

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: August 30th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon. Before we begin, you may notice throughout your day that all flags across our state remain at half staff in honor and memory of the 13 blessed members of our armed forces killed last week in that heinous attack outside the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. Our prayers are with their families, and our thoughts remain with all of our service members working to ensure that our fellow Americans and tens of thousands of Afghan refugees are able to safely make it to the United States. God bless each and every one of them.

Also last week, we learned of the passing of this guy, former Assemblyman and Fairlawn mayor Nicholas Felice. He served in the State House for two decades and was respected for his kindness, good humor, and willingness to reach and work across the aisle, essentially to put people before politics. Later this week, flags will also be lowered in his honor and memory, and our condolences go out to his family and friends and all who served alongside him under the golden dome.

Now, let's get into today's briefing. Sitting alongside of me, as always, to my right the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichelli. To her right, we welcome back another familiar face, Communicable Disease Service Medical Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz; great to have you both. To my left, another guy who needs no introduction, Superintendent of the State Police Colonel Pat Callahan. Parimal Garg, Chief Counsel's with us, and a cast of thousands.

First and as a reminder, federal extended unemployment benefits including the \$300 weekly benefit expire on September 4. The proper way to extend federal UI benefits is through federal action, not a patchwork of state ones. It should be noted here that no state is extending this benefit beyond September 4th. The reality is that continuing the \$300 per week benefit through state resources would be cost prohibitive. It would cost at current at least \$314 million per week and perhaps hundreds of millions of dollars more. In other words, we're talking about well more than \$1 billion per month to maintain this benefit at its current level. Overall, the Department has put \$33.7 billion directly into the accounts of nearly 1.6 million New Jerseyans since the start of the pandemic, of which \$25 billion had been federal dollars. We have some of the most generous unemployment benefits in the country and God knows we needed them. We consistently hold the

top ranking for percentage of unemployed workers receiving benefits. Unlike most other states, those entering our workforce are guaranteed a wage of at least \$12 an hour. That, by the way, increases to \$13 an hour in just four months. They're guaranteed sick leave, expanded paid family leave, equal pay protections, all of which are among the strongest in the nation.

We recognize the impact that this will have on some families facing unemployment issues. To support New Jerseyans living through the economic impacts of the pandemic, we have invested in rent assistance, food assistance, childcare assistance, healthcare affordability – affordability assistance and other support programs. We have set up programs which are funded through billions of dollars of federal coronavirus relief funds. In terms of childcare and healthcare, the direct supports and subsidies we offer mean that for some families, these vital needs can be had at virtually zero out-of-pocket costs. The Department of Labor is prepared to assist those who need further assistance to find these resources.

We also must make the most of the American Rescue Plan funds we've been given to support our small business community and our startups who are, in fact, the major creators of jobs across our state. We cannot crowd out essential investments in other areas including for the assistance programs I mentioned as well as for our schools and colleges and universities among them. Our federal coronavirus relief pot is intended to support multiple recovery programs that our residents and businesses both need. We must ensure that we are appropriating these funds judiciously for the greatest possible long-term recovery. The federal benefit has helped families and kept a stalled economy from falling into an economic collapse and today, we have, thank God, at long last, a strong recovery underway.

Next up, as the majority of our schools prepare to open to all students, faculty, and staff next week, we remain committed to ensuring as safe a start to the school year as possible. As we have previously announced, everyone in our schools, everyone, is to wear a mask save for extremely limited exceptions. To that end, and under Pat's oversight, the Office of Emergency Management within the New Jersey State Police, we have identified approximately 6 million K-N95 and surgical masks along with roughly 500,000 child-sized masks that we will make available to districts on an as-needed basis for students or staff who might forget, damage, or misplace their own masks. We will make these masks available to districts at no charge, and we invite all public school districts and non-public schools to request any masks that they may need.

I also remind those district leaders who continue to want to make what is a matter of public health into something political that our in-school masking policy is not a polite suggestion. We do not and will not take lightly to any district or any school who tries to finagle their way out of their responsibility for protecting public health. Let's just be perfectly clear that if you try to do so, you're only putting your students, educators, support staff, administrators, and everyone else in your school, plus by the way, your families, their families, and your communities all at risk. I'm certainly heartened that the overwhelming majority of residents support our efforts, and I would remind those who continue to oppose public safety and common sense that this is no time for selfishness or political posturing. This is the time for selflessness and putting our schools on the best possible footing with regard to providing full-time, in-person instruction and protecting public health, period.

Now let's move on and get to the latest data. We'll start with our latest vaccination numbers, which this morning tallies a total, as you can see, of 5,573,402 individuals who live, work, or study in New Jersey who have now completed their vaccination schedules. More than 70% of all New Jerseyans have now received their full vaccine doses, and we're about to crack 80% of all eligible individuals have gotten at least their first dose. If you are among the roughly 675,000 who have received a first dose of either Pfizer or Moderna's vaccines and are on schedule to get your second shot in the coming weeks, we do remind you to make sure that you have to get that all-important second shot. It's the only way to ensure that you get the full measure of protection that these vaccines provide. We'll show those numbers in just a minute.

If, for some reason, you are still on the fence about getting vaccinated, I implore you to get off the fence and get to a vaccination center. Visit our appointment finder at that website, covid19.nj.gov/finder to find a site nearest you. Here's why: in exactly three weeks, we anticipate administering the first booster shots. We are still awaiting final authorization and guidance from the CDC to begin administering boosters, and we are also awaiting CDC guidance on the eligibility window. It appears that boosters will be recommended for individuals either six or eight months following the completion of their initial series of a Pfizer or Moderna vaccine. Data for J&J booster, by the way, is not yet finalized.

Just for point of reference, if a six-month window is approved – and it's not clear yet whether it's six or eight, Judy, unless you've got some inside scoop that I don't have. If it's six months, on September 20th, immediately 2.4 million people in this state will become eligible for a booster shot. As these folks return to the queue in a few weeks, we do expect to see an increase in vaccine demand. Now to be clear, we are confident that we have both the supply and the distribution

capacity to serve everyone. We have proven to have one of the broadest and most efficient distribution and delivery programs in the entire country. While we have tremendous capacity at our vaccination sites now and we've got just about 1500 of them, we are working hard to increase it further in anticipation of the booster and the demand that will go with it.

We will almost certainly reopen several larger vaccination sites and megasites to serve the millions of individuals who will become eligible for booster sites this fall. We believe we can serve both those getting their first doses, especially in high-risk and high-need areas, and those eligible for their boosters who we anticipate arriving within a reasonable time frame of when they hit that either six or eight-month window from when they completed their initial round of vaccinations. If you have yet to get your first shot, now is the time to do it because the demand is only going to pick up again in the next month. By the way, Judy, I looked at my notes this morning; we're knocking on doors today in 27 communities in the state. Again, the folks who are unvaccinated largely break into two categories: folks who are rejecting the science and the data, and folks who have a legitimate reason, folks who work several jobs; they may not speak English; they look at the history of vaccinations in the African-American community in our country and have got rightful pause. They may think their immigration status will be outed. They may think it still costs money; it's free, by the way. That's why, under Judy's leadership, we're still knocking on doors and my guess is we'll do that at least for another couple of weeks.

By the way, among other reasons to get the shot, the vaccines continue to prove overwhelmingly powerful as the latest breakthrough data from Ed's team at the Communicable Disease Service shows. Here are the overall numbers to all breakthrough cases. These numbers tell a compelling story to say the least. If you're on the fence, look at these numbers. There is no reason to leave your health and the health of your family to mere chance. The vaccines work. When we look at only the numbers for the week of August 9th through 15th specifically, the case gets even stronger. Again, this is in the midst of the Delta variant raging in our state and in our country. For the entirety of that week, unvaccinated individuals accounted for roughly 88% of the 13,118 total positive test results returned. Of the 1,637 fully vaccinated individuals who did test positive, 98% stayed out of the hospital. That rate continues to track roughly with what we're seeing among all breakthrough cases. Moreover, the preliminary data also reports zero COVID-related deaths from among the fully vaccinated.

Again, look at these numbers and take them to heart. This is truly only a pandemic among the unvaccinated. Those who are fully vaccinated and overwhelmingly are protected at every stage. Here are the rest of today's numbers I would tack onto the one day number of newly returned positive test results that since last Monday, we added a total of 15,064 to our overall count. Good news is the rate of transmission continues to decline, though it is still over one and it shows, therefore, an increasing spread of the virus. Here are the latest numbers from our hospitals. The total number of hospitalizations is up a little more than 10% from last Monday as is the ICU count, but the number of ventilators in use has increased by about 25% over the past week. These figures should be a wake-up call to the threat that the Delta variant poses, again, overwhelmingly to the unvaccinated.

With regard to the ICU number, I should also note that among all states, we currently have the lowest percentage of ICU beds statewide taken up by COVID patients That's little solace given that we're at our highest numbers overall since mid-May, but it also speaks to the strength of our healthcare network and how well we have all done to put ourselves in such a strong position to lead the fight to end this virus. That credit goes to the millions of you out there and our extraordinary frontline healthcare workers. Here are the latest numbers, sadly, as it relates to losses of life.

With that, let's take a moment to reflect on three more of those we've lost over the past 18 months. We start today by remembering Eloise Clark and Brenda Gary right there on the screen, Eloise on the left, Brenda on the right. They were mother and daughter, and we both lost them on successive days. Brenda was the first to pass. Again, Brenda's the daughter on the right. Born and raised in Newark in East Orange, she had most recently lived in Somerset. She had a lifetime of learning at both Essex and Passiac County colleges as well as through the Red Cross offices in East Orange and at one point, worked for an electronics tester for RCA. She was a woman of great faith, a member at one point or another of the Holy Spirit Church in Orange, St. Rose of Lima and Newark, and Union Baptist Church in Orange, which was the family's spiritual home. Brenda was 78 years old.

Eloise, again on the left, was 103 years old and called Montclare home after spending decades living in Newark and Orange. With the support of her late husband, John Thompson, she was one of the first black women in Essex County to own her own beauty shop, which she ran on Orange Street in Newark for more than 30 years. When she wasn't at her shop, she loved to read and to travel, even if that travel meant just taking a day trip to places like Atlantic City with her daughters and granddaughter or with friends. While she was homebound in her final years, her ability to light up the room with her smile never vanished. They leave behind a tremendous family starting with Sheila, who is Eloise's surviving daughter and Brenda's sister. Brenda leaves her own children, Sharice, Victor, Antonio, James, and David and their spouses, as well as nephews Charles, Robert, and Eugene, and niece Laquanna, who she raised as her own.

I had the great honor, by the way, of speaking with Antonio last week. Eloise also leaves her other grandsons, Curtis and Maurice, along with a total of 12 great-grandchildren and 4 great-great-grandchildren. We pray that God has blessed both Eloise and Brenda and welcome them home. May their spirits continue to live within all those who they left behind. God bless them both.

Today, we also remember this guy, Hawthorn's Renato, known by all as Ron, Foschini. He was just 51 years old. He lived his entire life in Hawthorn and was a general manager for Aramark Corporation. He loved his family and he loved his friends, and he loved cooking for and entertaining everyone. Given his deep roots in his community, it's no surprise that his lasting legacy is all that he did within and for Hawthorn. He was a devoted and active parishioner at St. Anthony's Roman Catholic Church. He also ran numerous fundraisers for Hawthorn schools along with coaching baseball, football, and soccer.

Ron leaves behind his mom, Elaina, along with his beloved wife, Maria, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last week, and his children, Nicholas, who was 21, and Gianna, 18. That's Nicholas standing with him at the right photo and Gianna standing with him at the left photo. He also leaves his sister, Anamarie, and brother, Angelo, and their families including many nieces and nephews. I should note here that both Nicolas and Gianna attend Montclare State University. Nicholas is starting his senior year and Gianna is a freshman. Today is move-in day for Gianna. That's a day you always – you think through. You're with your mom and your dad, and she is not with her dad this year. How sad is that? We send them both our very best for a school year ahead and to you both, I know your dad is proud of you and is watching over you. We thank Ron for a lifetime of community service. His example is one that will stand the test of time. God bless him, Maria, his mom, Nicholas, and Gianna, and God rest his soul.

Last week, we confirmed 101 New Jerseyans had lost their life over the past week to COVID, and we remember each and every one of them.

Now let's shift gear. Let's turn our attention to another of the terrific small businesses working hard to help their communities come back and partnership with the New Jersey Economic Development Authority. Today, we're going to visit Hackettstown, not too far from where you are, Pat, a tremendous and historic community in Warren County. Hackettstown is the home of Stella G's Restaurant. It's not just a restaurant; it's a cafe and it's a from-scratch bakery that has been in business since 2007 and owned and operated by the husband and wife team of Nick and Courtney Deronne since 2018. They don't just provide breakfast and lunch to a base of loyal regulars and others who come in, which they do, but they've also created jobs in Hackettstown with a staff of between 8 to 10 helping them turn out meals and baked treats.

To help them keep Stella G's afloat during the darkest days of the pandemic, they turned to the EDA for help. With three grants in hand, Nick and Courtney have been able to meet expenses and remain a vital part of the Hackettstown community. Last week, I had the great honor to catch up with Nick and thank him for keeping the faith. Business is slowly coming back and I know that because of his and Courtney's dedication to Stella G's and to the Hackettstown community, they and their team are going to thrive. Check them out, by the way: stellags.com. That's S-T-E-L-L-A-G-S.com. If you want to go by and see them, I encourage you to do that. They are at 186 Main Street in Hackettstown.

Finally before I close, I want to give a shout-out to these young ladies, the members of Girl Scouts of Northern New Jersey, Troupe #95817 from Englewood. They have been collecting personal supplies that are being delivered to survivors of the recent earthquake in Haiti, everything from hand sanitizers and masks to toothbrushes and toothpaste. Moreover, they received a bronze award for their service project. I want to thank Mayor Janice Kovach, dear friend of Clinton for bringing this one to my attention. A huge thank-you to them for showing our true Jersey spirit. They make us all incredibly proud.

Now a quick reminder that we will be back here on Wednesday for one more pre-Labor Day briefing. We won't be here next Monday because of Labor Day and obviously, the observance, but will return then next week on Wednesday, September 8th, to coincide with what is the first day of school in many places across the state.

With that, please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichelli.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichelli: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. A week ago, the US Food and Drug Administration granted full approval to the Pfizer vaccine for those 16 years of age and older, making it the first licensed vaccine against COVID-19 in the United States. In making the announcement, the acting FDA Commissioner said, and I quote, "The public can be confident that this vaccine meets FDA's gold standard for safety, effectiveness, and manufacturing quality that we require for an approved product." Full approval or licensure is the next step after an emergency use authorization, or EUA. Those who are 12 to 15 still remain eligible for the Pfizer vaccine under the EUA. So 12 to 15 under the EUA, over 16 fully vaccinated – full approval, I mean. They are both the same formulation; they are not different vaccines.

As we know, the FDA has not yet authorized a vaccine, even on an emergency basis, for children younger than 12. Clinical trials are still in progress, and regulators continue gathering data from those trials to determine safety as well as what dose should be given to younger children. As students, parents, and educators prepare to resume in-classroom instruction, it is important to remember this return to school season is like no other. Everyone must take COVID-19 seriously. As I've said we are in a race against the highly transmissible Delta variant. With children 11 and younger not eligible to be vaccinated yet, it is especially important for young people who can get vaccinated – in other words, the 12 to 17 year olds – to please help us fight back against this unrelenting virus by getting vaccinated.

New Jersey's vaccination rate for the 12 to 17 year olds who have received at least one dose is 53.8%. That's above the national rate of 50%, but we must do better. Because we still have more than 300,000 children between the ages of 12 and 17 who remain unvaccinated, we must do better. There are hundreds of locations for adolescents to get vaccinated including neighborhood retail pharmacies. To find a location near you, please visit <https://covid19.nj.gov> (<https://covid19.nj.gov>).

Ten weeks ago, the Department of Health identified high-risk counties and municipalities who needed additional support to increase their vaccination rates. Our goal was 70% vaccination rate in 56 selected municipalities. We identified several individuals within the Department of Health to serve as county ambassadors and redeployed them out to the municipalities. We set a goal of 70% vaccinated eligible individuals in every municipality. At the start, we were 14.9% to our goal. Today, we are 82.1% to our goal. This is through the hard work of the county ambassadors along with the full cooperation and collaboration of our local elected officials, the local health departments, all existing vaccination sites and pop-up sites, the school superintendents, and local faith leaders and community leaders.

As an example, in September, Essex County will have 123 vaccination sites up and running, scheduled. Thirty-nine of those sites will be in their high schools. This cooperation is repeated in every municipality we are in. Vaccination is the most powerful tool that we have in our tool kit and collaboration within our municipalities is the most powerful engine we have to move our rates forward. Remember, all students, educators, staff, and visitors are required to wear face masks indoors in school. It is also important to continue to wash our hands frequently to remove germs to avoid getting sick and to prevent the spread of colds, the flu, and other diseases.

What we call layered prevention strategies are the best protection for students and staff. That includes keeping physical distance, staying home when you're sick, getting tested for COVID-19 if you think you may have been exposed or if you don't feel well. I began my career as a nurse, so I appreciate the unique challenges that students and educators will face as the new school year begins. In addition to keeping students safe from COVID-19, educators and staff will need to provide safe and supportive school environments to promote overall student well-being. After being physically away from the traditional school year, some students may feel stressed or anxious. Parents should encourage their children to speak up if they are feeling overly stressed, anxious, or depressed and remind them that school counselors are available and there to help.

The CDC data shows that the pandemic has created significant stress and trauma for children, adolescents, and families. Schools can help promote student well-being by establishing supportive environments and referring students to appropriate mental and physical health services when appropriate.

I would also like to review a few other health and safety tips that make for a successful school year. I encourage parents to reschedule any missed check-ups and catch up on immunizations and other important health screenings. Routine vaccinations save lives. It's important for children to be up-to-date on their vaccines. It's also important for students to eat well, be active, get enough sleep, drink plenty of water, limit sugary drinks, and eat healthy both at home and in school to maintain a healthy weight and support brain development and healthy growth.

I don't think I need to repeat, students should also be tobacco-free. Use of any tobacco product are unsafe for youth. E-cigarettes are the most used tobacco product among US middle and high school students. As many of you know, tobacco products contain nicotine, which is a highly, highly addictive substance and can harm the developing adolescent brain.

Finally, students should wear helmets and protect their heads. Children and adolescents can get concussions in a number of school settings ranging from school sports activities to the hallway, the playground, and even the cafeteria. This pandemic has presented us with unique challenges for helping students make the transition back to in-person instruction. As children are welcomed back, let's make sure it's done safely for all. Healthy students are better learners.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals are reporting for several days now over 1,000 hospitalizations and 209 individuals are in ICU. Fifty-one percent of them are on ventilators. Fortunately, we have no new cases of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children. At the state veterans home, there are no new cases among residents and at our state psychiatric hospitals, we do have one new case among one of their patients at the Trenton Psychiatric Hospital.

The daily percent positivity as of August 26th for the state is 5.19, so we've seen some decrease in positivity, which is a good thing. The northern part of the state reports 4.65%; the central part of the state, 5.28%; and the southern part of the state, 6.22%. That concludes my report. Please continue to stay safe, get vaccinated to protect ourselves, our family, friends, and our children. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. Several quick things before we turn to Pat. Number one, I got my flu shot at the end of the week, so I'm doing what you told me to do. Secondly, I'm looking at the list of communities where we've been aggressively with the ambassadors knocking on doors and whatnot, 27 communities. The increases in the percentage of population that is vaccinated since the ambassador program began is pretty substantial. I'll give you the just Perth Amboy is at the top of the list, 24% increase. Trenton, 21%; Patterson, 20; West New York, 19, and so on. It's impressive list, and so with that, thank you. Great advice on the back-to-school piece, all common sense but important to reiterate as we're about to turn the page on another, God willing, great school year. Thank you.

Pat, we get a lot of moving parts. I guess we all do these days. First of all, it was very cool yesterday. You and I were right here in the capital city with Athing Mu and her family, two-time gold medal winner, great parade. You and I saw her at the step-off and pretty special day for Trenton and for New Jersey. You got Task Force One in Alabama. We'd love to – helping out with this awful Ida hurricane. Looks like we're going to get soaked mid-week in New Jersey, so as usual, there's a lot of moving parts. Over to you and thank you for everything.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Yes, I'll start with the rain expected this week, Wednesday into Thursday. From Wednesday morning into Thursday night, we do have a flash flood watch for 16 of our 21 counties, upwards of 6 inches and even more than that possibly expected in our northwest counties. As far as Task Force One, they did get down to Alabama, staged in Alabama over the weekend. That's a 45-member team with both vessels as well as vehicles. They are standing by in Oxford, Alabama right now. They're either going to deploy to New Orleans or are going to assist in-state because the amount of rain that's expected still in the state of Alabama. We also have the potential of sending our National Guard down there for a deployment. As you and I discussed, whenever we do these and assess these EMAC requests that we never leave our own state exposed or vulnerable, but I do trust and am certain that whatever support we give down to our southern sister states that we don't leave New Jersey in any way, shape, or form not staffed or supported.

Just a quick note – and I know you didn't know this, but Stella G's is across the street from Linda and I's church in Hackettstown. The food is awesome and the service is awesome. If anybody finds themselves up on Main Street up in Hackettstown, I would certainly go by there, great spot. Thanks, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: Let's go right now. Amen to – we always want to be the state that's here for other states in need or other crises in need. Witness the Afghan refugees and you probably saw that we set up a task force at the end of last week. By the way, Judy and Pat are prominently on that. We all – at the same time, as you rightfully pointed out, when we're helping others who – first question you ask – I know Lisa Howe, our general – adjunct general asks is to make sure that we've got ourselves protected and properly staffed in Jersey and with that confidence, we can help others out.

I was back and forth with Governor John Bill Edwards over the weekend of Louisiana. I mean, it's just unfathomable that they're getting poleaxed here with the brunt of this storm. He made the point this is sort of comparable to Katrina but the good news is there's a lot more in place 16 years later than was there 16 years ago, so we keep all of them in our prayers.

Again, the programming note that I referred to, just because we're not going to be with you on Monday, we're going to do a Wednesday this week and a Wednesday next week, so we'll be here unless you hear otherwise from Mahen. Our colleagues will be here Wednesday at 1 o'clock.

Q&A Session

With that, Matt, let's start with you. Good afternoon.

Matt Arco, NJ.com: Good afternoon, Governor. Which megasites will reopen and how many people might they serve daily starting when, and will the state be able to serve all 2.4 million eligible at the six-month window, or how long will that take? The Labor Department said 190,000 people going off PEUC, that about 100,000 of them will be moved to a different extended benefit program. How will that 100,000 people – how will they be moved and/or notified? Last year, high activity – excuse me, on CALI scores, so-called high activity regions were told they should consider fully remote learning but were not required to make the switch. Is the state using the same standard this year? If not, why not?

Governor Phil Murphy: Ask Judy or Pat. I'm not sure that we've made the determination yet on the megasites.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: We do. We have our All Hazards Incident Team assessing what's that going to look like, Matt, and I have no doubt that we're going to stand them up. Maybe the Commish could add as far as timing. We're close to having that plan mapped out.

Governor Phil Murphy: I think, Judy, before you jump in, we'd love to get your reaction on what I'm about to say in addition to Matt's question. I think inevitably if they do shrink this from eight months to six months, we're going to have a very, very busy few weeks. Let there be no doubt about it. I don't know how you'd react to that, but please jump in.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichelli: You're exactly right. It all depends on whether it moves from eight months to six months. If it moves to six months, we know about two and a half million people will be eligible. We will be prepared through megasites, county sites, and all of our existing sites to get as many people vaccinated as possible. We will identify what the throughput has to be on a daily basis to make sure that everyone in New Jersey that's eligible to be vaccinated with a booster gets vaccinated right now within a four-month period.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm going to – Matt, may I come back to you on the unemployment question? I don't have a crisp answer. Mahen, will you help me out on that if you could? I bet you Rob Rosario-Angelo may weigh in while we're still together. As it relates – Judy, I'll take your counsel on this as well. As it relates to the CALI scores, I think we're being – we're guided by two principles in terms of back to school. One, most importantly, keep everybody safe. We believe that the package that we've put in place, which is everybody masked. By the way, I hope that's not forever and always, by the way, that we can – that's where we're going to start the school year but please, God, we get through this surge of the variant. Everybody masked and then educators and staff vaccinated, which is already at a high level among educators, and/or be subject to a multiple weekly testing. We think that package achieves the safety objectives, which is our first and overwhelming principle.

The second principle that's guiding us is the enormous price we've paid in learning loss. The preliminary data that we've looked at is pretty staggering. That's not unique to New Jersey. It's pretty staggering. I'm going to use a phrase – Judy, you tell me if you disagree with how I characterize this. Unless this thing goes south on us in a very big way – and I'm not sure how I'd necessarily define that – we're going to – and assuming that both of those principles are – not just guide us but we achieve them, we're going to – we're staying in person. Would you add anything to that, or you good?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichelli: We'll continue to use the CALI scores to do an assessment of the transmissibility, the percent positivity, the cases per hundred thousand, and the COVID-like illness through our emergency rooms. It will dictate how we work with the school districts for testing protocols. I don't know, Ed, if you have anything you want to add.

Governor Phil Murphy: Ed, we got to get your money's worth. Anything?

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: No, besides the fact that absolutely we still do look at the CALI score. We continue to assess it as to how to best measure what's happening in the state and absolutely it is a definite goal to try to keep the kids in school.

Governor Phil Murphy: Ed, good to have you back, by the way. Thank you. Alex, good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Good afternoon, Governor. Dr. Lifshitz, welcome back. Please settle this for us. How much more transmissible is the Delta variant among vaccinated persons than the original strain of COVID-19?

Governor Phil Murphy: Among vaccinated?

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Vaccinated, yes. We've heard six – we've heard a lot of different numbers. Please tell us how much more transmissible it is and the source for that information, what you're looking at, to determine that. Commissioner, just an update from last week. I asked you last week about plans to test teachers and state workers who don't get vaccinated. Can you give me an update on that? How will that be handled? Will it have to be – will these teachers have to go to a third party and get proof of vaccination? Where are you in that process? Governor, why did you make the decision to continue the \$300 of unemployment benefits up to the September 4th deadline? Could you have ended that earlier? You also certainly have stimulus money sitting around. You did say that extending unemployment benefits for these folks would cost a billion dollars a month, but you do have the money. Why not do it? Similarly, will you use stimulus money to defer the payroll tax increase that's going to hit New Jersey businesses starting this fall? Finally, just a political question. You always say that you run like you're ten points behind for the election that's taking place in November. In just the last month, you've ordered vaccinations, increased taxes, increased the gas tax, and are now ending unemployment benefits for many New Jerseyans. Is it safe to say that you don't think that you're running ten points behind and that your strong political position enables you to do this?

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for all of that. Let me – you said I increased the gas tax. Actually, we're going to cut the gas tax, for the record. I begged folks to see inside my heart and mind. Politics just in – does not play a role in the decisions we make; it just does not. As a political matter, I am running like I'm ten points behind. It is not a factor in any of this. Again, I'm happy that based on the formula, as the Treasurer announced last week, the gas tax is going down, which is good news and God knows, we need it.

I will go back to Ed and Judy in a second. The \$300 supplement for us and then when we saw the other states that did cut it, Alex, and the data did not show that it had the impact that it was intended to have – in other words, you heard a lot of folks saying the \$300 supplement was the reason people were staying home and not going back to work. The data doesn't really support that theory. I personally think it has been a factor, but it's a factor among a half a dozen, including as I mentioned several times, when an economy's going like this and taking off, there's a confidence. People are asking themselves hey, wait a minute. Why am I washing dishes for \$12 an hour when I could do X for 15 or \$18 an hour? I think that's the far bigger reason.

Nothing to report on any more money for towards small businesses, whether it's payroll tax-related or not. That's something that we're constantly assessing. We're number three in the country since the pandemic only behind California and New York, and they have a lot more people and a lot more small businesses than we have, so remember, we're the 11th largest American state and we're punching at number three in terms of small business relief. That's a constant area that we're assessing what else we may be able to do.

I realize I didn't answer you. It wasn't just the \$300 but hey, you've got federal money lying around. Yes, we do, but that's over \$1 billion a month, and I used the phrase earlier, we don't want to crowd out investments that we know will also have long-term impact on infrastructure, education, healthcare, etc.

I think that's my side of it. Ed, how much – it's a great question. Again, repeat Alex's question for folks watching at home in case they missed it. How much more transmissible is the Delta variant than the original base COVID-19 virus among vaccinated individuals? Then Judy anything you want to add to either that or the testing regime for either educators and staff on the one hand or state workers on the other hand. Ed, take it away.

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Thank you. That's a good simple, direct, important question because that's really what people care about for the most part. I went ahead and I got vaccinated. What's my risk now? Am I going to get the disease? More importantly, am I going to get sick enough to be hospitalized and/or die, or is it going to be something more mild? Here's why as much as I'd like to give you an exact answer, I can't give you an exact answer and why nobody else can, either, and you see these different numbers. While it seems very straightforward, to get a sense of how many more people are getting affected, what do we do? We can look back. We can say okay, this number of people have been infected in the past. We know it was mostly Alpha; now it's almost all Delta. How many more people are becoming affected now compared to the past? We do that, but the problem with that is something else that's changed. Well, big thing that's changed is time. It's now months longer after those people were first vaccinated, so is their immunity beginning to wane, meaning is it just as protective earlier but now we're further along and we know that – what else happened early on? We vaccinated most of those people who had immune systems that weren't as good. They in particular may be losing immunity more, which is why we talk about whether they should get a third dose down the road, and we think it likely may happen.

We know that they're having more breakthrough cases now certainly than we were before but becomes impossible really to tease out how much of it is from the fact that the vaccine – I'm sorry, that the virus is more contagious, and it clearly is, and how much of it can be because the vaccine has some waning over time? What is clear is this: the Delta virus is clearly more contagious. You are at more of a risk of getting it if you're vaccinated than you were if it was the Alpha variant beforehand. However, the vaccines clearly remain far and away the best way to protect yourself from getting the disease at all. Even more importantly, as the Governor showed before, becoming sick enough that you end up being hospitalized and/or dead.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said, Ed. Judy, anything to add to that and/or on testing for educators and state workers?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichelli: Now I'd like to talk about testing. The mandate is a vaccine mandate. I have to emphasize that what we're trying to do is encourage people to get vaccinated, that the fallback, for a myriad of reasons, you choose not to get vaccinated is testing. We are doing a full inventory of all of our testing sites. You can – and I encourage people to go to the COVID info hub. You can go by county and see all of the testing sites in your county. For any county that has a gap or an access issue, we will be working with that county to bring up testing sites that will be available for individuals to be referred to. I have to keep emphasizing it is a vaccine mandate. The most important thing we can do is get vaccinated. The alternative, if for whatever reason you don't want to get vaccinated, you're going to have to get tested maybe once a week, probably twice a week. We will have available sites in every county for that to occur.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. Thank you, Alex. I'm going to go back to Matt as promised or as expected. Rob weighed in. I'll read you what he wrote and Mahen, we can still follow up if Matt needs more color. "Those that may be eligible to move from PEUC to state-extended benefits were emailed a couple of weeks back and will hear from us again on next steps." Again, we can add more color as – if you need it. Thank you for that. Sir, good afternoon.

Reporter: Good afternoon, Governor. Questions from the newsroom, how many booster shots have been administered in the state. A question from our reporter John Agagis [0:48:00], how will you respond to districts that don't comply with mask mandates, especially if it's a matter of not enforcing the masks once kids are inside the schools?

Governor Phil Murphy: I think the answer on boosters, if you mean the third shot, the answer is zero at the moment. None have been administered, and they will not begin at earliest until September 20th. Again, we're awaiting guidance from the CDC as to whether or not the recommendation is to get – and this is a game-changer in terms of the amount of people who are going to be eligible, whether it's eight months after you've been fully vaccinated or six months after. If it's six, a lot more people instantly on September 20th are going to be eligible.

I was with Jeff Zients, I should say. They don't call him this, but I think of him as the White House COVID czar who's doing a terrific job – at a national governors' meeting last week. That six-month piece was new news hot off the press then, so that's going to be a – the assessment on where that comes out will be.

Listen, we've been quite clear, and Parimal might want to weigh in here. This is not – this is a mask mandate in schools. This is not mom or dad writing a note saying Johnny or Sally doesn't want to wear one. Any excuse needs to be from a medical professional, verifiably so. The good news is we've had a few back-and-forths with a few districts, and I have to say overwhelmingly, folks have been leaning – there's been a lot of – obviously there's a lot of emotion around this. I just saw a poll that came out last week. It's a high 60% to low 20% yes/no on masking. That's a good place to start. I have to say, our deliberations with the districts, even if they didn't start in a place that we liked, have been at least up til now have ended up in a place that's been a good place. Is that fair to say, Parimal? Thank you.

Sir, do you have anything with the cap?

Reporter: No.

Governor Phil Murphy: You're good, okay. Ma'am, how are you?

Reporter, 6ABC: Good.

Governor Phil Murphy: Let's get a microphone there to you. How are you? You up from Philly, I believe?

Reporter, 6ABC: Yes, from 6ABC in Philadelphia, hi.

Governor Phil Murphy: Nice to see you.

Reporter, 6ABC: Clarification on the one question that was just asked. I know Camden County has been issuing additional third doses to immunocompromised groups, which I believe that is authorized to be done. Do we have any data statewide on that, on how many doses of that particular categories, those receiving cancer treatments, etc., receiving a third dose? Then is there an update on Afghanistan and refugees at the joint base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst? How many are there and how long are they expected to stay? How long are they allowed to stay there? Then finally on schools, do you support districts mandating vaccines for students who are of eligible age? How would that be handled if – I mean, there are a number of parents out there who will not let their children be vaccinated if they're in one of those districts that decides to mandate it. Do you support those policies?

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for all. I'll go in reverse order. On mandating, I think one district in particular, Hoboken, is the one that has stepped up to do that. As a statewide matter – I'll give you two parts to the answer. We feel comfortable as I sit here on August 30th with the package that we've got in place for the state, which is combination of vaccination mandate, if not multiple testings per week, and masking for everybody. We think that is sufficient given the data that we're looking at right now. On the Part B of this, you have to leave, as we've said so many times, all considerations on the table. I think we feel – I don't want to speak for Judy and Ed or Angelica Allen-McMillan, but I think we feel comfortable that we've put in place the package that achieves that safety objective, and we're going to continue to monitor it clearly.

On Afghan refugees, again honored that New Jersey is helping out in such a big way. We established, as I mentioned, a task force last week. Pat and Judy are very much involved in that. This is an evolving situation. We feel like we are on our side of the partnership doing the things that folks would want us to do: task force set up, fielding a lot of calls on folks who want to help out, whether it's faith institutions or nonprofits or communities themselves. We're preparing for a significant number of folks that will be at the joint base for probably a significant amount of time.

As it relates to the numbers, how long they'll be there, what the protocols are, we're going to defer to the Department of Defense on all the above. They're really running the show on this one, and we are partners but we are – I'd want folks to defer to them in terms of the information both for security and for other reasons. I had a good conversation, speaking of

security, by example, yesterday with the Secretary of Homeland Security, Alle Mayorakas. We had a good conversation. We're constantly on. Largely, Pat, I think fair to say, largely with DoD but not exclusively, Pat and his team at OEM are involved. There's a whole lot of moving parts here, and again, we want to be in the category of doing the right thing.

I know that – Judy, I'll take your counsel here. I know that when we do start the boosters, we're going to start with those that are the most vulnerable, right? That's where we started initially. We start with both frontline healthcare workers and folks who are seniors and immunocompromised. Anything you want to add to that specific on the question on Camden County?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichelli: Well, the first is the question on how many third doses have we administered? That's at this point 36,534. We believe that's too low. Nationally, we think about 3% of the population is immunocompromised. We're really asking particularly medical directors in long-term care to do a deep analysis of those medical records and identify individuals who should be cued up to get that third dose right now. When we know whether we're dosing at eight months or six months, our hope is that we will have megasites, county sites, available sites so that anyone who is available to get the vaccine can get the vaccine. I don't think we'll be – we would rather get it all done in a very quick period of time.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, and my answer, I should go back to the prior question. My answer was the generic what's it look like on liftoff on September 20th, so you answered the specific one to your question, which is 36,534. I would guess that the megasites, without having asked either of you, is we're going to go through what we went through. The megasites are going to be relevant for a period of time. My guess is two or three months would be – if I have to put a prediction on it. Then there continues to be – Ed will appreciate this and Judy. There continues to be a very open debate that no one on this planet knows the answer to, which is how often are these – are we going to be required to get this? I mentioned I got my flu shot earlier than normal, I might add, this year last week. I'd normally get that in October. Is it going to be an annual? Is it going to be every six or eight months? Please, God, I hope not that. Is it going to be every five years, ten years, no more? Those questions remain and my guess is to the extent that we have booster requirements, we're going to augment our distribution in the early two or three months of whenever that cycle occurs. If this is an annual event, I'll bet you we'll be here a year from now talking about megasites for a period of – I think a concentrated period of time to handle that first wave. Thank you for all.

Sir, good afternoon.

Chuck O'Donnell, TapInto New Brunswick: Hi, good afternoon. Chuck O'Donnell from TapInto New Brunswick.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hey, Chuck.

Chuck O'Donnell, TapInto New Brunswick: Hi. Commissioner, a couple months back you – several weeks ago, you mentioned that the number of vaccinated residents in New Brunswick was actually much higher than first anticipated. I believe maybe it was in excess of 70%, yet I see on the dashboard on the government site that that number's not updated. It's still, I believe, a little bit below 50% it shows as of today. Is there a reason that hasn't been updated? I also had a question about the urban enterprise zones that were recently refunded. There was some conflicting information I saw published. Are all 30-something statewide zones eligible for that boomerang money that comes back for restoration, revitalization, or was it a small number? I saw five were chosen. I've seen that published, and I'm not quite sure what the real answer is.

Governor Phil Murphy: That's it? Parimal, I'm going to ask you to come weigh in on the second one but on the first one, Judy, I'm showing that we've got on my list – and New Brunswick, by the way, is on the list, and we had good progress working with them. We upped their number to 11% but the data, at least as of my printout, is we're still lagging data from New Brunswick on my list. Do you have any more –

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichelli: The New Brunswick data is really difficult. It's the one city, because of the students – remember, Rutgers was the first university in the United States that required students to be vaccinated. The number of off-campus housing skews their census. We've had difficulty identifying New Brunswick's percent but with – taking the students out, their percentage is over 70%.

Governor Phil Murphy: We can come back, Mahen, if you can just – we'll come back as well to add any color on that. Is that fair to say? Jim Cahill is as good as it gets. They know what they're doing there. Parimal, any observation on the UEC question?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: We'll follow up with you and get you the right information.

Governor Phil Murphy: I don't want to misfire and tell you. By the way, that's a great program and it's a game-changer in the communities where it exists and will not re-exist, which is great. Let me grab a quick swig here. Mask up as I speak. I want to thank Judy, and Ed, and Pat, and Parimal, and Mahen, and everybody, as always. We got a couple items we're going to follow up on, Mahen. You'll make sure we do that. Again, we'll be back here Wednesday at 1 o'clock in light of

the Labor Day holiday. Wishing everybody a great last week of summer and in many cases with schools, whether everything from pre-K to higher ed, either opening this week or opening next week, we wish everybody a fantastic school year. Please get vaccinated. Please do the right thing as you have been doing by the millions and stay safe. God bless. We'll see you soon.

Governor Phil Murphy

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