

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: March 8th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon. I am honored to be joined by the woman to my right, the Commissioner of the Department of Health who needs no introduction, Judy Persichilli. To her right, another familiar face the state's epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan, great to have you both with us. To my left the guy who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police Colonel Pat Callahan, Director of the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, Jared Maples, Chief Counsel Parimal Garg and a cast of thousands.

I've said it to Judy, privately, I will say publicly, I'm very happy that we were doing an event indoors. We were out there in the Mother Nature on Friday and Saturday.

Today is International Women's Day. Here, here. Here in New Jersey and around the world, we are celebrating and honoring the contributions women make every day to the betterment of our communities. We celebrate both the trailblazers who came before, and the emerging leaders of tomorrow. And we also acknowledge how, over the past year, this pandemic has especially impacted working women, especially working moms, who have shouldered so much. We will continue to work for a more equitable future, not just for New Jersey's women, but for all.

A quick note that we neglected, this is on me, to get to last week, but March is Arts In Our Schools Month. I'm sure every state could say that, but this is a particular badge of honor in the Garden State. We know that over the past year one of the great ways that our young people, especially, have been able to speak about this pandemic has been through art. Art is also one of the myriad ways we know our young people are coping and dealing with the stresses they are facing.

Supporting them has been our tremendous arts educators and local arts organizations who have sought to make their classrooms and studios safe havens for our kids. One of my greatest prides is that under our administration, New Jersey was the first state in our nation's history to achieve universal arts education across our entire public school system. We've never needed the arts more than right now, and our hats are off to everyone who is inspiring our kids to create, to perform and to persevere.

Now moving on, this morning, Judy, our vaccine dashboard ticked past another major milestone as we registered are 2,500,000th delivered dose with a current total, I believe this is always as of 10:00 a.m., of 2,511,731.

That breaks down roughly 1.65 million first doses in either Moderna or Pfizer. It also includes more than 861,000 New Jerseyans who are now fully vaccinated or have completed their course, either because they have finished their two-shot regimen of those vaccines, or they are among the first thousands who received Johnson & Johnson's single-dose vaccine.

If you recall, we passed the 2 million mark just a week ago. In seven days, we have delivered another 500,000 shots into the arms of New Jerseyans. It took us three weeks to move from 1 million to 2 million shots administered. I believe it was 55 days to go from zero to 1 million. We're on track to beat even the most recent faster pace and then some.

Additionally, our six mega sites have now crossed the threshold of 500,000 total doses administered and that's a big step as well. And please keep in mind, we've said this over the past week-plus, we are not expecting to have our dose allocation from the federal government significantly increased until April, although we are on with them, pounding away to get as much as we can. In fact, our team had a call this morning with the White House on that very topic. We are moving forward to maximize every single dose we have, and to make sure we reach as many folks who live work and study in New Jersey as possible.

Before we move on. Again, I think this is the week of the 8th. I think the week of the 8th, 15th and 22nd, Judy will show incremental improvement. I think somewhere around the week of March 29 or April 5th, we're going to see a quantum step up. A combination of J&J coming fully on the line with Merck and other help, but also the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines having been committed by those two organizations to increase their production. So bear with us for the next few weeks as it is getting better, but incrementally, and then you're going to see a quantum jump up.

Now, with this, here's a fun story. I want to give a huge shout out to this couple, Alan and Judy Green. They're from Clark. Both are originally from Newark. Both are retired career educators. On Saturday, they received their second doses at our mega site in the Meadowlands, run in partnership with Hackensack Meridian Health. Saturday – you ready for this, Pat? – also happened to be their 50th wedding anniversary. And the staff at the mega site threw them an anniversary party. Not exactly the cruise they probably had in mind, but Alan and Judy are among the tens of thousands of New Jerseyans who received their vaccinations on Saturday alone, but I know this one is going to be memorable for all involved.

So to Alan and Judy, with whom I had the great honor of speaking this morning, we wish you a Happy Birthday Anniversary and we are so happy that you now have the vaccine that will allow you to enjoy many more years together, including hugging your grandkids.

We also had two great visits over the past few days that further highlight the progress we're making. Again, we're not patting ourselves on the back here. We're not in the end zone, but the progress is undeniable. On Friday, Judy and I, this is an inside shot but most of the festivities were outside, as Judy and I will never forget. Judy and I joined with Union City Mayor, Senator, dear friend, great leader Brian Stack, County Executive Tom DeGise, another dear friend and great leader, and very coolly, Johnson & Johnson CEO Alex Gorsky, another dear friend, and many local and county officials to watch as some of the first doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine were administered to older residents at the Union Plaza Apartments.

The first in line was that woman with her back to the photograph, Anna Marie Flores. To see the look of relief on Anna's face -- and of the others, I might add -- being vaccinated was all we needed to know how much of a game changer this newest tool against COVID is. I think that's Janet Castro to the right of the picture there. She is head of the Health Department in Union City. Really special day.

And on Saturday, Judy and I traveled to Gloucester County to the mega site at Rowan College of South Jersey to look on as that site rolled out its program for vaccinating our educators. And Gloucester County Institute of Technology Educator Teresa Cairney, right there, had the honor of being first up to bat. It was also very special. And that mega site, Judy, runs like a Swiss watch, right? Just people coming in every 15 minutes, it's really impressive.

I once again and they joined us, I want to thank Congressman Donald Norcross, Congressman Tom Malinowski, Senate President Steve Sweeney, I give him a particular shout out because it was his idea to work with us on not just the educator vaccinations at Gloucester County but also in helping our efforts to prioritize 75-and-up of our seniors. We also had NJEA President Marie Blistan, which was very cool; Interim Commissioner of Department of Education Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan was with us, all among others and for that, I want to thank them for joining us and for their commitment to work with us to ensure educators have the access they need, so we can get more of our schools open for in-person instruction.

And, by the way, this morning, we opened two more of our community-based vaccination sites at partnering churches in Jersey City and Camden, part of our effort to ensure the most equitable vaccination program in the nation. Again, not in the end zone, folks, by any means. We have a ways to go.

But here are the facts. New Jersey is moving forward and moving ahead of nearly every other state in getting our residents vaccinated. We currently rank eighth among all states in doses administered daily, an average of 67,000 administered doses per day. We're 10th in total doses. We're in the top 12 in terms of throughput of our vaccine supply from delivery from the federal government to delivery into the arms of New Jerseyans. We are above the national averages in terms of the percent of our population that have both first and second shots -- and . keep in mind, by the way, that we're the 11th most populous state, so we have a lot more ground to cover than many of the states ahead of us, no disrespect to their efforts.

As I noted earlier, we have gotten through another 500,000 shots in just seven days, and all of this is being achieved against the backdrop of vaccine demand, continuing to far outpace our vaccine supply from the feds.

I know there are still many of you looking for an appointment, and they will come. We are still far short of the supply we need to meet the maximum capability of the vaccine delivery system we have put together from our six mega sites to the hundreds of other vaccination sites across the state, to our federal retail pharmacy partners, frankly, Judy, to the many hundreds, over a thousand of other distribution locations that have qualified, only awaiting our supply to go out from the feds.

We certainly, if you've not gotten your appointment yet or not gotten your vaccination, we completely understand your anxiety. But make no mistake, every New Jerseyan who wishes to be vaccinated will be vaccinated, and vaccinated soon. That is our goal and that is our promise.

And, perfect segue, one of the ways we will reach this goal is through the American Rescue Plan that President Biden has put forward and which is moving swiftly to its final approval by the Congress. The additional federal funding for our vaccination efforts will be a huge help to us. But this plan, in its entirety, is going to do much more, so much more, to help our state and millions of New Jersey families and communities move forward.

Among other things, there is no way to underscore the importance of that additional \$1,400 for countless working and middle-class families that will help relieve the fiscal stress that so many are living under. This is money that's going to help pay bills that have been mounting, among so many other necessary items. And, with additional funding for families with kids, it means that childcare can be placed back within reach for so many as they begin to get back to work.

It will extend life-sustaining food assistance for families in need. It will meaningfully help our lower rates of child poverty. Aid for our small businesses, especially our restaurants and bars and small performance venues will mean more of them will be able to keep their doors open and can weather whatever remains of this pandemic. For those still without work, the extension of the \$300 additional weekly federal benefit on top of their state unemployment benefit, will be an important and critical lifeline.

For our county and local governments who have incurred tremendous costs in keeping their communities and residents safe, nearly \$3 billion in direct federal relief will mean that property taxpayers will not be left shouldering the entire bill. And the additional billions in federal support for our schools will also mean that we can not only get moving and getting our kids and educators back into their classrooms, but local taxpayers, again, won't have to pick up the entire tab.

For us in state government, the anticipation of more than \$6 billion in direct federal support will give us additional degrees of freedom in meeting the many needs of our residents within the new budget I proposed a couple of weeks ago.

There is so much more in this bill that is good for New Jersey and good for our sister states. All in all, the American Rescue Plan means that New Jersey can get moving forward again. I'm extraordinarily grateful to Senators Bob Menendez and Cory Booker and Representatives Frank Pallone, Bill Pascrell, Donald Payne, Jr., Albia Sirius, Bonnie Watson Coleman, Donald Norcross, Josh Gottheimer, Mikey Cheryl, Andy Kim, and Tom Malinowski, for voting to help our state and our people. And of course, I thank the boss, President Biden and his team for their leadership from the top.

With that, let's turn our attention to the rest of the overnight numbers. We're reporting today an additional 2,201 positive PCR test results, alongside 421 new presumed positive antigen tests. That adds up to 2,622. The positivity for the 43,025 PCR tests recorded last Thursday, 7.13%.

Statewide rate of transmission, while it got back over one, it has stayed at 1.06, Judy, for several days at this point.

In our hospitals, as of last night's reports, there were a total of 1,786 patients being treated. That is also down, 1,669 of whom are confirmed positive, COVID positive. There are 393 reported patients in our ICUs, 237 of whom are requiring a ventilator.

Throughout yesterday, 179 live patients were discharged, while 175 were newly admitted. And again at the risk of comparing apples to oranges, because these are not confirmed, our hospitals reported 23 losses of life on Sunday. And today with a heavy heart, we also must report 20 new confirmed losses of life from our New Jersey family. The total count of confirmed is now 21,193. Probable losses of life remain at 2,331. And as we do every time we get together, let's honor a few more of these blessed souls we have lost.

We're going to start by remembering a lifelong Newarker, Joseph "Joe" Yobbi. He was just 62 years old when he passed. That's Joe on the left. At a young age, Joe started a love affair with automobiles that would become not just a passion, but a career. He spent decades in the car business, starting at age 23, and continuing strong on until retiring as the financial director for Mercedes Benz of Manhattan.

The only thing he loved more than cars was his family, through weekends down the shore, and on vacations all over. He now leaves behind his wife on the right of 33 years, Patti. I had the great honor of speaking with Patti on Friday. By the way, she was also hospitalized, Judy, and battled COVID, but she says she's back in shape. And his children, and by the way, this is left to right. That's Joseph beside Joe, daughter Alexandra holding the baby, that's baby Anthony, and her husband Raymond. And as I say, Baby Anthony was his beloved grandson.

Joseph's mother, Mary, passed a week after Joe passed. And I asked Patti was it from COVID? And she said no, it was because of a broken heart. He also leaves his sister Janet and her husband Joseph, his nephews and nieces, Christopher, Cynthia, James, Sarah, Nicole and Dave, and great nieces and nephews Nicholas, Justin, Madelina, Nora and Joseph. With a perpetual smile and a quick laugh, it was no secret that Joe enjoyed every moment of life. May God bless him and his memory and his family. And by the way, Patti told me how overwhelmed she and the family were when Mercedes dedicated the cafe in their Manhattan offices in Joe's memory. God bless him and God rest his soul.

Next up, we celebrate the life of Vincenzo Tarantini -- look at that smile -- of Maple Shade in Burlington County. He was a restaurateur in his own right, owning Vincent's Pizza in Merchantville, and the LBI Pancake House, among others. But he will always be connected as the co-owner of the family business that he and his brother Franco inherited from their parents, the iconic Tarantini Panzarotti.

Vincent came to the United States in 1961 after his stint in the Italian Navy ended, settling with his family in Camden. From there, his parents started their panzarotti business and he chipped in to help them sell the hot packages of fried dough stuffed with tomato sauce and cheese. Sounds good. Soon, Tarantini Panzarotti was supplying restaurants across the South Jersey and Philly areas and a family legacy was born. Tarantini Panzarotti is now in its fourth generation.

Vincent was a baker and a chef his whole life, but in his downtime he was also an accomplished woodworker, and spent hours tending to his garden alongside his wife, Barbara, with whom I have the great honor of speaking on Friday. He now leaves behind her -- by the way, he passed four days shy of their 56th wedding anniversary. He also leaves their children Pauline, Mary, Paul and Karen and I had the great honor of speaking with Karen as well on Friday, and their families, including his nine grandchildren, Stephen, Matthew, Patrick, James, Jesse, Kayla, Faith, Henry and John. May God bless Vincent and his family, the American Dream come true. And if you're in South Jersey, I hope you'll raise a Tarantini panzarotti in his honor.

And finally today, we remember Carmen Verderosa of Lebanon in Hunterdon County, Carmen was only 54 years old at his death. A Bellville native, Carmen spent most of his life in Middlesex County before relocating to Lebanon only three years ago. Music was his passion and his vocation. And as an accomplished sound engineer, Carmen owned and operated Woodrock Studios in Raritan Borough, a recording studio and rehearsal space. Woodrock became a focal point for the world, Woodrock became a focal point for the local music scene. And Carmen, a huge supporter of local music, welcomed every musician into his studio. His dear friend, Sue Gibson, who brought Carmen's passing to our attention summed him up simply and eloquently, and I quote her, "As a beautiful soul." Carmen was a longtime parishioner at Our Lady of Peace Roman Catholic Church in North Brunswick, where he had lived for many years.

He is survived by his wife, Kathy with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Friday. They were only married for two-and-a-half years, but they were together for 15. He also leaves behind his parents, Carmen and Barbara. He also leaves his sister Diane and her husband, Carmelo, along with numerous aunts, uncles, and cousins, and many, many dear friends. My hope, our hope is that Carmen has found a new studio, and he is back at work behind the board, doing what he loved most. May God bless and watch over him.

We remember Joe, Vincenzo and Carmen as do every member of our New Jersey family who has been lost to COVID. And it is for them that we will continue to fight to defeat this virus until the fight is over.

And as we keep up that fight, the New Jersey Economic Development Authority is continuing its fight to help our small business community remain strong. Certainly the support offered by the American Rescue Plan will only serve to augment the hundreds of millions of dollars the EDA has already put to work to support our small employers. Two weeks ago, we noted that the EDA awarded \$14 million through its Sustain and Serve NJ Program that will order up more than 1.5 million meals for families in need from 160 New Jersey restaurants.

Today I want to acknowledge one of the community organizations placing some of those orders. This is Our Community Dinner Table, which was founded last year, just as the pandemic was taking hold, by the Palisades Park brother and sister team of Sam and Esther Chung. They made it their mission to rely on their local restaurants that Our Community Dinner Table would deliver to families who needed help. At the pandemic's worst, they were providing upwards of 300 meals a day. It was the ultimate win-win. Families would be fed and a local establishment would be able to keep their doors open.

When the EDA announced the sustain and Serve NJ Program, Sam and Esther got in and they are one of the program's recipients. Meaning they'll be able to keep Our Community Dinner Table going strong, and in turn keep Palisades Park's restaurants going strong as well. I had the opportunity to check in with Sam on Friday, and to thank him for all that he and his sister Esther have done to keep their community fed over the past year. Tremendous work indeed. Check them out, their website is very simple, ourcommunitydinnertable.org.

And another note from our business community I want to give a shout out to a dear friend to the Hugo Neu Corporation and its CEO Wendy Neu, right there in the middle, who last week turned the keys over to the New Jersey Reentry Corporation, and that's one of my predecessors, Governor Jim McGreevey accepting those keys for a brand-new career training space in Kearney. From there, New Jersey Reentry Corp will provide vital job skills to residents recently released from incarceration, helping them make the most of their new start.

Among the areas where folks will be trained is the technology sectors that will be the driving force for our economic future including solar installation, as an example. And the Department of Labor is also playing a role, bringing its training and apprenticeship expertise to bear. This is an exciting partnership and I am grateful to a dear friend of Tammy's and mine, Wendy and the Hugo Neu Corporation for their tremendous generosity and spirit and to the New Jersey Reentry Corporation, Jim and his colleagues, for doing great work.

One final note before I end, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the passing of this guy last week of a cornerstone of our state's legal community, the longtime president of Legal Services of New Jersey and one of its founders in 1971, Mel D. Miller. For 50 years, Legal Services of New Jersey has supported tens of thousands of low-income New Jerseyans in their fights for justice in any number of areas, be it in housing, employment, civil matters or other. As president, by the way up until last year when he stepped aside at age 75, he did not and never did call it a retirement, Dee made sure that the organization stayed true to its mission of ensuring that every resident, regardless of their income or status, could seek justice.

This morning I had the great honor of speaking with Dee's three children, Tristan, Coran and Kendra, and I extended our condolences. And I told them that this guy, their dad, was a hero to thousands and thousands of New Jerseyans up and down our state. And by the way, New Jersey set a model for the nation in legal services. So his impact, his great shadow was cast not just up and down our state, but across our country. He did so much good for so many. May God bless him watch over him.

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. We continue to see vaccination numbers increase in the state. Today, the six mega sites will exceed 500,000 doses administered. And today, two more community-based vaccination sites have fully opened in Camden and Jersey City. In total, these sites have administered more than 11,000 vaccines to residents from communities that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

As I've said in the past. It is an amazing scientific achievement that three safe and effective vaccines are available to the residents of our state. With the arrival of the J&J vaccine in the state last week, there's a lot of interest in that vaccine. As we have shared before, the effectiveness of all of the vaccines to protect against severe hospitalizations, disease and death is the same. We are getting reports of individuals, however, canceling their appointments for the Moderna or Pfizer vaccine, and asking to wait until they can receive the J&J vaccine. As a reminder, our state won't be getting shipments of the J&J vaccine for the next three weeks. If you choose to wait for the J&J vaccine, you will go back into the queue. If that is your choice, we respect that.

However, as public health experts, including Dr. Fauci have said, we urge individuals to take the first vaccine that becomes available to them. We urge you, if you have an appointment, please consider getting vaccinated. We expect 374,870 doses of vaccine this week. That's 198,500 first doses of Pfizer and Moderna. That means about 198,000 people will be able to start their vaccination journey this week. I'll remind you, we have 2 million individuals registered and in the queue. And we will get 176,320 second doses for individuals who will finish their vaccination journey.

The goal of our vaccination plan is to prevent morbidity and mortality and to support essential societal functions. And these priorities are difficult to reconcile because we certainly believe all individuals are worthy and need to be vaccinated.

Once we have enough supply, everyone who wants to be vaccinated will get vaccinated. I am getting lots of requests from different groups, including advocates for senior citizens, migrant or seasonal workers, the homebound and people experiencing homelessness etc. I want to assure everyone that all specific and vulnerable populations are under consideration and each will have a plan. Both the mega sites and the community-based sites have been designed to meet the needs of all residents in the state.

All of these sites are ADA compliant, and special arrangements are made for those with specific mobility challenges. Because of the volume of individuals and the size of the mega sites, many accommodations have been made to make them easier to navigate for individuals with disabilities. We know some individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities are more sensitive to things like noise or lights or crowds, so all six mega sites have quiet rooms to make the process less overwhelming to those individuals. For those who are hearing impaired, there is a sign language interpreter that is immediately accessible via FaceTime. And one individual actually rotates between the sites. All the vaccination mega sites have made accommodations for a wide range of disabilities.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals are reporting 1,786 hospitalizations. There are 237 individuals in critical care, 60% of those in critical care are on ventilators. Fortunately, there are no new reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. Cumulatively, there are 106 cases in our state, and none of the children at this time are currently hospitalized.

There are no new reports of variance in our state since last week. We continue to monitor this closely to see any impact on cases in our state. Because of the concern about these variants, we continue to ask that our residents comply with our travel advisory. We want individuals subject to the advisory to self-quarantine for at least 10 days upon returning to the state and to limit the spread of the virus within our communities. That is in line with the continuing recommendation from the CDC regarding travel and also vaccinated individuals.

We're currently reporting 136 cases of what is called now variants of concern. The B-117 variant, otherwise known as the UK variant, and the P-1 variant, which was first reported in Brazil are now present in our state.

At the state veteran homes, sadly, there has been one additional death of a Menlo Park resident who tested positive for COVID during a hospitalization on March 1. At the state psychiatric hospitals, there's one new positive case among a resident at Ancora.

The daily percent positivity as of March 4th for the state is 7.13%. The Northern part of the state reports 6.98%, Central 7.97%, Southern part of the state 5.90%. That concludes my daily report. Continue to stay safe, continue to mask up, social distance, stay home when you're sick, get tested. Wash your hands frequently. 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 all. I meant to say this earlier, after you and I were together at Union City, I snuck up to Passaic County and went to the county's main site in Woodland Park, in a former Modell's Sporting Goods Store. We were inside, by the way. Really impressive. And we've said this before, but it's not just the mega sites, and now the community sites, but the counties have each done a really terrific job with county commissioner Director Pat Lapore, his colleague TJ Best, Tony Denova who is the Administrator for the County; Keith Kazmark, the Woodland Park Mayor, just really impressive.

Every one of these places, there's a sort of Tale of Two Cities right now, which is completely understandable. Folks who are frustrated that have not gotten an appointment or have not gotten their vaccination are rightfully frustrated, and we don't blame them. We haven't had the supplies out of the feds that we need and that's going to change. And we've been saying all along, you get to Memorial Day and I think even before then, anybody who wants to get vaccinated is going to be vaccinated.

But the other side of the coin is witnessing it with our own eyes or speaking to people on the phone or anecdotally and running into them. The folks who have gone through the process are overwhelmingly complimentary, including the State Police, National Guard, health professionals, nurses. And these things are really, really well run, up and down the state, including the big ones and the smaller ones. And so our fervent hope is to get as many people as fast as we can from being over here with anxiety, which is completely understandable, to the experience which is overwhelmingly being well received. So may it stay that way on the ladder and we will we will get the front part of this addressed with more supply from the feds.

So Pat, I looked at the weather this week. It's gonna be pretty warm actually, so this – I don't want to take away from your meteorological chops, but I'm not sure there's a whole lot to say other than it's chilly today, but it's going to get warmer as the week goes on. We missed you last Wednesday, keeping you in our prayers. What do you got on compliance or other matters? Great to have you back.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon, everybody and thank you for your prayers. With regard to compliance, since I last reported, there's just a handful in Woodbridge. Fire and Ice Nightclub was cited for EO violation as was in West Orange, La Dolce Vita was cited for a third time for Executive Order violation. Also last week, the ABC investigators went out in Warren County and found one establishment which was Desidario's Stone Tavern in Washington was found in violation.

The weather looks phenomenal, Governor, as you said. We're hoping that that leads to – I don't want to jump the shark as they say, but the Commissioner and I are hoping that leads to more walk-up sites. It's tough to stand outside when it's as cold as it's been, as you and Judy can certainly attest to with your outdoor events. So we're hoping that warm weather leads to not only outdoor dining but certainly, more importantly, the walk-up sites.

And lastly, I just thought I would, since it's International Women's Day on Friday, the Lieutenant Governor and I welcomed, if you remember, General Laura Richardson. She came last spring when we were upfitting the mothballed hospitals and field medical stations. She is the Commanding General, Three Star General of US Army North. She took the time to come up here Friday from Fort Hood, Texas, to see how we were doing in Edison, as well as our community-based vaccine site in Paterson.

And of all things on Friday, when she's up here in Jersey trying to take best practices, that very same day, President Biden was nominating her to be a Four Star General to lead the Pentagon's Southern Command. A phenomenal woman of service and certainly a tremendous partner. She's the one who sends that Department of Defense team and staff to support our hospitals and medical stations and vaccine sites. So I just thought it was fitting and appropriate to recognize and certainly thank her publicly and all of her staff from the Department of Defense for their support of everything that we're doing here in New Jersey. Thanks, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: What a great story. One of two women, I believe, nominated on Friday to be Four Star Generals.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: That's correct.

Governor Phil Murphy: In our Armed services. So hats off to her, congratulations to both of them. And I think fitting that she got the news which she was in Jersey. Thank you for that.

We'll start over here with Matt. I think we'll be in the regular rhythm that we've been in, which is I think increasingly likely that we'll be with you Monday, electronically Tuesday, with you again Wednesday, electronically Thursday. And I think increasingly more likely that some combination of us will be on the road on Fridays, hopefully be able to deliver the COVID overnight numbers as part of that. But we want to get out there with our own eyes and see as many of these distribution points as possible. And there's nothing like – it's one thing to read the numbers and that's, the numbers are going in the right direction. There's nothing like seeing it with your own eyes, particularly the emotion that people have when they when they receive the shot.

So with that, Dante has got the mic. Matt, Good afternoon.

Q&A Session

Matt Arco, Star-Ledger: Good afternoon, Governor. When will the Department of Health develop visitation policy that recognizes people in nursing homes who have been vaccinated? We've heard from families who are frustrated because their parents have been vaccinated, in some cases they've been vaccinated too, but nothing has changed in terms of them being able to see their parents.

And the CDC has recommended vaccinated people can get together with other vaccinated people indoors without masks. Governor, is this a recommendation that you would support? You know, for example, if 20 people are all vaccinated, would they be able to gather indoors, which would currently violate the indoor limit?

And if yes to this, what sort of system, checks and balances, would it be? Would people have to carry around their vaccination card or something? And that's it.

Gov. Phil Murphy: So Judy, let me start if that's okay with you. And a couple of things that are direct, Matt, and one that's sort of back. You didn't ask this, but we're constantly assessing our capacity limitations, the level, the degree to which we're open. And that's something that is ongoing and I just want to reiterate that.

Tina, I'm practicing without a license here, and Judy without a license, but it's pretty clear when you look, when you dig through the numbers. Judy and we did a call earlier on this front. It's pretty clear that hospitalizations, severe illnesses, are going in the direction we want them to go in. And remember, each of these three vaccines are 100% effective against hospitalizations and fatality. That's apparently happening.

At the same time, it's quite clear people are still getting the virus. So there's sort of a decoupling, fair to say. So that's something, and in those, I assume due to the variants that are in our midst. So that's something we're watching, and those are factors that we're trying to weigh in terms of capacities and the degree to which we open, when we do it, etc.

I assume, Judy, on the visitation policies. I know the CDC came out a couple hours ago and you've got your team and Tina and her team are assessing that. So the answer to your second question is to be determined because it's still in the hands of the health professionals, but I assume it impacts your first question, Matt, which is the extent to which we can be more embracing of visitations, particularly to folks in long term care, nursing homes, etc.

Judy, do you want to start and then we'll hand it to Tina, or vice versa?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, I want to talk about long-term care. You know, we're extremely sensitive to the issues of visitation in long-term care. As I did a quick read of what the CDC came out with, they are not recommending any changes to visitation on long-term care. As we see positivity rates decrease and CALI scores move from red to orange to yellow, when that score stays at a lower level for two weeks, visitation can start opening up in long-term care. And a number of our facilities in Central, West, and Southern-East and West, I believe, have started to do that, because the CALI score has moved those regions to yellow.

But at this point there, there won't be based on what I quickly read from CDC, significant changes in long-term care visitation. And I'll let Tina just talk a little bit about what her group has to do with the new guidance.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Yeah, and the new guidance was just released this morning, so we need a little bit of time to digest this all. But what we can generally say about this new CDC guidance is that it generally does not apply to public settings, does not apply to healthcare settings in general. You know, and there are a lot of different scenarios that are actually covered within these new guidance. So we anticipate, we hope that, you know, perhaps within the next several days or so that we'll be able to revise some of our guidances to reflect an aligned – we anticipate they will align with these new CDC guidance.

And just to expand on what the Governor had said earlier, it is really great that we're seeing a decrease in our cases, in our hospitalizations and deaths. But it's not just from vaccination alone. We have to remind ourselves that right now we're nowhere near the finish line right now. We're nowhere near the coverage, the vaccination coverage that we'd like.

Today, I believe, the CDC Director, Dr. Walensky said that something like about 9% of the population is fully vaccinated, right? So we're nowhere near that. So that's why we have to continue the masking, the social distancing, all those layers of interventions on top of the vaccinations to keep us on track with success in this stemming COVID.

Governor Phil Murphy: Always a good reminder. And by the way, we broke the back of the curve in the spring without any vaccinations because of that, the public health mitigants and steps that we're taking. Real quick, Matt, hold on one sec.

Matt Arco, Star-Ledger: Just to put a fine point on it, it just sounds then like you will not be – you're going to be sticking with CALI for nursing homes, over vaccinations and I guess that's what, because of what the doctor said, is that the CDC doesn't recognize nursing homes?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah, O don't believe they're changing any of the guidance on long-term care at this point. That was my quick read of the guidance on vaccinated individuals. And we still have 296 long-term care facilities with what we call active outbreaks, which is still concerning.

Governor Phil Murphy: Those numbers are down but obviously 296 is 296 too many, right? Yeah. Thank you for that. Sir.

Reporter: Good afternoon, Governor. Republican lawmakers held a hearing on Friday criticizing the administration's handling of the pandemic at long-term care facilities. What is your response to that hearing? They specifically criticized the state's directive requiring long-term care facilities to transfer hospitalized residents back to facilities, regardless of their COVID status. Do you regret that directive?

Some questions from Colleen O'Dea. Governor, you were in Gloucester County on Saturday to watch the vaccination of teachers but according to your order, teachers do not become eligible for another week. Did these teachers meet other criteria such as age or serious health conditions? Or were they able to get the vaccine early to provide a photo-op to appease the NJEA? Again, please provide a county-by-county breakdown of the number of doses the state is giving to counties, not including the LTCs or the pharmacies, just the doses that the state has control over and is giving to counties and municipalities. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Was that last question related to the teachers question or is that a separate one? Okay, we'll come back to the last one.

For Colleen or you, this just in, President Biden last week came over the top through the Department of Health and Human Services and mandated that teachers and daycare professionals be vaccinated. So that's the reason we did that. This is not a photo-op, with all due respect. We don't do photo-ops. And so that's that.

Listen, I was out on the road, as I mentioned on Friday, in Union City and Passaic and ended up in Newark. I don't have much of a reaction, frankly. Our record is, I think, crystal clear as it relates to the steps that were taken. Now, does that mean that every operator did the right thing? And my fear is that some did not do it. But the directives that came from Judy, the words that were in those directives, if what you're saying is true, they haven't read the directives, because it's crystal clear.

If a resident, and Judy reminded us on April 10th that this is their home. This is not like they're going to some abstract location, this is their home. If they were to be readmitted to their facility, you had to meet certain strict black-and-white standards separating not just residents, but staff, remember staff going in and out of these places. In fact, we saw this recently was still happening pre-vaccine a couple months ago, right? Unwittingly asymptomatic bringing the vaccine in [sic]. And by the way, part of the reason they were getting infected is they were working on multiple jobs because they weren't getting paid enough and we're finally addressing that. And staffing levels weren't appropriate. And it took a pandemic, for us to get the support to get laws passed that have addressed that as well.

But it was crystal clear. If you were going to readmit a formerly COVID-positive resident, they had to be separated by floor, by wing, by building. The staff could not commingle. And by the way, went further, if you could not do that as a facility, you were mandated to come to the Department of Health and raise your hand and say we can't do this. Please help us find a different solution, a different location. And in fact, that happened on a number of occasions. And that's exactly what happened. So I have no time for the political noise. We're still flying the plane. As Tina said a minute ago, we're still in the war here. We're still in the fight.

And if that all weren't enough, we started reporting probable deaths in June, you could look that up and do the math. That's nine months ago. We have been crystal clear and transparent on that as well. Judy had the courage to hire an independent firm that came in with no strings attached and held a mirror up to the entire industry of long-term care, to our practices within that industry, gave a very graphic final report a month later, by the way; again, nine or 10 months ago, including Executive Order recommendations which we have pursued. Statute, laws that we've pursued with our Legislative partners. So the facts, I just don't want to let the facts get in the way of some political stunt.

With that, Dave, over to you.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. Following up, Matt, by the way, stole both of my questions. So I'm following up –

Governor Phil Murphy: You've got to make one up?

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Well, I have a couple made up already. But just to follow up with regard to the new CDC guidance about visitations. We did a story with the Group Family Advocate Care Experience talking about how they don't understand. They really talk about how urgent the situation is to be able to be as caregivers in visitation with their loved ones.

I know, Commissioner, you had said there's no CDC guidance specifically about changing the long-term care visitation policy, but they do say the CDC, in their guidance, that if grandparents are vaccinated, then they can even commingle with their grandchildren, which would be considered a very low-risk group. Also, the CDC does not say specifically, we're excluding long-term care situations.

So can you just talk about, I mean, I understand we want to follow the spirit of the CDC and for obvious reasons. But I mean, practically speaking, if family members are vaccinated, if long-term care residents and their staff are vaccinated, the risk of significant and severe illness, hospitalization, death, all drops dramatically. And these people make the point that isolation can kill as well as this virus. So if you could just talk about that, because these people are desperate.

Also, second and final question, outdoor dining in parts of New York is soon being raised to 75%. Not in New York City, but in other parts of New York State. Governor, will you consider this idea? I mean, the warmer weather, obviously as meteorologist and the Head of the State Police has referred to this changing dramatically in the next few days. You know, maybe are you thinking about this idea of increasing the outdoor dining. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, do you want to take the – and I am just going to say something, if I may, the mental health strain, the impact has been overwhelming. And I would say, and I think on everybody, right? Kids learning on a screen, educators, parents, all of us, but I think none more so than either and residents of long-term care, broadly defined; seniors, developmentally disabled, whoever it might be the strain there on them and their family is as acute with that group as it is with any. Judy, sorry.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: We're trying to reconcile so many conflicting issues with long-term care. We can't ignore the fact that there are still active outbreaks. And during an active outbreak, movement within the facility should be restricted.

The second thing, we can't deny the fact that we had one of the highest mortality rates in long-term care. The density of our long-term care facilities, the number of individuals we have in long-term care, along with the physical structure, which has many semi-private rooms, and sometimes three and four bedroom accommodations, increases the risk.

On the other hand, we have said pretty clearly essential caregiving and compassionate visits should be allowed. And that those definitions are not just for end of life, you know, if someone is in significant mental distress or emotional distress, that perhaps lends itself to a compassionate care visit.

So we are encouraging long-term care to look at each individual, as an individual, along with their family structure, their supportive loved ones, and make the best decision in terms of essential reality, essential caregivers, and compassionate care.

On the other hand, we have to be vigilant, and the CDC is the public health experts that we look to. And we have developed a system called the CALI score that is in keeping with the CDC and our system as well. I don't know if you want anything to add, Tina.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Yeah, and we are particularly sensitive to the considerations around long-term care facilities also, because to what the Commissioner was saying, we have to also be mindful that these aren't necessarily just enclosed private households that, you know, there's movement and mobility from staff coming in, there's also turnover of residents as well. So it is a very nuanced type of approach that our department has looked at and it's taken very seriously.

Because the whole idea of CDC putting out these recommendations is recognizing that there is a need to weigh the risks and benefits of isolation with the public health aspects, and how do we might look at these scenarios in a very thoughtful manner.

Governor Phil Murphy: I don't want to overstate what Wednesday will look like. But these just came out a couple of hours ago. My guess is that, Judy, you and I guess it'll be Eddy Bresnitz on Wednesday will have more to say on that, but Tina, thank you for that.

I'd say one other comment on long-term care, kind of back to your question, sir, but tied into this. Here's something we can all agree on. We got clobbered. We had another loss of life in our Menlo Park among our veterans, bless our veterans. Clobbered in long-term care, the country got clobbered, the world got clobbered, and we mourn each and every one of those lives that have been lost. And we never ever, ever can make any light of that.

As it relates to reopenings, we're constantly looking at this. To some extent, what our neighbors do is instructive. But we also have to look at the numbers that are specific to our state. So for instance, New York City, a few months ago, closed indoor dining entirely. We kept it at 25% and have raised it modestly to 35%. My guess, if the numbers continue to go in the right direction, we'll take some steps, perhaps sooner than later. We do have this kind of weird dynamic where Tina is right. The hospitalizations are going down due to a number of reasons including vaccines, but much more than that. Cases, people are still getting infected and getting the virus so you try to thread a needle between those two realities. Is that fair to say? Thank you. Nikita, good afternoon.

Nikita Biryukov, New Jersey Globe: Good afternoon, Governor. So a bill eliminating mandatory minimums for a series of non-violent crimes, including official misconduct, drug crimes and some property crimes has been on your desk for about a week now. I know you've previously balked at the inclusion of official misconduct, but has there been any change in your thinking on the matter and is there any indication of timing for Bill action?

Separately, there's a new Bill moving through the Legislature to move parental notifications for underage marijuana offenses to the first offense instead of the second. Just wondering if that's something that you're amenable to.

And then separately, again, it's been, I guess, more than three years now and no one has really been able to say who was behind racist campaign flyers in Edison and Hoboken. Do you personally believe that there should be an investigation into those flyers?

And then I sort of asked you about this in a different way last week, but do you agree with the decision to drop Assemblyman Chiaravalloti from the Hudson Democratic line?

Governor Phil Murphy: No, nothing new one mandatory minimum sentences and no insight for you on timing. I am basically where I have been, that the Criminal Sentencing and Disposition Commission was stood up by us after having been dormant for eight years by Chief Justice Poritz and Gils Ship who was the CEO of National Organization of Black Law Enforcement. They did good work. They did outstanding work, they came up with a set of recommendations, some Executive Order, some statutory fixes. I continue to be in the same place. I've been on that no insight on timing.

I spoke with the Senate President on Saturday. Without getting too much into the weeds, no pun intended on the notification question, I personally think that's a step in the right direction. And so we'll see where that goes. It's not on my desk, that's not even through the Chamber's yet, it's got a ways to go. But as a conceptual matter, I'll put it that way, I support that direction.

Nothing new on Edison other than I found it at the time to be incredibly offensive and I hope the persons who are associated with doing it ultimately are found. I'm not sure what the price you pay for that is, but they deserve to pay a price because it was really offensive.

And no comment on the Hudson County decision other than you asked me last week about both Mayor Jimmy Davidson, and Nick. And I'm a big fan of both of them. And we've worked really well with both over the past number of years. And I've got nothing new in terms of where I think that settles, but two outstanding public servants, two outstanding electeds. Thank you.

With that, I'm going to pack up and mask up. I want to thank Judy, Tina. Again, I don't want to over promise and under-deliver and my guess is we'll have more to say on a lot of things on Wednesday as you all digest the CDC guidance. Thank you both, as always. Pat, good to have you back, particularly in good weather. Jared, Parimal, Dan. Again we will be electronic with you tomorrow and in person with you on Wednesday. That's my guess, is we will be electronic and then on the road on Friday, but we'll get Dan or Mahan to give you the details on that.

So I would just have two quick reminders here as we break. One is to underscore the point Tina made today, Judy's made it hundreds of times, we've made it. The vaccines are a huge step in the right direction. They are yet another weapon in our arsenal. They're not the only weapon and that's a very important point. So face coverings, social distancing, washing hands with soap and water, using common sense to take yourself off the field. All of that still matters. The vaccine is a very potent weapon on top of that. So please continue to do the right things.

And secondly, we're going to see increased supplies, in an incremental fashion, over the next several weeks. And that's all good. It's all going in the right direction. We will see that supply go up in a quantum way, either at the end of this month or early in April. And so folks, we understand if you've not gotten your appointment, if you've not gotten vaccinated, and you want it and you're frustrated and you've got anxiety associated with that, we completely get that and understand completely. The condition around that, that supply-demand imbalance is going to change within a matter of weeks. And when it does change, it will change meaningfully.

To the 2.5 million people now who have had a shot, at least one shot in their arms, I think if you speak to them, they feel like this has been a game-changing event. Not only do they have peace of mind, but the experience of actually getting it overwhelmingly has been a good one and we are committed to continue that for every single New Jerseyan who wants to get vaccinated. God bless you all. Thank you.

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