

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: March 4th, 2022 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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The last one of these!

Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everyone. Sorry to be a couple minutes behind. Want to start off by talking for a minute about Ukraine. First of all, we stand with the people of Ukraine unwaveringly, and we will stand with them to the end. I hope the end is a peaceful one and it comes soon. We have established, literally within the past hour, a website, as you can see, nj.gov/ukraine, and the first lady and many others are – will be populating this website with information in particular about what – where folks can do or what organizations they can work with as it relates to shipping things either to folks in Ukraine or refugees who are leaving Ukraine, nj.gov/ukraine and as I say, we stand in complete, total solidarity with the people of Ukraine, with the governor – government of Ukraine. New Jersey has one of the largest Ukraine populations of any American state. I think we're the fourth largest behind California and New York and Pennsylvania. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church North American Headquarters is in New Jersey, and we stand in spirit, in prayer and action with our Ukrainian brothers and sisters.

Secondly, I cannot resist the moment to call out the thug Vladimir Putin and his kleptocracy, this war of choice. This is insanity, absolute animal, and deserves the condemnation that the world needs to bring down upon him. Lastly, words like silence, neutral, and abstain are spoken or acted by cowards who are as guilty as sin, and the blood is on their hands just as it is on Putin's.

With that said, please, God, for the last time, I'm joined by the woman to my right who needs to introduction, the Commissioner of Health, Judy Persichilli. To my far left, disorienting moment here, the state's epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan. To the far right in his normal spot, the Department of Health's Communicable Disease Service Director, Dr. Ed Lifshitz, and to my left, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have First Lady Tammy Murphy, Chief Counsel Parimal Garg. We've got Ruth Hartnett with the microphone, Mahen Gunaratna,

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and we have Derek Roseman with us, and it's a treat to have him with us. We have the whole band together for what we hope is a final encore. Today marks the two-year anniversary of the first confirmed case of COVID-19. I received the news while in the bed recuperating from cancer surgery, which was performed earlier that day. For Judy, the news was a most unwelcome birthday present. Since then, counting today, we've brought you, whether here at this table or at locations throughout the state, some 257 updates on our progress in fighting the coronavirus pandemic. This anniversary is the right time for us to end these in-person briefings. As coronavirus moves from pandemic to endemic and as we transition away from crisis management to a more normal way of life, it is the right time.

We have asked so much of each and every New Jerseyan for the past two years. You have overwhelmingly delivered and then some. We're at this point only because of your dedicated work to protect yourselves, your families, and your communities. I know you are exhausted both mentally and physically and ready to return to normal. Let there be no doubt, so are we. We persevered and fought and persevered and fought some more. That's why we're at this point today. With all we have done to ensure the preparedness of our healthcare system and with the advent of both the vaccines and treatments, we are ready to move forward and not to live our lives in fear.

Now before we get to the numbers, we do have an announcement. As we announced a month ago, the statewide school and daycare mask mandate is being lifted effective this Monday, so in three days, March 7. Today, I will be signing the executive order to formally make this so. The school and daycare masking requirement was the last major mitigation measure we had in place and because of that, the order I will sign also, as of Monday, this coming Monday, March 7th, lift the public health emergency that I declared in January when Omicron was hitting its peak. Like today's briefing, this action marks the end of this phase on our war against the coronavirus as we make the transition from pandemic to endemic. Because we are committed to our efforts to vaccinate, test, and coordinate the healthcare system's response, this order will continue existing orders, directives, and waivers related to those areas. It will also maintain the normal state of emergency that allows for statewide management of the COVID-19 response which I declared on March 9, 2020.

Like the state of emergency that was declared in the aftermath of superstorm Sandy by then-governor Chris Christie in 2012 – and by the way which remains in effect to this day – this authority allows us to receive and distribute federal funding without any unnecessary red tape or bureaucratic obstacles. Like the state of emergency for Sandy, which most of you probably didn't know remained in effect, maintaining this one will not impact your daily life in one even small way. Make no mistake, given the enormous progress we have made, the time when large-scale mitigation measures were necessary has passed and hopefully will never return.

Switching gears, I want to give a quick shout-out to these two guys, members of the US Para-Olympic team from New Jersey preparing for competition in Beijing, sled hockey defenseman Josh Pauls on the left from Greenbrook and Franklin Lakes's Jack Wallace who plays forward on the same sled hockey team on the right. We wish them and all of Team USA the very, very best.

With that, Judy, let's do our final run-through of the numbers. We'll start with a look at hospitalizations, which continue to tail off and get back to the levels they were prior to Omicron. With newly reported cases, we're also seeing the positivity rate dropping down below 3% on several days, including under 2% today. Vaccinations and importantly boosters continue their sure and steady climb, not as fast as we'd like, but they're going in the right direction. The latest numbers on breakthrough cases changes nothing of what we've been saying over the past eight months that we've been bringing you this data. Getting vaccinated and boosted dramatically decreases your chance of severe COVID that could lead to hospitalization or death.

Switching quickly to look at the situation in our schools as we prepare for Monday's lifting of the in-school masking requirement, the number of cases of in-school transmission over the past two weeks is in a very good place. The rates of infection overall for students and educators regardless of where the exposure occurred is now back to where it had been trending from September up until Omicron showed up. Here are the latest numbers, sadly, of confirmed COVID-related deaths. Again, these are the deaths that were confirmed on those dates, not necessarily – in fact, not the folks who passed on those dates.

Even though these briefings are ending, we will continue to provide these numbers through our online dashboard on a daily basis. This includes a new page for breakthrough cases which will be updated weekly. I know Judy will be able to provide a little bit more color on that one. We will also provide some numbers on a weekly basis through our social media channels. Let's now, for the final time, remember three of those that have been lost. Today, all three are lives lost in the earliest days of the pandemic, in April of 2020.

First up, this woman, Bayonne's Marie Perrone, known by many if not most as Arie, especially to her loved ones. She was 87 years old. Born in neighboring Jersey City, she had a lifetime love of animals. Marie or Arie spent as much of her free time as she could in Atlantic City playing the slot machines. If she wasn't there, she was probably somewhere singing along with do-wop music on the radio. With her passing, Arie is reunited with her late husband, Joseph. She left her daughters, Joanne and Maria, and I had the great honor of speaking with Maria last week and Maria's husband Jimmy along with five grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. A New Jersey original, may God bless and watch over her memory and the family she leaves behind.

Next up, this man, Anthony Manfre. He was 73 years old and had called Freehold his home since his retirement from the New York City Police Department. Anthony, by the way, was also a proud Vietnam veteran. After the move to Freehold, Anthony ran his own limousine business, though he preferred time driving solo or with his wife, Rosemary, by his side in his Mercedes convertible with the top down. A few of the constants in Anthony's life were a good, dirty martini – you got to love that – a Sunday dinner of macaroni and gravy, and the New York Yankees. I'm sure he would not be happy with the state of baseball today. Remembering him are Rosemary and their three children, Anthony, Kimberly, and Danielle, along with their families. I had the great honor of speaking with Rosemary and Kimberly last week. You talk about tragedy, Kimberly not only lost her dad but she lost her husband to COVID at around the same time. We know Anthony has found a place where the sun is shining and the top of the car is down. May God bless and watch over him and the family he leaves behind.

Finally, we remember the guy on the right there, South Orange's Roehl Cosio Empestan, known by everybody as Ro. He was raised in Jersey City after coming to this country at the age of four with his father from their native Philippines. A standout wrestler at St. Peter's Prep, he went on to receive a degree in accounting from Pace University. He spent his entire career at the New York accounting firm of Geller and Company. Ro was just 50, 5-0, years old. As you can see, he was a family man all around. He left his wife in the center of 11 years, Jesse. I had the great honor of speaking with her last week. She also had COVID. Thank God she's in a better place. He also left behind his two children you can see there, Gaia, who is 10, and Miles, who is 7, of whom he was rightfully very proud. Ro was so proud of the career opportunity he was given because of his college education that Jesse established a scholarship fund in his honor at his alma mater, Pace University. That is a fine lasting legacy. We're honored that Ro was part of our New Jersey family and may God bless him and watch over his memory and his blessed family he leaves behind.

Marie, Anthony, and Ro are the final three of the 646 New Jerseyans we have honored in these briefings. They, in turn, represent only a small fraction of all those who this virus has taken away. We began our practice of telling their stories when we had to make the hard decision to keep families and friends from gathering for funerals. In lieu of those somber ceremonies, we turned these few minutes of our regular briefings into that time of remembrance. We mourned not just as individual families or communities but as an entire state. Between April 3rd and July 3, 2020, we lowered our flags to half staff as we remembered all lost in that powerful first wave. Even after the restriction limiting funeral attendance was lifted along with our flags, we continued bringing you these pictures and stories. Every life lost to COVID was worth honoring and remembering, and we endeavored to tell as many as we could. By the way, this slide shows the picture of every single one of the 646 folks who we have lost who we memorialized.

We never wanted any life reduced to being just a number, and so we're in that crazy position – and frankly we're still in it – where you got to make health decisions based on the numbers, the science, the data, the facts, but you can at the same time only let it be about numbers. We had to remember and we have to remember each and every one of these lives we've lost and the families they've left behind.

For all of these 646 folks that we have honored in these briefings, I have called each and every one of their families speaking with well more than 1,000 family members. They told me stories and brought me in on inside family stories and jokes. Some calls were light-hearted and we laughed together over happy memories and many were brutal and somber, and we cried together over what had been lost. All are forever in my memory and our memory. We honor them still. We honor each and every single one, hard to believe, of the more than 30,000 lives we've lost. For all of them, let's do one final moment of silence.

One of the other regular features of our briefings was to put a spotlight on a small business or community-based organization whose future was put in doubt by the pandemic but who found partnership and a lifeline through one of the many financial support programs we offered. Many of these stories came from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, which has done nothing less than heroic and historic work with our small businesses, arts, and nonprofit communities. The EDA not only modified preexisting programs to support the state's small businesses but they also created and implemented numerous entirely new programs. In total, the EDA injected

nearly \$850 million into small businesses up and down the state. All in all, they awarded more than 80,500 grants. Their innovative and ground-breaking Sustain and Serve program – which by the way became a national model – drove the purchase of more than 4 million meals from hard-hit restaurants which went to New Jerseyans experiencing food insecurity. Perhaps more than anything, Sustain and Serve was our greatest win-win.

Others also contributed greatly to our economic response and recovery. The Department of Labor created its Return and Earn program to pair unemployed workers with small businesses looking to fill the positions they need to fill to grow, to thrive, and lead our economic recovery. Employers received up to \$10,000 in wages subsidies to hire and train new employees. In turn, new employees received a direct \$500 Return to Work benefit. The Department of Community Affairs put \$2.6 million into grants delivered through its Neighborhood Preservation COVID-19 Relief program that helped downtowns stay open and stay welcoming. The New Jersey Redevelopment Authority's \$5 million Small Business Lease Emergency Assistance grant program assisted more than a thousand businesses located in the 64 communities in which it works. We've brought you 154 stories of businesses we partnered with to keep them open, creating jobs and serving their communities. Just as importantly, I hope we inspired you to support the local small businesses in your community.

Bear with me one second here. Sorry.

Before I close and turn things over to the woman who needs no introduction, I want to give thanks to some of the folks who've made these briefings what they've been. Certainly first and foremost, to my partners up here at the table, Judy and Pat especially who've been with me for nearly every single one of these briefings, Tina on the left, Ed on the right, who've made a terrific tag-team of expertise. In absentia, I don't want Eddie Breznitz to think we forgot about him. He was awesome for us for a while. Thank you all for not only helping us to educate and inform but even more, for all of you and your teams, what you did throughout the course of the past two years, to direct our response. I cannot express in words my gratitude to each of you.

I also want to thank the tremendous team here at the Trenton War Memorial who allowed us to set up shop in this ballroom and well, basically never leave. To the team from the Office of Information Technology and Office of Innovation who brought you the livestream every day, built the websites, gave us an edge in technology and communications unlike any others, thank you. Thank you as well to the folks in the back who host the sign language translators who ensured that every New Jerseyan, not most but every New Jerseyan, could be a part of this process. I thank everyone within the Governor's Office who took time out of their days to make these briefings happen as well, Derrick Roseman, who I'd mentioned who helped craft the words we've spoken over the past two years and still does. He and I are working on the budget speech this afternoon together. Mete Patel is a guy you probably never saw who spoke to literally every one of those 1,000 family members that I spoke to separately to each and every one of them. I want to give a particular shout-out to First Lady Tammy Murphy, who's with us today.

I also want to thank the members of the media who came and reported out the news that we made here. Over the course of the past two years – you ready for this – we counted. You asked us a total of 6,211 questions; 6,210 of them were from Alex. By the way, some of the questions were even on topic, so we thank you folks. Before I turn things over for the final time to the woman who needs no introduction, I have to thank again each and every one of you out there watching. You put in the hard work. As we move to this next phase, all I could say is this: Be safe, be smart, enjoy the upcoming Spring and warmer weather; enjoy getting together with family and friends. One last time, don't be a knucklehead. With that, please help me the woman – 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. On this, the last of our regular COVID-19 press conferences, I want to start by saying a special word of thanks to Dr. Tan and Dr. Lifshitz, and the entire team at the Department's Communicable Disease Service for their expertise and tireless efforts since they first became aware in early January of 2020 of an outbreak of what was then referred to as the Wuhan pneumonia. Throughout this pandemic, while we were all monitoring COVID, this team, the CDS team, was remaining vigilant and also monitoring, for example, an Ebola outbreak in the Congo and assessing travelers at the Newark International Airport. They were instrumental in helping us with immunizations of Afghan refugees at the joint base. They remained vigilant every single day keeping a watchful eye on other contagions nationally, statewide, and internationally.

As the Governor said, two years ago today we confirmed our first case. This was a novel virus, never before seen in humans. We knew very little about the virus. You may recall the strategic national stockpile of prospective equipment was empty. Our supply was scarce. We had limited testing capacity and had no alternative care sites to assist hospitals with overflow patients. We lacked a centralized data analyst – analysis and reporting team and we

had limited dashboard capability. We did not have a Department of Health call center. Most importantly, early in the pandemic, we had absolutely no knowledge of asymptomatic spread of this virus and limited understanding and treatment options for patient management. We have made incredible progress since those dark days two years ago. We continue to learn more about the virus even to this day, and we now have an array of therapeutic and clinical treatments. We strengthened our local public health infrastructure, committing \$90 million in COVID funding to counties, cities, and local health departments. We developed a Department of Health data and nerve center and data analysis and reporting hub. We brought up a bi-directional call center that fielded 5.6 million calls. We learned the value of partnerships at the federal, state, and local level as we augmented public health investigation capacity.

With the support of the Army Corp of Engineers, we stood up alternative care sites, including three field medical stations and multiple hospital base sites. We followed the science and made decisions based on data and always through an equity lens, recognizing that social determinants of health disproportionately impacted communities of color. We learned the resiliency of our healthcare partners. We learned the overwhelming importance of clear communications engagement with stakeholders and arming the public with information and education.

The result of our efforts have been one of the best vaccination programs in our country. There are many reasons for this success, first and foremost, the hard work of our vaccination partners, the willingness of so many residents to get vaccinated, constant communication with the public and stakeholders, and transparency through dashboards, the COVID information hub, and the call center. Because of our vaccination partners and those willing to be vaccinated, currently 92% of eligible individuals ages 5 and up in New Jersey have received at least one dose; 78% of those age 5 and up have completed their primary series, and 54% of those who are eligible are boosted.

Now the challenge before us is to define the new normal as we expect COVID-19 to remain with us. We need to stay vigilant and integrate all that we have learned into our everyday practices and processes. We must remain focused on our most vulnerable residents. It is likely that we will continue to have surges in COVID-19 activity, so it will be important that we all continue to be aware of the activity levels and adjust our behaviors accordingly. CDC has recommendations for precautions people should take based on their personal risks in the context of COVID activity levels. We will set targets in terms of disease burden and severity using COVID community levels. With the CDC, we will continue to monitor the capacity of our healthcare system as well as hospitalization data. We will continue our ongoing efforts in identifying emerging variants. We will continue to look at syndromic surveillance and wastewater surveillance as possible early indicators of increasing disease.

Today, the Communicable Disease Service added a new feature to NJ COVID-19 dashboard titled COVID-19 Cases by Vaccination Status. The new page under the Case and Mortality Summary tab displays weekly COVID-19 case, hospitalization, and death rates for unvaccinated persons, those who have completed their primary series, and those with a booster dose. The chart at the top of the new page has a dropdown menu that allows you to select between cases, hospitalizations, or deaths. Weekly rates are displayed by vaccination status. Each of the charts show significant protection for those who are up-to-date, and that includes boosters. It includes comparisons of the risk of COVID-19 infection among unvaccinated individuals, with those who have completed their primary series with or without a booster. In the four weeks between January 3rd and February 19th, unvaccinated individuals had four times the risk of infection with COVID-19 compared to fully vaccinated individuals with a booster dose. It also includes a table summarizing cumulative vaccine breakthrough cases. This new feature will be updated weekly on Wednesdays.

As always, as we continue to promote our mission to help all New Jersey residents live long, health lives, and that will include controlling COVID the illness, limiting mortality, and doing it equitably, we will support public health systems to recognizing care for the overall impact of the pandemic on individuals suffering from long COVID, PTSD among healthcare and essential workers and the population at large, and we shall remain vigilant about the mental health and wellness of all New Jerseyans, especially our children.

We must continue to promote public awareness and science-based information and respond rapidly to transmission hotspots. Similar the Department of Communicable Disease Service, the nursing profession is also grounded in a science-based body of study that moves that science from the classroom to the bedside into the communities and most importantly into our schools. To more than 200,000 nurses in our state, I thank you. On behalf of all the people of New Jersey, we owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude for your work and support caring for patients, students, and their families. That gratitude and thanks also extends to the hundreds of physicians, pharmacists, technicians, and aids, and all frontline workers who all worked together to promote the health and wellness of our state.

As we continue our work, it is with gratitude also to all New Jerseyans for the work you all have done and I know will continue to do. Sincere thanks to the Department of Health's Pandemic Response Team and to Governor Murphy, a governor who relies on science and data and I know will continue to work with the Department as we integrate COVID surveillance and response into our ongoing work. We'll never forget the tragedy of this pandemic and the lives lost and the family and loved ones impacted, including members of our own Department of Health family. However, at the same time, we will be reminded of how the pandemic brought out the best in many of us, demonstrating our collective interests in protecting the public, particularly among the most vulnerable and also our unrelenting, ongoing resiliency.

Now, lastly, please remember, continue to wash your hands frequently. Practice respiratory hygiene. Physically distance. Stay home when you're sick and get vaccinated and boosted to protect yourselves, your families, your friends, and our children. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, a tour de force. On behalf of your fellow 9.3 million members and your New Jersey family, thank you for everything. I would underscore as well two comments. Number one, thanking the healthcare workers. Judy remembers the first nurse to ever serve as Commissioner in the state of New Jersey's history as all the nurses and more broadly all the other healthcare and frontline workers. Secondly, the notion that this has brought out the best in so many, let's never forget that as well. Thank you.

Okay, Pat and a little bit of Judy, I have to say this. I know your brother, Matt. He's one of the team at operating engineer's local 825. I've seen him all over the state. I only recently learned that he and his buddies at 825 have never missed a briefing, and they watch it usually from Ron's Landmark in Netcom. To Matt, and Ron, and the whole crew, huge thanks. That's pretty incredible. If that weren't enough, I also learned that one of Judy's dreams in life is to ride a bulldozer and that Matt – his brother Matt is going to make that – your dream and your birthday wish come true this Spring. You never know. I learn something every day.

Pat, what do we have for weather? I think it's good and warm. I know you've got some folks to thank, some lessons learned. Thank you for everything you've done. Take it away.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor Good afternoon. It's supposed to be a decent weekend weather-wise, a little bit of rain, but I think we might hit a record high on Sunday, maybe low 70s, which is – should boost all of our spirits well. We also will be activating the State Emergency Operations Center this weekend to monitor that Freedom Convoy and just from a situational awareness standpoint and from a reporting out and making sure that we're briefed and aware, trusting that that goes safely and that everybody adheres to certainly the rules of our highways and byways.

Just a few reflections, Gov, to your point, echoing some of both yours and the Commissioners. One reminder is that during the past two years, we had several natural disasters that hit us at the same time, Orlean, Acias, Enrie. I remember the same week that Ida hit us with both catastrophic flooding and tornadoes in the south that we were just starting to accept what would end up being more than 16,000 Afghanistan refugees at joint base McGuire during a pandemic and watching that city come up overnight. Again, pretty special that no one anticipated during an unprecedented pandemic.

To your point, I think that call to action across our state when medical personnel, supplies, equipment, treatments were nonexistent and then it made us reflect on what could we do better and how are we better just a few points, and certainly way beyond this, the ability to scale up operations across anything, testing, vaccinations, mortuary affairs, hospital capacities, just-in-time training, increase in those hospital capacities due to the build-outs by the Army Corp of Engineers, PPE stockpile that now stands at over 140 million pieces of equipment and items for critical needs that are strategically located throughout the state. I think a lot – in the early on, everybody did wait to hear what the violations were across the state with regards to executive orders, but in the big scheme of things, there were very few that were not compliant and the overwhelming New Jerseyans complied with what we had asked them to comply with.

When we asked for donations, our phone lines got shut down because so many New Jerseyans stepped up on PPE, gowns, and gloves, and we had to go to an online system to coordinate that. Even up to and including when we asked – we tried to hit that goal for vaccinations and we surpassed that even in advance of our goal. Just a few – not only of all emergency management, federal, state, county, local, our enlisted and civilian members that spent every day of the week just trying to coordinate and mitigate the challenges that we were up against, especially that All Hazards Incident Team, which still continues to function, not just a state police team; health, National Guard,

corrections, just from all departments across the state. Whatever we asked them to do, vaccine operations, testing, mortuary affairs, hospitals partnered with our leaders. I think they did 14 community-based vax sites and 10 of those were in some of our hardest hit communities.

Just a few more thanks: FEMA, can't say enough about that, that relationship which was phenomenal. I think it serves between us and Region 2 as a model for the rest of the nation. Department of Defense that sent medical staff when we were hurting. Army Corp of Engineer again and the National Guard, to General Howe and her crew every step of the way, whether that was helping out and cleaning long-term care, testing sites, field medical stations, every single step of the way to have the National Guard and sometimes service men and women from across the country – to meet folks from Michigan or Texas that came here to support our efforts, just phenomenal, and all of our volunteers

I'll just close with really thanking you, Governor, certainly Commissioner Persichilli, and the 9.3 million New Jerseyans that entrusted – OEM, our enlisted and civilian members, to be a part of a team during an unprecedented time. It's certainly personally and professionally one of the most humbling honors of my life and career. I thank you, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: I would echo those last words without fail. Also, many of those organizations, the federal ones in particular, we worked just as successfully in one Administration as we did the next across the political aisle. People left politics at the door and did the right thing in so many ways. Thank you, Pat, personally to you and your extraordinary team, General Howe and the extraordinary team at the Guard, our federal partners, county and local folks who were with us every step of the way, just extraordinary leadership across the board.

I haven't thanked him a while, but I also want to thank publicly George Helmy, Chief of Staff in my office who's been an extraordinary leader during this entire – every single day, every single step of the way.

Q&A Session

Governor Phil Murphy: We're going to start over here for a change. I'd like to ask you if you could literally give me one or two each because we don't have time for a long list from each of you and I appreciate, again, what I said earlier. I mean it. Even when we haven't agreed with the premise of your question or where you were headed, you all have done an extraordinary job in the press getting the story out. That's probably saved a lot of lives as a result of that.

Let's start with Daniel. You're up.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Good afternoon, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon.

Daniel Munoz: NJBIZ: My understanding is that many administrative orders, waivers, and directives rely on the state's public health emergency. What are some of the measures that you said you want to keep in place and how? Will the end of the public health emergency disrupt any hospitals or vaccine sites that rely on some of those measures? Also, any reaction to the Senate yesterday passing a resolution critical of unemployment backlogs or opening up state offices?

Governor Phil Murphy: On the first one, I think maybe it makes sense for Parimal, who's right behind you, and you to talk offline. Basically we have two sets of emergencies that are in effect, one of which is a state of emergency which can be open-ended. It doesn't need to be renewed and as I mentioned, the one related to superstorm Sandy is still, in fact, outstanding. That's for good reason, because we're – believe it or not – sadly, for good reason. People still aren't back in their homes. There are still federal matters, etc.

The one that – the other one had to be renewed, the public health emergency, every 30 days. That had a whole series of things associated with it, most overwhelmingly the school mask mandate. We're lifting that as of Monday. We sat around and said you know what? We're going to – there's no reason even to go to the 11th of March, which is when it otherwise would've expired. The big thrust of this was that school mask mandate, so we're going to pull it as of Monday. To allow Judy, and Pat, and others to continue vaccination programs, testing programs, again, eligibility in a non-bureaucratic way for federal funds, we want to make sure those elements are still in place and that we will accomplish that by this.

Listen, there is an enormous amount of frustration by folks who have not been able to get to a positive resolution on their unemployment claim. I hear it all the time. I hear it on Ask the Governor. I hear it from men and women on the street. I hear it through the Commissioner. There's just no question about that. If folks are out there frustrated because they do not have a rightful resolution, I'm frustrated with them. I get that completely. I know the Commissioner, Rob Asaro-Angelo, is committed to getting all of these claims resolved one way or the other. Some of them are very complicated, as I've said this many times here before. These are a lot of handmade suits. Very rare is there a broad system or a broad category challenge.

I know there's a human nature thirst to having a physical presence across the table from you. I don't know that it shortens at all the resolution of the claim, but I do know there's a human nature comfort from that. I think we'll have the unemployment function back in our One Stops effective I think March 28th of this month, so three weeks from Monday. We'll continue to work with the legislature. I don't think any state – this is no solace to somebody who's frustrated that it's not been resolved. There's no state that's batted at a higher batting average or done this more efficiently than New Jersey. I know folks hear that and say oh, my God. The problem is that the federal system is overwhelmingly antiquated and not fit for the times we're in. We're one of the few states in a pilot with the feds to try to get that as updated and refreshed as possible. Thank you.

Brent? Good afternoon.

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Good afternoon. Does the end of the health emergency mean the remaining mask mandates in state government buildings, health settings, and transit are gone? If it's passed, would you sign the new bill that would end the self-serve gas ban in New Jersey and allow a hybrid model? Do you have any personal investments with ties to the Russian government?

Governor Phil Murphy: On the last one, we do not, so that's – we can take that off the list, thankfully. Listen, on self-service gas, that's been a political third rail in New Jersey, which I have historically not crossed. I think given that gas prices on average have now gone over \$4 a gallon, I'm not necessarily signing up for that because I need to understand what impact it would have on that, but I will say more broadly, we're committed to finding any way we can make this state right now, particularly given this crisis and this war of choice by the thug Putin, any way we can make this state more affordable.

I meant to say this, by the way, and sorry, on the mask mandate in state buildings – I think you should assume that's going to be dealt with sooner than later. I think we want to get through Monday and the school mask mandate. In state buildings, it's why we're still wearing them when we come in and out, because this is a state building, but I don't think you should assume. I don't want to make news, Judy, but I don't think that's going to last a whole lot longer.

You didn't ask this but you mentioned it. We're incredibly proud of New Jersey's role in the Afghan refugee reality. Just to reiterate, I'm proud to be wearing the Ukrainian flag beside the American flag. I sent a letter to President Biden raising our hand. I want early on for the President and his Administration know we've done it. We did it successful, and we'll do it again for our Ukrainian brothers and sisters. Thank you. You good?

Do you have a question? Please.

Reporter: What do you think of the fundamental changes COVID has brought on –

Governor Phil Murphy: I can't – sorry?

Reporter: I'm sorry. What do you think of the fundamental changes COVID has brought on New Jersey's workforce and their quality of life? Two, now that you're ending the briefings and we're entering the endemic phase, are you going to begin the examination you've been promising to do what went wrong in long-term care? If not, when and how long do the case numbers need to go before we do this?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, I don't have a precise answer but we've committed very much publicly to doing a post-mortem, and that will include long-term care. We hired a firm, by the way, back in April or May of 2020, a Manat firm, to do an independent assessment of where we were deficient in terms of laws, executive orders, behavior in our long-term care centers. That's almost two years ago. We actually already did that. Judy, to her credit, took a lot of courage to do that because you're holding a mirror up to the state. I've signed a lot of laws and executive orders since then as a result of that report.

More broadly as a post-mortem, I don't have a specific – by the way, I'd love to say that we're by our last briefing, this is over. It's come to an end. It's not, right? We think we can responsibly live a normal life with COVID, but an endemic means it remains in our midst. The flu is still with us 104 years after the pandemic of 1918. Your first – how did it

impact the workplace?

Reporter: Oh, what do you think are the fundamental changes COVID has brought on New Jersey's workforce and the quality of life?

Governor Phil Murphy: And the quality of life? Yeah, I think it's to be determined. We – I asked corporations, universities, I asked our own teams, nonprofits, other institutions what does work look like going forward? I think it is to be determined. I think there's largely going to be a back to work, but I think there'll be a flexibility if I had to predict that will be with us for a while if not forever. That would be my early sense. Thank you.

Elise, good to see you.

Elise Young, Bloomberg: Thank you. What is your view of legislation that would preclude New Jersey from having any business interactions with Russia? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm strongly in support of it. Without a specific opining on the – or opining, rather, on the specifics, strongly in favor and I give Senator Paul Sarlo a huge shout-out and a lot of credit. Between that prospective bill, which really, Parimal, correct me if I'm wrong, has overwhelmingly to do with how we invest in pension funds and at the investment council – between that and the executive order 291 from the other day which I signed which instructs every aspect of the state to review any Russia-related licenses, contracts, other relationships. We want to take the relationships with anything Russia to zero, literally to zero. Some of that's more easily said than done, but that's our objective, and that's where it's going to end up. By the way, let me just say this: there is evidence that there is literally tens of millions of Russian people who do not support this war. This is not directed at Russian people; it's directed at the Russian regime under the thug Vladimir Putin.

Alex, does this gentleman beside you got a question or you got – okay, he's with you, okay. Alex, good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Good afternoon. Commissioner, you said earlier that you were on the lookout for surges of COVID-19. At this point with the numbers so low, what would a surge of COVID look like numbers-wise, and what kind of actions would you take to mitigate that? Are we going to be going back to any sort of masking lockdown restrictions in a relatively small surge? Colonel, since you're head of OEM, what was the condition of the pandemic response plan in March of 2020 when you presumably first looked it up and have you updated that plan? If so, how?

Governor Phil Murphy: One more.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Governor, I've consistently asked you if you feel you've made any mistakes. Since you've only said that you wish the Trump Administration told you sooner about the severity of this thing, do you have any regrets? Do you regret mandating that COVID patients be allowed to go back to nursing homes, sending thousands of them to their deaths? Do you regret the failures in the unemployment –

Governor Phil Murphy: I got your question, Alex. Thank you. Ruth, we're good there. Don't say stuff, Alex, that you know is false. We didn't "send people back to their death." That's – what do you get out of that? Judy was crystal clear. I was crystal clear – when I say crystal clear about the protocols about the folks returning to long-term care, and you know that. Let's have a responsibility here. You know that we said you needed to be in a separate floor, wing, or building, that the staff that took care of you had to be segregated as well into that same floor, wing, or building. You know that we also said if you could not accomplish either of those, raise your hand and tell us and we will help these folks find their home. Judy also reminded us way back when that these were their residences. This is where they lived. This was not like they were going by choice to a hotel or something. You know how that worked, and my answer beyond that is where it is.

Pat, any comment on OEM update plans and Judy on surges?

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: We annually update what we call our Emergency Operations Plans, Alex. I think the lessons from H1N1 and from Ebola have us constantly and continuously – but offline, if you want to either stop up at my office or go to the ROIC, I'll take you through what that process looks like.

Governor Phil Murphy: That's probably worth doing. Judy, anything on what you think a surge looks like? In fact, we had this conversation earlier today. I think – may I just say this? That this is a very good question. There will be surges, just like there are with the flu, right? Ed referred to what a bad flu season looked like a year-plus ago or almost a year ago. Please, Judy.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: We're going to look at our CALI scores and also the CDC has put out a new scoring model that looks at cases per 100,000, hospital capacity, and staffed beds in our hospitals. What we're learning is particularly many people that are vaccinated and boosted, they may be getting breakthrough infection but it's not impacting the healthcare system. At the end of the day, if we can take care of people in their homes through primary care and the healthcare system is not overburdened, we would not have to implement anything significant. If the healthcare system becomes overburdened – for example, if the staffed beds are an issue because the healthcare providers are getting sick, then we would have to make some accommodations. We'll continue CALI and CDC.

Governor Phil Murphy: On the long-term care, one thing I want to add to this, which we've added before, unfortunately and sadly, not all operators behaved in the way that we mandated that they should operate. They have either been fined, some action taken, whether it's by the Department of Health or the Attorney General or whatever it might be. Thank you for that.

Let's go to Joey, if we could.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Good afternoon, Governor. Just one thing. So you've got your executive order about Russian interactions with New Jersey and you said you support Senator Sarlo's bill. Do you think that that – those two actions combined are enough to deal with New Jersey's role in this interaction and if not, what else might you plan on doing legislatively or with your own [inaudible 0:53:00].

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, it's a good question and I'll give you an incomplete answer. We're looking at everything right now. That website is going to include how you can donate, how you can help. We're, as I mentioned already to Elise's question, bringing the whole range of potential relations, whether it's an investment, a contractor, whatever, with Russian entities to zero. We've been back and forth on roles that we can play more broadly. I'm going to be at a big Ukrainian center tomorrow. Strengthening the community here, spending a fair amount of time with diplomatic representatives privately both praising and criticizing votes that've been taken. As a former ambassador, I guess I've got a speck of credibility in that respect.

I think it's fair to say – and Pat's been part of this. We're going to continue – Tammy has been part of the donations side. We're going to continue to try to figure out any steps that we can take, including accepting happily – not happily because of the root cause but happily in the sense they've got to go somewhere – refugees and all that would go with that. First, Judy and her team played an enormously important role with the Afghan refugees. You'd have Department of Education involved in a big way. You'd have probably our military bases, National Guard, state police, human services, so there'd be a whole range. We're looking across the board at all of that. I mentioned earlier in response to – again, partly to Elise's question – affordability, which was an issue before this invasion, has now become an even more acute challenge. We're looking – we're kicking the tires across the board on that.

I'm told that's Katie, but I can barely see you. Hi, Katie.

Reporter: Hi. Has New Jersey received any of the new treatments in pill form that can be prescribed to people who test positive? Are any New Jersey sites going to be part of the test entry program that President Biden announced on Wednesday?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, the answer on the second one is absolutely. I don't know that we have a number yet, but Test and Treat will be – when it opens, I think Jeff Zients at the White House said there would be hundreds of locations nationally, so we would get our – if you get – New Jersey's fair share usually is you take 3% of whatever the American amount is. If it's 300, my guess is we'll have plus or minus 10. How about – these are the new antiviral pills and whatnot. Have you gotten any update on that, Judy?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Well, we do get our fair share. We get an allocation. We've identified areas within the state, throughout the whole state, that have the full regimen of therapeutics. As you know, some were not as effective against Omicron as we would like. Then others were more effective, and that became somewhat scarce. I also just recently got a report that Evelshade, which is for immunocompromised transplant patients, perhaps patients with multiple sclerosis – that we do have an adequate supply in the state, and we're hoping physicians will make sure that there are patients that are appropriate for Evelshade take advantage of it.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that. Thank you, Katie. Ken with my favorite mask.

Kenneth Burns, WHYY: For the record, I also have one of my home states. I know this was a theme throughout the briefing. How will this experience help you for the next health crisis, and what lessons will you take in putting a plan together? Where are things in terms of closing the gap in the race of disparities when it comes to vaccination and testing? Will any of those strategies change over to other disparities? Then my final question, you keep saying that we are transitioning from a pandemic to an endemic but an expert that I spoke with yesterday said the numbers don't indicate that we're close to an endemic. Are you seeing something in the data or are some of your colleagues seeing something in the data? How are you classifying the next phase as an endemic even though we're very much in the thick of it?

Governor Phil Murphy: The last question will give us a chance to get Tina and Ed to get some of their money's worth for showing up today, so thank you for asking it. Listen, what have we learned and what can we apply to the next health crisis? My guess is that's a long answer that we're going to be building – not only have we already built to some extent on it, but we're going to be doing that, I would guess, in the future as well. I do think we were caught as a nation flat-footed in terms of supply of stuff, whether it's to Katie's question, an antiviral, monoclonal antibodies, vaccines, testing, PPE, ventilators. I feel very good about the vibrations I'm hearing from the White House and the federal administration. I feel very good with the folks on either side of me in terms of building a wall. It's not just scale; it needs to have instantaneous ability to get to the point of attack. My guess is it's a longer, much more complicated list, and we'll all be turning that over.

On racial disparities and vaccinations, we've made progress, but we're not to the point where I think Judy or her team or I would find acceptable. It's just a grind. We're closer on the Latino side than we are on the black New Jerseyans side. It's a work in progress. We can get you – offline, we'll get you the details. I would think you probably agree with that?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah, we're about 17.5% of the individuals that have received vaccinations are of Hispanic – identify as Hispanic origin, and we're about 8.6% of the African-American population; 8.6% of the individuals got vaccinations identify as African-American or black. We'd like that to be higher.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, I mean, there's – 17.5 is up against about 20% in terms of the representation of the population; the 8.6 is up against 12-ish. I believe, so 17 ½ out of 20 is better than 8.6 out of 12, and neither one of them is where we want them to be.

Lastly, Tina and then Ed, thank you to each of you and your teams for extraordinary service over the past two years. By the way, it's not like we're shutting down and going home. You'll continue to serve. Any color or comment on pandemic to endemic and then Ed, if you could.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Sure. First, thank you, Governor and to the Commissioner, for your leadership over these last several years. We certainly appreciate all the support toward public health. I don't think a lot of people really understood what public health was prior to this pandemic, and we really do appreciate that visibility.

Governor Phil Murphy: Same right back.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Defining endemic is still a work in progress. For example, as the Commissioner had mentioned, CDC had just recently modified its community transmission indicators to reflect a lot of the changing nature and changing elements of what has been going on during the pandemic. Now, for example, the CDC community indicators are more reflective of elements such as severity of disease, for example, because we have a lot of things that we have now that unfortunately we didn't have at the beginning of the pandemic, such as an effective vaccine, such as a better understanding of how the virus works, better therapeutics, better treatment elements.

That said, endemic, as we're trying to work out what that really means, the concept of living with the virus and learning to live with the virus, that really does encompass this ongoing need for us to take that personal responsibility in terms of understanding our risk, recognizing that risk is a multifactorial type of concept to embrace, that we have to take a lot of introspection as well to understand that in the context of what we understand of the science, because that really is the nature of living with the virus, being willing to be flexible, to adapt to all the changes and the new information that we're learning about the virus so that we can understand what our personal risks are and then take those measures. We already know what they are, the everyday preventive measures, getting vaccinated, to take those steps to promote the healthy behaviors that promote a healthy community.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that and thank you for your very gracious words. Same right back to you. Ed, welcome.

Department of Health Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Thank you. You've heard a lot about how we're in a much better position now than we were two years ago, and that is incredibly true. Everything from vaccination to treatments to understanding mitigation factors and what works and what doesn't work puts us – and other natural immunity. We are in an incredibly better position than we were two years ago. As has been mentioned, we're moving from a pandemic phase to a more endemic phase. That doesn't mean that we're putting out a sign that says mission accomplished and the virus is gone and it's not going to cause us any issues or problems down the road.

While we have only maybe 5% of the cases that we did from just a couple months ago, we're still seeing a thousand cases a day or so in New Jersey, which is still a lot of cases. Unfortunately, people are continuing to die from this, even, for example, in a supposedly much more mild Omicron surge, wherein two weeks we saw more deaths than we'd see in a bad flu season. The virus has not gone away. We do need to learn to live with it, because we do not completely think it's going to go away. That's what endemic means. Part of that means this. As Tina and this other have mentioned, that means learning to live with it.

That means to some extent it becomes a little bit like the weather, or to put it a different way, tomorrow the weather's supposed to get a whole lot nicer, a whole lot warmer. To me at least, it seems like we've had a very long, cold, dark winter. Believe me, I'm looking forward to some warm weather, putting away my coat, going outside, having a nice walk. I'm not putting away my coat. I'm not throwing away my coat. I know that it may very well get cold again. We're only in the beginning of March. I'm certainly not going to go for a swim tomorrow, because no matter how warm it feels, it's not going to be summertime. The virus is like that as well, meaning there'll be times will it get worse, and we do expect it'll get worse, and at those times it'll make sense to increase some – increasing some measures that people that people might take.

You might wear your mask more often. You might be more careful about where you go. Other times, things will get better. As things get better, it makes sense to relax measures, as we've been doing. It makes sense to go about as more of a normal life as you can. There are a lot of things out there that are endemic. Lyme disease is endemic in New Jersey. Endemic doesn't mean gone. It doesn't mean that it is not going to cause us any issues again, but it does at least to me mean that we're in a much more controllable spot and in an area where we can live much more normally with the virus, but we still need to pay attention. It has been said, eternal vigilance is the price for freedom. We do need to continue to be vigilant when it comes to this virus, as well as other things that may come down the road.

Governor Phil Murphy: Ed, thank you for that. I seem to recall in that exchange we had a year ago that you had said a bad flu season was about 2,000 deaths in New Jersey, to the best of my recollection. If you'll look at the past week, we're running at about 3,500 if you just annualize the last week. Not confirmed, but the actual – what the hospitals are reporting. That's a bad flu season.

Pat wanted me to say one thing on your lesson learned is enhanced IT data monitoring and reporting capabilities in real time to monitoring of evolving trends in status of our hospitals and health care systems. We're much more able to do what I just said, and Pat wrote for me, than we were before this thing. As has not always been the case, but has more often been the case, Dave, take us home.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Thank you, Governor. With the school mask mandates about to be lifted on Monday, as we know, please recap the guidance that you want district leaders in schools across New Jersey to keep in mind once those masks become optional in a few days. Perhaps, Governor, you as well as the Commissioner could comment on this. What do you want them to remember, to consider, if and when there are COVID spikes in their communities or in their parts of New Jersey? And what do you want parents and students to keep in mind as well with regard to this? Finally, you've touched on this a bit. Are there concerns about a possible sudden emergence of some new dangerous variant that could bring us all back together again as one happy family? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said. On the former, I think use your judgment. Use your common sense. Prepare for the fact that there may be a bad turn. We don't see it at the moment. This gets to your second question. We discussed the variant earlier. Judy, you should comment on this. The sequencing I think showed that we're at 3.5% of the cases.

Department of Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Nationally 3.5% of the cases are BA-2, which is subvariant.

Governor Phil Murphy: Higher in our region, right?

Department of Commissioner Judith Persichilli: We're higher in our region.

Governor Phil Murphy: We're something that looks a little bit more like 12%, but it does not appear to more – there's no evidence it's more lethal.

Department of Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Not yet.

Governor Phil Murphy: On schools, use common sense. Enjoy the fact the mask isn't on the kids' and the educators' face. Make sure you're keeping an eye on the local health reality where you are, which is why we've given them – the districts the flexibility if they say, listen, in this particular town or county it's going south, we could put that back in place. God knows we don't want to do that. I'd say the basic stuff. When you're inside, you just ought to be more cognizant, whether it's a school or a bar or a restaurant, whatever it might be, than when you're outside. I think everybody, having a willingness to accept that we don't know all that we don't know on this thing and that we're going to try to navigate this together. I don't know if there's anything else any of the three health experts want to say on the variant. It's something that I think all health officials are keeping an eye on, whether it's this variant or other potential variants. This one does not appear to be any more lethal than Omicron, thank God. Anything else you want to add to that?

Department of Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I just want to remind all leaders, particularly school leaders, be vigilant, resilient, pay attention to the Department of Health's communications and recommendations, and stay in close contact with your local health department.

Governor Phil Murphy: Sorry, I didn't realize you were here.

Reporter: Sorry about that. One more question for you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I didn't see you, I apologize.

Reporter: That's A-okay. Thanks for taking one last question.

Governor Phil Murphy: Dave, it turns out you didn't take us home.

Reporter: I know the state and federal guidance has been for those who were most vulnerable to listen to their doctors, but a lot of people have to work. What's your message to the New Jerseyans who are making a compromise to have to go out into society and who are feeling anxious about the guidelines that are being scaled back? Is it safe for them to work in our schools and hospitals?

Governor Phil Murphy: That's a question that is for our health experts. I think they've got to be very careful, I would think, Judy, someone who's immunocompromised. The good news is – Ed alluded to this, and Tina as well. The good news is it's a lot better than it was, but it's not at zero. I would say the advice to everybody is use your common sense and think this through. What's responsible behavior would be even a more acute recommendation for folks who are immunocompromised in those settings in particular. Judy?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I think if you're immunocompromised, work with your health care provider. Make sure you mask up. Get vaccinated and boosted. If necessary, if that is not boosting your immunity, talk to your doctor about Evusheld and whether you're a candidate for that. Be careful. You will be at risk. There's no doubt about it.

Governor Phil Murphy: On behalf of Judy and Pat and Tina and Ed and Tammy and Parimal and Derek and Mahen and Alyana and Alex, Ruth, the whole team, thank you all so much. Keep doing the right thing, folks. God bless you all by the millions. You have come through this together. It's thanks to you that we're able to say at this point this is the last COVID briefing we're giving. It was mentioned earlier that it is the woman who needs no introduction's birthday. Callahan and I have, not surprisingly, got a little something for you, Judy.

END OF CALL

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