

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: February 2nd, 2022 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everybody. I'm here with the woman on my right, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, who needs no introduction, Judy Persichilli. To her right, the State's Epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan. Great to have you back, Tina. To my left, another guy who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have chief counsel Parimal Garg, Alex Altman, one of our senior comms persons, and a cast of thousands.

Pat, happy Groundhog Day. As I said to you earlier, that sucker saw his or her shadow, which means another six weeks of winter, I suggested to Pat that we hire the groundhog into the Office of Emergency Management so that next winter he or she will have an idea of walking in our shoes. On a serious note, yesterday began Black History Month, and to put it very simply, black history is American history, and we are all better for learning about the struggles and triumphs of black Americans, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and how shameful was it yesterday with 12 or 14 historically black colleges all getting bomb threats. Just an awful, awful, shameful thing to have happen.

Before we get to the numbers, I want to briefly acknowledge two notable passings. First and foremost assemblywoman, former president of the Board of Public Utilities, and former superior court judge Barbara Curran passed away over the weekend at the age of 81. She was the first woman to serve in all three branches of state government, breaking several glass ceilings all the way. We extend our prayers to the – and sympathies to the Curran family.

Finally – secondly, rather, on Friday – and this one cuts close to the bone for Judy and Tina, the Department of Health team lost one of its own, this woman, Kathy Suchodolski, in a tragic automobile accident. Kathy had only recently joined the Department as a public health representative after spending several years with the Monmouth County Department of Health where she was a crucial part of the county's pandemic response. Our thoughts are with her husband Bill, and I had a call with him this morning, and you can imagine – he was stoic, but you can only imagine their daughters Allie and Elizabeth. She's remembered fondly by everyone who worked with her at DOH and for many years before.

Let's turn to the numbers if we can. Trends that we are seeing across literally all metrics continue to suggest that the Omicron tsunami, as fast as it washed in is washing out at nearly the same speed. As we look to the latest reported new cases, we see the rate of transmission has now settled into a very positive place. Judy, I think you've said that that's the longest we've been below one maybe in the pandemic, right? At least in a long time. This is one of those times where the fluctuations and the day-to-day case numbers and test positivity rates aren't overly illustrative. We need to look at the longer range trend line as a seven-day measurement, but the RT has a seven-day look-back. The RT is giving us a more optimistic fuller picture. Judy, I don't want to put words in your mouth, but you also – you and Tina get the standard, which is literally if you were to measure RT only on that day, and it's staying in that same neighborhood, which is a good sign. However, even with these numbers dropping, none of us are yet at a point where we feel completely comfortable. We saw last winter how the numbers could quickly turn back around, and we do not want to test that theory with Omicron, so we have to remain on a vigilant footing.

Before we go to hospitals, I spent a good chunk of – the weekend was split between storm duty Friday and Saturday and then the National Governor's Association meetings on Sunday and Monday, and we spent a lot of time on COVID. Judy, we had Scott Gottlieb, New Jersey's own with us, Jeff Zients who runs the White House team and a whole bunch of other experts. Every time you think you have this thing figured out, it humbles you, so I almost don't even want to say what the summary assessment was, but the general consensus is we're on the road from a pandemic to an endemic. Tina will want to weigh here – weigh in on this. No one knows how straight the road is or how long it will take us – is that fair to say – but the general sense – first of all, the overwhelming sentiment, both sides of the aisle, we want to get to the place where we can live with this thing in as normal a fashion as possible. That is the general consensus, and so please, God, that's the way it continues. As I say every time you think you have this thing figured out, it humbles you and takes a turn you didn't expect, and as I've said before and I will reiterate, eight out of ten of those turns are negative, so let's hope that doesn't happen here.

Now let's look at our hospitals. We also see falling numbers. Total hospitalizations have fallen by more than 30% since the Sunday night before our last briefing, so that's two Sundays ago. Regardless, while the decrease over the past week is a positive development for sure, there are still nearly 2800 residents in the hospital. We are only now back to where these numbers were at Christmastime, and they compare with what we experienced last February, so a year ago. We've noted here many times in the past that hospitalizations lag the virus's activity and sadly deaths lag the hospitalizations, so while we're pleased to see these trend lines, we know the staffs in our hospitals are still overwhelmed, and we can't yet let up on any measures.

One number that doesn't ever get easier to see is noting how many more New Jerseyans have now died from COVID complications. In the month of January, the total number of confirmed deaths was 2,381. Not all of those are from January, but increasingly, the bulk of them are real-time confirmations. Now let's not get lost in this misinformation that Omicron isn't deadly because there are nearly 2400 families who could beg to differ.

Let's go to vaccinations. The big takeaway here is that we now exceeded 50% of those eligible to have now gotten their boosters, but that leaves nearly another 50% who have yet to get theirs. Since we last met, we crossed another vaccination milestone, and today, more than 90% of all eligible residents have received at least their first dose. We may see this universe of vaccine eligible residents expand in the very near future as federal regulators weigh the application from Pfizer-BioNTech for emergency use authorization to administer their vaccine to children under the age of 5. While a final decision may be several weeks away, this is obviously a development which is a good one and we will watch very closely.

Here is the latest available data on breakthrough cases, which also, again, highlights the importance of getting your booster shot. You get three categories of people here. This is from December 26th through January 22nd, so pretty much illustrative of the Omicron surge. The left column you received only your primary course, the middle column is you got that plus you're boosted, and the right column is either you didn't get the full primary or you were completely unvaccinated. Again, this makes the case pretty clear as well as the number of those who have received their boosters is nearly equal to those who've either yet not completed their primary course or are choosing to remain completely unvaccinated.

The rates of illness, hospitalization, and death among those categories is in a word stark. Just take a look at that. We probably ought to figure a better color out here, but you can see deaths – the bottom two, by the way, are confirmed. The right one is empty because – the bottom line, rather, is confirmed. The right one is empty because they're not able yet to confirm within that particular category, but just take deaths. If you have your primary course, it's 10 persons per 100,000. If you are not vaccinated or not fully vaccinated, it's 26 persons per 100,000. If you are vaccinated and boosted, it is .5 persons per 100,000. I think that meets the definition of stark.

Finally, let's get to check in on the data in our schools. Here too – by the way, this is you got COVID without regard to whether it was an in-school transmission or you got it somewhere else. It does not make that difference. Charlie, is that you? Nice to see you. You see a significant decrease in the overall rates of infection among all students, educators, and staff since their highs a few weeks ago. Again, these are per thousand individuals, but let me just short circuit the question I know many of you have. These overall rates are still roughly twice what they were just eight weeks ago, just as the Omicron tsunami began its rise, and if you go back to mid-November, pre-Omicron, these rates are four to five times higher than that period.

Over the past two weeks as schools which chose to return from their holiday breaks in remote fashion moved back to all in-person instruction, we've also seen an increase on the in – the rates of in-school transmission. You can see we added last week 33 outbreaks covering 398 students and 57 staff and educators, and you can see the cumulative numbers on the right. Outbreaks 465 and obviously students impacted and educators and staff impacted below that. Obviously, we care about every single one of those cases, but keep in mind, we have 1.4 million schoolchildren and roughly 3500 schools, and the numbers on the right are not what's happening now. That is cumulative. That's since last-August. I think that speaks to the multi – the importance to the multi-layered approach to safety that we have in place in our schools, and they speak to why we are not yet prepared to pull away any of these layers, but as I've said over the past week or so – and my conviction has only gone up – I look to a time in this school year when we are no longer masking in our schools. That does it for the numbers.

Let's move on and take a couple of minutes to remember two more of the New Jerseyans we have lost during the pandemic. I normally say three. Sadly, between the time of calling a family member about a lost loved one and today's press conference, that same family lost a second person in the family, so I'm going to defer that family to when we next get together, which will be this coming Monday at 1 o'clock.

First up is Louis "Louie" Puopolo, was a lifelong resident of Springfield in Union County. He was a small businessman owning and operating his own land surveying company for more than 25 years. He was 69 years old when he passed way back in April of 2020. By the way, among the first New Jerseyans lost. Louis had two loves of his life: his family and the New York football Giants. To the latter, he was a season ticket holder and a leader of the L6 tailgate crew, so greetings to the L6 crew that would gather each game day in the parking lots at MetLife Stadium and before that the old Giants Stadium. To the former, his memory is carried on by his wife on the right there of nearly 45 years, Judy, his daughter Nicole, with whom I had the great honor of speaking, her husband Edward, his son Louis, his wife Katie, and his grandchildren Lea, Carmine, and Tessa. May God bless him and his memory and the family that he leaves behind.

We also today remember the guy on the left, Jose Rivera, a long-time Rahway resident who found his way to our state via New York City and before that his home town of Mayaguez, Puerto Rico. He was 70 when COVID took him in May of 2020. Jose was a United States Navy veteran, serving from 1969 to 1971 as a boilerman aboard two of our nations most recognized aircraft carriers, the USS Yorktown and the USS Intrepid. After returning to civilian life, he drove a New York City taxi before spending a 30-year career as a union truck driver and shop steward.

Driving wasn't just Jose's job. It was his passion. He held a collection of classic cars, Pat, including a 1955 Chevy Bel Air convertible that he gave a ground up restoration to. He was a member of the American Tri-Five Association, a club of hobbyists committed to cars from the mid-1950s as well as the Garden State Gear Shifters and the Raritan Bay Cruisers. Those are some groups. Jose left behind his partner Cheryl Packan. They were together for almost 26 years – or for 26 years. I had the great honor of speaking with her. By the way, she had a nasty case of COVID, and he also leaves behind four sons and nine grandchildren. We're certain that Jose is driving on an open road with the top down. May God bless and watch over his memory and family, and as always, may God bless everyone we've lost over the past nearly two years.

Next up, I want to give a quick shout-out to the Boys & Girls Club of Camden County, which partnered with the New Jersey Economic Development Authority to receive the grant funding it needed to maintain the services it provides to nearly 1800 children. Throughout the past 23 months the club has hosted virtual school for children, maintained its summer camp program, and continued to provide food to families who needed it, among everything else it does to provide a safe place for kids to learn and grow. I spoke with CEO Bernadette

Shanahan and director of operations Sabina Manhart Rome, who noted the EDA was closing gaps in program funding, and they also noted how essential those programs have been in enabling club members' families to get back to work knowing that their children were in turn safe. The Boys & Girls Clubs do tremendous work and play an important role in the lives of their communities, whether in Camden or anywhere else across our state, they all deserve our thanks. Check these folks out at – Boys & Girls Club of Camden County, you ready for this website address? Begreatcamden.org. Begreatcamden.org. B-E-G-R-E-A-T Camden.org.

Finally, this Friday, the winter Olympics will open in Beijing and walking into competition with Team USA are four New Jerseyans. From left to right, bobsledder Charlie Volker from right across the river from me, Fairhaven in Monmouth County. Next up, Basking Ridge's Kenny Agostino, who will be found on the left wing for Team USA in men's ice hockey. Next, Princeton's Kelly Curtis who will be sliding in the women's skeleton, and long track speed skater Kimi Goetz on the right, the pride and joy of Flemington. She'll be in the women's 500- and 1000-meter races. There are other athletes competing either for Team USA or other nations who have ties to New Jersey, but Charlie, Kenny, Kelly, and Kimi are truly team New Jersey, and we will be cheering them on despite the time difference. We wish them and every athlete the very best as they chase their dreams of Olympic medal and Olympic gold. With that, please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction to my right, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor, and good afternoon. Our state has one of the highest vaccination rates in the nation. Hospitals, long-term care facilities, mega-sites, community health centers, faith-based groups, school officials, county and local health departments have stepped up to administer more than 16.8 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine in just over a year. Nearly 8 million people, or 90% of eligible New Jerseyans, have gotten at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, and 76% have completed their primary series.

We had some more good news yesterday when Pfizer announced that it has filed an application with the United States Food and Drug Administration for emergency use authorization for a two-dose vaccine for children between the ages of 6 months and 4 years. That means parents will soon be able to begin COVID-19 vaccination series to protect their youngest children. An emergency meeting of the FDA's advisory group of outside experts is scheduled for February 15th when they will discuss the request and make a recommendation. A week from today, on February 9th, the Department will host a Facebook Live event with pediatric infectious disease physicians so they can answer questions from parents about the pediatric vaccine.

In the meantime, we are focused on promoting boosters through multiple initiatives. The Department's call center at 1-855-568-0545 continues to assist callers including the home-bound in scheduling booster appointments and sending text message reminders to those who need booster shots. Last month alone there were 173,000 outbound calls to support booster education and events. Our COVID community corps continues its effort alongside our FEMA canvassing partners to provide education, answer questions, promote area pop-up clinics and help to schedule appointments for those who want to get boosted.

The state's Grateful for the Shot initiative continues its partnership with faith-based groups to host vaccination events in places of worship like the Parish of Our Lady of Angels here in Trenton and other community gathering sites like the country club in Lakewood. There have been dozens of Grateful for the Shot events that have been focused on increasing primary series and booster vaccination rates. We are bringing the vaccine to where people are during weekends, evening hours to make it as convenient as possible for people to get boosted. We have had successful pop-up clinics in places like the Cherry Hill Mall, schools, entertainment venues, and senior high-rise buildings. We've had more than 700 vaccination events specifically for children 5 to 17 years of age and most of them have either been school endorsed or school held.

We have key Department staff designated right now as vaccine ambassadors working with community partners in municipalities where the booster rates are below the state average of 50%. The state has set up mega-sites in Bergen, Burlington, Gloucester, Passaic, and Somerset counties at the following locations: in Passaic County at the former Macy's store, at the Preakness Shopping Center in Wayne, in Bergen County at the former Lord and Taylor store at the Fashion Center of Paramus, in Burlington County at the former AC Moore store in Mount Laurel, and in Gloucester County at the Gloucester County Department of Health in Sewell, and in Somerset County at the former Lord and Taylor store at the Bridgewater Common Mall.

With more than 1900 COVID vaccine sites around the state, we have made the vaccine extremely accessible. Now we need those who have postponed their booster shots or their second doses or their third doses if they are immuno-compromised to protect themselves, their families, and their communities by getting up to date with their vaccinations. Our booster rate is 50%. While most counties in the state are average, we still have much work to do, and only 46% of the staff in our long-term care facilities have gotten a booster dose, so we must do better.

Today a new CDC study provides further evidence of the protection boosters offer against hospital admission and intensive care unit and intubation for mechanical ventilation and death. The study, based on data from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, showed that the primary series is effective in preventing serious hospitalizations and deaths but not nearly as protective as boosters. As of January 8, 2022, during the period that Omicron variant was predominant, unvaccinated persons had infection and hospitalization rates 3.6 and 23 times higher, respectively, than those that were fully vaccinated, and with a booster, it was 2 and 5.3 times higher, respectively, than those of fully vaccinated persons without a booster. Boosters work. The data the Department collects for New Jersey confirms what the CDC study showed. Even in the time of Omicron, vaccines work and boosting works even better. Protect yourselves, your loved ones, your neighbors, and your community. Get the vaccine, and if you've been vaccinated, get boosted.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 2,774 hospitalizations. There have been nine new cases of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children since our last briefing. There are now 175 cumulative cases in the state. Four of these children are currently hospitalized. At the state veteran's homes since our last briefing there have been six new cases among the residents at the Menlo Park home and four new cases among Paramus residents. At our state psychiatric hospitals, there are 11 new cases among patients, nine at Trenton, one at Ancora, and one at Ann Klein. The percent positivity as of January 29 for the state is 12.0%. The northern part of the state reports 10.09%, the central part of the state 12.03, and the southern part of the state 17.47. That concludes my report. Please continue to stay safe. Let's get vaccinated and get boosted to protect ourselves, our family, our friends, and most importantly, our children.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. God bless our veterans. The numbers now stand at Menlo Park 71 losses of life, Paramus 84, Vineland 13. God bless them, each and every one of them. Thank you for everything. Pat, I know you've got a fair amount of strike force FEMA related balls in the air that you and Judy are coordinating on. We also have some I would say potentially unusual and some nasty ice-related weather coming in if my observations are accurate, so with that, over to you, sir.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor, good afternoon. On the weather front, although it's going to be the 50s tomorrow, those temperatures are going to plummet and come crashing down on the overnight. We are expecting a rain to sleet and snow mixture. That freezing precipitation line is difficult to pinpoint right now, but we're using interstate 78 at this juncture as that delineation point. We'll certainly be on with our county OEM coordinators and National Weather Service monitoring that. That's probably going to look like a 24-hour precipitation event Thursday into – even to late Friday night, so certainly watching that.

To your point on the COVID front with OEM and Department of Health, the Commissioner went through the vaccine sites. I will note that the CDC testing site that was established in Galloway will be closing on February 6th. Acute care strike teams, they're still operating right now at University Hospital. They're due to conclude on February 20th unless we do extend that if that request is warranted. We also have our hospital expansion that's going on strictly from a point of preparedness, one of those four pillars of emergency management. We're doing – looking to basically upfit mothballed wings of hospitals, University Hospital being one of them, Robert Wood Johnson being another one.

They're actually meeting today with FEMA and our All-Hazard Incident Management Team, and always the US Army Corps of Engineers play a huge role in that. I also just will report that we do have two temporary morgues set up one in Newark at University Hospital. Glad to report no decedents being – are there at this juncture. Trenton is the other location, and sad to report that we do have 12 decedents on site as of yesterday morning. Just a constant daily grind on the COVID front and then to your point Punxsutawney Phil did not do us any favors this morning, Governor. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: The thing that you – the three of us were speaking about earlier today, I don't want folks to think that we're – there was a time back early in the pandemic we were setting up field medical stations because we were running out of beds. This is not that. This is a smart move working with the Army Corps basically to de-mothball wings and maybe even offices and get them hospital bed, hospital room ready in case we ever need them in the future. This is on the lesson – right, is that fair to say? This is in the lesson learned category that you never know, and so the Army Corps has raised their hand and said if you want it we'll help you, and we said we'll take you up on that, and it could be – listen, it could be anything. It could be a pandemic or God forbid a natural disaster or whatever it might be, but we'll now have more capacity, which is great.

Secondly, we should at least – I'll throw this out, Pat, and you see if you agree or disagree. We're now a number of days beyond it, but the postmortem on the storm Friday into Saturday where the shore got crushed, so we got about 16 inches where we are – that number got up I think as high as 20 inches. It was an all-state snow event, but I think up by you it was only a few inches, if I'm not mistaken, but it was a clobbering storm with high winds on the shore. I'll say both of these things and live to regret them. For several now – for many storms in a row, the forecasts have been on the money. What we were getting from the National Weather Service, our own work, the storm played almost exactly as they and we expected, and secondly, it is hard to deny – and I'm not sure I have all the reasons – but our power outages are coming in each of these storms, every one of them, meaningfully below our fears.

I don't know about you, but I was fearing 100,000 to 200,000 outages. I delayed leaving the state. When I finally left the state, they were under 500, and I don't think they ever got above 1500. I think that's somewhat resiliency. I think we're working well with the public utilities. They're doing a lot of the vegetation management that was sorely needed to be done when we first got here, but it must be said, the forecasts have been accurate, the outages have been lower. As I say, I'll probably say that and find out it'll go the other direction, but would you –

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: I would definitely agree. I think the investment in that – I think that vegetation management's a huge piece, expecting those winds and the amount of snowfall, and I think at our height, it might've been a thousand, Governor, and then by – in the middle of the storm, we were down to 300 outages. Again, once the service providers were able to go up in those bucket trucks, it was restored completely almost, similar to a blue sky day, we call it. President Fiordaliso, certainly a shout-out to him and all the service providers for staying on top of that.

Governor Phil Murphy: Joe deserves credit. Diane Gutierrez-Scaccetti Let's hope it stays this way, good forecasts and low number of power outages. Sarah's got the mic. We'll start with Charlie. Before we do, I've already alluded to this, but unless you hear otherwise, we'll be back to our Monday schedule next week, Monday right here, 1 o'clock, unless you hear otherwise. Please, Charlie.

Q&A Session

Charlie: Hello, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Hi.

Charlie: Have to ask, any reaction to the guilty plea of Sean Caddle in the 2014 killing of Michael Gladieri? Question on the redistricting rewarding process. Do you believe that the public should have access to all the maps submitted for consideration before final decisions are made? I do have a letter for you, or a letter on that topic I'd like to share with you. Is there somebody here I can give it to to make sure you get it?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yep.

Charlie: You nominated Sheila Hobson to the Middlesex County Tax Board. Perhaps you can enlighten me about what prompted you to do that. In 2020, Ms. Hobson led the charge to remove Ralph Johnson, an elected member of the Piscataway Board of Ed, but an administrative law judge ruled that his removal "undermined the will of the public who elected him and unduly smeared his reputation." I know you've been outspoken in support of voting rights. How does this nomination of Ms. Hobson square with your support for voters and their right to choose their representatives?

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. No reaction to the plea other than my jaw hit the floor. You just can't believe stuff like that happens, but apparently it does. No comment on the apportionment or redistricting process other than I have complete faith in Chairman Jones and that he'll take the entirety of the state into consideration. I am a fan of transparency so as a general matter – I don't have the specific answer to your question but as a general matter, the more light we can shed on things, the better.

The letter, I'd normally say give it to Sarah, but she's got to hold the mic, so either Alex or Parimal, if you could find them when we're over, and no color or comment on the Middlesex personnel question. Good to see you, though. Thank you.

Hey, Brent.

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Hi. Will New Jersey follow New York City and offer free COVID antiviral home delivery for higher risk residents? With numbers dropping, do you expect to renew the public health emergency for another 30 days? If so, why? What is your reaction to Steve Sweeney being ousted from the Legislative Redistricting Commission?

Governor Phil Murphy: I missed the first one.

Brent Johnson, NJ.com: Will New Jersey follow New York City and offer free COVID antiviral home delivery for higher risk residents?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, I – at the moment, we don't have a plan for that, but I think that's on the board of consideration. Is that fair to say, Judy? No news on the public health. The reason why it's in place – remember, we put this – we had to re-up this, and it's a 30-day window, which I guess is a week from tomorrow is when it's up again. We had no choice. I think January 11th had 30 to 40,000 cases. No choice. Having a meeting with legislative leadership tomorrow, so no news to break, but we want to do this always in a smart, responsible way, again, a phrase that I would use that meets the moment. It doesn't undershoot it, and it doesn't overshoot it, that it gets it Goldilocks just right.

No comment other than what I just said, Brent. I have complete confidence in the leadership of Chairman Leroy Jones and the apportionment commission, and I know that he'll take all things that need to be into consideration including geographic elements and aspects. Good to see you.

Joey, how are you?

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Doing good, Governor. How are you?

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm good.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: So you attended the National Governor's Association meeting this weekend. Can you talk about what happened there? Did you make any specific asks?

Governor Phil Murphy: Everybody asks me, where's Joey Fox?

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Yeah, I'm sure. That must've been the predominant question.

Governor Phil Murphy: Comes up all the time.

Joey Fox, New Jersey Globe: Did you make any specific asks for New Jersey or notch any specific accomplishments? Now that we seem to be overcoming the first Omicron peak – I say the first; hopefully it's the only – how would you assess the effectiveness of New Jersey's response, especially compared to other states that don't have things like mask and vaccine mandates? Then finally, a quick follow-up on the Sean Caddle thing. I kind of apologize for asking this, but did you ever have any interactions with him in any capacity? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Someone has told me that he managed or was associated with Ray Lezniak's 2017 run for governor. If that's true, I must've because we were in rooms together around – before walking out on debates with people's senior teams, but I don't recall ever having a personal interaction. That's the only place I think it could've happened.

Listen, we're going to do a postmortem on the whole shooting match when we finally get out of the woods, and I don't want to compare and contrast what we did and patting ourselves on the back versus other states, but I think at every step of the way, led by Judy and Tina and their team, they've done their best to meet the moment. I think there's no question that – remember, we don't have a mask mandate unless you're in certain settings, right? We strongly recommend you wear a mask. I think the extent to which people – particularly vulnerable people, comorbidities, in healthcare or long-term care setting, a congregant home, unvaccinated, not fully vaccinated – there's no question that a mask worn has protected more lives than not. There's no question, even though we're not happy with booster rates at 50% - I think the national average is 27%.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: It's lower.

Governor Phil Murphy: We know we're saving lives by pounding away, even if we're grinding away, at getting more people boosted. At the NGA, it was a good exchange. Interestingly enough, by the way, good participation, 29 governors, 22 Democrats, 17 Republicans. The chair of the NGA is a very good man and a good governor. I don't agree with him on everything, but Asa Hutchison of Arkansas – I'm the vice-chair. Very little – largely people checking politics at the door, big focus on infrastructure, education, learning loss, computer science education, in particular, COVID response, good comparing of best practices among governors. Then we had a very good couple of interactions with the President, including a working group session first with members of his team on things like energy, infrastructure, agriculture, COVID, economic recovery, and then with the President and Vice-President, just an open question-and-answer. It was a very good use of time, for sure.

As I said, I pointed at Tina. We got to make sure we give Tina her money's worth here. Everybody's struggling with the road forward, that pandemic to endemic. Is it a straight line? How fast does it happen? None of us want to either over-manage it or by under-managing it, miss getting clocked out of left field, which we're also all trying to avoid. It was good. It was a very good use of time. Again, I went probably 30

hours later than I had because of Pat, because of the storm, all kidding aside. It was really a good use of time. Thank you.

Alex, good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Good afternoon. Dr. Tan, I wanted to ask you if you've read the Johns Hopkins study that showed that lockdowns caused only a 0.2% difference in mortality for COVID patients and said that lockdown should be rejected as a pandemic tool because they're ill-founded. Did we make a mistake locking down last year and for parts of 2020? Commissioner, I just want a little clarification on the numbers that we saw before. When you put up your chart that indicated the breakthrough cases, 350 deaths for those who've received only a primary booster, 126 received the booster, 633 unvaccinated. That adds up to 1109 deaths, if my math is correct, but the Governor said in the month of January, 2381 people died. Why the discrepancy? Did 1200 people die the last week of January? Is there something else going on? Are you presenting incomplete numbers?

Governor Phil Murphy: The answer on that last one is I think it's possible 1200 people died in the last 9 days of January. I will come back to you, but I think that probably is actually the answer. I also think that period covered – it was not quite lined up into January.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: December 26th to January 21st.

Governor Phil Murphy: It's possible.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: I'd also like to ask you, Commissioner, what do you think about the legislature debating a bill that would create a memorial for COVID-19 first responders? Do you think that a memorial is appropriate, or that some of the first responders and healthcare workers you know would prefer better staffing levels and higher pay instead of a meaningless, empty gesture like a plaque somewhere?

Governor, I'd like to ask you your reaction to Senator Vin Gopal signing onto Declan O'Scanlon's bill to limit your emergency power. Why isn't it reasonable that you should have to answer to the legislature after 60 days when you declare an emergency for anything, whether it's public health, a storm, anything else? I'd also like to ask you – I know Colonel Callahan's reaction to this because you and I talked about it earlier this week, Governor. Do you believe that Sundiata Acoli, who murdered State Trooper Warner Forester in 1973, should be released from prison? He's 85, early onset dementia, has had COVID. Should he be released from prison? Has he served his debt to society? Finally, I want to follow up on the public health emergency question. You have about, I guess, nine or ten days to figure out what exactly you're going to do. What metrics will you use in order to decide whether or not you declare a new public health emergency? You said when you were in DC, we're not getting this to zero.

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