown Caucuses in particular, the Senate President, the Speaker, folks on our team just didn't relent and stayed in every step of the way.

I think as I've been saying publicly for the past number of weeks, that probably the trickiest part of this was to be respectful of the two principles, one of which none of us want more of our kids, particularly kids of color, tied up in the criminal justice system. And on the other hand, voters voted for adult use legalization of cannabis, and not to legalize it for kids. So getting those two principles properly respected was not easy, but we got it done.

And I didn't hear the Republican criticism. I would just say this, if I understand your question correctly. Cannabis or marijuana is not legal for kids and we were able to achieve that. We were able to sort of do something which was hard to do, which is to harmonize the two Bills, both the Decriminalization Bill as well as the Bill that legalizes cannabis. I think we successfully got that done.

Again, I didn't get to this overnight, and I didn't get to this for all what will be economic benefits, jobs created. You know, lots of the ancillary reasons. I have kidded about this, about it being another reason why young people will want to come here or stay here. The reason I signed these Bills, the reason why we've been in the fight is for social justice, to undo the wrongs that have been existing for decades upon decades and if not, in some cases, centuries. But as it relates, especially to the war on drugs, and the disproportionate impact that our communities of color have paid. And at long last, we have broken through and as of today, better days are here. And lives that have been nicked up or in some cases ruined, we'll be able to correct, at long last. For this moment going forward, we won't have to see that same chapter written again in our state's history.

With that, let me pack up here a little bit. Frank, it's a real treat to have you. You're back in session tomorrow? Tomorrow, we wish you nothing but Godspeed, given particularly what's on. Judy, do we want to hit the scheduling point or not? There's a little bit of a debate, I think it's fair to say, between no scheduling and appointments are very scarce. Being scheduled, but there just aren't enough appointments. But obviously, that's something we want to break the back of.

Judy mentioned, we had a successful chapter with the vendor at the end of last week. That has been a spirited and challenging reality over the past couple of months, and so let's hope that chapter at the end of last week bodes well for more and better chapters, particularly as we get to opening this up further in terms of eligibility, which is inevitable as we get more supply.

Got the double mask here, I am flying the New Jersey colors. Judy, as always. Ed, I apologize. We didn't bring you in from the bullpen and I owe you one, but great to have you here. Judy, as always. Pat, as always and Frank, what a treat. Bless you and thank you for everything you do for millions in our state and many more millions in our country.

Jared, Parimal, Dan, everybody, keep at it, folks. Keep doing what you've been doing and the numbers continue to get better. We'll be able to make more announcements such as houses of worship and sporting events as we did today. Stay the course, folks, keep the faith and God bless.

Governor Phil Murphy

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