

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: October 4th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon, everyone. Seated with me to my right is the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli, to her right we welcome back Department of Health's Communicable Disease Service Medical Director, Dr. Ed Lifshitz. Great to have you guys. To my left is Superintendent of the State Police, another guy who needs no introduction, Colonel Pat Callahan. Pat, loved being with you on Saturday night to celebrate the 100th birthday of the New Jersey State Police.

Before we dive into the latest numbers, just a reminder that at 5:15 today we'll be hosting our second virtual information and resource townhall for anyone impacted by flooding from Tropical Storm Ida. Joining me, obviously, will be Pat along with Senator Cory Booker, representatives from FEMA, environmental Protection Commissioner Shawn LaTourette, Human Services Acting Commissioner Sarah Adelman, Department of Banking and Insurance Chief of Staff Justin Zimmerman, and as always, Dan Kelly, the head of the Governor's Disaster Recovery Office. We will take your questions to help you navigate available programs. To register, enter in that URL at the bottom of the screen [bitly/idadtownhall](https://bitly.idatownhall), and once you register, you will get the Zoom logon information emailed to you. Again, today 5:15. Go on [bitly/idadtownhall](https://bitly.idatownhall).

Now let's move forward with this morning's update on our vaccination efforts. With this grand total you see on the screen, we're about to cross having 75% of all eligible New Jersey residents fully vaccinated, and more than 83% of eligible residents have now received at least their first shot so we can plot out the trajectory over the coming weeks that will get us to that figure as well. The number of additional doses and boosters also continues to move upward, and we do anticipate this number to increase as more and more people who

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received the Pfizer vaccine specifically decide that the time is right to get their booster, and sticking with vaccinations for a moment, here are the latest figures from the Department of Health's Communicable Disease Service under Ed's leadership regarding breakthrough cases among the fully vaccinated.

Overall, the vaccines continue to prove effective in not only protecting people from contracting COVID, still more than 99.5% of the fully vaccinated have remained coronavirus free, but especially in keeping those – out of those folks who do, out of the hospital and from dying. Here are the weekly figures from September 13 through 19. These numbers correlate with the last big round of new cases and new hospitalizations. While we would anticipate that the number of breakthrough infections would similarly increase, and they have, the very low incidence of hospitalization and death among the fully vaccinated really tell the story of the vaccines. We are now at a very distinct minority of residents who aren't vaccinated, and we acknowledge that for a good number of them, there is nothing we can do that will ever break through the misinformation that they are clinging to, but for those we know who may just still be on the fence for whatever reason, look at these numbers, and then remember that the vaccines are free, and a free vaccine is far, far better than an expensive hospital stay or please God no, the cost of your family – cost to your family, rather, for a funeral.

Now let's move on to other numbers for today. Here are the latest positive test results reported to the Department of Health. We continue to see the rate of transmission holding below one, and that remains a very good sign, but it's only a matter of time before the weather will be forcing more people back indoors and to keep this number low and prevent another winter spike, we do need everyone to not only get vaccinated, but we strongly encourage you to wear a mask and keep a social distance when among a crowd indoors especially when you're not able to tell their vaccination status. Here are yesterday's hospitalization numbers. The hospitalizations number, Judy, has not significantly fallen over the past week as number – as case numbers have, but as we all know, this is because it's a trailing indicator of the infection but also because the virulence of the Delta variant means many people hospitalized for COVID are just staying longer.

Here are the – today's newly reported sadly with the heaviest of hearts confirmed deaths, and among them – I don't know if it's in this number or not, but sadly, we know we have one more veteran's death in Vineland. I've been writing 64, 81, 11 for many, many months. 64 losses of life in Menlo Park, 81 in Paramus, and it was 11 until we confirmed today the 12th loss in Vineland, so please keep them all in your prayers and their families. Again, with the heaviest of hearts, newly confirmed nine losses of life. Probably deaths now at 2797. With these, let's take a couple of minutes as we do every day to honor three more lives who we have lost from our extraordinary New Jersey family.

We'll begin by remembering this woman, Mary Recine, a lifelong resident of New Brunswick, who passed away on February 7th at the age of 93. For 30 years Mary served as an administrative assistant in the athletic department at Rutgers University, but for even longer, she was the primary caregiver for her son Bobby who suffered a spinal cord injury in a football game at Rutgers. Mary was a devoted parishioner at St. Mary of Mount Virgin Roman Catholic Church and when both Bobby and his late brother Victor were younger, she was an active swim mom with the Village Recreation Swim Club in neighboring East Brunswick. In passing, she was reunited with both the Victors in her life, her late husband and son and with Bobby. Mary's third son Michael survives her along with his wife Susan, and I had the great honor of speaking with both of them last Wednesday. She's also survived by her two grandchildren, Katie and Michael, jr., and great-grandchildren Byron, Aiden, and Juliana. May God bless Mary's memory and the family she leaves behind.

Next up we recall Berkeley Township's Anthony Roselli on the left. He was 90 years old when he passed last December 5th. Tony was born in Italy in the Adriatic coast town of Molfetta. He came to the United States at the age of seven and spent the rest of his life in the Toms River area. He was an auto mechanic by trade taking time away from his job to serve in the United States Air Force during the Korean conflict stationed in Anchorage, Alaska. When his service ended, he came back home to Toms River but remained close to our armed forces working at the Lakehurst Naval Air Station for the rest of his career. When Tony couldn't be found square dancing with his beloved wife of 64 years, Jeannette – and that's Jeannette on the right – by the way, Jeannette just passed a couple of months ago not from COVID – he could be usually found by the Barnegat Bay fishing, crabbing, and clamming.

Besides Jeannette, Tony was also predeceased by his granddaughter Amanda. He is left to remember and carry on his legacy by his children Anthony, jr., Theresa, and Lisa – and I had the great honor of speaking with Lisa last Wednesday – and their families including his seven grandchildren, Anthony, III, Amy, Alison,

Christopher, Kayla, Emily, and Joey, and great-granddaughter Ava Rose. He is also left – he also leaves behind four surviving siblings Marie, Nina, Jerry, and Morris, along with numerous nieces and nephews. Lisa reminded me of the extraordinarily tough year that that family has had. She said they lost their mom, dad, and an aunt and an uncle. We are honored that Tony would choose to make New Jersey his home for life, and may God bless and watch over his memory and his family.

Today, we also remember Middletown's Debra Farmer who passed away on January 28th. Born in Western Pennsylvania, Debra grew up in Rahway, started her family and raised her children in Milltown and spent time in Union Beach before ultimately moving to Middletown. Faith and community were Debra's passions. A lifelong Girl Scout, she helped lead troop 343 in the Jersey Shore region. She also taught Sunday school at the King of Kings Lutheran Church in Middletown. She left behind her husband Ken, with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Friday, as well as her three daughters Cristin, Caitlyn, and Cari, and Cristin's husband Charles and 11 grandchildren, including two whom she was raising, her grandson Jayson and granddaughter Rhyanne. Deborah also leaves her mother Patricia, her siblings Susan, Kimberly, and Robert, and their families, many beloved members of Ken's family, and countless friends. We thank Deborah for all that she did for her community, and may God bless and watch over her and her family.

Now changing gears before I turn things over to Judy I want to quickly give a big shoutout to this guy Charles "Chuck" Kirkland, who for the past 17 years has owned and operated the Middlesex Baby Spa, a preschool that despite its name serves children up to the age of 6. As with many facilities across our childcare sector, Chuck and his team were hit hard by the pandemic, whether it be from a loss of students whose parents stayed home from work or the need to invest in health and safety measures to protect the families whose children he continued to educate. Thankfully, Chuck found a partner in the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, and the grant he received allowed him to not only keep his dedicated staff but also cover expenses. I had the opportunity to chat with Chuck last Wednesday, and as more and more folks are getting back to work, Chuck's seeing more of the young learners coming back as well. I'm so pleased that he's able to be there for him. This is how we've gotten through this, by being there for each other, and it's no time to stop now. By the way, check this place out in the township of Middlesex in Middlesex County, the Middlesex Baby Spa is at 484 Union Avenue, 484 Union Avenue in Middlesex.

On that note, let's end today with a really good story from the Jersey shore. A week ago, this woman, Kayla Smith, a 16-year-old resident of Point Pleasant was out surfing in bay head when several women ran up to her and pointed out three men caught in a rip current offshore. With her board, Kayla drove – rather dove back into the ocean and got herself out to where the three men were, and with them hanging onto the surfboard, Kayla was able to bring them back safely to the shore and very likely saving their lives. Thanks to Kayla's quick thinking, she is a hero, and a reminder that even though we may still have some good beach days left – although this week I'm not sure – Pat, you'll tell us – our beaches are now largely unpatrolled by lifeguards, so please take all precautions before heading into the water and be especially aware of any reported riptides. We're grateful that Kayla was able to give this story a happy ending, and we don't want to experience the opposite. With that, please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor, and good afternoon. During these press briefings, the Governor and I routinely stress the importance of vaccination to prevent hospitalization and death among our residents. Last week, the CDC amplified that message with new data outlining the risk to pregnant women in particular. Cases of COVID-19 in symptomatic pregnant individuals are twice as likely to be admitted to intensive care, be put on a ventilator, and a 70% increased risk of death. CDC shared that the highest number of COVID-19 related deaths in pregnant individuals 22 in a single month of the pandemic was reported in August of 2021. Pregnant individuals with COVID-19 are at increased risk of adverse pregnancy outcomes that could include pre-term birth, stillbirth, and admission into the ICU of a newborn also infected with COVID-19.

Despite recommendations for vaccination, uptake of COVID-19 vaccination by pregnant individuals has been lower than that of non-pregnant individuals. According to the CDC data, only 31% of pregnant individuals in the United States have been vaccinated against COVID-19, and vaccination rates vary markedly by race and ethnicity. Vaccination coverage is highest among Asian individuals who are pregnant, 45.7%, but lower among Latino pregnant individuals, 25%, and lowest among black pregnant individuals at 15.6%. COVID-19

vaccination is recommended for all individuals 12 years and older. It also includes individuals who are pregnant, breastfeeding, trying to get pregnant now, or might be planning to become pregnant in the future. CDC recommends urgent action to accelerate primary vaccination for this group.

There is no evidence suggesting that fertility problems are a side effect of COVID-19 vaccine. Healthcare providers should communicate the risks of COVID-19, the benefits of vaccination, and information on safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccination in pregnancy. Getting vaccinated is free and convenient with more than 1600 vaccination sites across the state, including more than 1,000 which offer Pfizer vaccine. Please call the Department of Health Vaccine Call Center at 1-855-568-0545 or visit covid19.nj.gov/finder to get help finding an appointment.

As we have shared previously, more than 1.1 million residents who received their primary Pfizer series through the end of March are already eligible to receive their booster dose. That includes those 65 years and older, those with underlying medical conditions at a high risk for severe COVID, or those who work in jobs that places them at higher risk including 650,000 healthcare workers, grocery store workers, public transit workers, education staff, including teachers and support staff, daycare workers, first responders, including firefighters and police, transit workers, food and agricultural workers, and the United States Postal Service workers. I would urge those who are eligible to get a booster shot as soon as possible so you have that extra protection as the holidays approach. More and more people will be eligible for the booster in the coming weeks, so please schedule your booster now.

Pfizer BioNTech has also recently submitted data to the FDA on the safety and efficacy of their vaccine for children ages 5 to 11. The FDA's independent panel is expected to discuss this data later this month, and the Department is awaiting federal guidance on vaccination for this age group. Since that group cannot receive vaccination yet, we need to boost vaccination among the 12- to 17-year-olds. Among 12- to 17-year-olds, 60.4% have at least one dose. When we look at the ages 12 to 15, that percentage is 55.9%, so we are concerned about the low rate because these age groups are most likely to have contact with those under 12 who are not – who are vulnerable and not eligible to be vaccinated. I urge parents to schedule COVID-19 vaccination appointments for their children 12 and older to help protect their health and the health of those around them.

Another important vaccination that protects the health of our communities is the flu vaccine. Now is also the time to get the annual flu shot. Annual flu vaccination is recommended for everyone six months and older. The vaccine can reduce flu illnesses, hospitalizations, and can help to conserve potentially scarce healthcare resources during the ongoing pandemic. It's likely that flu viruses and the virus that causes COVID-19 will both be spreading this fall and winter making it more important than ever to get a flu vaccine. It's the best way to protect yourself and others, especially those who are particularly vulnerable to both COVID-19 and influenza, such as older adults and those with chronic health conditions. Flu vaccines and COVID-19 vaccines can be given at the same time. Flu vaccines are safe and effective and are offered in many locations including doctors' offices, clinics, health departments, urgent care centers, and pharmacies. Low or no-cost flu vaccinations will be available through your local health departments, your federally qualified health centers, and some non-profit organizations.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 1,074 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients and PUIs. Fortunately, there are no new reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. At the state veteran's homes there are no new cases among the residents of the homes, but as the Governor shared, there is one death at the home in Vineland. At the state psychiatric hospitals, there are two new cases among patients at Ancora. As of September 30th, the percent positivity in the state is 4.01%, the northern part of the state 3.06, the central part of the state 4.68, and the southern part of the state 5.15. That concludes my daily report. Continue to stay safe, get vaccinated to protect yourselves, our family, friends, and our children. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. I will choose to use the words that a lot of faith leaders use. I choose to lift up three points that you've made. Can I ask you to repeat the first one in particular? No evidence whatsoever that the COVID vaccine impacts fertility.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Absolutely, no evidence.

Governor Phil Murphy: Unequivocal. Secondly, it's fair to say we have more supply than we have demand for boosters, and folks, just – obviously if you've not gotten your first shot yet, that's probably the biggest mountain we have to climb still, right, but the boosters are available. They're available in many locations, hundreds of locations around the state. If you're eligible, go out and get them. Again, Pfizer only and six months after your second shot. The third theme I was going to lift up is we clearly need to chop some more wood with the teen vaccination rates, especially the 12 to 15 cohort. Folks, anything we can do there would be huge. Pat, I mentioned we – honored to join you for the 100th birthday on Saturday night, which was incredibly special. We got a FEMA call later today. Weather's a little bit choppy. Anything you've got on any of those fronts or other matters. Great to have you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Thank you and first lady for being with us, too, Saturday. It was great. With regards to the weather, we are expecting rain today and tomorrow and potential thunderstorms. To the Governor's point, we do expect some residual rough surf – excuse me, rough surf and rip currents due to Hurricane Sam that's moving north. Victor at this time doesn't appear to have any impact to New Jersey, but we still always watching the tropics. Looking forward to the call today at 5:15. FEMA, as you said, will be on, and we've been working closely with FEMA. We've actually asked FEMA to send in volunteers from AmeriCorps, and 75 volunteers will be showing up this week to help clean out homes, those water damaged materials. We're trying to make homes safe and certainly habitable again for those to make sure that they can get back in. Our recovery bureau continues to assess damages and also to work with our local governments as well as private nonprofits to make sure that they're getting briefed on how that public assistance process goes in order to reimburse them.

We also have formed a debris management working group with FEMA and DEP, really concentrating on those rural areas and waterways, any concerns that we have to make sure we get that debris taken care of. I'd just like to highlight in closing to reiterate what the Attorney General put out a few weeks ago, particularly as it pertains to those unscrupulous folks who take advantage of situations, the Division of Consumer Affairs is poised to take any complaints, whether that's price gouging for gas, tree removal, contractors that take a down payment and don't show up. That could either be done online at njconsumeraffairs.gov, njconsumeraffairs.gov or citizens may call 973-504-6240 to report any of that price gouging or activity that is against the law. That's all I have, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: Special place in hell for those folks as we have said before. Dan, can we fire up the FEMA slide again from early on if you guys could find it? The reason I want to bring this up is twofold. First of all, if you want to be on the townhall – thank you for that – you can see down below [bitly/idatownhall](https://bitly.com/idatownhall) is how you get on it. Secondly, I notified some legislators in both Mercer and Morris Counties today that the FEMA center – the pop-up centers in those two counties would be coming down over the course of this week but want to make sure that everybody realizes that does not mean FEMA's going away. They've made a decision. They don't feel like they need the walk-in service, but remember, it's disasterassistance.gov, disasterassistance.gov, so just because one of these walk-in centers may be shutting down does not mean that FEMA's going away, and that's a message that we'll reiterate on our call later on today. Thank you for pulling that up. We'll start with Mike – with you, and before we do, I think we're going to be in the same cadence this week, so we'll be back together with you Wednesday at 1 o'clock. We've got a holiday next week, so my guess is we'll just be doing Wednesday next week, but we'll make that call definitively when we see you this Wednesday.

Q&A Session

In the meantime, Mike, take it away. Good afternoon. Jameel's got the mic.

Mike Catalini, Associated Press: Good afternoon, Governor. Thank you. A question about booster shots. Online on the panel that – the webpage, the COVID webpage – sorry – it shows the breakdown of booster shots by type. There's 132,000 Pfizer and then 49,000 Moderna, yet Moderna's not cleared. I was wondering if you could explain why and how that's happening. Then another question on boosters. The New Jersey Vaccine Scheduling System seems to have been down since at least last Wednesday. I was curious if there's an explanation for why that is and an expectation for when it will be up and running. Then just one question from my colleague in Newark, Dave Porter. Governor, he asks what do you want to see from the MTA in terms of exemptions for New Jersey drivers – this is about congestion pricing – and what steps are you prepared to take if those aren't part of the final plan? Thanks.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'll start Judy, and you can weigh in here. Judy, if I get this wrong, please correct the record. The Moderna shots are not boosters, per se. They're third shots, so those have been eligible since I think mid-August, and that is for folks with chronic medical conditions – immunocompromised, pardon me, is the phrase. That is the source of that, Mike. Judy will come back on any more color on that or on the scheduling system. I think what we're looking for and we won't relent on this on your third question is what we've been looking for from day one. Don't discriminate against New Jersey commuters, particularly those who use the George Washington Bridge, because there's already a carveout for the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels, secondly that we have a meaningful seat at the table, and if this is going to raise a significant amount of money, particularly given the infrastructure needs of the region, we think it's rightful to ask that some amount of that money get put towards projects that benefit New Jersey commuters. What steps we've taken – there's nothing new on the steps we've taken or would take, and I hope we don't have to take them. We've got a good working relationship with New York. We do a lot more when we can find common ground, and we've been able to do that, but whether it's levers we've got at the Port Authority in particular or other levers, we will – not with any glee, but if we have to, we will use them. Judy, anything on either the Moderna third shots or the scheduling system.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: The Moderna third dose is 49,875 for those that are moderately or severely immunocompromised, active cancer treatment, solid organ transplant individuals. The Pfizer, actually, is both their third dose and booster, and that's 127,188. We're not able to separate out whether it's a third dose or a booster, so that's – that number includes both.

Governor Phil Murphy: Scheduling system?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: We're expecting the scheduling system to be up as soon as Microsoft application gets finalized. I think it's due to the Department of Health for testing this week.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. Thank you, Mike. Matt, good afternoon.

Matt Arco, NJ.com Good afternoon, Governor. Today I think is the last day for state workers and teachers to get, for example, the J&J shot to be considered fully vaccinated by the October 18th deadline. Does your administration have any sense of how many folks haven't met the mandate and what we're looking at there, and also, will teachers, workers, or anybody else under this mandate be required to get booster shots if they fit the criteria?

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, we will likely – I would bet on Wednesday – Parimal, help me out here. People say to me all the time hey, New York City said X about where their teachers are, or Hoboken has now said Y. Easy to do if you've got one district. With over 600 districts and schools that we oversee, the data reporting has been – is more complicated for us to get our arms around this. I think we're going to take a step. I think we're going to announce something on Wednesday to smooth out the data. Judy, I think it's going to come from you and not me. No specific news on that, but it is – we have every reason to believe that it is – we start at a very high place.

I don't think we made news yet on boosters for educators or staff, so I think right now, let's get to the first stage. We expect folks will do the right thing and so far, overwhelmingly, folks have done the right thing for reasons that I'm not sure – is possibly due to federal confusion among, Judy, the independent panel, the FDA, ultimately the CDC. I think that has not helped us in terms of messaging on the booster. In fact, I mentioned last week that we had said to the White House we really need some over-the-top messaging to make this as crisp as possible. Anything else you want to add on that? Okay, thank you.

Joey, is that you?

Joey Fox, NJ Globe: Yep, good afternoon.

Governor Phil Murphy: How are you?

Joey Fox, NJ Globe: Doing pretty good. How are you? Well, so it has now been more than a week since mask mandates were announced in childcare centers. Do you have any color on how that's going? Have you heard from parents or teachers whether it's been as difficult as some people predicted it might've been? This week obviously has – there's been a lot going on in Washington related to the infrastructure reconciliation

bills. Have you spoken with Speaker Pelosi, or President Biden, or anyone in Washington, particularly in your capacity as Vice-Chair of the National Governors' Association? Then finally, one question for you, Commissioner Persichilli. For a little while now, you've noted a pretty clear difference in positivity rates in south Jersey in particular, how they're pretty consistently higher. Is that something that the Department of Health is specifically working to address? Are there any south Jersey-specific programs that you've got going? Thanks.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. I don't think we've got an empirical answer on how it's going with childcare, but we do know, overwhelmingly, like everything else, folks are doing and at least trying to do the right thing here. Again, we don't have to go over the same ground again. All of us acknowledge keeping a mask on a two year old is not the easiest thing, but the bigger question is are these centers doing what they need to do especially with adults and doing at least not just the letter but also the spirit of keeping a healthy environment. The answer, anecdotally, is overwhelmingly yes.

We speak with the Administration all the time on infrastructure reconciliation, COVID, you name it. I'm still in the and/both category, and that really is not just the hard assets of which we would be a big winner because of our density and our share of legacy assets. So much of the human infrastructure elements are programs that we're already doing in New Jersey. We are, in many respects, the canary in the coal mine on whether or not this stuff works. We're resoundingly experiencing it works. If we got more federal help, it would allow us in most of those cases not to really start much new because we're already doing it but to scale programs we're already doing and bring them forward a lot faster. That's both hard and soft infrastructure.

Judy, anything that you've got in south Jersey as it relates to positivity rates I think is the question from Joey? They're consistently a little bit higher there. Any thoughts on that?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah, we're seeing the opposite of what we experienced a year ago. The disease was more prevalent in the north and then traveled down to the south. This is actually the opposite. The best we can look at is the gatherings for the summer, primarily in the southern portion of the state. That's the only thing I think we can point to specifically. That's where most of the positivity is. I don't know, Ed, if you have...

Governor Phil Murphy: Ed, any interest coming out of the bullpen here? Great to have you.

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Thank you. I'm just sitting here channeling 1978. No, that's exactly correct.

Governor Phil Murphy: that was uncalled for.

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: That as we're looking at these cases as have been mentioned, the southern part as well as the Jersey Shore towards the south, Ocean, Monmouth Counties in particular, are relatively higher compared to other areas. There are a whole bunch of reasons why that might be happening as has been mentioned. Certainly part of it has to do with the fact that over the summer months, that's where people tended to congregate more. I'm sure there are a lot of different factors that go into those numbers but certainly we're paying close attention.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Ed. Thank you, Joey. Alex, good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Good afternoon, Governor. Dr. Lifshitz, Governor Murphy has suggested before that it's possible that indoor masking for students might not be required for the entire school year. What kind of metrics would you need to see for you to say that it was safe to allow kids to remove their masks indoors in schools? For you, Commissioner, can you give us a little bit more information about the death in Vineland, the date that this person died, had they been hospitalized, and does your department count the 47 probable deaths at the veterans' homes as part of the probable death number, or has there been any work done to try and have those deaths marked down as confirmed?

Governor, California Governor Gavin Newsom announced last week that all students in K through 12 will be required to be vaccinated once vaccines are approved. Will you do the same thing here? If you don't know yet, can you just talk about your thinking on the issue? Do you believe that all students should be vaccinated? Do you have the ability to compel them to? What kind of data would you use to make that decision?

Finally for you also, Governor, you said today 75% of the population is fully vaccinated. I assume that's 16 and over. You celebrated when it was 70. Did you make a mistake, or is the virus and the Delta variant different than you expected? Are the vaccines less effective? How can you explain that and what's your new goal for full vaccination now? Is it 80? Is it 90?

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you. Again, I love the way you ask these. Your first question was whether or not we would keep masking in place for the entire school year or when would you feel – was that – Jameel, help me out.

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Essentially just the metrics that you would need to see the data to remove that order.

Governor Phil Murphy: I will let Ed come in on this and Judy, if she's got anything as well on it. My subject non-empirical answer would be I'd go back to where I think we all think this is headed, which is it's never going to go to zero. The virus – I think our operating assumption, folks, is it's going to be in our midst. Ed had mentioned several months ago that a bad flu season is a couple thousand deaths, and we're running well above that, particularly with the Delta variant. At the time he said it, we were actually coming down. It was in April or May, and it was coming toward that. Why do I say that? The reason why I feel like I can say it won't be forever and for always is because we're not going to hold ourselves to a zero reality here. We're going to make moves and make decisions based on what we think is a reasonable expected future state of the virus. I'll let Ed come in on that.

My guess is we're not going to disclose anything in particular about the individual in Vineland, but the numbers I referred to, 64, 81, now 12 do not include any probables in my numbers unless Judy tells me otherwise.

I don't anticipate that we're going to need to do that in terms of mandating the kids to have it, but it's an option I think we leave on the table as we do across the board here. We think we've got the right package for school in place. We also acknowledge that as the weather starts to slip on us and we're spending a lot more of our lives inside, including schools, that we may well see some bumps. We think this is the right package in place.

It's not a mistake; getting to 70 is – which by the way we announced in December, and it was a Herculean effort and we got there. I think you and I were together on shot number one, University Hospital in Newark. To think that we're able to go from there – by the way, doing the press conference outdoors on December 15th, I will also not forget, but we're able to get there by the end of June. It was a Herculean effort. I don't know that I've got the number, but it's got to be higher than what it is. Let's just say that. We got to keep cranking and it's in this dogged phase. Clearly the Delta variant bit not just New Jersey; it bit our country and it still is. Alaska right now, you can't get a hospital bed in Alaska, among other states that are really getting clobbered. This thing came back in a way that it clearly took some edge off the – our ability to continue to open up everything wide, but we're largely – other than masking, we're largely open wide and we're able to battle it. The biggest thing we can do is get vaccinated.

Ed was asked the question – Ed, how would you describe it, an environment, even if it's subjective and not empirical where you could see us not masking inside of schools?

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Sure. Let me start with why do we mask. We mask because we're trying to protect people against the spread of COVID because we know COVID is a particularly nasty virus that causes or certainly can cause severe illness and death. Masking is one of many different what we call layered prevention measures, meaning in and of itself, it is somewhat effective, but there are other things that can be more effective and when you put them together, they become more effective yet, what we sometimes call the Swiss cheese defense, meaning that there's holes in any single layer but when you layer all these different things together, they are helpful.

When would I talk about taking away the recommendation as far as masking goes? When several things are happening, when either the virus is less common around; the virus has become less deadly; or there are other, better prevention measures that can protect people. We talked about trying to protect people starting with there. We talked about vaccination. As vaccination becomes available to younger children, certainly that's going to be a major step forward in making it much less likely that they will become ill and pass it along. We

talk about the virus itself. Well, that's what we're talking about every day here is the numbers; how many new cases are there; how many hospitalizations are there? There's no single number I would point to because again, it plays into, in my mind anyway, the combination with these other factors because it's not just an exact number. It's where it's going; it's branch and measures.

We talked about how deadly is the virus out there and again, we're looking at hospitalizations and other things. Luckily that is going down somewhere and we've gotten good news even recently as far as possibly some of the treatments that are available for this. If the disease becomes more treatable and less deadly, then that would be another reason to be able to say okay, we become less concerned about it and we can back off on some of our prevention measures. It would be nice to be able to say oh, there's a single number for a single amount of time but unfortunately, at least in my mind, it's somewhat more complicated than that. It really is looking at how all these different things are interacting.

Governor Phil Murphy: Ed, one other – one factor which I didn't hit which is worth underscoring. Pfizer has submitted data on vaccine testing trials for ages 5 to 11. That would be clearly a game-changer in the right direction and a factor. Thank you for that. Anything you want to add, Judy? You good, okay. Sir, you got anything? Yep, hold on one sec. Jameel's coming to you. Okay.

Reporter: Governor, how do you respond to local health officers across the state who say they're burned out, underfunded, and need more trained staff, more money and more support to cope with the pandemic? Also, you required healthcare workers to get vaccinated or tested regularly by September 7th. What percentage of those workers have now gotten vaccinated? How many opted to get tested one to two times a week instead? Who's paying for those tests? COVID-19 indicators like new infections and hospitalizations are starting to decline. What does this say to you about the current state of the pandemic, and what's your advice for families as we start to think about the holidays, particularly Halloween, which demanded a lot of rethinking last year? Thank you, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, we were open for business on Halloween, and we will be open for business this Halloween. Let me just ask everybody to be safe, smart, do the right thing. The concern is I assume it's going to be similarly – we're in this several month period where it's one holiday after another, some religious, some secular, but they come in with a cadence. The key will be how people behave when they're inside. It won't be going door-to-door trick-or-treating, though everyone should be careful, as always. It'll be the party in somebody's basement or the dinner table, again. We didn't have the vaccine last Halloween; we got one now. We know it works. We know our numbers are very high. Good news is Saturday night would be an example of this. God willing, nothing comes out of it, but Tammy and I wore our mask into our table and we were hanging at our table with folks we knew were vaccinated. We felt pretty comfortable and put it on when we were leaving. Folks have to just use their common sense, but we're open for business on Halloween., thank God.

When I say the local health offices, I mean this is something we're seeing and you're seeing it with healthcare workers, not just in the local health offices. We have nothing but sympathy and respect for these folks. If we can continue to get resources to them, we will. We've done that. If we need to do more, we will do that. They've been on the front lines. Judy, you work with local health offices up and down the state. They've done extraordinary work. They are the linchpin into the community, so when someone asks us about a particular school outbreak or how's a region look, as we were discussing a few minutes ago, they are our eyes and ears. We want to be there with them.

By the way, it's another reason for folks to get vaccinated. They've got pressure on them. Again, the tragedy of 18 or 19 months ago was there was no playbook. Nobody knew what hit us. The tragedy of today is we got the playbook; we know exactly what to do. The fact that there are folks out there not doing it is adding to that strain needlessly.

I don't have a specific percentage on healthcare workers, but we'll come back to you with somebody. Dan Bryan is with us. Judy, anything you want to add on particularly the local health officials you work with so closely?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: There's not enough words of gratitude for the work that the local health officers have done through this pandemic and what they continue to do. We've tried to get them as many resources as possible like contact tracers so they can do case investigation and contact tracing. I think that that has – from the input that I've gotten from some local health officers, that's been very

well-received, and we want to continue supporting them throughout the rest of this pandemic for the work that they're doing. They're at the center of all of the information that flows in and out of the state going to the communicable disease service, going back to the schools. The local health officers are at the center of all of that. They are tired, and they're weary, as many people are, but they keep on going and they – again, there's no words – enough words of gratitude for the work that they're doing.

Governor Phil Murphy: Amen, and by the way, never, ever, ever political, to the great credit of folks, just folks waking up – no matter what their affiliation may be, just waking up every day trying to do the right thing, and they've been incredible. Thank you.

Dave, good afternoon. Take us home.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. With regard to congestion pricing, I know you had mentioned that you feel strongly about this and there are levers that can be pulled at the port authority. Could you explain what you're talking about, please? I don't know that the Port Authority specifically has anything to do with what the MTA decides about congestion pricing. I know that we have representatives from Jersey, obviously, in the port authority. Can you please spell out what you could do if talks don't go well with those folks in New York and how you're going to stop this congestion pricing ripoff from taking place in New Jersey?

It was mentioned today, the RT is slowly dropping, hospitalizations stable and slightly going down as well. Of course, again, we're seeing 80,000 fans at MetLife and other football stadiums on Sunday, 20,000 at concerts all over the place, and yet now the CDC is again recommending that people not get together for Thanksgiving, which is a ways down the road, even if you're fully vaccinated, that you should have fans going. I know, Governor, in your house, your wife had mentioned all the windows were open; it was very cold, people wearing coats at the table. People are like, alright, I got vaccinated. Alright, I got the booster. Everybody in my plan for Thanksgiving dinner – it's not going to be a hundred people. It's going to be a fairly small gathering. Are you concerned that people are going to say to hell with this; this is stupid? When can we possibly have any sense of normalcy here? What's the point of getting vaccinated?

Apparently, it's difficult if not impossible to get a COVID test on Sunday, from what we've been told. Every location that this individual tried within a 30-mile radius and close to here and Trenton was not open. They had no appointments available; I think that was the way it was listed. Then there are plenty of appointments to get a test today, Monday. Is this a problem? I don't know if this is the lay of the land in the whole state but if you can't get a COVID test on Sunday, then it would make sense – I know our numbers are lower for the weekend. Finally, Commissioner, you had mentioned your plug for pregnant women to get vaccinated. What's the most important thing that you and maybe Dr. Lifshitz and you as well, Governor, would want to convey? What is the most important message to pregnant women that they may not quite be getting yet about being pregnant and also getting a COVID vaccine? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Let me go through these. I'll give you my thoughts and then turn it to Judy and Ed to add theirs. Again, we have a very good working relationship with New York state, New York City, and we are in so many ways in the same boat together. That's why, by the way, the Port Authority was born, to acknowledge that. There is infrastructure. We can get you more detail, but there's infrastructure required to actually implement congestion pricing and the infrastructure includes, at least in part, infrastructure that the Port Authority has to put in place, tolling in particular.

I had not seen what the CDC said about Thanksgiving and just as I sit here today, if you know – if it's your family and you know the vaccination status of everybody – as you rightfully point out, Thanksgiving is usually – it's not New Year's Eve, right? It's usually a table, and you've got people around it. Use your common sense but I'm a little bit mystified by that. I don't see why, if you know everyone's status, you can't sit down and enjoy dinner together, so that's not coming from me, at least. I don't want to get over my skis for a guy who doesn't ski.

I don't have color on the Sunday COVID tests other than acknowledging that there are a lot fewer on the weekends. Last Sunday, I'll give you an example, 18,131 tests. Last Wednesday – hold on a second – sorry, Thursday, which is the day we announced our results from today, 44,281, so two and a half times as many tests. We'll come back to you. I'm not aware of anything in this particular area that is causal toward that.

Again, I'll had this to the experts but the big headline for me on pregnant women is it does not impact your fertility. That's one of these big myths out there, which is preventing a lot of childbearing aged women from actually stepping up and getting vaccinated. That is, based on the data, a myth. It is no basis in fact. With that, anything, Judy, you want to offer on Thanksgiving, Sunday tests, pregnant women, and ask Ed maybe to come in behind you on the – particularly the last one.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Sure, on pregnant women the message we want to get across is that the COVID vaccine is effective and will not harm you or your fetus or the child you're carrying. The important thing is that you will be harmed if you are not vaccinated. You're putting yourself and your fetus at risk. We averaged in September about 41,000, 42,000 tests a day. We've done an inventory of the availability of tests in every county. Our goal is to have an open site seven days a week in every county. I know that Mercer County has – if you go on the site, it's a home test that you apply for, and it'll be sent to you. We would like to have an open center in Mercer County. I think at this point, we have six counties that do not have a static open site, and we'll be working with them to bring that up.

Governor Phil Murphy: Ed, anything you want to add, particularly on the pregnant women question?

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: It is very understandable. Pregnant women, obviously, should be concerned about the health of their unborn children. We tell them not to put things that are unnatural into their body all the time. We tell them not to take wine; we tell them not to take aspirin. There are all sorts of antibiotics they shouldn't be taking. We tell them to be more careful with all sorts of different things, so it's only natural and understandable that pregnant women would be concerned about taking something such as a vaccine, which could be seen as unnatural, into their body whether it might have an effect on their fetus at all. As has been talked about up here and is absolutely true, the much, much greater risk is not the unnatural vaccine that you would take but the unnatural virus that could invade you instead.

The virus is much, much riskier to the unborn child and to the mother itself than the vaccine. We'd strongly encourage that pregnant women get vaccination. As also has been mentioned, we'd strongly encourage before the pregnancy. I have personally three children between the ages of 18 and 24, two young women and a young man, and as soon as they were eligible to get the vaccine, I encouraged them to get the vaccine, and they got the vaccine. Why did I encourage them and why did they get it? Well, I can tell you this: I am a physician and as a physician, I took care of patients for a long period of time. I know the dangers associated with COVID. I know that while COVID luckily does not cause serious illness commonly in that age group, it sometimes can. It can sometimes have long-term effects and that the risk to them is certainly much greater than the risk from the vaccine. I know how to read the studies and talk about that sort of thing, and I'm very comfortable in saying that.

I'm also a public health professional. As a public health professional, I feel strongly that they could get vaccinated for all the reasons we've been talking about because the surest way that we as a community can get out of this is to get everybody vaccinated. The fewer people who are susceptible to the virus around, the less chance the virus has of infecting them, the less chance they can go on and mutate, the less chance you can come into contact with is. Getting vaccination is best for the overall community.

Lastly, as a father, as a parent, I know how I would feel, and I know how they would feel if they inadvertently caused harm or ended up essentially killing somebody else now because in reality, that's what can and does happen. Every one of the people that we've talked about today, every one of the thousands of people who have died in New Jersey have been infected by somebody else. Not one of those persons was trying to do it on purpose; most of them probably never even knew they had a role in that. If I was to think that my son became infected and he infected somebody else and they infected – and four people down the line ended up coming into contact with somebody who was much more frail and ended up having a serious outcome or death, that would be certainly heartbreaking if I knew about it and not knowing about it doesn't make it any better. Certainly we do everything we could to try to encourage them to take care of their community and the people around them as far as that goes.

That's my longer-winded answer to your question, but yes, absolutely pregnant women should get vaccinated just like we tell them to get vaccinated against the flu, by the way, which also is another virus that can cause them greater problems when they're pregnant.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said, Ed, thank you for that, and Judy as well. We'll leave it there. I want to go back just to the Thanksgiving question you asked, Dave. We're going to be Draconian if we think we have to be Draconian, not because it's a close call. When we shut the garage doors, when we mandate something as it relates to masking, whatever it might be, we lose credibility if we're being seen to be Draconian when it's not – it completely defies common sense. I hope we never cross that line, particularly knowing the playbook that we know. If it's your family, and you know your vaccination status, and you're getting around a table for Thanksgiving dinner, I think it's out of bounds for us to say you got to whatever, wear a mask, don't have the dinner, whatever. To me, Judy, unless you disagree, that's out of bounds.

With that, mask up. Judy Persichilli, as always, Ed Lifshitz, thank you for that. Pat Callahan, Dan, Parimal, Jameel, cast of thousands, thanks to each and every one of you. Folks, again, common sense I think – that may be a nice way to make decisions based on the facts and use your common sense. That, to me, is the winning combination. Folks by the millions in this state have done just that. Just keep it up. We will be back together again unless you hear otherwise right back here this Wednesday at 1 p.m. God bless.

Governor Phil Murphy

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