

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: November 8th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everybody. With me today is the woman on my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli, to her right, another familiar face, the State's Epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan. To my left, another guy who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have chief counsel, Parimal Garg, and a cast of thousands here.

First a programming note – and we're going to go with this and see how it feels as we have over the past. Starting today, we're going to drop back to providing these in-person briefings once a week, and at least for the time being on Mondays. Throughout the pandemic, we have altered as you know the numbers of briefings based on numerous factors including the paths that the numbers are taking and our expectations for major announcements. As things are currently progressing, we are confident in being able to meet once a week, and as always, the numbers will continue to be updated daily on our dashboard at covid19.nj.gov, which you see on the screen, and we'll continue to push out information through our social media channels. Again, we'll meet, unless you hear otherwise, Mondays at 1 o'clock right here.

Before we get to the numbers, I want to quickly speak to congress's passage at long last of the bipartisan infrastructure bill late Friday night. For New Jersey, this bill can be summed up in two words: game changer. First of all, the bill sets up the long-awaited construction of the gateway – the full gateway program of rail improvements leading to and from New York City including the desperately needed new rail tunnels under the Hudson. Gateway aside, there is more than \$12 billion that New Jersey's now set to receive to give our state the safe, modern, and reliable infrastructure our economic future demands. There is no lack of roads or

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bridges needing repair. For example, more than 500 bridges statewide are categorized as structurally deficient. There is no lacking for upgraded mass transit networks, including buses and ferries, no lack of need for electric vehicle charging stations, for improved internet connectivity, and on and on. All of this is covered in this bill.

I'm equally pleased – I think this is a real badge of honor for New Jersey – that every single member of our congressional house delegation on both sides of the aisle voted for these critical investments on Friday. This vote is proof that congress can get big things done, and of course, both of our terrific senators had already voted for infrastructure I think as far back as August. These projects will create good jobs now and support good jobs for years to come, and for a state like ours, which relies upon solid infrastructure like few others, this is fuel for our continued economic growth and security. I congratulate the President for his hard work to get this investment done, and again, I thank our delegation, Democrats and Republicans, who helped write it and support it.

At the same time, I am pleased that the latest iteration of the Build Back Better Plan, which should soon be before Congress, would restore the federal, state, and local tax deduction for countless middle class New Jersey homeowners. This is a tremendously positive step forward to undo the damage foisted upon middle class taxpayers under the tax reform passed in 2017. Our delegation, again, has been central in getting the SALT reduction restored, and I thank them for this as well. Now let's get this done, and get tax relief into the hands of our middle class as well as making childcare more affordable and accessible, getting a strong focus on clean energy to combat climate change and more issues critical to our state's economic long-term well-being.

Next up, a quick announcement for the Department of Human Services that they continue to accept applications for the Exclude New Jerseyans Fund program. This program is open to individuals who suffered an economic hardship due to COVID-19 but were excluded from pandemic-related financial help including residents returning from the justice system and undocumented individuals. For complete eligibility information and to apply, please go to that website, excludednjfund.nj.gov, excludednjfund.nj.gov.

With that, let's move to today's numbers. The important thing with today's overall vaccination numbers, Judy, I think, is that children aged 5 to 11 years are now eligible to receive the Pfizer vaccine. As we noted last week, we hit the green light on this the moment the FDA provided its final vaccination guidance, which I believe was on Wednesday. As of this morning, you can see 9,116 between the ages of 5 to 11 years old have gotten their first dose, so for all parents, we strongly encourage you to get your child vaccinated against COVID. When I look back at our announcement over the summer that our schools would begin the academic year with a masking requirement in place – by the way a requirement that gave none of us any joy – one of the reasons was that our youngest students were not yet eligible for vaccinations. Now they are, and with each child who gets vaccinated and enters a classroom with an educator who was vaccinated and sits among their peers who are vaccinated, the closer we get to being able to lift this requirement.

With that, let's take a quick look at the latest reports of in-school transmission, which we'll get to now as we weren't able – we weren't together last Wednesday. These numbers take us through last Monday, November 1st. For the week of October 25th through November 1st as you can see there were an additional 11 outbreaks linked to in-school activities. That's the same number, by the way, from the prior week. These 11 outbreaks impacted 68 students and 11 staff members statewide. You can see there too the overall numbers of students and staff who have tested positive for coronavirus through a confirmed case of in-school transmission, and again, 148 cumulative outbreaks, 681 students cumulatively impacted, 113 members of staff cumulatively impacted. Again, we would never, ever, ever minimize any of these numbers. Once case is one case too many, but it does bear repeating that we have more than 1.5 million students across 3,500 school buildings statewide. These overall numbers are proving that our multi-layered approach to safety is working, and it can only be enhanced thorough vaccination.

Let's also in that respect take a quick look at the latest breakthrough case numbers as well. As the recent spike in cases due to the Delta variant wanes, so too – I'm knocking on wood, Judy, on that one, and Tina – so too has the numbers of identified breakthrough cases. What hasn't changed is the fact that the vaccines continue to prove highly effective in not only slowing the spread of the virus but in preventing those who do test positive from developing a case of COVID that would land them in the hospital or worse yet kill them.

Here are the preliminary – latest preliminary weekly results, and again, across the board the overwhelming majority of new cases, hospitalizations continue to be from among the distinct minority of residents who remain unvaccinated.

Here are today's latest newly reported cases. Over the past several days, the rate of transmission ticked up above that benchmark level of 1 meaning a slightly increased rate of spread. That should just remind us that this virus is still among us, and as we begin moving back indoors with more of our lives [09:10] with the cooler weather, we still need to remain vigilant. Referring back to our breakthrough slides, this is another case for vaccination and the proof that you are vaccinated and do subsequently test positive, your chances of staying out of the hospital and above ground are only strengthened.

Here are the latest numbers from our hospitals over each of the past seven days, the overall hospital count has been under 700 total patients, but the numbers of patients in the ICU and on ventilators has remained stable. When compared to where we were a year ago, you can see the difference that vaccinations have made. If you remember throughout October of last year, we had a massive surge of cases not unlike the Delta surge we saw over the summer and earlier this fall. However, while there are 627 hospitalized today with 144 folks in ICUs, one year ago, those numbers were 1,439 and 284 respectively. Again, even with the Delta surge, fueled largely by spread among the unvaccinated, we escape a repeat of these numbers in large part because of vaccination.

Here is the latest with the heaviest heart of confirmed COVID-related deaths, so as we always do, let's remember a few more of those lives we've lost. For our first two, we are reaching back to the pandemic's earliest days. Fair Lawn's Barbara Louise Weston, on the right, was 90 years old when she passed on April 5, 2020. That was Palm Sunday of 2020. Born and raised as one of eight siblings in the Bloomingdale Butler area of Passaic County, she joined many of her peers in finding work at the factories in Paterson, first for the Wellworth Pickle Company and later in several of the city's famed textile mills. She went on to raise her four children but also never gave up her love for animals, and throughout her life, she supported local animal welfare organizations.

Barbara is survived by her children, Kenneth, Gloria, Connie, and Edna, and I believe – I'm not 100% positive. I believe that's Edna on the left, with whom I had the honor of speaking last Monday. She worked for the Paterson Police Department, Pat, for 31 years. She herself had an awful case of COVID and was in the hospital. Thank God she's out and getting back on her feet. Barbara also leaves behind not just her children but their spouses and families including a remarkable 13 grandchildren, 22 great-grandchildren, and multiple great-great-grandchildren among many more beloved family and friends. She also left behind her one remaining brother Paul. We are certain that God has blessed Barbara for a lifetime of good.

Next up, we remember – also from up around the same neck of the woods, we remember this guy, Ariel Cachola of Paterson. He was just 37 years old, and he passed on April 3, 2020, two weeks after Barbara did. What is the connection? The connection is that Ariel was engaged to marry one of Barbara's granddaughters, Erica, and Erica is the brother, by the way, of the Frelinghuysen Township Deputy Mayor, Keith Ramos. Known by many by his nickname Spanky, Ariel had been a member of the staff at St. Joseph's Regional Hospital for more than 15 years, and as would be true to probably anyone with his nickname, Ariel was blessed with a tremendous sense of humor that could pierce the tension in any situation.

In addition to leaving his fiancée Erica behind, he also leaves behind six children, Ariana, Ariel, jr., Adriel, and Alexandra and then Jacob and Rosalee, his children with Erica. He also left behind his parents, Eduvigis and Daisy, and siblings Jonathan, Eric, Kayla, and Noelle. Please keep them in your prayers as well. Ariel was one of our essential workers, working in a busy hospital at one of our darkest hours. We know God has blessed him, and we thank him, too, for his service.

Finally, for today we recall South Plainfield's Nicola "Nick" DeSantis. He came to Middlesex County from his native Melizzano, Italy. He passed at the age of 61 on March 9 of this year, 2021. A graduate of South Plainfield High School, Nick went on to attend the Teterboro School of Aeronautics and was working as a technical service manager for MG America, the US arm of the Italian company that produces manufacturing equipment for the pharmaceutical industry. He had been with MG America for a full 29 years, and his loss left

a tremendous gap in institutional knowledge and expertise. Nick left behind his wife Patricia, with whom I had the great honor of speaking Monday. I should've said, back to Ariel, I had the great honor of speaking with Erica, his fiancée last week as well.

Nick left behind his wife Patricia, again, with whom I had the great honor of speaking, and three children. Thomas is in Piscataway, Michelle in Jersey City, and Angela, who was married in July, I'm sure with a heavy heart missing her dad, and she lives in Verona and their families including his sole grandchild Shane. He's also survived by his parents Antonio and Maria – please keep them in your prayers – sisters Lina and Rosa, among many others both here and back in Italy and around the world. We are grateful that the DeSantis family came to call New Jersey home, and we thank Nick for being a great example for many. May God bless and watch over him and the family he leaves behind.

Now let's switch gears as we also do every day to salute another small business that is serving its community thanks in part to the partnership of the New Jersey Economic Development Authority. In 1987 Hildegard Mirinda – that's Hildegard on the right – opened the Mullica Hill Floral Company, which she runs alongside her daughter, the perfectly named Rose Oland on the left, who is the lead floral designer. Together the two boast a combined 50 years of experience and education in horticulture and floral design. In addition to working with local farms, they even use flowers from their own gardens to make every design special.

For many across south Jersey, Mullica Hill Floral Company has been the go-to for weddings and special events, but the pandemic threatened the store as it postponed countless celebrations. Thankfully, Hildegard and Rose found a partner in the EDA which came through with emergency grants that allowed them to meet expenses, and today as those postponed weddings and other gatherings are finally being celebrated, Mullica Hill Floral Company is there to fill the need. I had a great conversation last Monday with Rose, and I thank her again for all that she and her mom are doing to make every celebration special. Check them out, mullicahillfloralco.com, mullicahillfloralco.com.

Finally, today with a heavy heart, I want to acknowledge the untimely and tragic passing of the Department of Human Service's deputy chief of staff this guy Steve Schultz. He died unexpectedly on Halloween, and he was just 42 years old. He had dedicated his entire career to public service. He was director of the last US Senator and dear friend Frank Lautenberg's south Jersey office as well as an aid to assembly majority leader Lou Greenwald and a senior staffer in the Camden County Clerk's Office. Steve was also the former chief of staff for the Volunteers of America Delaware Valley and served a term as a councilman in Pine Hill. We send our deepest condolences to his wife Melissa and his sons Stephen, jr., and Jackson. Those two were his pride and joy. Steve is also survived by his mom Mary and his in-laws, countless friends, and of course, his colleagues. With the heaviest of heart, we will end on that note.

Again, I want to thank our congressional delegation for their efforts to pass the most consequential infrastructure bill in at least a generation, and I also want to thank each and every one of you who got out to vote. Democracy is not a spectator sport as they say, and this year we saw many more New Jerseyans get on the field than in recent non-presidential elections. That's a good thing. This is how we make a stronger democracy and a better New Jersey. Again, we'll be coming at you from now until further notice on Mondays unless matters demand otherwise. I also want to say I was incredibly proud on Friday to be at the inauguration of Rutgers president Jonathan Holloway. It was a really emotional day and a great day for Jersey and obviously Rutgers, and 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. Good afternoon. The department continues to promote COVID-19 vaccination, particularly among our younger individuals. The CDC's recommendation to allow the vaccination of children ages 5 to 11 against COVID to help protect this younger population is welcome news to many parents. COVID-19 cases in children can result in hospitalizations, deaths, multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children, and long-term complications such as long COVID, in which symptoms can linger for months. We cannot predict which child may develop severe disease, so it is important that we protect every child. The Pfizer vaccine for this group is one third of the adult dose, and clinical data, reviewed by the US Food and Drug Administration has shown the vaccine to be safe and 90.7% effective in preventing COVID-19 in children ages 5 to 11.

While most of these children have mild infections, some have more severe illness. Also, these children can transmit the infection to other children and to adults who may be more vulnerable. As of last night, 1.2% of the population 5 to 11 has received one dose of vaccine. That is over 9,000 doses. Vaccinating this population can protect other family members and those who cannot get vaccinated. It can help children stay healthy, which will allow them to stay in school, participate in sports, and socialize with their friends. Additionally, any time the virus is replicating, mutations can evolve, so stopping infections in everyone is the best way to curb this pandemic.

Parents who are looking for an appointment for their child between the ages of 5 to 11 can visit covid19.nj.gov/finder. Under select a COVID-19 vaccine, they can use the drop-down menu to select Pfizer-BioNTech age 5+ and find available appointments. The Department of Health is also working with county superintendents to stand up clinics at schools, which allows for vaccination in convenient and familiar surroundings. Some of these school clinics are kicking off this week. Parents should discuss any questions they have with their pediatrician, their family physician, or healthcare provider and visit Department of Health's COVID-19 vaccination page and the CDC website for more information.

We also want to remind individuals to get their booster shots. So far, 23.6% of those eligible to receive a booster have received a booster. For those who received Pfizer or Moderna COVID-19 vaccine, the following groups are eligible for a booster at six months or more after their initial series: 65 years and older, age 18+ who live in long-term care settings, age 18+ who have underlying medical conditions, and age 18+ who work or live in high-risk settings. For those who got the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine, booster shots are also recommended for those who are 18 and older and who were vaccinated two or more months ago.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, we have 627 individuals in our hospitals. There's one new report of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children for cumulative case count in New Jersey of 136. None of the children are currently hospitalized. The state veterans' homes reports no new cases among their residents, and there are no new cases among our patients in our psych hospitals. The daily percent positivity as of November 4th is 3.78%. The northern part of the state reports 3.15%, the central part of the state 4.67%, and the southern part of the state 3.89%. That concludes my daily report. Stay safe. Get vaccinated to protect yourselves, our family, friends, and our children. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you as always. Before we go to Pat, a question for you and Tina. We all read reports obviously most importantly in New Jersey but around the country and around the world. Europe right now I get read in more often than not to Germany where we've got a lot of roots, to a lesser extent UK, other places, you're starting to see a very significant upswing here. Any color on that? Any expectation? Is this the Delta Plus version of this? Any color on that and whether or not you think this might be coming our way? Please God, no.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I know. I'm sure Dr. Tan wants to weigh in here. The readings that we get, it's primarily Delta Plus. At this point, the surveillance reports that Tina shares have been positive in terms of what we're seeing in New Jersey in terms of Delta Plus, but I'll let Tina.

State Epidemiologist Christina Tan: The new variant of Delta, the AY4.2, we haven't really seen that at all in New Jersey much less in the United States. According to CDC's reports, we are seeing the AY4 circulating, but it's way less than –

Governor Phil Murphy: Tina, who names these things by the way?

State Epidemiologist Christina Tan: Huh?

Governor Phil Murphy: Who names these things?

State Epidemiologist Christina Tan: Not me.

Governor Phil Murphy: They don't exactly roll off your tongue.

State Epidemiologist Christina Tan: There's an entire group of individuals who handle – various interdisciplinary committees that are put together to do these types of namings, and then specifically for the AY4.2, it's like just a handful, and the last one that was identified here in the US was sometime in September.

Obviously, the CDC continues to monitor the variant activity, but for now does not seem to be an issue quite yet, but it is being monitored.

Governor Phil Murphy: Please, God, it stays that way. I believe today is the first day that the US is allowing fully vaccinated folks to travel from Europe, so we shall see. Again, please God, we've got this thing on the run. Thank you both. Pat, the weather's great, which is great, but this is also the time of the year that you start doing your wargaming and getting prepped for winter weather. Any information you've got on that or any other matters you've got.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Yeah, it's a great next four days of weather, but as the Governor said, during days like today is when we get with our primary partners Department of Transportation, Board of Public Utilities, Department of Health, especially with the booster and third shot plans that we have, as well as the DEP, just to make sure that we're prepared for what is predicted to be a pretty tough winter with regards to temperatures and storms. We use days and weeks like this to make sure that those plans are ready to be fully operational. That's all I have, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Pat. Appreciate that. Just looking at my notes here. I think we'll start over here with Dustin. Again, we will be back with you unless you hear otherwise a week from today. As I said, each day we post up on our websites. You'll get the information the raw data every day, but we'll probably – our schedule is coming together for the week. I'll speak for myself at least but perhaps in combination with my colleagues we'll be out there around the state in other circumstances, and hopefully, if there's anything meaningful on COVID, we'll communicate with you then.

Q&A Session

Here we go. Dustin, good afternoon.

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: God afternoon. Your campaign put out a memo this morning saying Jack Ciattarelli should concede and that failure to do so is an assault on the integrity of our elections. Do you agree with that characterization? Just as you were walking out here, his campaign put out a statement saying that waiting a day or two for all ballots to be counted shouldn't be controversial. Do you have any response to that? On the Senate President search, you were in a meeting last week to discuss the next senate president, expressed your support for Nick Scutari. Advocates see this as an opportunity to diversify New Jersey's leadership, so can you talk about why you support another middle-aged white man for that position? Do you have any concerns about the ethical allegations that Senator Scutari was serially absent from his municipal prosecutor job? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I would say on our race, Dustin, when it's mathematically impossible – and there's a difference between conceding and counting every vote. We're going to count every vote. That's never been in question, right? That's going to happen, but I think it's incredibly dangerous when it's mathematically impossible. Our lead right now is meaningfully larger – I don't want to get into too much politics here, but it's a fact. Our lead is meaningfully larger than the lead that Glenn Youngkin has in Virginia, and that race got conceded and sowed up I think five or six days ago. This thing was run fairly. It was run transparently. Every vote will be counted, but when it's mathematically impossible to win, I think it's dangerous.

I think it's bigger than winning or losing. It gets to question what it is to be an American and respect the institutions of – that we count on as a society including democracy. It's not a question of whether or not the votes are going to get counted. They're going to get counted. That's never been in question, and I think the election – again, we do a postmortem on this, and we always will, and the Secretary of State leads that, and I think she deserves a lot of credit, but if it's mathematically impossible, it's dangerous. This is not what America is about.

Dustin, I would just say this. I did a lot of – let me put aside. I have a lot of respect and regard for Senator Scutari, number one. Number two, I was – I did a lot of listening and asked questions, and that was my job. This is not something for me to put my thumb on the scale. I haven't, I'm not now, and I won't. I also think the Senate President Sweeney deserves – I don't know his race in terms of the numbers of votes, but I think he thinks at least he does have a mathematical shot. We should let that – have the respect to let that play out. I'll leave it at that. Thank you.

Let's go across to Matt here. Hey, Matt.

Matt Arco, NJ.com: Good afternoon, Governor. Can you just – on that last thing that you said because I wanted to ask you about your campaign statement and what you said about Senator Sweeney on Friday, saying that all those votes should be counted. How do you square that, that those should be counted? We all agree, all the votes will be counted, but how do you square with that with he should be able to maintain this public position and Jack should take a different view? Also, Senator Weinberg has said of some of the last things that she'd like to see voted on in lame duck, the controversial vaccine mandate that stalled a few years back is on that agenda. Do you think lame duck is an appropriate time to vote on such a measure, and do you support it?

Governor Phil Murphy: Is that it?

Matt Arco, NJ.com: Yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, I think on our race, I know the math. I actually don't know the math on Steve's race. At least I had the impression that there was a shot. There is no shot in our race, and I think that's the difference. I defer to the Senate President on that one. I don't have a specific reaction to that, Matt. I did not see Senator Weinberg's statement in that respect, so I'll defer, if that's okay with you. There are going to be some things that we're going to be hyper passionate about. Protecting a woman's reproductive freedoms is going to be high, if not at the top of that list. I'll defer in terms of the specifics on that because I have not seen it, and we'll leave it at that.

Sam, is that you?

Sam Sutton, Politico: Yes, it is.

Governor Phil Murphy: Sam, I'm having trouble, I have to admit to you, with the masking. I apologize.

Sam Sutton, Politico: It's alright.

Governor Phil Murphy: Facial recognition has gone down here.

Sam: It's okay. Speaking of the Reproductive Freedom Act, that's the only question I've got for you. How do you see that faring in lame duck? Do you think it's going to be harder for that legislation to pass as-is given how difficult this election was for legislative Democrats?

Governor Phil Murphy: On this one, I don't – the margin of victory, frankly in this case, whether or not we won, does not factor for my – into my calculus. This is essential. If folks are just tuning into this, a woman's reproductive freedom in New Jersey is completely predicated on case law, which is in turn completely predicated on Roe v. Wade. With the new members of the Supreme Court from President Trump's appointments, from the steps that Supreme Court has taken in Texas and will likely take in Mississippi and other places, Roe v. Wade is under assault. It's pretty quite clear, and the reproductive freedoms in New Jersey can only go on if they are codified statutorily in a law that I would sign, and that – what happened last week, win, lose, or draw, does not impact in one – in any respect my passion for that.

Joey, is that you? Good afternoon.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Good afternoon. So a few things here, so one, will you order county boards of elections to publicly disclose the number of votes that they have remaining to count tonight? Theoretically, every vote should be at least in if not counted by tonight Then also election results on Tuesday looked pretty different than they did on Wednesday and those look pretty different from they do now. Do you see that as an acceptable status quo, or is that something you and the state is working on to prevent those pretty slow counting that makes results look pretty different at different points? Is there any discussion about potentially leaving the Motor Vehicles Commission open next Monday, Veteran's Day, to relieve some of the pressure on that office? Then finally, I just want to follow up on something that Dustin asked, as well. With – it's looking relatively likely that the three most powerful politicians in New Jersey are going to, once again, be three white men. Do you see that as something that you actually want to try to change? Do you think that's a problem in such a diverse state? Thank you?

Governor Phil Murphy: I have no problem with their disclosing what's left to count. Parimal will correct me here if I'm wrong. If your question is as of tonight, then that's entirely provisionals at that point. I no issue with it. I just don't know whether or not that will happen. Parimal, any thoughts?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: The Governor does not order the county boards of elections as it relates to voting matters. That falls to the Secretary of State, who's an independent cabinet officer.

Governor Phil Murphy: Am I, conceptually as a citizen, open to that? Yeah, I don't see why not. I think we have to review – and had some good preliminary discussions. We got to make sure that we've got the strongest 21st Century voting reality. We've become one of the great vote-by-mail states. We do it really well. I think early voting with 207,000 early in-person voting, rather, first time out is a really good result. Yeah, but listen, I'm like everybody else. You'd like to be able to, in some way, have a magic wand and know what the results is as fast as you can. I lived through that personally last week in the sense of the process by which those votes come in. I'm open to anything we can do to strengthen democracy and make this as – continue to make this as transparent and as straightforward as possible.

I have no – I've not thought about the question of Veteran's Day on motor vehicles, but let's come back to you on that one. Listen, we are – and I don't think I fully addressed it. I'm glad you brought it up because I didn't finish my thought with Dustin. We're the most diverse state in America. We should have a state that reflects that in terms of the leadership; there's no question about it. We have the most diverse Cabinet in our state's history. That's something that I have a fairly significant amount of control over. It's just a fact. I don't control the process of who's the Senate President and who's the Speaker. I've enjoyed a great relationship with both Senate President Sweeney and Speaker Coughlin. Speaker Coughlin will continue to be on the case in the seat. I have to separate what I think about these folks as individuals versus an overall passion for diversity. I also don't want to imply that I can control a process which is not mine to control. I'll leave it at that.

Dave? Good afternoon.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. You said that about 9,000 younger kids 5 to 11 have been vaccinated. How many children in total are eligible? Could you please remind us? What is our target for this younger group of kids in terms of vaccinations? Governor, you had also mentioned that this effort will help hopefully in the not-too-distant future to lift the mask mandate in schools. Can you talk a little bit about what it's going to take for you to not require masks for kids in schools, what combination of factors are going to be involved, and at what levels and whether it's really possible or impossible at this point to say what this is going to be? What would you say, Governor, to people who, I'm sure, will say immediately that you're trying to strongarm people to get their kids vaccinated by making this kind of statement? Final question, on the Delta Plus, you raised the issue, Governor, about what we know or don't know in terms of what's going on here in Jersey with – in relation to what's happening in Europe. Am I wrong in assuming that if it's in Europe, it's going to get here pretty soon? I mean, I remember we were talking about Delta last February, March, April, and yeah, it's going to get here. It's been here for a long time and now it's basically every COVID case we have. With regard to that, Governor, how concerning is this, especially because people are so damned sick and tired of COVID, people just don't want to hear about it anymore? Now we're going to get a whole new Delta Plus scenario. How concerning is that? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. As usual, Sue Fulton was listening, so Joey, you asked about motor vehicles Closed Thursday, so on the 11th itself but open on Monday. Every transaction is available except first-time permits and knowledge tests. I assume she means online. The 30% no-show rate is causing problems. We're looking to increase booking to mitigate the impact of no-shows. I could go on, but the answer is we'll be closed Thursday but open on Monday.

Judy, let me take a shot at some of these and then throw it to you and Tina for good measure. Judy can tell you the total uptake, but I think the 9,000 was about 1-point-something percent of the eligibles, right?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: One-point-two.

Governor Phil Murphy: One-point-two percent, so we've got a fair ways to go. On the school masking mandate, I assume the strongarm – your point was related to that, so if you get vaccinated, we'll lift the mandate; I don't view that strong – I view that just factually. I think it's a number of factors, and I'll include the question you asked about Europe as part of this. Certainly this is a big step in the right direction, so that's very good. Secondly, another piece of good news, our general vaccination rates continue to go up. I think the booster uptake is lower than we would like. Hard to say otherwise. Generally, vaccination overall going up. Thirdly, the Delta – the current caseload and the current Delta base variant, we clearly have that going in the right direction.

What works against us? Inside more than outside, holidays, and the reason I did ask the question of Judy and Tina was that very question that you asked. What has hit Europe has historically hit us here. I do think at least relative to the UK, we've had a more sensible set of parameters in place. We didn't go hog wild on one say as they appear to have. I also think we've got a good – at least in New Jersey, we have a good hand to play in terms of vaccination rates relative to a lot of the European countries. I would just say it's a concern; it'd be hard to say otherwise.

Parimal reminds me earlier, the executive order for mask mandating in schools, just to put a date out there – and I'm not suggesting this is the date folks should focus on but another data point – is January 11th that expires. We would have to volitionally re-up that, but I would hope this is the beginning of a process – I can't tell you exactly when – that we'll be able to get to that place sooner than later. It's not today, but I hope sooner than later.

Judy, any comment on any of that, and Tina as well, including the number of kids versus the universe of kids, etc.?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: The 5 to 11 year olds, there's 760,000 5 to 11 year olds, and we'd like to get all of them vaccinated. We've moved that dial from 70%, 80, 85%. The more individuals we get vaccinated, the more the virus has no place to go. Of the 12 to 17 year olds, we have 260,000 left to get vaccinated. We moved along with the 12 to 17 year olds; we'd like that to be higher as well. We have 260,000 12 to 17 year olds, 760,000 5 to 11 year olds.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Total for 5 to 11 year olds?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Tell you in a minute. I'll give that to you in a minute.

Governor Phil Murphy: Tina, anything you want to add on the European question we didn't hit already earlier?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Just to add that right now, there's no evidence at this time to suggest that this – that there's an impact to the current vaccines that are being used right now in terms of the effectiveness of our current vaccines and AY4.2. Just to again reiterate the message that probably our best tool again is increasing our vaccination coverage. We have to remember that increasing vaccination will limit – it's the same management, right? It's vaccination will help prevent the spread of any of our variants that we see right now, any SARS-Co-V2 that's circulating, on top of the fact that as we increase vaccine coverage, we're going to minimize the ability for the virus to mutate and to create the emergence of more variants.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, anything on the teenagers, or do you want to get back to –

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah, the 12 to 17 year olds are 650,000, and we have 260,000 left to be vaccinated.

Governor Phil Murphy: So 60% of the way there, basically, right?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm not making news and I – and this is just one person's opinion. I think two other thoughts I'll leave folks with. Number one, in terms of lifting the mask mandate in schools, I could see it as we do it in a phased approach if that number of 12 to 17 year olds gets into an acceptable zone, which it

almost by definition will be before the younger kids. You could see making a move, phasing it in, based on the age of the kids, high school versus middle school versus grammar school. That seems to me to be a sensible way to think about this.

Secondly, a bigger picture one, we continue – I mentioned this on the booster, so this is not related to the 5 to 11 year olds where I'm told in certain places – which is a good sign, I have to say. It's hard to get an appointment, meaning the demand is significant. I know our friend Joe D. was all out over Essex County over the past five days, again, doing it unlike anybody else. I think at a certain point, we have to ask ourselves either as a nation or as a state, or maybe both, if we continue to have supply/demand imbalances with supply being significant and demand being under what we need it to be on boosters whether or not you open this whole thing up because right now, other than the time frame, which you'd never want to – you have to respect it has to be six months after Moderna, Pfizer; it has to be two months at a minimum after Johnson & Johnson. At a certain point, we're sitting on more supply than demand. Then I think at some point, that has to lead us to decisions taken with the White House or taken here in New Jersey, so more on that. Not to make news, but that seems to me to be a moment in time that is in our future.

With that, Judy, Tina, thank you, as always. Pat, as always. I mention – I did not mention Jamil had the mic today. Jamil, well done. Parimal, Eliana. Again, we'll mask up. Unless you hear otherwise, we'll be back here in person a week from today at 1 o'clock, same time, same station. We will be, obviously, diligent each day putting data up on our websites. We'll be out and about and if there's news on COVID to report while we're out and about, maybe for other reasons, we will certainly not hesitate to speak to it. Lastly, if we think we need to be together again in person, that's a decision that we'll make. Again, folks, if you're eligible for your booster, please get it. If you haven't been vaccinated at all, please, God, get vaccinated. If you've got a child who's 5 to 11, it's safe; it's effective. Please go out there, get an appointment, and get vaccinated for those precious little kids. Thank you all. God bless.

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