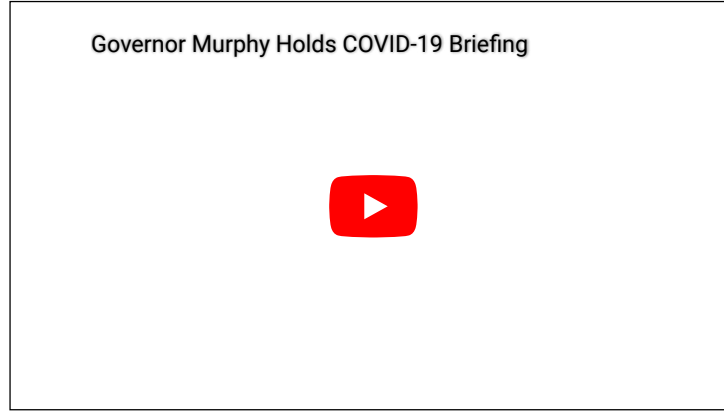


Governor Phil Murphy

# TRANSCRIPT: February 8th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

02/8/2021



**Governor Phil Murphy:** Good afternoon, everyone. I hope everybody enjoyed the Super Bowl last night. I didn't see that one coming, I have to say. That was not the game I expected. But more importantly, I hope everyone enjoyed the game responsibly though the snowstorm may have had an impact on some plans.

Honored to be joined by 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 State's Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan, great to have you both. Guy to my left who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. Jared Maples is with us, the Director of the Office of Homeland Security Preparedness; Chief Counsel Parimal Garg and a cast of thousands.

This morning we are proud to announce that we have now exceeded more than 1 million COVID vaccination doses statewide. Our dashboard shows that number administered as of midmorning, and that breaks down to 813,216 initial doses and 224,237 second shots. For those tracking at home – and this trend, I think, is an important one and I think Judy, our hope is we keep this trend up, the shape of the curve, if not even accelerate it. When we administered our first vaccine on December 15<sup>th</sup>, it took us 29 days to get to a quarter-of-a-million administered. It then took another 10 days for us to get to 500,000. It's only taken us 16 days to go from 500,000 to 1 million. Even with the continued scarcity in supply and the rescheduling caused by snowstorms, we have put 500,000 vaccine doses in arms in just a little over two weeks. This is definitely forward progress and it shows how we are working to maximize every dose we received from the federal government to administer the vaccine to those currently eligible, including our seniors, and it also shows the increased rates of vaccinations by CVS and Walgreens given to the older adults, residents with disabilities, and workers in our long-term care facilities.

Make no mistake, while this is a significant milestone, we have a good ways to go to reach our ultimate goal of 4.7 million vaccinated adults by the beginning of summer. I'm in that Memorial Day to Fourth of July window. We are definitely on our way but we need much greater supply to get the vaccination infrastructure we purpose-built from the ground up working to its full potential, especially in the six mega sites that are capable. In the aggregate, those six sites are capable of vaccinating 10,000 to 15,000 people a day.

But as we discussed here on Friday, we are seeing increases in our supplies over the next three weeks and that is a big step in the right direction as it means we'll have more appointment slots we can open up and it means as well that we can look to the day where we can make more residents eligible for vaccines, folks like our educators and our other essential workers. So this is a great barrier we have crossed but we are not resting on any laurels here. No trophies, no ribbons, no spiking the football in the spirit of Super Bowl Monday, but we're going to keep at it until we reach our goal and we are going to do our part to meet President Biden's nationwide goal of 150 million vaccinations in his first 100 days.

Next up, let's switch gears and take a look at the current educational configurations in our 811 state-overseen whether they be public school districts, charter schools, Renaissance schools, and schools for students with disabilities. We are reporting a strong and continued movement toward in-person instruction and you can see the numbers there. As of this morning, 95 are open for all in-person instruction. That's an increase of six since the last time we spoke to this last Monday. Over the past week, another 21 have moved to a hybrid model and that's now up to 491 schools or districts. The number remaining all-remote is now at 190. That's down 23 from last week, and 35 are employing some sort of a mix, that's down from 39.

As I noted, the trend is going steadily in the direction of in-person instruction, at least in some form, which further supports our work toward making more educators eligible for vaccinations beyond those who are currently eligible either because of age or health conditions. We again thank all in this extraordinarily unusual and stressful year, all of the local school leaders and officials, the educators, our parents, kids, the stakeholders who are still working hard with their County Executive Superintendents and the Department of Education to ensure the right decisions are made for their district educational communities.

Switching gears again, as we have previously noted, the school elections originally scheduled for January and March of this year, as well as the fire district elections scheduled for this month have all been delayed until April 20<sup>th</sup> to coincide with the school elections scheduled for that day. That's not new news, we spoke to this some time ago. We took this step in order to conserve the state's resources and reduce the burden on local election officials. Today we are announcing that these scheduled April 20<sup>th</sup> elections, as well as the municipal nonpartisan elections scheduled for May 11<sup>th</sup> will be conducted in person. As always, voters will have the ability to request a vote-by-mail ballot for any reason. We will ensure that all in-person polling places adhere to proper health and safety protocols including face coverings, social distancing, and frequent sanitation.

We are able to take this step as our COVID numbers are headed -- I emphasize headed -- in the right direction and we are optimistic that these trends will continue, especially as more residents get vaccinated and the weather also becomes warmer. This is very different than the situation we confronted last summer, when we had to make a decision on the November election, knowing that our models showed a huge surge of COVID cases in the fall, which unfortunately, came to pass. While we are not making a decision on the June primary elections at this point, we are optimistic that we'll be able to conduct in-person voting in June as well.


Switching gears again, before we get to the overnight numbers, I want to speak to the numbers being released by the Department of Banking and Insurance today regarding the success of the initial open enrollment period through our new state-run Affordable Care Act health exchange, Get Covered New Jersey. The initial open enrollment period closed on January 31<sup>st</sup>, so that was a week ago yesterday, and I have announced a special enrollment period through May 15<sup>th</sup> in response to the pandemic, to allow those who still need health insurance to get covered. No questions asked, by the way; anybody can be a part of that. Since Get Covered New Jersey went live on November 1<sup>st</sup> of last year, 269,500 New Jerseyans purchased a health plan through the marketplace. This is an increase of 9.4% over last year's enrollment period when our marketplace was still being run by the federal government.


Additionally, over the past three months, more than 75,000 new consumers purchased on the exchange. This part is really quite remarkable: consumers receiving income-based financial assistance for their plans are paying, on average, just about \$121 a month for their plans. That's \$43 per month lower than the plans they purchased in 2020 and it's even \$27 per month lower than in 2014 when the ACA marketplaces first opened. I offer my congratulations to Commissioner Marlene Caride and her team at the Department of Banking and Insurance, as well as to the Director of the Office of Health Care Accountability and Transparency, Shabnam Salih, for all their hard work in making our initial marketplace a success. And again, as I mentioned, [getcovered.nj.gov](https://www.getcovered.nj.gov) is the website. That will remain open through May 15<sup>th</sup> for a special enrollment period so residents who need health insurance can have another chance at purchasing an affordable policy.

With that, let's get to the overnight numbers. Judy, I'm going to say right up front on testing, at least, we should be combining today and tomorrow, looking at a blended average, I think, right? We've got some reasons why I think this number is artificially low, 2,218 positive PCRs, 516 presumed positive rapid tests. We know that there is an electronic lab reporting issue. The numbers, I think, are lower on the PCR side, at least, than they should be. I think you'll see in tomorrow's numbers, so take Monday and Tuesday, divide it by two and that'll give you a realistic sense.

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The positivity rate for last Thursday's 53,738 recorded PCR tests was 8.5%. Judy, nice to see that in single digits a couple of days in a row. The statewide rate of transmission is currently 0.85.

In our hospitals, we have 2,814 in total, 2,633 confirmed COVID positive, another 181 awaiting results. Of the total, 540 were in intensive care, 373 of whom were on a ventilator. Throughout the day yesterday, 255 live patients were discharged; 256 new patients COVID positive came in. At the risk of comparing apples to oranges, 40 in-hospital deaths reported over the past day.

So overall, the metrics we are seeing continue to point in the right direction. The number of new cases, both in terms of raw numbers and the rate of transmission, while still high, are far off the peaks we saw just several weeks ago. The numbers in our hospitals, in our ICUs and on ventilators are all also off their peaks. Importantly, we're seeing a lot of days like today where the numbers of folks leaving is either greater than the numbers coming in or about equal. The more of those days we have, the better.

All of this means that our healthcare system remains in a very strong position and capable of treating those currently in its care. As we have discussed many times before, ensuring the stability of our hospitals has far and away been the most pressing reason behind the steps we've taken, even more than the number of new cases. We simply could not allow our hospitals to get to a point where they were overloaded and unable to care for everyone. Every day over the past several weeks, we have been stepping further and further away from that danger point. If these trends continue, and continuing these trends rests entirely with not just us, but all of us, the millions of us, it's in our hands, we can again look to additional steps to further reopen our economy. Obviously, these variants that we talk about are something that we're watching like a hawk and obviously very closely.

Because of the work that you've put in to push our numbers down, folks, on Friday our restaurants were able to expand their indoor dining capacity from 25% to 35%. We're already hearing from many restaurants, owners and managers about how this step is going to give them a boost for getting through the winter. I, like you, want to allow them to open even more. If the numbers continue to improve over time, we can responsibly do so. We ate outside with a couple of our kids on Friday night, a little chilly, but it was good to see a good spirit and let's hope that continues.

In the meantime, many of our restaurants continue to look to additional assistance from either the New Jersey Economic Development Authority or the New Jersey Redevelopment Authority to help them stay strong for the point at which we can further expand indoor dining. One of these establishments is

Sol Sazon, a Dominican restaurant located in Willingboro and co-owned by brothers Thomas and Luis -- Luis is the chef, that's him there -- Geronimo. I had the opportunity to check in with Tom on Friday. They're excited to be able to attend to more customers in addition to those helping them by purchasing to-go meals, but it took a grant from the Redevelopment Authority's small business lease emergency assistance grant program to ensure that they could stay open through the pandemic. Sol Sazon is among countless restaurants and small businesses across the state which have relied upon such relief to pay their expenses and stay open. Let's do more together to ensure that they will make it entirely on their own. Check them out by the way, [SolSazon.com](http://SolSazon.com) is the website. Their address is 4324 Route 130 North in Willingboro.

We are certainly excited by passing our 1 millionth vaccine dose administered today, but we know we have a long way to go. We have to continue relying on the practices we know will protect lives and further slow the spread of the virus: social distancing, wearing our face masks, washing our hands, taking yourself off the field, if you don't feel well or if you've been exposed, using good old common sense. All of this together is how we beat this virus.

However, we do have the solemn duty today to report with a heavy heart another 25 deaths which are now confirmed to have been from COVID-related complications. This moves our statewide total to 22,011, including 2,187 probable deaths. As we do each day, let's take a couple minutes to remember several more of the blessed brothers and sisters who we have lost.

We start this week by remembering this guy, Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Rindenow. A longtime fixture in Passaic's proud Jewish community, he had moved to Safed, Israel only several months ago to join several of his children who had emigrated there. I've never been to Safed, but it's a renowned community in Israel. It's in the very north and it's basically an artist's community, and apparently it's beautiful. The Rabbi and his wife Mindy moved to Passaic roughly 30 years ago from Israel, by way of San Francisco, where he previously was a teacher. Rabbi Rindenow and Mindy would raise their family in Passaic, where he would work on staff of the Passaic Torah Institute, serve as Rabbi of the Carlebach Minyan of Passaic and Clifton, and where he would also apply his other profession as a psychotherapist.

Together, he and Mindy would be blessed with 10 children, and nine of his children survive him today. One son, Shlomo, was tragically killed in an accident while serving with the Israel Defense Forces Engineering Corps in 2016. We send condolences to Mindy and their children. I actually spoke to Mindy and her son Akiva, who are in Safed, this morning. We keep the Jewish communities in Passaic, not just the family but the Jewish communities of Passaic and Clifton in our thoughts as well. Rabbi, may your memory be a blessing to all.


Next up, to honor the life of Munro's William Gorelick. Bill was 93 and called nearly 75 years living in Plainfield, New Brunswick, Edison and ultimately Monroe. A graduate of New Brunswick High, he was a student at Rutgers University when he was drafted into service as a medic during the Korean War. When his time in uniform ended, he got his start in business owning Brown's Stationery Store in Dunellen, before partnering with his father and brother to open the greeting card and gift store, Card-O-Rama in Perth Amboy, which they would eventually expand to 30 locations up and down the East Coast.

His business days behind him, Bill spent his retirement on the golf course or on the tennis court, and always remained an avid reader. He was a deeply devoted husband to his late wife, Judy, a proud father of sons, Bruce, Steve and Michael and a loving grandfather to Alison, Emily, Mitchell and Cory, all of whom he now leaves behind. He also leaves behind his brother Jerry. I spoke to Bill's son Steve, who is no stranger and as you can imagine, he was busted up about his dad. Steve is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Motion Picture and Television Commission. May Bill's memory also be a blessing to those who mourn him. We thank him for being a proud and exemplary member of our New Jersey family.


Finally, today, we remember Pauline Arnold of the Hopelawn section of Woodbridge Township. She had lived there since 1952 and was 92 years old. I believe she was Irish, Pat, I'm not sure of that. I will have to get back to you on that. Pauline and her late husband Albert chose Hopelawn as the place where they would raise their family. She settled into the community and was a nearly 70-year parishioner at the Good Shepherd Roman Catholic Church there. Family was foremost to Pauline, whether it be summer vacations in Point Pleasant, or making everybody – and she meant everybody, by the way – dance should the song Run Around Sue come on the radio, by the one and only Dion. You and I remember Dion, a guy from the Bronx who had a lot of connections to Jersey and lived here for a while. Or, whether it was maintaining her Christmas Eve tradition of buying her kids, grandkids and great-grandkids matching pajamas and then refereeing the race to see who could put them on first. When she turned 80, two of her grandsons helped her cross off one bucket list item with a trip to Germany. We actually did that with my mom. Pauline is now reunited with Albert, who passed away in 1990 and she is survived by her daughters Barbara, Diane and Marie, and their families, including eight grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren. Her 14th great-grandchild, by the way, is on the way. I had the great honor of speaking to one of our granddaughters, Kelly Joy on Friday and she was quite a grandmother. What a tremendous spirit, who has left us. May God bless and watch over Pauline and all who loved her.

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For them and for all we've lost, by the way, you may have read this morning, a Congressman from Texas, Ron Wright passed away from COVID. Let's always remember in our state, in every person we talk about, this is a life that was lived, a life that's lost, family, who loved them left behind, every one of them a proud New Jerseyan. Let's honor all as best we can and that is by doing all that we can to save every life, to keep up with the practices of social distancing, wearing face masks, washing hands with soap and water, getting tested appropriately, getting vaccinated if you're up to bat.

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Finally, today, a point of personal privilege. I want to talk about that guy. I want to spend a moment to acknowledge the passing yesterday of former United States Secretary of State George Shultz. He turned 100 in December. Several reasons I wanted to bring him up. He was big-time New Jersey. He was born in Manhattan but he grew up in Englewood, and he attended college at Princeton University. He served a number of administrations in a variety of capacities, including as Secretary of Labor under President Nixon, Treasury Secretary, and one of the longest-serving Secretaries of State in our nation's history. He was also as knowledgeable as anyone on government and in the area of diplomacy and Foreign Service; he never wavered from his position that America must remain in an active and forward-leaning role on the world stage.

But it's also personal. This guy was very good to me when I was US Ambassador, he helped me out of a couple of really tough situations. I introduced him once at an event and I got the ultimate – like, it'll never get better than this – he walked up to me after and he said, "Ambassador, that was quite an introduction. May I have a copy of that?" I thought, man, it won't get any better than that. When you ask career Foreign Service folks, I think just about 20 years after he had left State in the final days of President Reagan's term, when you ask them who were their favorite Secretaries of State, literally not most of the time, all the time, the two that came up were Colin Powell and George Shultz, guys who walked the floors, lead from the front, didn't ask you to do something that they weren't willing to do themselves.

But I'm going to leave you with one great George Shultz, story, Judy before I hand it over to you. So when he was Secretary of State, this became legend and you were an Ambassador, either a political appointee as I was or career Foreign Service and you were about to go out to your posting, he would want to see you before you left. He'd bring you in, you'd have a conversation, advice, how's your family and whatnot. He had a huge globe in his office on the seventh floor at the State Department. He would say in every one of these meetings, "Hey, by the way, show me your country." Apparently, I'm told, eight or nine out of 10 times the man or the woman would spin the globe and point to the place they were headed. Schultz would spill the globe back and point to the lower 48 and say, "That is your country and don't you ever forget it." Isn't that a great story?

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

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Thank you, Governor and good afternoon, everyone. As the Governor shared, we have hit a milestone of more than 1 million doses administered in our state so I first want to thank all those who worked hard to set up the sites across the state, to vaccinate, and all of those who have rolled up their sleeves to get the vaccine.

The call center continues to answer questions, help individuals register and schedule appointments for those who are eligible. Since live agents have been available, they have spoken with more than 50,000 individuals. Agents have registered more than 6,000 people and scheduled more than 600 vaccination appointments. This weekend alone, agents spoke to more than 16,000 callers. They registered 514 individuals and scheduled 286 appointments. We know that the public has questions and concerns about the vaccine. Today, I want to share with you some of the frequently asked questions the department has been receiving, along with the answers.

First, I want to remind everyone that there is no cost to get vaccinated. There is no out-of-pocket expense. You can receive a vaccine regardless of your documentation status or your insurance status, but you do have to live, work or study in New Jersey to be eligible.

We often get asked, can the COVID vaccine give you COVID-19? The vaccines cannot cause infection with COVID-19. In fact, the two vaccines that we are currently administering cannot infect you at all. The current vaccines do not contain any live virus or attenuated virus.

Will the vaccines work against the variants we are hearing about? Well, in most cases, yes, they have been found to be very good stopping severe illness, hospitalization, and death. However, Oxford University said over the weekend that early data from a small study suggested that the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is not authorized in the United States yet, offers only minimal protection against mild disease caused by the South African variant. The lead researcher for that vaccine manufacturer said on Sunday that they expect by fall to have a modified vaccine to deal with the South African variant.

Another question we get asked a lot is should pregnant women get vaccinated? The CDC and its Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommends that women talk to their healthcare provider about whether they should get vaccinated. When making a decision, pregnant women and their healthcare providers should consider the level of COVID-19 community transmission. They should also consider the patient's personal risk of contracting COVID-19 and the risks of COVID-19 not only to the woman, but the potential risks to the fetus. Additional considerations are the efficacy of the vaccine and the side effects of the vaccine. Based on current

knowledge, experts believe that the mRNA vaccines, which are the Pfizer and Moderna, are unlikely to pose a risk to pregnant women or their fetus. However, the potential risks of mRNA vaccines to the pregnant person and the fetus are unknown, because these vaccines really have not been studied in pregnant women.

Are the two different vaccines interchangeable? The COVID-19 vaccines are not interchangeable with each other or with other COVID-19 vaccine products. The safety and efficacy of a mixed product series has not been evaluated. Both doses of the series should be completed with the same product.

Here's a question that I get asked every day. Why isn't there more vaccine? Well, it takes time to produce vaccines and the production capacity of Pfizer and Moderna vaccines is increasing slowly. It's great news that we are closer to having an additional vaccine to protect the state, now that J&J submitted its application to the FDA on Thursday night. The FDA is scheduled to review the vaccine candidate's clinical trial data on February 26<sup>th</sup>. Johnson & Johnson has said it hopes to provide the federal government with 100 million doses by April. The J&J vaccine is only one shot and doesn't require ultra-cold storage. What are the advantages of that vaccine? Well, there is an advantage of only having to need one shot. It will be more mobile, the vaccine will travel better, and in fact it will travel so well it would be easier to deploy the vaccine closer to where individuals live.

If I get vaccinated, do I still need to wear a mask or face covering? Yes, you will still need to wear a mask and follow all safeguarding methods until enough individuals are vaccinated to produce community protection. We know that the vaccine keeps you from getting sick, but we don't know yet if the vaccine prevents a person from contracting the virus and then spreading the virus.

When will there be more visitation at long-term care facilities? We recognize the physical separation from family and other loved ones has taken a significant toll on our residents of nursing homes. We are still concerned that our long-term care facilities are still experiencing outbreaks. In fact, there are 417 active outbreaks as we sit here today. According to the Centers for Medicare/Medicaid Services, visitation is tied to the levels of spread in the community. The department has released a directive on the phased-in reopening of facilities that is based on the outbreak status of the facility, its ability to meet criteria including, but not limited to, testing of staff and residents, infection control protocols, adequate staffing and personal protective equipment and is tied to the timing of the state's reopening plans. However, end-of-life visits, compassionate care visits, and essential caregiver visits continue. We hope that as more people get vaccinated, the spread of the virus in the community will lessen and that it will also lessen in facilities. It is also vital that healthcare workers in long-term care facilities also get vaccinated, as we know this is one way that the virus enters these facilities. In time, safe visitation will be restored.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 2,814 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients and persons under investigation, with 540 individuals in critical care and 69% of critical care patients on ventilators. There are no new reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children, however, we have a cumulative total in our state of 88 cases. Three of these children are still currently hospitalized.

There are a total of 31 reports of the B-117 variant, otherwise known as the UK variant. Three of the individuals had a known travel history. Atlantic County has reported one, Burlington four, Essex four, Hudson one, Mercer one, Middlesex two, Monmouth two, Morris two, Ocean 12 cases, Passaic one and Warren one.

At the state veteran homes there are no new cases among residents, and at the state psychiatric hospitals, no new cases among patients.

The Daily positivity as of February 4<sup>th</sup> in the state is 8.5%. The Northern part of the state reports 8.43, Central 8.74, and the Southern part of the state 8.25.

That concludes my daily report. As always, 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 for everything, including I love the frequently asked questions review. Is this statement true to you and Tina? It is still the case – I say this a lot and I want to make sure I've got your permission to continue to say it – no one on Earth at this point knows the answer to the following question: how often do I need to get vaccinated? Is it annual? Is it once in 10, once in a lifetime? Is that fair to say? I'm still good on that? Okay, so that's another question I get asked, are we going to have to go through this whole thing again next year? The answer is, no one knows. If Tony Fauci were sitting between us he would say the same thing. Thank you for that. I love that you're going through those questions.

Pat, we got the Super Bowl. I think it's probably too early to tell whether or not any knucklehead behavior came out of that. Anything you've got on compliance? We feel like we're now in a weather pattern. I get worried when you get into one of these, I'm dating myself but the groove on the record and you can't get out of it. But we had a pretty good shot yesterday, something potentially tonight, tomorrow, maybe again later in the week. Whatever you've got there will be great. Thank you.

**State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan:** Thanks, Governor. Good afternoon. With regards to compliance, police responded to Black Diamond Billiards in Union, again no facial coverings, no social distancing. This was the third time that establishment has been cited for EO violations, among others.

A little bit of a post mortem on yesterday, troopers investigated 233 motor vehicle accidents, assisted 135 motorists. Again, we think we dodged a bullet with regard to outages, they capped out at 958 and the service providers did a phenomenal job getting those folks back online again. Again, unfortunately, the validity of the groundhog's prediction seems to be right. We have a storm starting early, about 2:00 a.m. they think Tuesday into Wednesday and that should be about two to four for the Northern part, maybe an inch around the Central part, and then rain down south. Then again, snow is forecast to begin late Wednesday into Thursday, and then a second wave Thursday into Friday, which right now the snow maps are a little uncertain but maybe eight inches or so there, Gov. So we are definitely in a pattern of just a constant barrage, but with all of our partners, we're certainly monitoring it.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thank you for that. And again, I think we said this probably until we're blue in the face. We just hope everyone enjoyed the game responsibly last night. Otherwise, we may see what we saw coming out of the holidays. I don't think there's, at this moment, any reason to believe that we won't be on the regular rhythm this week, so Monday, Wednesday, Friday, which means we'll be with you virtually tomorrow and back together unless Mahen tells us otherwise at one o'clock on Wednesday. With that, Matt, we'll start with you. Good afternoon.

#### Q&A Session

**Matt Arco, Star-Ledger:** Good afternoon, Governor. There are proposals in Washington to reduce the income limits for full stimulus for individuals and married couples. One plan would reduce it to people earning less than \$50,000. What do you think about that, especially as a Governor of a state with a higher cost of living?

We're continuing to hear small reports with people not hearing back from Department of Labor. Are you aware if there are more claims that still need to be processed, and when those people will get certified?

When people are vaccinated, they're getting a card that verifies they've been vaccinated. We've been hearing that Walgreens hasn't been handing out those cards. Does this pose a problem for those residents?

Commissioner, when did the call centers start making appointments? Were they first or second doses, or both?

Also, any insight into what's happening in Ocean County with the UK variant? You said that was much higher numbers. Had any travel been associated with Ocean or any other insight?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I don't have a deep-seated passion about the rescue bill that's being debated but I think the broader and stronger it can be, the better. Whether that's for the state, whether it's for money to support vaccinations, testing or I think relative to families, I think it goes true for all of the above. As you rightfully pointed out, we are among the higher cost of living states in the country. So not a deep passion, but I think this is the time to go big.

Department of Labor, Rob Angelo reached out to me. He got through the 75,000 folks a lot faster than he was predicting on Friday, and so I want to take my hat off to him and his team. That unlocked itself over the weekend. The note to me was there are still some people who are pending in that group, but there are, in fact according to him, specific reasons associated with their particular case. This has migrated from one class of persons, all of whom have the same challenge, to now uniqueness on a particular case. If it's other than that, we'll come back to you.

I don't have a reaction on Walgreens, but we'll track it down. Mahen, we can track that down, or Judy and your team. This is the first I've heard of it but not to say it isn't the case. I can't read my writing on the last one but I believe it was for you, Judy. One more time, Matt?

**Matt Arco, Star-Ledger:** On the Walgreens?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** No, the next one. The last one you asked, you said for the Commissioner.

**Matt Arco, Star-Ledger:** About the call center. When did they start making the appointments? Was it for first doses or second doses or both?

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** My understanding is they started making first dose appointments last week, I think it was actually Wednesday. I don't know about second dose appointments.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** We can come back to you. It was to have been on Sunday and then the storm pushed it to Wednesday. We'll come back to you on the second dose. Mahen, will you help me follow up there? Thank you. Sir, anything?

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
**Reporter:** Yes, I've just got one from Alex Zdan. There's a word in it that I don't know how to pronounce so I'll skip it, it's regarding a bill. Governor, why did you choose to sign the bill decriminalizing things such as magic mushrooms while marijuana decriminalization is still stalled? What is the status of negotiations on marijuana decrim and the enabling legislation? Thank you.

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**Governor Phil Murphy:** Nothing new on the marijuana front. Again, we've had very good back and forth with Members of the Legislature, with the leadership, for which I thank them, as well as Members of each Chamber. Again, we're still trying to find our way to that point that we all want to get to which is to get this done, to get it done the right way, that both protects our kids from the criminal justice system but also legalizes cannabis in the right, responsible way. I've got nothing really to add on mushrooms unless you do, Parimal?

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**Chief Counsel Parimal Garg:** I would just say it was an appropriate revision to the criminal statutes around mushrooms. It's still a criminal offence. It's a disorderly persons offense and other states, including Colorado and Oregon, have actually gone much farther and decriminalized mushrooms altogether.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** That's an important point. It's adjusted, but it's still a criminal offence in New Jersey. Thank you. Sir, great mask.

**Reporter:** Thank you, sir. My mom will be happy to hear that. Governor, on February 1<sup>st</sup>, the state dashboard reported fewer cases among residents and staff in long-term care. The decrease was about 1,800 fewer from the previous day. The number you're currently reporting is lower than it was on January 31<sup>st</sup>. Can you explain that?

An FDA advisory panel will decide on Johnson & Johnson's emergency use authorization on February 26<sup>th</sup>. If that vaccine does get the EUA, how long will it take for Johnson & Johnson doses to become available at New Jersey's vaccine sites?

Third, will any of this week's 250,000 doses be prioritized for teachers? Would you consider funneling teacher vaccines through the Department of Education, as some have asked, to streamline the process for frustrated educators who simply can't get an appointment?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I don't have any quick reaction on the numbers that you asked about. We can get back to you, so bear with us, and we'll come back to you on the first question. Mahen, will you help me out there?

J&J, going before the committee, I think, on February 26<sup>th</sup>. I think that is the right date. I believe they believe they can put doses on the streets, if they get approval that is obviously, in March, probably about two weeks later. I don't know how many will come to us. If we're per capita, we're usually in and around 3% of the nation so you can sort of do the math on that one, but it's meaningful. And as Judy pointed out, it's one dose and it's regular refrigeration, and it looks like it works so that's a pretty good combination. They've got to obviously opine on the safety and the efficacy, the professionals.

Nothing new on educators, although as I've said, I view them, as I've been saying the past week or so, in the on-deck circle. Remember, if you are an educator and you're either 65 and older, or you're under 65 but you've got a chronic condition, you're already eligible as we sit here. You've been eligible for two or three weeks at this point, but we clearly want to get there. But we also don't want to over promise and under deliver. I know Judy and team want to get there. It's not the only reason that we can more broadly open our schools, but it's a big step in the right direction in that regard, so bear with us. We want to get there and we will get there. We will come back to you on the numbers on the dashboard. Dave, good afternoon.

**David Matthau, NJ 101.5:** Hi, Governor. Commissioner, how are the vaccine supplies looking for the next couple of weeks? Do we have any specific updates from the feds in terms of what we're expecting to roll in? A question that is basically just for clarification here. We know that the county sites can limit giving the shots to county residents, but what about the mega sites? We've had a couple of people who said that they were from another county and the mega site said, "Sorry, you don't live here." I thought that the mega sites were supposed to be open to everybody.

For both you, Commissioner, and the Governor, as more New Jersey residents do continue to get vaccinated, how much of a difference do you think this is going to make in terms of how will the metrics that we cover begin to go down? Specifically, if we are adding 100,000 or 200,000 vaccines a week, will there be a corresponding drop? Is there a delay in this? This business with the vaccines, how significant of a role will it play? Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Judy, I'll start and throw it back to you, if that's okay. I think you've probably got the supplies, which I'll leave to you, it's getting better. It's not where it needs to be but it's clearly going in the right direction. That's absent the reality of a Johnson & Johnson, so this is just the Moderna and the Pfizer. Judy can go through that.

Yeah, we've said counties have the right to say it is a priority for their own residents. I actually am somewhat surprised on the mega sites. I thought that was open to all and I think we've been pretty clear about that. So if you've got a specific case, we may want to follow up with you afterward.

Gosh, man, I think it makes a big difference. I can't sit here and tell you exactly on what date and exactly what changes but you just start to imagine, 1 million shots gets to 2 million, 3 million, I mean this thing starts to rack up and you combine that with the epidemiological curves cresting and starting to come down a little bit, warmer weather, which doesn't feel like it's today but at some point, it's going to make a huge difference, without question. I don't know that it's a Monday to Tuesday light switch sort of difference but it is a major positive contributing factor to our ability to get back on our feet and get back to some sense of normalcy sooner than later.

Judy, anything you want to add on the next few weeks of supplies and/or how you or Tina see the vaccine as a game changer here?

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** First on the number of doses that we're receiving, I don't have the numbers with me but on a call with General Perna and his team on Friday, they are going to give us the actual number of doses for the next three weeks, to give us some predictability for the points of dispensing for the vaccination sites. Like I said, I don't have those numbers with me, but it's a slight increase and some predictability, which is exactly what we were asking for.

On the other hand, on the statistics, remember our main goal is to prevent morbidity and mortality, so the first thing we'll look at is hospitalizations and deaths. Dr. Tan can certainly add to that.

**State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan:** As both the Governor and Commissioner mentioned, it's going to be hard to particularly pinpoint at what point vaccinations make an impact, because we have multiple layers of protection right now. We have evidence, for example, right now that masking, so many different CDC analyses right now that have shown how – and this was before the vaccines – have contributed to decreases in hospitalizations, have contributed to less in-school transmission, as just some examples.

In terms of looking at the population versus individual level, we do know that the pharmaceutical companies and CDC are still consistently looking at vaccine effectiveness. That's monitoring how well the vaccine works in real-life scenarios. We know what the efficacy data shows from the initial trials and what ACIP and FDA have looked at, but now we're also looking at vaccine effectiveness, just like we do for the flu vaccine. We monitor, we follow groups of individuals who are vaccinated and not vaccinated, compare how many get COVID versus how many don't get COVID, to have another indicator of how effective the vaccine is in real-world scenarios.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Tina makes a good point, Judy, that we were able to break the back of the curve late spring, early summer without a vaccine. That's why the words I would use would be a positively contributing factor and hopefully an accelerant to get to where we want to get to faster. Thank you both. Charlie, how are you?

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**Charlie Kratovil, New Brunswick Today:** Good afternoon and thank you for all the information. In particular, I appreciated the hip hop history lesson last week in remembrance of Edward Fletcher, so thank you, Gov.

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**Governor Phil Murphy:** By the way, I spoke to both his widow and son after I had said that, and very moving conversations. His son, as I mentioned, worked for the General Assembly. He's up in Cape Cod working a county position and really good folks. Please.

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**Charlie Kratovil, New Brunswick Today:** A few questions for you. Will you be nominating someone to be the Middlesex County surrogate or will you wait for a new person to be elected? You've nominated Kevin Egan to replace Martin Perez on the Rutgers Board of Governors, which would replace the only Latino board member with a White person. What is your message to members of the Latino community who may be concerned about this move?

Maybe somebody can answer about the call center with Extend. Can anybody give information about the value of that contract? How much is the state paying the vendor for this center?

Finally for the Commissioner, I mentioned last time we spoke, Robert Wood Johnson Hospital in New Brunswick failed to give proper legal notice of their 2020 annual meeting. You said you'd look into it. What did you find? Will you require them to hold a properly noticed meeting?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** On any nominations, Middlesex County surrogate or otherwise, when we've got news to report we will let you know, so nothing to tell you there.

Listen, Kevin is a terrific guy. He'll do a great job on that board. The Latino community is one of the fastest growing, most important communities in our state. Just by example, we've got leaders all over government, Marlene Caride who I spoke about earlier today has done a phenomenal job. I mean, you cannot underestimate – we sort of glanced through Get Covered New Jersey, like we took it off the shelf. This is from whole cloth, and has done an extraordinary job.

I don't have the detail on the call center contract but within the realm of we obviously are on the side of transparency. We'll come back to you on that if you bear with us.

I've got nothing new on the Robert Wood Johnson Hospital annual meeting so we're going to come back to you on that. I've got nothing new – have you? No, I know that's the only thing you've been thinking about the past couple of weeks, so.

With that, I'm going to mask up. Thank you all, Judy and Tina, thank you, as always. Pat, likewise. Jared, Matt, Parimal, Mahen, cast of thousands. Again, virtual tomorrow, in person, same time, same place, Wednesday. Keep it up, folks. We always say that but that's the best advice we can give.

Tina, again, I want to underscore the point that she made. This is not an either/or next few months for us. This is keep doing this stuff and then add vaccines to the mix, and that gets you to that one plus one equals three reality. Then again, you add a couple of wildcards, which for the most part feel like they're potentially positive wildcards, Johnson & Johnson vaccine, warmer weather a couple of months from now to pick two, those allow us to accelerate what would otherwise have happened.

We mention this a lot. You mentioned there are more cases, Ocean County in particular, but the variants are something that you all are watching like a hawk. That could be a negative wildcard. We hope that they're not. It is part of the reason, it's a big part of the reason why right now we're being very cautious. Fair to say the curve is starting to come down, the vaccine is starting to get spread, all of that is good news but I know the experts to my right and their colleagues want to make sure that we're not taking anything that's an unknown for granted. Thank you all. God bless.

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