

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: December 13th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everyone. I'm joined by the woman to my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, another familiar face, the State's Epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan. Great to have you back. To my left, another guy who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have Parimal Garg, Alex Altman, and a cast of thousands here. Jameel's going to have the mic.

Before we get to the numbers, a quick reminder here that the December 31st cutoff of the grace period for utility shutoffs related to non-payments due to a COVID-related issue is just a little more than two weeks away. If you owe money on your utilities, you have until December 31st to pay what you owe, arrange a payment plan, or apply for assistance and not risk losing service. With expanded income eligibility for some programs, you may be eligible for assistance even if you thought you were not. Additionally, the BPU's annual winter termination moratorium on gas and/or electric shutoffs for residents eligible for numerous energy assistance or other programs is currently in effect through March 15, 2022.

For a one-stop page to learn about the state assistance plans that are in place, please visit the Board of Public Utilities website at nj.gov/bpu, nj.gov/bpu and click the link for assistance programs. That page will give you eligibility information and help you fill out an application. I cannot stress strongly enough the importance of applying for the assistance for which you are eligible, and again, time is of the essence as the grace period for shutoffs only runs until December 31st.



Now let's move to today's numbers. We'll start as we have been doing of late with this morning's updated vaccination totals, and here I should note that the number of New Jerseyans eligible for booster shots has increased with last week's announcement that 16- and 17-year-olds who received the Pfizer vaccine as recently as six months ago are now in line for boosters. We continue to see pickup in the rates of boosters being administered, and we strongly encourage everyone who is eligible to get their booster. While the rates have picked up, Judy, it's not nearly at the level that we need it to get at I think it's fair to say. Again, everyone ages 16 years and over who received Pfizer is now eligible so long as you're six months past your last dose. The same goes for everyone ages 18 and up who got Moderna. Everyone who has received J&J at least two months ago should go get boosted. Regardless of what vaccine you got the first time, you can get a booster of any other vaccine. I know the news is full of the latest on omicron, but as Judy and Tina can tell you, we are still dealing overwhelmingly with Delta in New Jersey. We know the vaccines work.

Today we're also releasing the first set of completed or compiled data, rather, on state employee vaccination rates. As of last Tuesday, December 7th and across 50 state departments, agencies, authorities, and commissions, 70% of all employees were reported as being fully vaccinated, and 43 either agencies or departments of the 50 reporting have reported full vaccination rates at or above 75%, which roughly matches the overall statewide vaccination rate. We know there are also a significant number of public employees who have received their first vaccine doses and others who remain unvaccinated are submitting to regular testing as required. As you recall, we undertook a phased in return to work across state government, so some offices are just ramping now up their reporting, and we continue to work with them to refine their reported data.

We're also working closely with agencies and unions whose numbers are below this average in ways to get more of their employees vaccinated. We continue working with agencies and our public employees' union partners to ensure full compliance with vaccination and testing protocols and most importantly providing guidance to and ensuring that agencies are working with local health departments to follow public health practices in preventing transmission in the workplace. To be sure, any employee who identified as non-compliant and is subject to disciplinary actions. This is about ensuring a safe workplace for everyone. Just as we know our state employees are focused on providing the best services to our residents, we need them just as focused on protecting the health of their colleagues and the people they serve.

Wednesday marks – Judy, it's hard to believe, Pat – the one-year anniversary of the first vaccinations in our state. To commemorate, and as we discussed last week, we are designating Wednesday as Boost NJ day with greater walkup access to the boosters at many of our vaccination sites, and Judy will be announcing the opening of a megasite on Wednesday in Somerset County in her remarks. We encourage everyone needing a booster to head to covid19.nj.gov/finder for the participating vaccination site nearest to you.

Next up, here are the daily case numbers going back across to last Tuesday. The numbers themselves – if you just spend a minute looking at them, they need very little interpretation. They're going up, and they're staying there. Today we, as you can see, have 3,481 new cases, but note also the jump in the overall rate of transmission which while holding steady for the past several days at 1.41, it still denotes a significant progression of the virus. To be sure, the overwhelming numbers of these new cases are among the unvaccinated as all the past breakthrough data – pardon me – for the past few weeks and months bear out, but we cannot overlook that there are more cases being identified among those who did complete their primary vaccine course, a course that now may begin to be waning. This is why everyone who was vaccinated earlier this year now needs to step up for their boosters.

Let's take a look if we can at the cases which have been determined to have been a direct result of in-school transmission, and you can see those numbers have been increasing over the past several weeks. This is in line with the increase we've been seeing generally, yet these numbers are still in the range of where we believe the layered approach to protection we've taken in our schools has kept in-school transmission in check, and if you look at the right-hand column – if you go back if you could to the previous slide, the right-hand column, cumulative outbreaks, that's 248 school buildings. Remember that we operate as a state about +/- 3500 school buildings, so it is still, thank God, a – we take them all seriously, but thank God, still a fraction of the buildings in the state.

Now if we flip looking at the overall case rates among all students and staff regardless of where the exposure occurred, the rate of infection nearly doubled for students throughout the month of November and increased roughly 2.5 times for staff. By the way, this is per thousand individuals, and this pushes back, if you will, on

the data which is on the – the gross data on the previous slide. This does not take into account whether or not a particular district did or did not submit. We know these are factual and give a good sense of the transmission rates across the state.

Looking at the numbers now from the hospitals, we see another set of increasing numbers and the latest data from the Department of Health tells us that the hospitalization rate among unvaccinated individuals, who are now by the way a distinct minority of New Jerseyans, is more than six times that of vaccinated individuals. Again, the unvaccinated are going into the hospital for COVID at a rate six times those of the vaccinated. Here I would also ask you to pay attention to the numbers in the ICU and the ventilator counts, both of which are also up over the past week. Ventilator count, Judy, up less so than the ICU numbers. I think you said it was the lowest percentage rate we've seen in a long time.

Here now are the numbers, sadly, with the heaviest of hearts of confirmed COVID-related deaths from the past week, and these are confirmed. These are unlike the previous slide, which is the hospitals reporting to us what they've seen in that 24-hour period. These are confirmed over the past week, and if you add up the confirmed and the probables, the toll of this virus is now a staggering 28,589 losses of lives. Let us honor three of those precious lives now if we can. We'll begin today by remembering Bergenfield's Suzanne Murphy. She was an office manager for Sports Time Screen Printing and Embroidery in Norwood. True to someone working at an office called Sports Time, Suzanne was a constant presence in her own sons' youth sports from working the concession stand during games to organizing team fundraisers. Suzanne was 64 years old when she passed, had been predeceased by her husband Robert. She left behind those two guys on either side of her, her twin sons Justin and Sean. I had the great honor of speaking with Justin last week. She also leaves behind Justin's wife Elisa along with their spouses and her three grandchildren Aidan, Camila, and Emiko. God bless and watch over her memory and the family she leaves behind.

Next up, we'll move down to Woodbridge, which was the long-time home of Margaret MacKenzie who was 93 years old. Born and raised in Newark, Margaret worked for Bell Telephone, and later on after taking time to raise her family, the New Jersey Jewish Federation. She was known to walk two to three miles a day and to spend her football Sundays rooting for the New York football Giants. God rest her soul, but she certainly didn't miss anything yesterday. Margaret is survived by her four daughters, Cindy, Joyce, Janet, and Diane, and I had the great honor of speaking with Cindy and Diane last week, and by their families, grandchildren Bill, Danielle, Christin, Kacie, Bobby, Jaime, Kevin, and Kelly, and great-grandchildren Cameran, Makayla, Nicholas, Kendall, Logan, James, and Hadley. She also left two surviving siblings, Tom and Jane. May God bless and watch over Margaret and the family she leaves behind, and by the way her two daughters told me they had not just their mom but three family members who have passed from COVID.

Finally today, we remember Clara Martez. A long-time resident of Secaucus, she was living in Polonuevo, Colombia, where she and her husband Edgardo were born, and where he was serving as mayor. Clara and Edgardo had previously immigrated and settled in Middlesex County where they raised their family and became American citizens. Later, their return to Polonuevo helped their native town. Edgardo became mayor in 2020 and Clara, a social worker, took to providing residents with masks and encouraging vaccinations. She had hoped to return to New Jersey after Edgardo's term as mayor ended. Clara leaves behind her husband Edgardo and their three children Karen, Carlos, and Diane, and I had the great honor of speaking with Carlos and Diane last week. May God bless and watch over Clara and her memory and the family she left behind, and God bless each and every one who we have lost.

Finally for today, let's highlight another business that is working through the Department of Labor's Return & Earn program to help folks get started on a strong career, Union City's My Smile Dental is a minority and women-owned dental practice, managed by that woman Alexa Masso that provides a comprehensive list of family dental service needs. With a need for more trained dental assistants, Alexandra has used the Return & Earn program to hire two additional assistants. The program covered some of the costs of training, and the new assistants each received a 500-dollar bonus in their first paycheck. That is how Return & Earn is designed to work. Businesses get support to bring on new employees, and in turn those employees get a one-time signing bonus and a start on a new career. I had the great honor of speaking with Alexandra last week. Check them out, mysmiledental.org, mysmiledental.org.

That's where we'll end for today. Again, as we approach the one-year anniversary of the vaccines, we encourage everyone who is eligible to get out and get vaccinated and get boosted, and even if you already are, we also encourage you to keep masking up when in crowded indoor spaces or when you don't know the vaccination status of those around you. Vaccination and common sense are the best protections that we have. With that, please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor, and good afternoon. As we approach the anniversary of the first COVID-19 vaccination being administered in our state, we have made tremendous progress in vaccinating those who live, work, and study in the state with 73% of residents fully vaccinated and 84% with at least one dose of vaccine. While we work to increase the vaccination rates in younger populations, we are also focused on getting more residents their booster vaccines. Those ages 16 and older who have received their primary vaccination series are now eligible for boosters. Currently, 36% of all those eligible have received a booster. As part of Boost NJ on December 15th, we are making boosters more accessible than ever before. We are urging vaccination sites across the state to have walk-in booster clinics on December 15th. Walk-in availability and extended hours are important to make access to boosters as easy as possible. A new megasite located in Somerset County will also open on December 15th at the Bridgewater Commons Mall. The site will be stood up at the previous location of the Lord & Taylor store.

While great progress has been made in the vaccination effort, COVID-19 is still with us. There have been nearly 800,000 deaths nationwide and nearly 50 million cases in the country, including more than 100,000 new cases a day. With cases increasing, it is critical that more residents get boosters because we know immunity is waning. We are seeing breakthrough cases. Although on average 80% of the patients in our hospitals with COVID as their principal diagnosis are unvaccinated there are still 20% individuals in our hospitals that are vaccinated and most likely are infected due to decreasing immunity. We also need residents to take commonsense preventive health measures like masking, physical distancing, handwashing, staying home when you are sick.

Another critical measure to help us contain this virus is testing. Vault Medical Services has been a valuable testing partner throughout this pandemic. Now the Department of Health and Vault have partnered on a free at-home COVID-19 saliva testing program. Testing is currently available at many states throughout – at many sites throughout the state, excuse me. As an alternative, this free PCR test provides increased accessibility to COVID testing and is a simple 10 or 15-minute process that can be done in the privacy of your home. With cases rising and holiday gatherings and travel, you want to protect yourself, especially if you are not feeling well or believe you may have been exposed, even if you don't have any symptoms. You can request a free test kit by visiting learn.vaulthealth.com/nj/. That's learn.vaulthealth.com/nj/.

The kit will be shipped through UPS with next day delivery. Once received, individuals will connect via Zoom with a Vault healthcare professional who will guide them through the test and answer any questions. When complete, the test can be sent back in a prepaid package via UPS next day shipping. You will receive your test results 24 to 48 hours after your sample arrives at the lab. The results are also automatically shared with local public health officials who conduct contact tracing, which helps us continue to track the virus. This new program increases the availability and accessibility of testing, particularly for those who may not be able to get to a testing site. This federally-funded, in-home alternative helps expand testing options for anyone who needs it.

Onto my daily report; as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 1,650 hospitalizations. This number has been increasing. New hospitalizations are up 81% compared to 2 weeks ago. Thankfully, there are no new cases of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children. There are 151 cumulative cases in our state, and 1 of these children is still currently hospitalized.

At the state's veteran homes there's been no cases among residents of the homes; however, there are eight employees who have tested positive. Seven are at the Vineland Home, and one is at the Paramus Home. Three of the seven employees at the Vineland Home are fully vaccinated and one is also boosted. At the state psychiatric hospitals, there's two new cases among patients at the Anne Klein Hospital.

The daily percent positivity as of December 9th in New Jersey is 8.02%. The northern of the state is 7.53%, the central part of the state 8.53%, and the southern part of the state is 8.43%.

[Transmission interrupted]

That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe. Let's get vaccinated and boosted to protect ourselves, our family, friends, and to enjoy a safe holiday season. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Judy, looking forward to Boost NJ Day. We'll be together up at University Hospital where we were a year ago on December 15th. Again, I just want to underscore thank you for your leadership and thank you for all get vaccinated and get boosted. There's just no other advice. I guess keep one of these on if you're inside piled on top of each other with folks whose status on vaccinations you don't know. Thank you for everything.

Pat, good to have you, as always, a good week of weather here. The tragedy of this past weekend was overwhelming. I spoke with Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear on Saturday. I've been back and forth with Governor Asa Hutchinson in Arkansas, just now with JB Pritzker in Illinois, absolute overwhelming tragedies, especially Kentucky, but not only Kentucky.

I know, as usual, you raised your hand. I raised our hand. New Jersey is here for those states if they need us. That's something I think we all wear as a badge of honor. We're invariably at or near the head of the class every time out in being there to help other states; any color you've got on that, Pat.

Secondly, how cool was Saturday at MetLife Stadium; Army-Navy, over 82,000 fans, largest attended college football game in New Jersey history, went off without a hitch. NJ Transit took 6,000 people there and 10,000 people home. I'm curious as to the other 4,000. They may have knocked back one or two is my only potential color as to why there were so many more coming home than there were going that. That went off without a hitch.

It was incredibly special. You and I had the great honor, if that weren't enough, to be on the field together. By the way, it was particularly poignant and special for the state police. Over to you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Thank you, Governor. To your point with regards to the Midwest, our New Jersey Task Force 1, our Urban Search and Rescue team, 1 of 29 such teams that serves under FEMA, they are number 5 in the queue right now. There's four other states ahead. I do anticipate at some juncture, given the magnitude and those ongoing recovery operations and rescue operations right now, that we will ultimately be there like we have been in so many states in the last few years.

To your point with regard to Saturday, I can think of no more fitting way than to wrap up our 100th anniversary and the sense of pride as those 100 troopers marched out and surrounded us during the coin toss was phenomenal; a special thank you to the Superintendent of West Point, General Williams, and the Superintendent of the Naval Academy, Vice Admiral Buck. They didn't have to include the state police in that and they did, understanding our connection to West Point with Colonel Schwarzkopf. Probably one of the most phenomenal moments in my career and I would say life. It was a pleasure to share it with you, Governor. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Very special. I came out, by the way, on the Navy side with the Secretary of Defense. Pat came out on the Army side with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, among others. I can't say how many Army friends of mine I heard from saying, "Did you pick the Navy side to come out?" I said, "Listen, we were told which side to go to. I don't want to take sides, Navy or Army." God bless them both.

As you likely know everybody, every cadet and every member of the community, it's a command performance. They're all in the stands, so they're all of them in their blocks, and it's really special. Judy, with one section of fans that are unrelated to either school sitting in the middle of them, we assumed that that was just in case things got a little animated to have a little bit of a buffer. It was an incredible memory.

We'll keep the rhythm that we've got for now, which means we'll be back here a week from today, same time, same station. I mentioned that we'll be in Newark on Wednesday to celebrate Boost NJ Day and also observe the one-year anniversary of vaccines in New Jersey. We'll give you more details on that as put that together.

Obviously, we'll get to you folks virtually or otherwise if we've got news to share in the meantime. Let's start down front with Brent. If you all could be a little bit more economical, there's a bunch of folks here today. I appreciate that. Brent, good afternoon.

Q&A Session

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: Good afternoon. Will New Jersey follow New York's new mask mandate policy requiring people to wear masks indoors in public in places that don't have vaccination rules? How many state workers have been disciplined for not getting vaccinated or tested? Are you concerned cases among students and school staff will only escalate through the holidays? Should schools consider going virtual or taking other preventive measures?

Is the state's latest surge primarily because the virus is circulating among younger people? We reported that 49 schools have filed for FEMA aid from Ida, but some are unable to pay for repairs they need to make in the first place. Is there anything within your scope of executive powers that can be done to help these schools? Would you support any legislative changes to make it easier for schools to access emergency funding in the future?

Governor Phil Murphy: Brent, just because you talk fast doesn't mean that was not the spirit of my ask. We're working with some of these schools. Cresskill is the one that is the most talked about. It's probably one of the largest-scale challenges, and we're trying to find creative solutions. FEMA will pay, Pat, but unfortunately they come in on the backend and repay you.

In Cresskill's case it's big, but they're not the only ones. That's something that we're working on. I realize I picked that one up first. We keep every option – Judy, I think, would agree with me – every option is on the table at the moment.

We think what we've got in place meets the moment in terms of masking and what New York is doing, but that's something that we will – obviously, all options stay on the table. No color on discipline. I think we can get back to Brent on that, some combination of Parimal and Alex will get back to you.

Listen, our hope is – I think there were 248 cumulative cases in schools out of 3,500 buildings. We know the price we paid with learning loss. The overwhelming hope is obviously to keep students and staff and educators safe, but to also keep them in person. We're going to do everything we can to accomplish that. Remember, getting vaccinated, particularly among the younger kids, is a newer reality in terms of their eligibility.

I would just ask folks, please, if you're eligible, get vaccinated. If you're eligible, get boosted. We know those are the two steps that we can take in addition to wearing these inside. Judy or Tina, I'm not sure, the recent surge, the last question was is that among younger folks? I'm not sure.

Do you have any color on the demographics? Tina, do you want to weigh in? Good to have you.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Thank you. Generally our cases, these days we're seeing proportionately are impacting the younger populations in general more so than some of our older populations. It's not surprising that we're seeing increases in case rates in schools because we're seeing increases just in general in our cases. If you look at our epidemic curve, we're seeing an increase in the last several weeks, probably due to a combination of not only the holiday surge but also the fact that we know that there is some waning immunity. That's why the importance of Boost NJ, the importance of getting that booster shot is really critical for us to get ahead of the epidemic curve continuing to go up.

Governor Phil Murphy: Amen. Thank you, Tina. Thank you, Brent. Dustin, good afternoon.

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Good afternoon. Dr. Tan, just wondering if you could expound on that a little bit. One of the questions I had you just touched on was whether you're seeing evidence of waning immunity in the increase in hospitalizations. In other words, are more fully vaccinated people being hospitalized who haven't gotten a booster?

Then for Governor, now that you've made the full pension payment, are you considering any reforms to the pension system to try easing the state's future burden and share some of the investment risk? Have you given thought to how you're going to make the next required payment, which is about \$7 billion without federal aid or tax increases? That's all I got. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Dustin, thank you. I think the answer is on the first one, but I defer to the others, absolutely. We're seeing waning immunity, and that's a contributor to not just increase in cases, but also increase in hospitalizations. Fair to say?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Yeah. We're looking at the case rate between comparing vaccinated versus unvaccinated individuals. What we're seeing here in New Jersey is extremely similar to what we're seeing nationally. If you take a look at the case rate over time where time goes this way and then the case rate goes on the Y axis, you're starting to see a divergence where individuals who are unvaccinated represent a higher slope, while individuals who are vaccinated represent a less steep slope in comparison. The difference between those two lines is increasing, meaning that there definitely is a difference between those who are getting vaccinated versus those who are unvaccinated becoming hospitalized. It's something like several-fold increase in hospitalization chance if you're unvaccinated.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Tina. On pensions, Dustin, I've been of this opinion for a long time. The state let the members down over a series of decades on both sides of the aisle, by the way. I'm of the mindset and I have been from moment one of the mindset let's get up to full payment and keep it there and just pound away.

While we've begun to change the reality of the pension crisis that we inherited, you still need to stay in there year after year and hit that full pension payment. That's what we're committed to doing. They'll be no reason as we sit here now, although we're early on and starting to put the budget together, there will be no federal requirement and there will be no new taxes. We will make that full payment. Thank you.

Daniel, is that you? Nice to have you here. Then we'll go back to Joey and Alex.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Hi, Governor. Thanks for having us here. First off, are you satisfied with the 70% compliance from state workers for the vaccine or test requirements? The effectiveness of vaccines are waning, and it's been reported that a booster shot significantly expands protections against Omicron. Any thoughts right now to expanding the state's vaccine or test requirement for state workers to requiring a booster shot?

Given the uptick in COVID cases and hospitalizations, any thoughts on requesting the legislature to extend pandemic executive orders or certain powers under the Public Health Emergency, both which will expire in early January? Some senate democrats have expressed reservations on your latest gun package. Senator Sweeney earlier this month said he wishes your administration would "focus and come up with a real game plan for the guns that are committing crimes in the streets of the state," namely, guns purchased illegally. He also said he wouldn't support the entirety of the package as it stands. What do you think about that? Is the package harder to pass in the upper chamber?

Lastly, current DOH guidelines on school quarantines have not been substantially revised since the summer. COVID cases are rising since Thanksgiving. It may rise again after the December holidays. At the same time, more students are getting vaccinated. Will there be any updates or changes to the school quarantine guidance?

Governor Phil Murphy: Let me go through these quickly. It's a good start with state workers. I said this, and I want to make sure you folks heard this. Because certain agencies and departments only got back in person over the past number of weeks, the data really is a starting place. The results are a starting place, not where we will end up.

Yes, it's a good start, but it's going to get better. It needs to get better. We're working with agencies, departments, public employee unions on a plan at each one of those fronts. No news in terms of booster requirements, but I think, Judy, over time this has been a discussion.

It's a different variant of the discussion at the federal level that would have been asked about as well. What's the definition of a fully vaccinated individual? My guess is that evolves over time. We're going to follow the CDC guidance on that.

We had a good meeting with legislative leadership at the end of last week and a general discussion of what we think we're going to need to do in terms of public health executive orders, etc. We need resolutions from the legislature to take certain steps. We're not quite there yet, but it was a very constructive discussion. We're

on the same page. Again, those executive orders expire on January 11th. I'm sure we'll have news at some point on that.

On gun package, listen, we are the strongest gun safety state in America. As much as there's still too much gun crime, I think you'd agree with me, there's no question the cause and effect of those gun safety laws. We have among the lowest gun crime realities of any American state. That's what we're committed to.

We have no issue with law abiding Second Amendment folks. That's not our objective. I think the packages that we've already seen passed, the legislation we've seen passed, as well as this prospective package all continue to get at making our state responsibly, sensibly, and reasonably the strongest gun safety state in America.

Nothing new on school quarantine guidelines, but that's something I know Judy and Tina look at and their teams regularly. We've been, frankly, since the beginning of the pandemic stricter than even the CDC is. That's something we constantly look and will continue to constantly look at. Thank you. Let's go to Joey, and then Alex. Joey, hello.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Good afternoon. Two questions for you. One, last week why were you so unwilling to answer questions about Capital police procedures and the vaccine or test mandate? Do you think that that's something the public deserves to know about, how the Capital is functioning, what you plan to do, etc.?

Then totally separately, are you concerned your upcoming roles as National Governors Association Chair and Democratic Governors Vice Chair are going to take up a large amount of your time and that you'll frequently have to leave the state? Then quickly for Superintendent Callahan, when I tried to observe legislators entering the Capital from their legislative entrance just this morning, I was turned away by the state police. Just wondering is that official state house policy? Is that the policy that you have put in place? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Nothing personal, Joey. Listen, this is going to address questions one and three, unless you want to jump in, Pat. State police is conducting a full investigation of what happened. We're not going to be commenting further while the investigation is ongoing; however, and this gets to your question, when it is complete, we'll make the findings public as appropriate. The public, yes, does deserve a right to hear.

You guys, perhaps, can follow up offline on Joey's experience this morning. My nose is pressed against the New Jersey glass. As much as I feel strongly that we've got something to add, whether it's in the National Governors Association or the Democratic Governors Association, we'll do it in a way that works for New Jersey. That's something we never violate.

The good news, if there's any good news – how can you say good news? In the context of this awful pandemic, we've all learned to do things on the phone, virtually, Zoom. I committed the first time around I wasn't going to leave and turn my back on New Jersey, and that's not going to happen this time. That's job number one through ten. We'll follow up with you separately on your own experience, if that's okay. Alex, good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12 NJ: Good afternoon, Governor. I have a question for you from my colleague, Walt Kane. Walt is pointing out that the Office of Information Technology recommended in October replacing the old computers that the Department of Labor has. The holidays are here, and we're still getting lots of complaints from people who said they've waited months for unemployment benefits. What do you say to them, and what actions are being taken to upgrade the computers?

For you, Colonel, I know that your nomination is in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee on Thursday. Congratulations. Will you at least answer their questions about what happened on Thursday, December 2nd if you won't answer ours? I'd like to know, did you speak with Governor Murphy or George Helmy at any point, communicate with them at all on Thursday, December 2nd?

For you, Governor, I'd like to follow up on the vaccination testing situation in New York. It sounds like you're more open to a vaccine mandate or a vaccine passport, I should say. Has your thinking changed on vaccination passports? If you say that these options are on the table like Governor Hochul has put in place,

are you playing the bait and switch that voters worried about when you swore up and down before the election that no new mandates were coming?

You're going to like this last one. *New York Times* is reporting you had dinner with James Carville recently in New Orleans. What did you two talk about? Did you talk to him at all about how he thinks that "stupid wokeness" cost the Democrats the governor seat in Virginia and may have made your margin of victory narrower than expected? If you run for president, will you run as the woke candidate?

Governor Phil Murphy: We talked about you, Alex. Okay, real quick, thank you for those. We put several 8 to \$10 million, as I recall, in the budget for DOL computer upgrades, and that's in process. We can get Chris Rein to follow up with you if you could help me, Alex, would be great. By the way, we have been picked as one of only two American states to do a pilot with the federal government, and that's where the big issues are, and that's what's got to get solved. I think I said this before. There's only so much we can do as a state given the state of the federal system. That needs to be renovated, brought to a whole different place. Then it's – otherwise, it's throwing – if we throw more than what we're throwing at it, it's good money after bad. Fair point.

Pat, I think I'll, as your colleague, just say thrilled that you'll be up before the Senate Judiciary Committee on Thursday. Richly deserved and we'll leave it at that.

Not necessarily have not changed my opinion on the vax passport, Alex. I do think I alluded to this earlier. My gut tells me the definition of a fully vaccinated person at the federal level – and we obviously would follow suit. My gut tells me that's going to change. That's something that I think is important.

I wrote options on the table. I can't remember what you asked me about. Oh, bait and switch, yeah. I mean it when I say that. There are a whole range – we have to. We would be abrogating our responsibility if we didn't say that because the fact of the matter is – I've said this many times. We've all said it. Every time you think you got this thing figured out, it takes a turn, and eight out of ten of those turns are negative. That doesn't mean either there's any bait and switch. We're going to call this as we see it and straight. We are – but that is not inconsistent with saying we're leaving all options on the table. At this moment, I don't see any shift of any significance.

Listen, particularly given that I'm – first of all, James and I happen to know each other. Secondly, I just was honored. I guess at that point, I was on the cusp of getting elected as the vice-chair and chair-elect of the DGA, just getting a sense of how he sees things. He's one of the smartest people I think I can say that I've ever met. There are 36 governors' races next year, so there are only 2 this year, 36 in 2022, so just picking his brain was the overwhelming reason to see him. Always worth the price of admission. One of the smartest, and I might add funniest people I know. Thank you for that.

Is that – Matt, is that you? Okay, you're up to bat. How are you?

Matt Arco, NJ.com: Good, how you doing?

Governor Phil Murphy: Good, thanks.

Matt Arco, NJ.com: Thanks for you time today. Governor, last week in Pennsylvania, the State Supreme Court struck down the school mask mandate imposed by the Administration of Governor Tom Wolf, essentially saying the State Health Department in Pennsylvania lacked the authority to set a blanket requirement for students across the state. Does it worry you that could happen in New Jersey? Could schools close down if a mask mandate in schools is struck down? The Group Free New Jersey Kids is appealing a decision about masks in schools. What's your response to the appeal?

Governor Phil Murphy: I've got no response to that other than the last one, other than we're trying to – as we do every day, we're trying to call balls and strikes, make decisions based on facts, science, and data and keep kids in school face-to-face because we know what learning loss has looked like. I saw Pennsylvania struck it down. Our mandate has been upheld. Parimal, you may want to comment on this.

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Yeah, our school mask mandate was actually just upheld last week by a federal district court, and we're very confident it's on sound legal footing.

Governor Phil Murphy: I don't think it's going anywhere, but in the – right now if you were to say, for whatever reason, you'd pull the school mask mandate away, for whatever reason, either a legal reason or volitionally, I think that would be irresponsible and almost certainly more people would get sick, and my guess is that schools would have to shut down. We don't have it on there just for the fun of it, sadly. It's on there for a reason. Again, part of the reason is the younger people have only recently become eligible and it is my fervent hope that we can lift it at some point responsibly, sooner than later, but we've got to do it responsibly. We know for a fact that we get to that day sooner if more people get vaccinated and more people get boosted. Thank you.

Daniel, good afternoon.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Good afternoon, Governor. What are the state agencies with the compliance rates lower than, I believe it's 75%? What are their specific compliance rates? Is there any demographic or job sector that makes up the majority of non-compliant worker? How many people are not vaccinated, state workers? Regarding the New York vaccine and mask mandate, it looks like Philadelphia just announced its own vaccine mandate. Legally and constitutionally, do you have the right to – do you have any authority to make that decision if you so desired? That's it. thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Daniel. It's a hypothetical but Parimal, I'm not sure if you want to comment on it, if we want to expand – the mandate for masking today exists – mandate literally is in schools. It is strongly recommended, strongly encouraged that if you're indoors and you're with other people whose vax status is not knowable that you wear it, but that's an encouragement. Anything you want to add to that?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Whenever the Governor makes decisions, we analyze the legal and constitutional implications. Every single one of the Governor's COVID orders that has been challenged has been upheld in every single case.

Governor Phil Murphy: I think, Daniel, on the compliance rates across agencies and departments, can I ask Alex? I don't have it off the top of my head. Can we follow up with you on that? Would that be alright? Thank you very much.

We'll come back down here to Dave and then we'll close out with Nikita. Dave, good afternoon.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. The hospitalization rate now is up to 1650. Last Monday it was 1244. That's an increase of 37.5%. If this continues for the next month, in mid-January, our hospitalization rate will be in the mid-3,000s. I know you've said everything's on the table, but at what point would you take action? I'm assuming it would be based to a large degree on hospitalizations. We know a lot of people are testing positive, but a lot of cases are mild or moderate. What would we need to see and how concerned are you that this pattern is going to continue? Okay, so the state workers who are either – refuse to get vaccinated or refuse to get tested, how many of them are there? Do we know? What happens to them? Do they get fired or is there a hearing or do they get put in a room where they're not near anybody else? Final question, Commissioner, you had talked about the free test. Could you give us the address again and spell it out so people know what the exact address is again? How many times can you get a free test? Can you get it once a week? Unlimited? Only once? Because it sounds important, and the tests are pretty expensive if you go to the drug store. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Dave. Yeah, are we concerned? Yes. Remember, the peak hospitalizations, I believe it was April 12, 2020, was 8,270. Also remember, we had barred any elective surgery at that point, which is not the case at the moment, so that – you've got to factor that in in terms of capacities. The fever feels like it's starting to break, at least temporarily in Europe. We've been following that very carefully. The country I know the best is Germany, and they've now had about 12 or so days where it's started to break, not unfortunately in a big way, but at least incrementally going in the right direction. Yeah, I mean, we are watching this very, very closely. Judy may want to jump in here in a second on any modeling that she and Tina have done.

I don't have the number of discipline folks, but we can come back. Alex, can we come back to Dave on that? Parimal, do you want to address the what? What happens if you are disciplined? We may want to follow up on that one as well, but please.

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: Sure. Any state employees who refuse to comply with the state's vaccination or testing policy are subject to progressive discipline up to suspension without pay and potentially termination if they chronically refuse to comply.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Where does that start? What's the first thing that happens? Are they relieved of their responsibility?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: I don't want to get into the specifics of every single disciplinary instance but agencies have a range of options in order to induce compliance, but there are consequences.

Governor Phil Murphy: It depends on where you work, what union you're a part of. There's different – there are potentially different answers to that. Judy, could you reiterate the website for the free testing but also any comments you want to make on modeling and Tina, as well, if you would like to jump in on where things are headed.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yes, for the free test, the website is learn, L-E-A-R-N, dot vault health, V-A-U-L-T-H-E-A-L-T-H, dot-com, C-O-M, slash-NJ-slash. On the modeling, we update our modeling now every week. Your evaluation is pretty much on target. If things stay the way they are right now, we would expect about 3500 cases. Mid-January would be the peak, and that's if things stay the way they are right now. If things increase, there could be what we call the high model, which would go even higher, 10,000 cases a day and maybe 5,000 individuals in our hospitals. That will be updated this week as we do every week, and so far things are pretty steady. We work with our hospitals. They report their capacity every day, and we have what we call a trigger plan so we would know how the hospital's doing regionally. I'm on the call with the regional collaborators on a weekly basis about capacity. Every hospital is required to have a surge plan.

Governor Phil Murphy: I would just add something we haven't said in a while. The one thing that we know cannot happen, we cannot allow our healthcare system to get overrun. Every positive case we take very seriously, but we can afford high positive case numbers as a general matter, but we cannot breach the capacities in our hospitals. By the way, I say that as a numeric matter, never mind the fatigue in these institutions. The irresponsibility of not getting vaccinated, among other fallouts, are unnecessarily stressing nurses, doctors, and other healthcare staff. It just doesn't need to be that way.

Nikita, please, take us home.

Nikita Biryukov, New Jersey Monitor: Good afternoon, Governor. I have just one for you today. So the eviction and utility shutoff moratoriums are within their respective grace periods but are set to expire at the end of the year. With COVID cases on the rise, are you considering extending those deadlines, and have you discussed doing so with legislative leadership?

Governor Phil Murphy: Would we consider it? Yes, but at the moment, that's not in the cards. There is something that Parimal may want to comment on. Water utilities are not treated pari-passu with electric and gas, and there is some movement to address that. That's the one big wrinkle. Parimal, anything you want to add to that?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: That's correct, Governor. There is a bill in the legislature that would extend the water shutoff moratorium until March 15th. The eviction moratorium phases out on January 1st according to the legislation that the Governor signed this summer.

Governor Phil Murphy: You do have the cold – you may want to repeat the cold weather reality, which extends until March 15, 2022 for electric and gas. Thank you, folks. Judy, Tina, thank you both. Pat, bless you. Pat, bless you. Parimal, Alex, Jameel, the rest of the group, deep thanks. Again, we'll be back here a week from today at 1 o'clock unless you hear otherwise. We will be on Wednesday at University Hospital, which I'm looking forward to, Judy, to celebrate the one-year anniversary of our first vaccinations. I think it is very straightforward, particularly as we see the numbers continuing to rise. Three words: vaccinations, boosters, masks, and on the last one, if you're inside, you can't socially distance, you're not able to tell the vaccination status of folks, just use your – that's a common-sense one. Get vaccinated. Get boosted if you're eligible. Continue by the millions out there doing the right things. I've said this, but I haven't said it in a while. As

challenging as it is right now, I wouldn't trade our hand with any other American state, and that's largely, not overwhelmingly, due to millions of you out there who have been doing the right thing from day one. Stay at it, folks. God bless.

Governor Phil Murphy

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