

Governor Phil Murphy

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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 State's Epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan. Great to have you both here. To my left a guy who needs no introduction, again, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. Parimal Garg is with us and a cast of thousands.

On Friday, New Jersey will be celebrating Juneteenth as a state holiday for the very first time. While Juneteenth is celebrated to mark the end of slavery, we must use this day to take stock of where we are as a nation and a state in achieving true equality for all Americans, especially the black and brown Americans who have lived with the vestiges of systemic racism. You'll likely know this, but it is worth repeating this extraordinary fact that Juneteenth commemorates the June 19, 1865, landing of union troops led by General Gordon Granger, a white man, in Galveston, Texas to spread the word that all enslaved blacks were at least free, yet President Abraham Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation on New Year's Day 1863, some 900 days earlier. Imagine the people General Granger addressed did not even know they had been free for two and a half years. For many black and brown Americans, that same feeling of justice delayed persists today. We must endeavor to do more to ensure equal access to all aspects of society: education, healthcare, housing, jobs, justice, not just in our words but in our deeds. This is what we must commit to on Juneteenth and every day, and I intend to do so.

Now moving forward, here are the latest vaccination numbers as counted by the Department of Health. There is no pandemic among the 4,627,717 million we have counted who are now fully vaccinated against COVID. There is only a pandemic among those who have yet to get their shot. I noted on Monday the simple fact is that these vaccines work. Our own data has shown them to be 99.94% effective against infection with the coronavirus with even stronger protection against hospitalization and death. When we look at the rest of the data, it unequivocally tells a story being written by the unvaccinated. The 306 newly added cases to the rolls today, the .91 rate of transmission, the 1.35% of Saturday's, by the way, nearly 12,000 PCR tests which returned as positive, the data tells us these numbers are almost certainly unvaccinated residents.



The same goes for much of our hospital metrics. The numbers we see here, the bed counts, the ICU counts, the ventilator counts, again, overwhelmingly if not exclusively impacting the unvaccinated. Same with those entering our hospitals, and while we're grateful for everyone who is discharged back to their families, the reality sets in that many of their hospitalizations were preventable and will be preventable through vaccination. Even with the heaviest of hearts, the seven additional confirmed deaths we report today should likely be seen through this lens. The number of probable deaths has increased by a net of five from last week, and even these folks may be folks who are passed and who are not yet vaccinated.

A year ago, the numbers we ran through on a near daily basis were what we needed to drive home the point that in the absence of vaccines, we needed to stay masked and stay socially distanced. We haven't said wash your hands with soap on them and water, Judy, in a while, but we used to be saying that literally every single day. Today, with strong, safe, and effective vaccines in our toolbox, these numbers tell a very different story. They tell the story of why you need to get vaccinated if you have not yet done so. The vaccines can prevent you from being one of the numbers on our dashboard. We anticipate hitting our goal of 4.7 million fully vaccinated individuals who live, work, or study in New Jersey very soon. That will be a huge boost to our fight to end this pandemic and a huge boost to our state pride. Together over the past year plus, we've done tremendous things, but we're not done yet. We continue to work across communities with more vulnerable populations where we need to further boost vaccination rates to make sure we reach everyone we possibly can.

The list of larger communities, those with populations greater than 10,000, where 50% or more of the population is unvaccinated continues to shrink, and that's a good thing. Today only seven of our larger municipalities currently have less than 50% of their adult residents vaccinated according to the Department of Health's data, and you can see right there where they are, Phillipsburg, Pemberton, Lakewood, Irvington, New Brunswick, East Orange, and Glassboro. Camden and Wallington, which were both on the list last week, are now exactly at 50%, and there's a lot of progress by the way being made in communities both on this list and ones that we've taken off.

We fully recognize the important caveat that in some of these communities there may be people who are vaccinated in other states or in other channels who have not yet been captured by the Department of Health's counts for one reason or another, and we continue to work with partners in our neighboring states and the federal government to share data so we can get as accurate a count as possible. I know Judy, for instance, the folks in Warren County think that a lot of folks in Phillipsburg may have been vaccinated in Pennsylvania, and I know we're trying to even deepen what is already a deep, deep relationship with our Departments of Health. By the way, that may well be true. Based on that, at least these numbers are the floor for these communities, and the actual number may be higher, but that does not mean for one second that we're not going to rest. We're going to run through this mile marker together and keep on going. We are not yet at the finish line, and we also have a tremendous support system to make sure we get to the finish line with our entire New Jersey family thanks to the great work of community-based organizations up and down the state.

One of those organizations is the Front Line Appreciation Group or FLAG that's co founded by Liz Bernich. Liz is on the left, and Gina McGuire on the right. FLAG has been working with local restaurants since the start of the pandemic to help to feed frontline workers at Morristown Medical Center as well as EMS, fire and police personnel, Pat, in the Morris County communities of Chatham, Madison, and Florham Park. With a grant to the New Jersey Economic Development Authority's Sustain and Serve NJ program, FLAG partnered with 27 restaurants to provide an additional – you ready for this – 39,360 meals. Moreover, Liz and Gina have inspired others to open similar groups in their areas with more than 40 FLAGs launched elsewhere in New Jersey and a total of 117 across the country. I spoke with Liz and Gina on Monday. We had a great call, and I thanked them for all they have done to keep the frontline heroes in their communities strong. Hats off to you both, ladies, and all your colleagues.

Now with again heaviest of hearts, let's take a couple minutes to remember three more of the New Jerseyans we have lost over the course of this pandemic. We're going to begin with Haddonfield's Frederick "Fritz" Holloway, a proud US Army veteran who served during the Korean conflict and a member of the Haddonfield American Legion post 38. Fritz was 92 years old when he passed. Fritz was recognized by many across south Jersey as the man behind the wheel of the buses for NJ Transit. Away from work, he enjoyed a good game of cards, a day at the racetrack, and a family cookout, and he was an avid football fan from the Haddonfield High Bulldogs all the way to the Washington Football Team, which one of these years we'll get a new nickname is my hope.

Fritz is now reunited with his wife Clara who passed away in the year 2006 and his brothers Raymond and Howard among other family. He is survived by his remaining sibling Evelyn along with his niece Bonnie, and I had the great honor of speaking with Bonnie on Monday. He is survived by numerous other nieces and nephews and great- and great-great-nieces and nephews. We thank Fritz for his service to our nation, our state, and his community, and may God bless and watch over him and his family.

Next up we remember this special gal, Erin Kasper. Erin was just 38 years old and had only recently moved into her own place in Avenel when she was lost to COVID in January. She was raised in West Windsor and graduated from West Windsor-Plainsboro High School South. In her youth, she was a competitor with the Special Olympics and was an active member with The Arc of New Jersey. She made countless friends with her magnetic personality and proved all who doubted her abilities wrong through her determined nature. Erin's compassion for people was on display through her volunteering with the Ambulatory Surgery Center and Jersey Shore University Medical Center. Her love of animals took center in her volunteer work with the horses at Monmouth Park. She'll be missed by all her friends both two- and four-legged.

Erin is now rejoined and reunited with her mom Anneclaire who predeceased her in 2010 having a fairly straight up surgery and suffered a blood clot and passed away. Erin is also reunited with several of her grandparents. She leaves behind her dad Jack, with whom I had an incredibly emotional call on Monday. God bless him and his fiancée Nancy. They're getting married in August, so wish them well and keep them in your prayers. She's also survived by her sisters Katie and Kelly and their families including her five nieces and nephews. She's also survived by her maternal grandmother Anne and many aunts, uncles, cousins, and literally countless friends. Erin touched a lot of lives in a short time on this earth. She will not be forgotten. May God bless and watch over that gal and all she leaves behind.

Finally for today, we remember the woman on the right Chaplain Diane Ross-Berry. Diane was Newark born and raised and served in the city of Newark's Water Department for 27 years, but she found her true calling in the ministry, initially serving both The Love of Jesus Family Church in Orange and the Rozier Temple Church of God in Christ in Harlem. She took the next step by helping to found the United Chaplain International Worldwide Outreach where she was an instructor for over 13 years on both sides of the Hudson. She loved to bring the word of God to all who would welcome it, and she ministered in prisons, hospitals, hospice, and right in her own neighborhood. Diane was 70 years old.

She leaves behind her husband, that guy, Chaplain James Berry, with whom she partnered in the ministry, along with her children Dana, Daru, Jamesa, Monay, and Sharay, and I had the great honor of speaking with her husband James and her daughter Jamesa on Monday. She is further survived by seven grandchildren, her brother and sister Maynard and Delores, and numerous aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins, and of course, her beloved church family and fellow chaplains. We thank Diane for her good works, and we know she is receiving her heavenly rewards. She too will be remembered by so many. We remember all we have lost over the past 15 months. The days are getting better. There's no question about that, but we must remember there are some families whose days will always be a little bit darker because of this pandemic and we honor each and every one of them.

Before I turn the program over to the Judy, one last quick announcement. Today I signed legislation that will offer an additional year of special education and related services to three classes of students with disabilities. These students would otherwise be aging out of our educational system because they will turn 21 years old during the 2020/2021, or the 2021/2022, or the 2022/2023 school years. These determinations will be made at the local level by district IEP teams or individual education plan teams, which includes parents or guardians and in some cases the student themselves. Working with the Department of Education, we will be allocating federal funds made available through the American Rescue Plan to cover the cost of this extension, which while difficult to estimate could be up to approximately \$600 million.

Again, this is a very specific three-school year reaction to the pandemic and the impact that it has had on these extraordinary lives. We recognize the pandemic has been especially hard on the roughly 8,700 students this will impact and who may not have had the full set of transitional skills and job training that they need for adulthood, and I am pleased to take this step to help secure a better future for them and their families. I mentioned it could be up to \$600 million. So be it. This is one of these things where we take the step regardless of the price tag because it is absolutely without question and hesitation the right thing to do. 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. Yesterday the CDC announced the upgraded classification of the variant B.1.617.2, known as the Delta variant. It's upgraded to a variant of concern from a variant of interest. This variant was initially identified in India in December of 2020, and as I stated previously classified as a variant of interest. This variant has been detected in at least 66 countries including the United States. While this variant has increased in New Jersey recently, it is currently a small minority of all variants. It is 5.1% of the variants sequenced in New Jersey in the last four weeks.

Initial evidence suggests that this variant is more transmissible compared with other variants including the B.1.177 Alpha variant, which originated in the UK. However, vaccines authorized for use in the United States have been reported to be effective against the B.1.617.2 variant as well as other variants. The spread of this variant is just another reason for us to remain vigilant and to continue to strive to increase our vaccination rates. We are seeing the impact that the Delta variant

is having in the UK, so we cannot let that happen here. We need to get vaccinated and ensure that they get their second dose to protect themselves and our state. We are seeing positive trends in cases allowing us to reduce restrictions, and we certainly don't want to go backwards.

Today the department is releasing updated protocols for hospitals and ambulatory surgery centers resuming elective surgery and invasive diagnostic procedures. The directives make a distinction between those who have been vaccinated versus those who are unvaccinated. For example, patients are exempt from pre-procedural testing and self-quarantine if they are fully vaccinated. However, some facilities may so elect to continue to test and require quarantine of patients. Hospitals and ambulatory care centers must comply with state and CDC guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19, which includes screening of healthcare staff, enforcing physical distancing, wearing of masks for staff and patients and proper cleaning and disinfecting. Facilities may allow visitors, but these individuals must undergo symptom checks upon entering the facilities, and the facilities should continue to monitor communities' surge status and be prepared to modify clinical services appropriately.

As I mentioned earlier this week, the department released guidance to adult medical daycare centers so that they can reopen safely. Given that these facilities serve vulnerable residents, the Department outlined health precautions to protect both the participants and the staff. The guidance recognizes the protections the vaccines provide against the spread of the virus. Importantly, when all participants and staff are fully vaccinated, physical distancing and group size requirements do not need to be maintained. If all participants and staff present during the group activity are fully vaccinated, participants may choose to have close contact with others without wearing a mask during the activity. For example, a fully vaccinated participants may participate in communal dining without masking or physical distancing if all participants and staff in the communal area are fully vaccinated.

All facilities still must screen staff and participants for fever and other COVID-19 symptoms prior to entry to the facility each day. During activities where not all staff and participants are vaccinated, individuals should adhere to six-foot physical distancing whenever possible. When it is difficult for individuals to remain six feet apart, physical barriers such as Plexiglas should be considered. Unless they are fully vaccinated, participants should be encouraged to wear masks when feasible. The facilities should also ensure proper ventilation, for example, opening windows or doors when doing so does not pose a safety or health risk. Facilities should make certain that ventilation systems operate properly and increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible, both in the facility as well as any vehicles that may be in use. The Department also issued guidance this week to programs of all-inclusive care for the elderly or PACE programs. The guidance covers important health precautions that must be taken for these programs to reopen such as screening, proper cleaning and disinfection, protocols to address exposures and cases, as well as masking and physical distancing requirements.

In other news, Monday was world blood donor day, which provides an opportunity to highlight the constant need for blood to help save lives. There's currently a severe blood shortage, especially for O positive and O negative. While blood donations are needed year-round, hospitals face a perennial blood shortage during the summer holidays. Every donation is important, and generous blood and platelet donations help ensure lifesaving blood products reach those who need it. We are asking New Jerseyans to once again roll up your sleeves and give blood.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported a low of 331 hospitalizations of COVID positive patients and PUIs. That number continues to decline. Fortunately, there are no new reports of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children. We have had a cumulative case count of 127. None of the children right now are currently hospitalized. At the state veterans' homes there are no new cases among residents of the homes, and at the state psychiatric hospitals, no new cases among the patients. Our daily percent positivity as of June 12th is 1.35%. Northern part of the state reports 1.05%, central 2.04%, and the southern part of the state 1.03%. That concludes my report. Please continue to stay safe and get vaccinated. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you for everything including the report. Just to underscore on the Delta variant, two vaccine comments, based on everything we know – and Tina, you should weigh in if you see this differently. Based on everything we know, the vaccines work against the variant, including the Delta variant, but we're also seeing the second part of that observation, the consequences of the UK's decision to string out and delay the second dose, which they believe may be well part of the reason why they're having such a flair up. That's two reasons to both get vaccinated and make sure if it's the two-dose regime, get your second shot. Get your booster shot. We're still running around 91% on the second shot?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: We need that, folks, to be as close to 100 as possible because it's quite clear, and again, the UK is living this – the second shot – again, it's either Moderna or Pfizer. This doesn't apply to the J&J vaccine, but it matters. It bolsters your immunity in a much stronger fashion, so thank you for that. Pat, we gave Cassidy and Zach a shout out

on Monday, but we will again. Father of the bride is back. We missed you on Monday. Great to have you in again. God bless the newlyweds. Over to you.

Superintendent of State Police Col. Pat Callahan: Thanks, Governor. Really nothing to report. I wish I could take credit for the weather because it's gorgeous, but I would if I could just take a second. Yesterday, Jim Barsuglia of our communications bureau retired after 52 years of service. I felt bad. I told him that he started on the year – in the year I was born in 1969. He's been with the state police for more than half a century in our hundred years of service, so him and his wife Judy stopped by. I think he's probably the longest serving civilian in state police history, and he served us through every single communications challenge, and I just wanted to be able to thank him personally and professionally. Thank you, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: It's Jim?

Superintendent of State Police Col. Pat Callahan: Jim Barsuglia, yes, sir.

Governor Phil Murphy: Jim, God bless you and congratulations and thank you for 52 years of service. We'll start over here. I think we'll be in the same rhythm that we've been in except to note what I mentioned up front. Friday's a state holiday. Honored at least to call Juneteenth a holiday. You may note that Friday is the 18th, but Juneteenth – that's part of a law that I signed. Just like the Fourth of July this year is on a Sunday, so the national holiday is on Monday the 5th. Even though June 19th is Saturday, we will celebrate it as a state holiday this Friday, and it's about time. Otherwise, we'll be with you virtually. I think you and I will be on the road for one of the next couple of days, Judy? We might want to invite Pat to tag along with that, Councilman Matt Stonie. She's got the mic.

Q&A Session

Is that you, Mike?

Mike Catalini, Associated Press: Yep.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good to see you, man. What do you got?

Mike Catalini, Associated Press: Good afternoon, Governor, thanks. I'm curious if you have an update on the number of people who've gotten the Vax Pass for state parks. I think you said last week or the week before it was around 43,000 people I think had signed up. Correct me if I'm wrong. I'm just curious how that figure has changed. Last July you said executive order 166 that set up a task force to provide oversight of federal funding for COVID relief. I'm curious if there's any update on what that task force has been up to. I think the order outlined that quarterly reports might be necessary. I'm curious if any have been issued across your desk and what that task force is up to, and then I don't think you've been asked about this since Friday. Republicans in the assembly held an event with parents who raised concerns about masks in schools. They're worried that it leads to asthma in some of their children or staph infections because of the elastic bands behind their ears, other concerns. I'm curious what you say to these parents. What is your reaction to their concerns? That's it. Thank you, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thanks, Mike. I don't have a Vax Pass update. Mahen, will you follow up with Mike and we'll get that number to you offline. It's been very successful. I know that for sure, and not surprisingly, particularly if we keep having days like this one or the weekend. Island Beach State Park is a particular success, but we'll get back to you on that. As it relates to the oversight, Mike, we probably do owe folks an update on that. Dan Kelly, who's been in state government, first at the attorney general's and then came over to work under Governor Christie in the post-Sandy period and has stayed in that position and does a lot of work with Pat and the OEM team on his side, is the person overseeing, frankly, the buildup of an office that will not just be a task force or a report, but there'll be an actual office that oversees this, and we will have more news on that I think sooner than later. Parimal, anything you want to add to that or you good?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Yeah, I would just add that those reports have been being delivered quarterly, and we can follow up with you afterwards to see what [inaudible 27:41].

Governor Phil Murphy: We'll get them to you. On the masking, generally and then specific to the meetings that the Republican legislators had, I want to be – I want to be crystal clear on this. Folks ask me this literally all the time. Will we have masks in the fall? My first answer is I hope not. That would be my hope. I suspect Judy would join me in that hope, but the DOE will come out with – Department of Education with guidance as they did last summer, and the Department of Health will have a strong input into that. The wild cards are we follow CDC guidance. Will there be a vaccine for kids under the age of 12? I think the answer is yeah, I bet you there will be. The question is the timing on that. Will there be please God, no, a third wave?

I hope – and I don't blame parents or kids for being stressed about this, educators too. Who could blame them? Everybody is. I hope the answer is that we don't, but it's just too early to make that call. Unlike an HVAC system where you've got to do a lot of work with a long runway, you could make the decision on masks 5 o'clock on Labor Day afternoon for the next

morning. It's a light summer as we hit, so more time on the clock really helps us. Judy's already put more guidance out about summer camps. That's a canary in the coalmine as they say. That's an indicator probably of how we're thinking about masks in the fall, but again, I hope we're in a place we don't need them.

As it relates to the specific meeting that the Republicans convened, again, I think we have to make decisions. I know people are frustrated by things from time to time. Who can blame them? So am I, but we've got to make decisions based on the facts, based on the data, based on the science, and unless I'm mistaken, Mike, and you can correct me, there was not one health expert in their discussion, not one. Come on, man. You've got to know what the health implications are of whatever steps you take. The first person I call are the two people to my right and their colleagues. That's where it has to begin, notwithstanding all the emotions – rightful emotions, by the way. I could go on, but I won't.

Brent, good afternoon.

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Good afternoon. The comments about this being a pandemic among unvaccinated people, is there data that's showing how many of the people who are – of the 331 people who are in hospitals, 200-blah-blah aren't vaccinated, or those who are dying weren't vaccinated? We're getting closer, as you said, to that vaccination goal, but I've gone back and looked through the comments over the last – the remarks over the last few months, and it started out as 70% of adult residents, then adults, and now individuals. It's 4.7 million or 70% of who? What is the –

Governor Phil Murphy: The adult population in New Jersey.

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Adult pop.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yes.

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Okay. That's it.

Governor Phil Murphy: That's it?

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Yeah.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay. We've started to address this and Judy, you may want to hit this, or Tina. We are beginning to gather the data. Ed Lifshitz – I forget when Ed was here, Monday I guess – addressed the period that began on December 15th and went through – I think we had data through the end of April or sometime in April, so December 15th is a magical date because that's the first shot in the arm. The data was overwhelming supportive of the notion that there's a bright line between vaccinated and unvaccinated. What I don't think we have yet, although we've committed to making the dashboard more robust in this particular respect, is I can't tell you of the people that went into the hospital yesterday or the people in the hospital generally. I don't believe we've got that, but we do know based on every anecdotal evidence it's overwhelming, if not exclusively, but I would leave that cushion there, persons who are not vaccinated.

Is it fair to say we're going to be getting more data over time? Christina, nice to see you.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Yeah, thank you, Governor. Yeah, this is going to be an ongoing effort as far as collecting data on vaccine breakthrough cases. Just to reiterate some of the numbers that were presented last week, as the Governor had stated, we were looking at a specific period of time, which will be updated from time to time, from December to April of this year. We had about 1319 – 1,319 breakthrough cases and of those, there were 92 individuals who were hospitalized. That's a testament to showing how the vaccine – it's living up to what other vaccine effectiveness studies have shown as far as diminishing the risk of becoming seriously ill with or becoming hospitalized with COVID-19 illness if you're vaccinated.

Governor Phil Murphy: Again, I think over time, we're going to be more robust on the data on that front. Thank you.

Alex, good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Good afternoon, Governor. Since you have signed S-3434, the bill that you referenced earlier, why did it take you so long to decide whether or not to sign it? It passed the Senate unanimously on June 3rd. It had earlier passed the Assembly. Was there an issue that you had with it? Was there something you wanted clarification on? Were you hearing from teachers' unions or any union members that encouraged you not to sign it, and did you consider vetoing it?

I'd also like to ask you about masks. Under the guidance that you've put forth right now that a child could go to summer camp – an unvaccinated child could be in summer camp and not need to wear a mask, simply be encouraged to wear a mask indoors, but if they went to summer school, they would have to wear a mask. Governor Cuomo recognized this discrepancy and he decided to make mask-wearing optional to the districts in schools. Will you do the same? Will you follow his lead? I wanted to follow up on a comment that you made on Monday. You talked about our post-pandemic life,

how things are going to open up. You said potentially not wearing masks if you were able to prove that you were vaccinated. Are you now leaning more towards a vaccine passport, and will you demand proof of vaccination before you relax the final masking rules in places like state buildings?

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. No real color to add on the S-3434, which is the special ed bill. We just want to make sure with every single bill that we vet it completely, we review it completely, understand it completely as I mentioned in my comments up front. It's in the category it's a lot of money, but it – frankly on this one, there's no amount of money that we shouldn't be willing to throw at these folks and their families. No more color.

I think too early to tell on the masking but again, I'll stay where I was to Mike's question. I really hope we can get to a good place on this and bear with us. Again, this is one as it relates to school in the fall. We've got time on the clock, and we want to use it.

I'm in no different place on the so-called question of proof of vaccine or vaccine passport. I just continue to be concerned. It's got a lot of attraction to it, but I can – I'm very concerned still about equity and the fact that we're still – our overall program is as successful – vaccination program is as successful as any state in America, and I think we should all be proud of that. We're making a lot of good progress on equity, but we still have wood to chop. That continues to be a vexing element for me, which is why we've not, as you've probably – you probably heard me say also that if the Devils were still in season, the Prudential Center could be sold out, and we're not asking for that proof. No new news there, but thank you.

Sir, good afternoon.

Reporter: Good afternoon. I have questions for everybody today.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm sorry?

Reporter: I said I have questions for everybody today.

Governor Phil Murphy: Oh, good, Christmas morning.

Reporter: For Commissioner Persichilli and Dr. Tan, are you seeing a resurgence of colds and other viral infections as people take off their masks and socialize more? What impact did COVID control measures have on this year's flu season, and what do you expect for the coming flu season as people return to work and school? We're hearing concerns that this season's flu vaccine may be less effective because there was so little flu circulating last year and is that something you're concerned about? For Colonel Callahan, why is the state having difficulty recruiting police officers, and what is being done to address that? Governor, for you, have you started a nationwide search for a new corrections commissioner? Do you have a date by which you would like to name Hicks's replacement? Then finally, if you're familiar with the bear incident in Morris County – sorry, I had to re-read this. Did that incident make you rethink your position on bear hunting? How concerned are you about the potential for dangerous interactions between bears and humans? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: You're all over the place there with those questions, right? Okay, you rarely get bear questions with recruitment or flu season. One thing I didn't say and I meant to say – and I would think – I don't want to put you two on the spot here, but it has been now two and a half weeks since we said you don't need to wear a mask anymore, and the numbers have stayed good, including they've continued to go in the right direction. It isn't just that they've stabilized. Hospitalizations, positivity rates, etc., are going in the right direction. Not the question you asked, but I meant to raise that earlier. I assume the two and a half weeks is the beginning at least. You were in a range where we would've been seeing something, you would think.

How worried are you about – I mean, the flu season was one of the best ones we've ever had, so the question I guess is, Tina, are you worried about a resurgence? What's that flu season look like, and is the vaccine – I'm not sure I understood the question. Would the flu vaccine be any less effective because less prevalence of the flu? I for one am going to go in, as I usually do in October, and get my flu shot. Please.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Well, first of all, flu is unpredictable. We say this every single year. It's really going to be hard to predict what the flu season is going to be like. That said, there were a lot of efforts that we did this past year related to COVID-19 control that really helped with limiting and minimizing influenza-like illness and other respiratory virus spread during this past respiratory virus season. That said, we have to be aware that efforts such as masking, social distancing, washing your hands, as the Governor had mentioned earlier, they all help with stemming the spread of any respiratory virus. Actually what we're seeing right now in our New Jersey trends – because we monitor flu and respiratory virus activity all year – is that indeed we are seeing a little bit of an increase in some respiratory viruses, specifically this virus called para-influenza

CDC, last week, had issued a health alert to healthcare providers and public health providers about the potential rise of inter-season respiratory syncytial virus. It's a virus that you typically see during the flu season but because there's been an increase in this respiratory syncytial virus, RSV activity this past summer, particularly in the summer states, not so much here in New Jersey but in the southern states. CDC has put out an alert for clinicians to be advised that first of all, if you see somebody presenting to your office with respiratory illness and they test negative for SARS CoV-2, consider other diagnoses such as respiratory syncytial virus or – and do testing for other viruses. Very importantly for the public is if you're sick and you've got a respiratory illness and you're negative for SARS CoV-2 as we had said before, please stay home until you're better. We got to remember that we've got all these other viruses that are potentially circulating out there, and we have to be mindful of that.

Governor Phil Murphy: I got to believe the simple – again, I'm the least qualified to answer this. The simple less use of this means we're going to see a higher level of flu and other respiratory than we did last year. Does that...

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Yeah, absolutely. Again, what we're seeing right now in our disease activity, we're seeing para-influenza virus activity pick up. We typically see that around this time of year anyway, but we didn't see it last year. We saw it this year because of the less masking, less social distancing, and the respiratory syncytial virus, the RSV circulation in the South, it is concerning, so that's why we just want to make sure that people just be mindful and remember all those things we learned during COVID, to remember to stay home when you're sick.

Governor Phil Murphy: Great point. If you've got a temperature, you don't feel well, take yourself off the field – we haven't said that in a while – even if you're negative for COVID. Real quick on my side and then I'll turn it to Pat, nothing new on the corrections department search. We've got a very highly qualified person who's the acting commissioner and indeed, this will be a national search.

In all seriousness, there's been more than one or two bear sightings. I was with the mayor of Irvington last week and we had one in Irvington a couple of weeks ago in Essex County. You mentioned the Morris County example. We need to be vigilant about nonlethal ways to manage this reality. Again, Connecticut hasn't had a bear hunt I think since 1848, and they've been able to do that. They're our neighboring state of ours. I think that's – this is – I'm very glad we were able to take the step, but that does not mean that we can let our guard down and not be vigilant about finding ways to manage the population that are nonlethal.

Pat, I don't think the recruitment of police challenges are at all unique to New Jersey. This is, I think, a national reality, and I assume among other things, you get a lot of folks – when you look at who we chewed up in the first batches of people to get vaccinated, it was healthcare workers and first responders because among other things, law enforcement in many cases, were the first persons in the door in houses with people who were COVID-positive. I got to believe that's not an insignificant factor. What other thoughts do you have?

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Although it is a national challenge as far as the numbers go, I would also take this opportunity to point out the qualified and diverse candidates that we are still getting in the door. I know of no other state in the country that graduated 309 new troopers during an unprecedented pandemic, and that speaks to the quality of these recruits. Thanks to the Governor's support, we have a class of 200-plus starting in August. Hopefully on the heels of that, we have the next class going in in February. Although the numbers may be down for various reasons, again, the quality and diversity of these new troopers is phenomenal.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, and the diversity, just having been a guy who is in the midst of your colleagues every single day of my life but also having been to both graduations, it is incredibly impressive and heartwarming, and it's reflective in so many respects, the folks coming in, of the great diversity of our state. Hats off to you and your colleagues. Thank you for that.

Dave, you're going to take us home.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Thank you, Governor. There's been a lot of talk lately and especially today. We're very close to the 4.7 million target, and yet some people, as you pointed out today, Governor, continue to resist getting vaccinated. What do you think the top two or three reasons are that people are not getting vaccinated? I mean, it's very clear. More than 99.9% of people who get vaccinated don't get COVID.

Governor Phil Murphy: Or don't get sick enough.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Don't get sick enough to –

Governor Phil Murphy: To be hospitalized.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hospitalized or tested, right. I mean, it seems like it's very clear, so what do you think are the reasons that people are still not getting vaccinated? The whole bit with our target of 4.7 million adults by the end of June, why is this so significant? How confident are you that we'll get there? We are slowing down every week. Judy, could you

talk a little bit about – and this is sort of related but it's kind of different as well. I believe the latest number that Donna gave me from the Health Department is that there are 980 long-term care workers that have not been – I'm sorry, that have COVID and is it still an issue? Are we still keeping track of the long-term care workers that have not gotten vaccinated? I know a couple of months ago, we were at 56%. Then I think we went to 58, which is not much of an increase. Are we making any headway with regard to this? Final question, contact tracing, is it still taking place? Is anybody doing this? How are they doing it? What are these folks working on now? I mean, I guess COVID cases have dropped pretty significantly. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good – all good questions. I'm going to give some thoughts, Judy, then turn it to you and give the real answers, as it were. Why 4.7 million? Because that – and Judy should speak to this, and Tina – 70% has some amount of magic to it, particularly if you add to that folks who have already had COVID. We haven't heard the phrase herd immunity in a long time, and I think the health officials discourage using that phrase. You get to a – I'll use critical mass that is where you need to tip your society into a much better place. You asked am I confident? The answer is I am confident. I really believe we're going to get there.

Reasons for not, I'm not sure Judy's got any survey results. I think a lot – it's a mix. The door-knocking has been particularly effective for us. For all the noise around the Shot and the Beer and Uncork the Vaccine and Vax Pass and the dinner with Tammy and me, all of which have worked, the real grinding day in and day out knocking on the door – I think it's a combination of didn't have information, couldn't get to a site, homebound or for whatever reason, schedules that – work schedules. We still have a lot of folks in the state working two or three shifts. Historic reasons, Tony Vauss in Irvington and I were in a barber shop in Irvington last Friday with Brian Bridges, the Secretary of Higher Education, and we had a great conversation but it was a sobering one in the respect it was about in black communities in particular, a very sordid history in our country of vaccination and using persons of color as so-called guinea pigs. Those are understandable historic reasons. There's also a block of folks who are so-called anti-vaxxers in this state. I don't know what the latest data is, but that number has never gone above the point that we felt the 70% was in peril. Assuming I'm right and we do achieve it this month, that will prove that out. I'm sure there are other factors.

Then on long-term care, the progress has been in the right direction, but it's still not where it needs to be among staff. Judy, Pat, and I were on the phone earlier. The vaccination rates of seniors, whether they're in long-term care or they're not, is really impressive I mean, that part is almost jaw-dropping, almost 90% as I recall. I just would repeat something we haven't said in about a month. If you are in a long-term care facility or you've got a loved one in there, ask the management what's your percentage of long-term care staff – again, these staff members have been, in so many respects, heroic. We're not trying to vilify them, but what's the percent that's vaccinated and what's your plan to get that number higher?

Judy, anything on any of that and any color? We haven't – the words contact tracing, which we used to – meant – speak in our sleep have not been spoken from this podium in a while. Over to you.

Health Department Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Thank you. We currently have about 2700, 2,745 contact tracers still active in our counties. They do more than just COVID contact tracing. They're being trained to help the county – the local county health departments and local health departments do more of the communicable disease contact tracing. That number will come down as we see the COVID cases come down just by virtue of the workload. Right now, it's about 2700 still very active not only doing COVID but learning to do other activities as well.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, may I – just on that one, we haven't said this in a while. Contact tracing didn't just get invented with COVID-19, right? It's important to note that the infrastructure existed. We just bulked it up and put a lot of resources directly at this virus.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Right, and just to emphasize what the Commissioner said is that we have contact tracing still happening. As long as there are cases of COVID-19, there's still going to be contact tracing activities. That's why it's really important to reinforce what the Commissioner tends to say at every presser. Please take the call. If you're a case, please take that call so we can identify those contacts, get appropriate containment measures, particularly as we're heading toward the home stretch of this marathon that we've been running.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, color on why folks aren't getting vaccinated and/or long-term care staff?

Health Department Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Okay, I'll talk about long-term care first. Right now, our most recent survey shows that 86.3% of the residents have been vaccinated in long-term care, so that's a really good percentage, 64.7% of the staff. That is going up every week. I have to say that the owners, the managers, the union leaders that we've been on calls with have been very responsive in trying to get the staff fully vaccinated. So 64.7 – 70% is not a magic number but it's certainly a number we feel anything above that is really excellent. I think we'll get there. It takes – the hesitancy is long-standing for many of particularly communities of color based on clinical trials that are in

our history and a fear that the repeat of that. With good education – we've done so many stakeholder calls. With good education and awareness-building, I'm seeing that number increase week over week, which is really a good thing.

Let me talk about the outbreaks in long-term care. You may recall in January, we were reporting 450, 460 outbreaks in our facilities, meaning 460 facilities with outbreaks. Today, we're reporting 52, so 52 of our facilities right now have what we call active outbreak. An active outbreak is one positive case either in staff or in a resident. If you look at those 52 that are an active outbreak, since the beginning of their active outbreak, which could be three or four months ago, the cumulative number of staff that have tested positive is in the 900 range. Of the 52 that are in active outbreak right now, 17 of them are reporting no cases, so 17 of the 52 have no active cases. What that means is they have no active cases and they are working out their outbreak status. They have to remain with no cases for 28 days. I expect the 52 to go down and the cumulative number of 900 to go down as well. Again, some of those – for example, no active outbreaks, active cases in the 17, some of those individuals three and four months ago were positive and were working through.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, I'd just say –

Health Department Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Tina, did I get that right?

Governor Phil Murphy: Tina, you good?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: I'm not saying anything.

Governor Phil Murphy: Just two other quick points and we'll wrap. One is, again, we're not trying to vilify the staff. Remember, after all these folks were in the middle of the hurricane when it hit. It's important that there's a plan at each one of these facilities and chains of facilities where they've got a plan in place. The numbers are proving that things are going in the right direction, thankfully.

The last point I want to make, which we've already said and we've said many times, but the 70%, discussing the magic, etc., we're not stopping. Assuming we get to 70, we're not going to stop. We're going to stay at this and keep driving. With that, I'm going to mask up. I want to thank Judy and Tina. Pat, likewise, Parimal, Matt, the rest of the team, Mahen. Again, we'll be – I'll bet you we'll be somewhere on the road in the next couple of days. We wish everyone a solemn and at long last commemoration of Juneteenth, a state holiday this Friday, long time coming. Make sure, folks, you remember that point about the history Americans who were freed for 900 days and yet did not know it. It's extraordinary. As it relates to COVID, folks, get vaccinated. I promise you, it's in your personal best interest. Keep doing what you're doing, folks, by the millions. Let's enjoy this great weather. You're on the shore, on one of our lakes, on one of our main streets. We're in the fat, great season in New Jersey. Enjoy it, folks. Take care. God bless.

Governor Phil Murphy

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