

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: December 21st, 2020 Coronavirus Briefing Media

12/21/2020

Holding a COVID-19 briefing. WATCH:



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everyone. As I noted on Friday, we're a little bit early today because we've got to peel off for a White House VTC, so we'll try to get through this relatively expeditiously. Joining me 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 far left, another guy who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have Jared Maples in the house, the Director of the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, Chief Counsel Parimal Garg, and we are joined today by a very special guest, the woman on my left, the Acting Commissioner of Education, Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan. Great to have you.

Before we move on, I want to address the news of the COVID relief deal that has come from Washington. I have long said that we are facing \$3 trillion to \$4 trillion moment, and that history will judge us harshly if we undershoot this moment. Certainly we are happy to see the House and the Senate come to an agreement, one that will offer some relief for working families and small businesses, extend the deadline for the investment of CARES Act funds into our communities, and provide some funding for our vaccination efforts and our schools. But at \$900 billion, we are under shooting, and no one should fall into a false sense that the job is done. It is not.

This is no time for half measures and we cannot keep finding ourselves back at the beginning once each round of support dries up before the pandemic is tamed. We need to keep working. Our families and businesses need more. Our communities and our fellow states need direct support. So yes, count me as grateful for this agreement, but do not count me as satisfied with it.

Now, as I mentioned, she's to my left, I've asked the Acting Commissioner to join us today because we have some really exciting news to announce. That is the awarding of a total of \$10 million in new preschool education aid through a competitive application process that will allow 10 school districts to expand their pre-k offerings in early 2021. Our investments in pre-k expansion are some of the most impactful that we can make. Studies have proven how, over a lifetime, every dollar invested in early education is repaid many times over.

For numerous communities, our investments in pre-k have also meant more peace of mind for parents who no longer have to worry about daily childcare while they work. Pre-k is an all-around win-win-win. With the Acting Commissioner here, we also have an opportunity to go over some of the metrics we're tracking in our schools.

Across the past several weeks, we have seen multiple schools adjust their learning schedules, but the majority of schools remain currently open in some form of in-person instruction. As of this morning at two schools are currently fully open for in-person instruction. I say schools, districts and/or schools, while 362 are currently offering a hybrid of in-person and remote instruction that has some students in the school building at some point in the day. The number of schools providing all-remote learning has increased to 320, and 47 districts are operating with a mix of all remote, in-person or hybrid learning across their buildings.

We do believe that at least some of the transition to all-remote learning over the past week has been timed with the fact that our schools will close for winter break starting the middle of this week through to Monday, January 4 so closing buildings for the extended period may allow some districts to undertake a full cleaning regime.

As we do regularly, we remind districts to report any changes to their plans to the executive county superintendents. This will be important for us to track which schools may be returning to either hybrid or full in-person instruction after the holidays. We continue to thank our administrators, educators, parents and students for continuing to work together, given the incredibly challenging and stressful circumstances.

Next, we have some good news to report regarding our ongoing efforts to close the digital divide for students who were lacking either the equipment or internet connectivity, or both, needed for remote learning. Through the hard work of Angelica and her team, and in partnership with districts, the total number of students who currently lack either the proper device or the connectivity for remote learning is now 14,349. That is down more than 54% from the week before last, the biggest one-week cut in the remaining digital divide that we've seen since the department began collecting weekly data early this school year. Moreover, this is a total reduction of about 94% from the initial estimated gap of 231,000 students over the summer.

By the way, let us repeat, enormous progress, but 14,349 is 14,349 too many. As we've been noting, the final unfulfilled needs are due largely to ongoing delivery delays, but we are hopeful that these will be filled quickly and this gap will be closed. We may have one more update on this number on Wednesday as our schools enter winter break. And all the statistics regarding the remote learning digital divide are available online at that website, nj.gov/education. To you, Angelica, and to your entire team, including Interim Commissioner Kevin Dehmer, I know we're not going to give up until the unfulfilled need is zero but I must give my thanks and congratulations to all you have done so far.

Next, today I'm signing two Executive Orders. The first will extend the public health emergency for another 30 days. As we have noted many times before, unless it is extended, these emergencies expire after 30 days and given where we are currently, we must remain in a proper footing where Judy and Pat and others can have the authority to continue responding to the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The second order will postpone the upcoming February fire district elections, March special elections and all other special elections for filling vacancies or deciding municipal questions until Tuesday, April 20, where they will coincide with the regular April school board elections for those districts which still hold them. We are doing this because moving these elections to a single day better conserves the time and resources of our local election officials. We are, however, holding off for now on deciding the manner in which these elections will be held, whether it's all vote by mail, in person or through a hybrid of VBM and in person. A final decision as to this must be made by mid-February. We want to be able to make that call based on where the numbers are and where we think they're headed, not only at that time, but going forward.

Before I get to the numbers, and Judy, I know you're going to talk about this in more detail. I want to note something that Judy told our team this morning, and that is New Jersey has registered all five of our state developmental centers in the federal pharmacy program for vaccinations, and many of our group homes for residents with developmental disabilities are similarly registered. To you, Judy and your team, Tina and the rest of the squad, thank you for your focus to ensure some of our most vulnerable residents don't fall through the cracks when it comes to vaccinations against COVID.

With that, let's turn to our overnight numbers. We're reporting an additional 3,186 positive PCR test results, bringing us to a cumulative total since March 4th, 435,763. The positivity rate for the 22,824 PCR tests recorded last Thursday was 10.78%. Judy will have some very interesting and I think fascinating insights as to the regional breakdown of those numbers.

The rate of transmission is currently at 0.99. Now yes, you're going to hear us today, on the one hand, on the other hand because we're torn right now, I have to say. This is the first time in a long while, on the one hand, that RT has fallen below one, but we are still recording some of our largest daily numbers, not just this day, but on an everyday basis since the pandemic begin. We had 5,200 just yesterday. One day of RT below one is notable. We're happy for it, but it's not worth any celebration. It's certainly better than the alternative, but it's worth our doubling down to push RT down even further to the point where our daily numbers see not just one day but a sustained drop.

In our hospitals, by example, as of last night there were 3,371 COVID-positive patients being treated, another 236 awaiting their test results. That's a total of 3,607. Of these, 727 were in intensive care units and 481 were requiring a ventilator.

Throughout the day yesterday, this is good news, 306 live patients were discharged statewide. That's good, while another 376 COVID positive patients were admitted, and that is sobering. Even more so, there were 56 reported in-hospital deaths yesterday. Again, this is apples and oranges. These are not yet COVID confirmed, but to give you a spot sense of the numbers and the reality.

In all of these important hospital metrics, we have over the past several days seen ups and downs. Each day that we see any decline is promising but days like today, where we see those gains reversed, reminds us of both the fact that we are bouncing in a range, and at the same time how far from being finished this virus is with us. It shows why the next two weeks are really critical.

We can't put it more plainly. This is not the year for Christmas as usual or New Year's Eve as usual. I was on with a labor leader earlier today and I said this is the year for small ball. Please, even though I know we all want to, do not hold a large indoor family Christmas gathering or indoor New Year's Eve party. We cannot take the risk of one or both of those celebrations leading to a spike in new cases and hospitalizations.

The anecdotal evidence is that overwhelmingly folks did the right thing in celebrating Thanksgiving. But it is also true that in the two weeks leading up to Thanksgiving, we were averaging roughly 4,000 new cases a day. So far, in the first three weeks of December, we're averaging nearly 4,800 daily cases. That's a 20% increase. On eight of the past 21 days, we've registered more than 5,000 new cases a day. Six of those came, by the way, within the first two weeks after Thanksgiving, including both of the days we registered more than 6,000. Likewise, the number of patients in our hospitals today is 25% higher than it was on Thanksgiving. Our ICU counts are up 30% since then, and ventilator use has shot up an even bigger amount.

We need to stay focused on keeping our families and friends healthy. Again, I want to repeat, we know that overwhelmingly many of you heeded this call during Thanksgiving and we thank you. But we also know that there were others who went on with business as usual, and this is not the year for that. This is the year for a small Christmas with those in our immediate family bubble. That means also ringing in the new year with only those in our own household. If we could do this, and we could push ourselves through our pandemic fatigue and into 2021 when our vaccine program will be taking off, hopefully by this time next year we can once again plan for the big get-togethers. But if you insist on having that big gathering this year, you're taking a real risk that when next Christmas or New Year's comes around, there will be fewer loved ones gathered around your tree or under the ball. Let's see 2020 off in a way that sets us up for a strong and healthy 2021.

We've already lost too many members of our New Jersey family. Today we are reporting another 29 confirmed COVID-related deaths. When our total of 16,315 confirmed deaths is added to our current total of 1,908 probable deaths, the scale of this pandemic is staggering. Let's do as we do every day and remember a few of the precious souls we have lost.

We will begin today by remembering a legend, East Hanover's Carmela Scarnato, who passed away at the age of 100. Carmela was a Newark native and longtime resident of Irvington. She was an Irvington high school cafeteria worker for 20 of those years before she moved to East Hanover in 1993. Active throughout her retirement, Carmela was a member of the East Hanover Senior Citizens Club where she made many friendships. Those friends and her family will miss her cheerful smile and the lighthearted way she looked at life. Her family especially will miss her cooking and exceptional baking.

Carmela was predeceased by her husband five years ago. She leaves behind three beloved children, her daughters Linda and Jennifer, and I had the great honor of speaking with Jennifer and her husband Dennis on Friday and their families, and Carmela's son Leonard, to whom she was especially devoted. She's also survived by her grandson David, grand-daughter-in-law Tara and her four great grandchildren Logan, Wyatt, Owen, and Cole. What amazing changes Carmela witnessed throughout a century spent in the great state of New Jersey May God bless and watch over her and her family.

Next up, we celebrate the life of a guy who was so properly named, James Motion. He called Richfield Park home and was 80 when COVID 19 took him away last month. For 23 years, James was a proud member of the NJ Transit family, a bus operator and a member of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 825, a Local I know well. Countless daily commuters on the 168 line from Paramus to the Port Authority Bus Terminal may have never known him by name, but they knew his face, and they knew he was going to do everything possible to get them into the city or home again on time.

James is survived by his wife Deborah and their children, Lisa and Jim, and Jim's wife Elise. I spoke with Jim on Friday, and his two grandchildren, Scarlet and Chance. NJ Transit President and CEO Kevin Corbett paid tribute to James at the agency's last board meeting and likewise today, I thank James for his years of commitment to NJ Transit and the riders who put their trust in him every single day. May God bless his memory and watch over him and his family.

Finally today, we remember a pioneer of the Soul and R&B TSOP, the sound of Philadelphia, Kenny Scott Jeremiah. Kenny was 78 years old and had called South Jersey home for the past 50 years. Pat, is that a look or what? Come on, man. Including the past several years as a resident of Northfield in Atlantic County. Kenny was a founding member of the Soul Survivors whose 1967 hit, one of my favorites as a 10-year-old, Expressway to Your Heart, which went to number four on the Billboard Hot 100 and earned him the first of what would eventually become multiple gold records. He performed around the world with numerous other musicians and groups throughout his career, including a member of Shirley and Company, and contributing to their 1975 number one hit, another favorite, Shame, Shame, Shame. Later Kenny would trade the stage for the radio studio, broadcasting for many years out of Vineland's WVLT Cruising 92.1 FM, alongside longtime partner and friend DJ Pepper Paul.

In 2017, Kenny's legendary music earned him a plaque on the Philadelphia Walk of Fame on the Avenue of the Arts and earlier this year, he was awarded the Blue Sapphire Salute to Service Award by Rowhome Magazine for his impact on the City of Brotherly Love.

Kenny leaves behind his companion of the past 29 years, Patricia Del Sordo, along with his best friend, his brother, Al and his wife, Gail. I had the honor of speaking to Al and Gail from Howard Beach on Friday. He also leaves behind his nephew Albert, along with many cousins. Kenny was predeceased by his niece, Nicole. There's a line in Expressway to Your Heart, you can look this up. "I thought I could find a clear road ahead, but I found stoplights instead." Kenny never found any stoplights. May God bless him and watch over him, and may his music play on.

These are just three of the now more than 18,000 families whose holiday celebrations have been muted because of an empty chair around the table. Their stories and the lives they lived are what should spur us to keep up with the practices that we need to, to maintain as we prepare for our all-out vaccination efforts. You know the basics, folks. Social distancing, wearing our facemask, washing our hands with soap and water, that just simply using common sense and not going to a big indoor Christmas or New Year's party.

Part of this is also working with our contact tracers, whose job it is to help inform those who may have been exposed to ensure they have the resources they need to stay safe and slow the spread of the virus. Over the past week we've added another 187 members to our community contact tracing corps, giving us just shy of 3,500 tracers on the job across the state. And since we've been aggressively adding to the ranks of contact tracers over the past several weeks, we're also seeing significant increases in case outreach. A huge thank you to residents who are cooperating with our contact tracers.

For those of you who are still hesitant to answer the call and share your contacts, I remind you that our contact tracing corps is simply trying to break the transmission of the disease. Their task is to alert those who you may have been exposed so that individuals can take proper precautions to protect themselves and their loved ones and receive any necessary support to do so. This can include support for isolation or quarantine, childcare, food delivery, income assistance or prescription refills.

Judy's team has also been increasing their level of direct involvement with local health departments in dealing with hotspot cases, whether that be in deployment of new tracers, assistance with technical issues, or providing additional trainings. We are seeing improvements in across-the-board metrics from these intervention activities. We also encourage everyone to download the COVID Alert NJ app to their smartphone. So far, the app has been downloaded roughly 470,000 times. Let's see if we can break 500,000 by the end of the year. COVID Alert NJ is free and it is secure. It does not track your locations. All notifications are anonymously handled through secure codes. If the app alerts you of a possible exposure, you'll never know who it was you were near, and they won't know that they're notifying you either.

Switching gears, on Friday we told you about the New Jersey Economic Development Authority's new Sustain and Serve NJ program through which organizations can receive grant support for the purchase of meals from participating New Jersey restaurants for distribution to residents. As a reminder, the application window is now open. For more information, please go to that website, business.nj.gov/COVID. Sustain and Serve NJ is among a number of financial support programs available to our restaurants which we know are not just a vital piece of our state's economy, but their local economies as well. Not just creating good jobs, but enhancing communities.

Speaking of which, if you live or work in Trenton, you know Maurice Hallett on the left, the man behind the 1911 Smokehouse, Downtown Front Street. Across its five-year lifespan, 1911 Smokehouse has emerged not only as a favorite lunch spot for countless downtown workers and visitors, but it has become a local meeting spot thanks to the great food and community atmosphere. Maurice had previously worked with the EDA to secure a grant that allowed him to not only pay their bills, but which gave him the flexibility to offer his employees similar hours to pre-pandemic times, as well as provide discounted meals to residents to help them through these trying times.

I had the opportunity to check in with Maurice on Friday and to thank him not only for his sense of community, but for his belief in a better future for our capital city. When you're in Trenton, as we are right now, I encourage you to stop by. His website is 1911barbecue.com. More importantly, Judy, 11 West Front Street.

Finally today, I want to acknowledge the passing of Shirley Grant the Teaneck-based talent agent who gave some of New Jersey's most famous names their start in entertainment. The list is long but I'll include just two: Wyckoff's Jonas Brothers, Montclair's actress, Christina Ricci, among many, many others. She ran her agency with her own name for a total of 42 years. A Jersey City native, Shirley passed away last Tuesday at the age of 100. New Jersey's mark in the entertainment business music, movies, television, theater, on and on is a tremendous point of pride for all of us. Shirley spent her career adding to that legendary status. We thank her for all she did to ignite the lights of countless New Jersey stars and we send our condolences to her family and everyone she helped over her career.

That's where we'll leave it this morning. Thank you again. The Monday before Christmas we'll come back and give you our schedule in a minute, but right now it is my pleasure to introduce the woman to my left, the Acting Commissioner of the Department of Education, we're thrilled to have her here. Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan.

Acting Education Commissioner Angelica Allen-McMillan: Thank you, Governor Murphy, for the opportunity to participate in today's press conference. I am thrilled to join you to announce the department's release of \$10 million in state funding to expand access to high quality preschool programs, continuing the

administration's commitment to investing in transformative learning opportunities for the state's youngest learners.

Despite the unprecedented fiscal challenges COVID-19 posed to our state, the Governor and State Legislature partnered to ensure that the fiscal year 2021 state budget advanced our shared goal of growing and improving preschool programs around the state. Thank you to our partners in the Legislature, whose commitment to early childhood education made this investment possible.

I would also like to thank all the dedicated applicants for their leadership and commitment to our children. Under a very tight timeline, they applied for the opportunity to plan and build programs for our youngest learners. Applying to join New Jersey's state-funded preschool program is a difficult task under normal circumstances, and these school districts have had the foresight to look beyond our current emergency and embrace the benefits of expanding or establishing preschool programs.

While preschool expansion has been a central priority in this administration since day one, COVID-19 has shown the critical importance of high quality, standards aligned early childhood education. The last nine months remind us of the extent to which our youngest learners require unique, dedicated supports to meet their needs, and of the extent to which our families and communities rely on early childhood education to participate in our society and economy.

The awards announced today will further empower our districts' children and families to reap the invaluable benefits of high quality preschool education. These funds will expand access to high quality preschool in 10 districts, growing the number of preschool seats in those districts by a total of 818 new seats, while also enhancing the quality of their existing seats.

The benefits of high quality preschool to our youngest students are immediate. Studies find that the impact of high quality preschool is realized almost immediately, with improving preparation for kindergarten and resulting in lower rates of grade retention. Long term, high quality early education can improve children's learning and development outcomes, narrow achievement gaps and convey long-term benefits throughout their adult life.

That may sound like a broad continuum and huge promise but decades of research prove that enormous benefits of participation in high quality early education pays off. Evidence also suggests that investments in high quality preschool yield sizeable returns at state, local and national levels, while any return that exceeds \$1 for every \$1 spent indicates that a program pays for itself, cost-benefit analysis has shown high quality preschool programs can yield up to \$17 in return for each dollar invested, when lifetime outcomes that result in contributions to society are considered. For all these reasons, we are eager to begin working with this year's awardees on implementing or expanding high quality preschool programs. New preschool seats will be open no later than February 1st of 2021.

Building on and in parallel to this progress, the of Education is also working diligently to safeguard the wellbeing of contracted preschool providers by ensuring full contracted payments from December through February 2021 to continue services through this difficult wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, with an eye on long term sustainability.

For more than 20 years, the Department of Education has been using preschool as an intervention for increasing school readiness. New Jersey has a remarkable stature in our nation's early childhood education field. Through his significant commitment to expanding access to high quality preschool for more three and four-year-olds, Governor Murphy enhances this stature and continues his record of monumental investment in education. Making this investment in preschool is how we grow a stronger and fairer economy that works for every family. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Angelica, thank you. I've said it, you've said it, I want to triple the underscore. First of all, it's great to have you here and great to have you at the helm of the Department of Education. There isn't a better investment dollar anywhere that I know of, but certainly within the realm of education, than getting kids early and getting them into our flow at a young age. The payoff is extraordinary.

By the way, when you speak to the folks who are leaders in the communities where we have pre-K and we're expanding, it becomes yet another magnet for those particular communities. I can't wait until the entire state has it, and therefore it's a magnet not just for communities but for the entire state of New Jersey. Thank you for your leadership.

I'm going to do something I haven't done since we've been here, I have to actually go out and take a quick call but it's for good reason. Please help me welcome the woman to my right, who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Well much has been said about the federal pharmacy program and its implications for New Jersey so I want to start with an overview of the program and the decisions the department made to include as many of our vulnerable populations in congregate settings into the program as possible.

In October, the CDC partnered with CVS and Walgreens to create the federal pharmacy partnership program to provide vaccinations to nursing home and assisted living facilities. Shortly after the program began, the CDC began expanding the types of facilities that could be admitted into the program to include those living in high risk congregate settings, not just long-term care facilities. The department immediately began advocating to get as many of these facilities into the program as possible.

The reason for this advocacy was to ensure that all individuals in high risk congregate settings would have equitable access to the COVID-19 vaccine. In addition to the vulnerable residents of nursing homes and assisted living facilities, we were most concerned for the 4,300 members of the staff and 1,250 residents with intellectual and developmental disabilities in our five state developmental centers and the 7,600 individuals in our 650 group homes and other long-term residential facilities.

Within the disability community there are strong advocates who have been unrelenting in letting the department know how critically important it is to get these residents and their loved ones vaccinated as soon as possible. The advocates gave voice to the voiceless and opened our eyes to the thousands of individuals in New Jersey relying on the department to make this decision.

Since October, the department has been in contact with the CDC, working to get as many groups as possible vaccinated through this program. The facilities in this category of congregate settings include Federal Housing and Urban Development residences for 21,600 seniors, and also continuing care retirement communities for 2,440 elderly residents. This was a massive undertaking. Although we do not have final confirmation of the number of facilities accepted into the program as yet, we do know that approximately 1,800 facilities have been uploaded into Tiberius, so we are hopeful that many of these facilities are in the program and will be able to receive vaccines as the vaccine is allocated to New Jersey through the federal pharmacy partnership.

That means that in addition to the 91,700 residents and 90,000 employees in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, approximately 9,300 residents in our state developmental facilities and group homes, 21,600 individuals living in HUD senior housing, and several thousand more in residential settings will have access to vaccines as they come into New Jersey. All of these individuals are at high risk.

Due to the number of individuals involved, this will take some time, but the vaccinations will be rolled out in an orderly manner, with vaccinations taking place at sites where the residents reside. As I stated, this proved to be a more complex task than first imagined. Many of these facilities did not have the information systems technology to support the requirements to get into the program. After receiving the approval of the CDC, the department undertook the task of uploading their information from all the facilities that did not have IT capability. Throughout November and December, the staff at the department assisted these facilities. This was the work that department was engaged in, and it was a decision the department made to once again include as many vulnerable individuals as possible. This resulted in our start date of December 28. It was a decision made to give access and hope to those in need, not the least among us, but for those who should be the first.

To further complicate the process, the CDC has strict rules regarding when the long-term care program can be started. In order to start the program, states were required to have 50% of needed doses reserved for the program a week prior to the launch. In other words, CVS and Walgreens would not be able to start

vaccination of residents and staff at nursing homes until the state had at least 50% of the needed vaccine doses.

In the first week of Pfizer allocations, the state reserved 21,450 doses to build up the reserve for the long-term care facilities, while also allocating 54,600 doses to protect our frontline staff in hospitals. That decision was made to protect staff that will be needed in the event of a second surge.

This week, which is the second week of Pfizer allocations, the state is reserving 34,125 vaccines for the long-term care program, which will reach the CDC's 50% threshold needed to start the program next week. For the third and fourth weeks of the Pfizer allocations, approximately 28,000 doses are planned to be reserved.

Given the reduction of Pfizer allocations, the CDC changed the requirements from the 50% needed in reserve to 25%. The CDC indicated that if the state maintained its plan reserving 50% one week before the first clinic, followed by 25% each of the next two weeks, that Walgreens and CVS would likely be able to schedule and host clinics more quickly, and so the state is keeping the original plan to have 50% of these doses reserved a week prior to our clinic start on December 28th.

Of course, as I reported Friday, the information about anticipated doses and shipments of both Pfizer and Moderna keeps changing. The previously expected second tranche of Pfizer doses for this week was 86,775. Now, based on what is entered into the federal Tiberius platform, we are expecting 53,625, a reduction of 38%.

The previously anticipated total Pfizer doses for December was 273,375. Now, based on what has been entered into the Tiberius system, the revised expectation is 183,300 doses. This change represents a 33% decrease.

Separately, we also received updated guidance on Moderna. For total Pfizer and Moderna for this month, the previously expected amount was 492,075 doses. The number that we expect to receive now is 392,800. This represents a reduction of approximately 20%. We will continue to allocate vaccine according to CDC guidance and the federal authorization. Today, the Moderna vaccine is being shipped to 18 hospitals, two federally qualified health centers and two urgent care centers. These community sites will be available to vaccinate healthcare workers in the community. As of 4pm yesterday, 26 hospitals reported administering 8,740 first doses to healthcare workers. For frontline workers in our acute care hospitals, especially in our emergency rooms and critical care units, the vaccine certainly offers a ray of hope during the dark days of this virus.

Moving on to my daily report as we approach Christmas and other holiday celebrations, I want to remind people that this cannot be a time of normal holiday gatherings. Although we saw an uptick in cases after Thanksgiving, our hospitalizations appear to be stable, but we must remain vigilant. Wear a mask, practice social distancing, stay home when you're sick, do not attend large gatherings. Stay within your household bubble. Don't let the virus come into your house for the holidays. It is an unwelcomed guest.

As the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 3,607 hospitalizations. There are 727 individuals in critical care and 66% of those patients are on ventilators. There is one new report of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. There are now currently 66 total cases in the state, and fortunately no deaths.

At the state's veterans homes, we are reporting one new positive case among residents at the Paramus home and five new resident cases at the Vineland home. At our state psychiatric hospitals, we are reporting four new cases across the four hospitals; all of those cases are at Ancora.

The daily percent positivity as of December 17th in New Jersey is 10.78. The Northern part of the state reports 8.91, the Central part of the state 10.39, and the southern part of the state 14.17. That concludes my daily report. As we approach the holidays, all of us at the Department of Health wish you a safe and joyous season filled with the joy of knowing that each of you have the ability to protect your loved ones, your neighbors and your community. Mask up, wash your hands frequently, celebrate remotely, avoid gatherings and for each other and for us all, please take the call. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you as always for everything, but in particular two things. One is the deep dive on vaccines. And again, we've got a White House call right after this and my guess is the story will continue to evolve. I think anybody who thinks this is a straight line, easy task, that there aren't going to be

bumps, twists or turns in the road is not paying attention to how complex this process is going to be.

Second thing is the northern positivity rate of 8.91%, clearly higher than you want it, I want it, anybody wants it, but that to me is significant. You look at the county numbers in the metro New York counties today, every one of these cases obviously we take seriously, Bergen 240, Essex 226, Hudson 224, Passaic 199, just to stop there for a second. It was 50% to 100% higher than that a week to two ago, and the sort of SWAT team approach, getting in there with the variety of resources that your folks bring to the table clearly has begun to have an impact. Again, whether or not we can sustain that, I think that's largely up to us. The fire department can't put out every fire if the entire place is on fire. But that hose works if we can collectively bring this under control. Thank you for that and for all.

Pat, as always, we've got obviously compliance. It looks like Christmas Eve may be bringing us some slop here. Any sense of the weather, compliance, other matters? Great to have you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Good to have you here, Doc. With regards to Executive Order compliance, since we last met there's been four separate incidents in Newark. Two days in a row the China Garden police responded there and employees were cited for preparing as well as serving food without facial coverage. Also Newark police responded to Caltcher Pub and issued three different employees similar citations, preparing and serving food without facial coverings. In Stratford, police responded to a noise complaint at a private residence. That homeowner is cited now for the second time for a violation of the Executive Order.

With regard to the weather, Governor, yes, I think there might be some light snow actually tonight. Thursday, one to two inches of rain which may transition over to snow on Christmas. It's a system coming off of the Great Lakes and the models still the confidence isn't very high, but we'll know as the next day or two goes on if we may just get that White Christmas after all.

Governor Phil Murphy: It looks like a pretty dramatic drop in temperature Thursday into Friday. I always like being with you, I'm hoping not to spend Christmas morning with you at the STEMC, but if we have to, we will. Thank you for that.

Speaking of which, we'll start with Charlie. Before we do, we're going to go, unless Mahen says otherwise, Monday and Wednesday this week and Monday and Wednesday next week. We will take Christmas and New Year's Day itself. We will not be with you but otherwise we'll go Monday and Wednesday in person and we'll be virtual and electronic with you for the other days. Again, we've got a fairly significant White House call shortly so I'm going to ask if you can all be economical with your questions. There's a lot of you here today. We're always honored that you're here. Charlie, we're going to start with you.

Q&A Session

Charlie Kratovil, New Brunswick Today: Thank you, Governor and congratulations to the Acting Commissioner on your nomination and on the announcement today. In just a few short weeks, the 750 students at Lincoln Annex School in New Brunswick will be asked to return not to their neighborhood school but to an unfamiliar temporary space in a converted warehouse, so their public school, which was opened just four years ago, can be acquired by a hospital and torn down. Acting Commissioner, have you spoken to any of the parents or students there about their concerns? Would you be willing to have those conversations?

For you, Governor, both the current Lincoln Annex School and the proposed replacement would be built without SDA involvement, even though New Brunswick is an SDA district. What does that say about the SDA and what do you think should happen with regard to future school construction funding for these SDA districts?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, I'll start, Charlie, and Angelica can weigh in if she wants to. I've got nothing new to report on this, other than this. I actually was across the street from the school last week with Judy, one of its most illustrious graduates. We care, both. We can walk and chew gum. We care both about our number one public education status in the nation, including that school and the kids and the parents who are associated with it. And at the same time, we can develop great innovation, STEM heavy Rutgers-related activities. Is that fair? Thank you, Charlie. We'll go to Dustin in the back. Thanks.

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Good afternoon. On tax incentives, are you okay with the fact that lawmakers added in 142 pages of amendments on a Friday for a bill passed today? Are there any analyses that show how much this bill could bring in, in terms of business activity and more taxes? And how can we reconcile borrowing \$4 billion and then forego more than \$11 billion in tax revenue over seven years?

Doug Steinhardt has called for the Health Commissioner's resignation over missing the deadline to start vaccinating in nursing homes. What's your response to that? Where does responsibility for that missed deadline lie?

When can we expect details on scheduling vaccinations? Now that the Hospital Association is voluntarily requiring its members to submit data daily on hospital outbreaks, we saw in the legislation that was passed on the dashboard.

Why the hesitation on banning flights from Britain, given the new strain of the Coronavirus?

Governor Phil Murphy: There's no hesitation. That's something that I think the science around that is still to be determined, unless Tina and Judy say otherwise. We're working with the Port Authority and our partners in the region as we speak. Tina, anything you want to add to that?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: I think right now we are still in the process of trying to understand what's going on with this new variant. We understand and know that mutations are happening all the time with this virus, as with other viruses in general. But as far as how that changes management right now, there is really no change in management. We still have to keep vigilant with the social distancing the masking. There's no evidence right now about the impact to vaccine efforts and frankly, the message that the Commissioner and the Governor have been reiterating this entire time about trying to not do non-essential travel, that's really at the crux of this all. Because whether you have concerns about a new variant from the UK versus a hotspot from another part of the country, does it really matter?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, I'm with you on that. We are in discussions with the Port Authority as it relates to airports, but I'm on Tina's point. I was asked this this morning. The message for me is don't travel. UK or otherwise, stay home. I'm going in reverse order, I realize.

You asked when we would have vaccination schedules up on the dashboard? I think this is still evolving. Part of the reason why we're with 37 other states on long-term care a week from today is we had gotten guidance from the feds, as opposed to this is what your order will look like, and that is still evolving. I'll leave it at that. Who said something?

Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record: Steinhardt called for the Health Commissioner's resignation over this issue of missing the deadline for vaccinations. I just wanted to see, where does responsibility for that missed deadline lie?

Governor Phil Murphy: I think you heard how we're thinking about vaccines and the last thing we need are people who don't know what they're talking about from the cheap seats. I think Judy went through this in great detail. Again, this is not going to be a straight line. This is going to be, you have to accept it's a little bit like we've been saying about the school year, it's not a normal school year. This is not an easy, straight line process. It is one of the most ambitious federal government initiatives ever undertaken. Folks have to understand that. We need our federal partners. They are going to be playing the existentially important role here but it is not a straight line.

Listen, I've said everything I'm going to say on incentives other than I'm told while I was here it pass the Assembly earlier 68 to 11 and the Senate 38 to 1 which means, by definition, it was overwhelmingly bipartisan and grateful to hear those numbers. The fact of the matter is the principles that underpin this incentives package have been out there for two years. I said this on Friday, the more people look at this, this gets better on close inspection, as opposed to otherwise. There's not only total caps, there's program caps, it's great for Main Street, underserved communities. It's a jolt in the arm for our innovation economy. It's got an inspector general. I mean, it's got all the stuff that we have been preaching from day one.

We're going to need it because the fallout from this pandemic and underwhelming federal response, at least for the time being, we're going to need this. I am gratified that we will have it as a weapon. Dave, good afternoon. We have to pick up the pace and I apologize.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Question for Commissioner Persichilli. You mentioned all of the players that you want to see in the federal pharmacy partnership program. In total, do we have an idea how many people are we talking about? Are they all going to start December 28 or is it just going to be the long-term care facilities and their staff and so forth?

Governor, this is from Mike Symons. He's wondering, he says it looks like the Regional Transportation Climate Initiative, we are not going to join this at this time. Could you explain what your thinking is on this and why we are going to do whatever we're going to do? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thanks, Dave. I actually misspoke. It's 36 other states, it's a total of 37 that are going a week from today. Judy, any more color on that?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: The total is about 125,000 individuals. We will start with long-term care, then assisted living, and then the state developmental facilities. Then we have thousands of group homes and they will be in the queue to be visited and vaccinated. Remember, it's two vaccinations, it's a two-shot deal. This is a big program, and so 125,000 vaccinations times two, so about 250,000 vaccinations. It will take a while. We do not have the schedule from CVS and Walgreens yet. Long-term care will start next week.

Governor Phil Murphy: Mike Symons, tell him I said hello. I haven't seen him in ages. I hope he's okay. Listen, we like this conceptually. By the way, I'd put our record on the environment up against any other American state over the past three years, and I mean that literally, from environmental justice to offshore wind and everything in between. We like it conceptually. The devil is in the details a little bit. I'm conscious of the sticker shock potentially, because it would require some amount of payment at the gas pump and in the environment in which we're in, per my reaction to Dustin's question about incentives, we have got to be careful about what we're asking folks to bear here. To say it's an unusual economic environment, I think is the understatement of the day. Sir.

Reporter: Governor, on vaccines, other states appear to be immunizing people at a much faster pace. New York State vaccinated some 19,000 people last week, while New Jersey got to less than 2,200. Regardless of federal shipping delays, are there any logistical problems, staffing shortages or other issues that have slowed the pace of this process in New Jersey?

You said the state has registered all five of the state developmental centers in the pharmacy program for vaccinations. Does this mean that they will be vaccinated after healthcare workers, or at the same time as people with underlying conditions? Can you explain also about people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who live at home? Will they also be prioritized in terms of getting the vaccine?

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. I believe, Judy, you should address this. I believe that it is purely in our case a slight lag in hospitals reporting into the system. I'm not aware of any logistical issues other than the readjustment of the numbers that we've already mentioned on the Fed side, and we had a little bit of a delay because of the storm last week. But I think we like what we see. Any more comments, Judy, on the state homes as well as the intellectually and developmentally disabled?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: For the federal program, we believe we are able to get in the state developmental centers, those facilities and the group homes, for the developmentally disabled.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that. Alex, have you got any?

Alex Napoliello, NJ.com: Good afternoon. For the Commissioner, we're working on a story about New Jersey Mobile Healthcare from Wyckoff, a private ambulance company that is being accused of mishandling a COVID patient. Now, I'm probably sure you haven't heard of that specific case, unless you have. Can I ask you generally, has there been any guidance issued to private ambulance companies during the pandemic about how they should handle COVID patients? Has the Department of Health revisited any of the licensing that's being done for private ambulance companies because of the stress and the strain? Have you seen any evidence that private ambulance companies are being used more because some of the public agencies are overwhelmed?

I also wanted to get just a little bit more clarification on the vaccine deadline. It sounded like and I want to make sure I'm clear on what you said before. Did the federal government sort of change the rules midway in terms of the percentage of vaccine? Was this something that the state came into late because long-term care facilities were overwhelmed? Or was this simply a situation where your workers didn't operate fast enough?

For the Governor, General Perna spoke over the weekend about the discrepancy in the numbers of vaccines going to the states. He took full responsibility. Do you accept his explanation? Do you take responsibility for missing the deadline for vaccines in long-term care?

Governor Phil Murphy: Nice try. By the way, I have a lot of regard for this guy and it is so refreshing to see somebody stand up, particularly that administration and say you know what? I screwed up and it's on me and not pass the buck. By the way, one thing I haven't said, not only are 37 states, including New Jersey, going next Monday on long-term care. I believe this is true. If you look at the amount of long-term care residents and divide it by total residents of the state, we have the highest density, at least among the highest if not the highest density of long-term care residents in the state.

Again, I think Judy's addressed this, but I would just add in my own words, we wanted to make sure we got this exactly right and we had guidance from the feds; we did not have a specific shipment number. You don't want to start a process where you've got a demand that you're not able to fulfil, especially on the back end. Anything more on that, Judy? I don't have any color on the ambulance companies. I know they got guidance from you.

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: They have not gotten guidance lately. We have had stakeholder calls on the vaccine program for all first responders, but we've not done anything lately for private ambulances.

Governor Phil Murphy: We can get back to you. I'd love to know, offline, if you could give us the specific situation, we could follow up on. I mean, you've been crystal clear in your guidance about cohorting and separating in all aspects of the health system, COVID from non-COVID. That includes both patients and/or residents on the one hand and staff on the other. We'll come back to you, though.

Daniel, we'll go to you if you could go up next.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Hi, Governor, I hope you're doing well. Regarding incentives, given the uncertainty with what the commercial real estate and office buildings will look like post-COVID, virtually every other industry in the state, does it make sense to rush through this economic incentive package thought of or used in a pre-COVID economy before we know what a post-COVID economy will look like? Will you and lawmakers have to revisit these incentive programs in the future?

You frequently criticized politics as usual and you've used that phrase with Grow New Jersey as the main culprit, so why push through a much larger bill that gives that impression and that gives the impression of politics as usual, that there might not be something in the 220-page bill that would stand up to public scrutiny if there was more time to digest it?

More on topic, next year will you be doing a post mortem of how your administration handled the pandemic? What would you look at? What would you put in the playbook? What do you think your administration needs to reconsider or look back at?

Governor Phil Murphy: The answer is we will be doing a post mortem. I think we've been crystal clear about that. On some of the stuff we're not waiting, so we're trying to do some of this on an iterative basis but there's going to be a full review. Look at what Judy did with the Manatt firm to come in on long-term care and hold up a brutal mirror that no other state was willing to do to the extent to which we did. That's led to laws that that I've signed, it's led to executive action. But the answer is yes.

Commercial real estate is clearly, I think that was your first question, there's no good answer to that right now. Nowhere in America, probably nowhere in the world. We spend a significant amount of time talking about whether or not the rebalancing of where people are working and how they're working, where they're living, is temporary, permanent or somewhere in between. I continue to think you've got smaller, this is my personal

view, you've got headquarters that are smaller, you've got some amount of ongoing work from home, and then you've got pods and other sort of halfway places that are sort of plug and play. That, to me, is where I think this ends up.

I couldn't disagree with the premise of your question about whether this was yet another business as usual, a corporate giveaway. I mean, come on. Everything we asked for is in this bill. Literally everything. Everything. Not most everything, everything. Caps, Inspector General, program caps, Main Street, underserved communities, brownfields, historical, venture capital, literally everything. This is the way I think of it. We've gone from a corporate giveaway plan to an economic development plan. That's what this bill is about. Thank you.

Let's go, Nikita, to you and then over to Brett to take us out.

Nikita Biryukov, New Jersey Globe: At the start of the year, I think in February, you introduced a package of ethics reforms that would remove the Legislative exemption from OPRA and require a 72-hour waiting period for the final versions of bills before they could get an actual vote. These have seen no movement since the pandemic. Are these bills dead?

Separately, how is the rush on tax incentives, especially when a bill is being amended with 140 pages of changes during a committee hearing, how is not condemning something like that anything short of a betrayal of the values in those reforms?

Governor Phil Murphy: A little bit like do they know that you beat your dog as the premise of the question. I'm going to say this and I'm going to probably say it for the last time. This package was, other than probably the size -- and by the way, this just in, we're in a pandemic and we need more help as opposed to less, particularly when the feds undershoot which they have done -- everything in this bill was signaled as much as two-plus years ago. The closer you look at this, this is one of these bills the closer you look, the more you like it. I continue to be, as a general matter, the general notion of ethics reform is good hygiene, good housekeeping and I still stand by that. Where that goes, I don't know. It is clearly one of many things, if you go back to February or January, we were headed in one direction and we've been hit by a truck over the past 10 months. But as a conceptual matter, I still like the notion. Thank you. Brent.

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: What is the status of making rapid test results available? Does that give any more clarity on hotspots where these tests are being deployed? Why did the state not respond to the Associated Press' request for how much the state spent on PPE and medical equipment in the early days of the pandemic? You have a bill on your desk to add additional unemployment benefits through February 27th. Will you sign it now that the federal stimulus package has been set with more for the unemployed?

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, do you want to give a quick sense of the rapid tests? I don't know that it tells us anything more about the hotspots, right?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: No, but we use them to be able to quickly isolate or quarantine individuals, and we're starting to report the antigen tests. That's a difficult situation, because so many of them are being deployed. Now, there is a test that will be coming out that you don't need a physician's order and you can do at home. I think we're going to see increasing rapid tests. I know Dr. Tan and I talk about this a lot, because we'll lose somewhat control over how many positives and negatives we have. We are tracking antigen tests, we're trying to develop a system to track antigen tests as they come in but we will never see all of them. I don't believe we will ever get a handle on all of them.

Governor Phil Murphy: But I think you're hearing, Tina, Judy's first point I think is the important one. It doesn't tell you any more about a hotspot, but it's actually the reverse. That's part of the response to a hotspot. The Abbott Binax NOW test, they are still not linked directly into the healthcare database anywhere, not just New Jersey, anywhere, whereas the Cue Health are. Tina, please.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: We actually are getting a lot of data on these antigen tests right now. It's just a matter, as the Commissioner had mentioned, of how do we package that and present this in a way that can be helpful for folks? I do have to say that we are acting on all of these positive antigen results. These are treated like our confirmed PCR tests, and that there's public health action that's being done on each of these antigen results.

Governor Phil Murphy: Without commenting on the specifics of the bill, Brent, anything we can do to help folks who are unemployed right now, count us in. I'll just say that as a conceptual matter.

I have no problem at all reporting what we spent on PPE, but maybe Parimal has got a better answer to that. I'm not sure why anyone said no to that, but I'm all for everyone knowing exactly what we're doing. I'd like to follow up with you on that one, if we could mind.

Thanks, everybody. Thank you also for being economical in your questions. I'll mask up here. Again, we are virtual tomorrow. Wednesday, we are at one o'clock. I know I'm going to be on the road tomorrow. More on that as we get that settled, but tomorrow will be an exciting day again on the economy. Wednesday, we'll be here at one o'clock. Otherwise, I think you and I may be witnessing some shots in the arms on Wednesday as well, separately. Angelica, thank you so much for being here and for your leadership. It's great to have you on the team. Judy and Tina, as always, thank you for your leadership. Pat, keep us honest on the weather, if you could. Again, we might get a little bit tonight, so everyone be careful out there. Jared, Parimal, Mahen, the whole team, everybody keep doing what you've been doing overwhelmingly. Small ball, don't let your guard down, stay at it. Slowly, but surely we dig out of this thing and with your help, we'll be able to get that bridge into a better tomorrow. Thank you all so much.

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