

Governor Phil Murphy

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**Governor Phil Murphy:** Good afternoon, everybody. Sorry for the few minutes delay, technical difficulties on my end. Thank you for joining us virtually today. With me on screen, as you can see, the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. The State's Epidemiologist, another familiar face, Dr. Christina Tan. State Police Superintendent Colonel Pat Callahan, Chief Counsel Parimal Garg. And today we have a real special guest, we have Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith, the Head of the White House COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force. We are incredibly grateful, Doctor, to have you on with us today.

In deference to your schedule, we will do things a little bit differently today. I'll give a quick rundown on the numbers and a few points on vaccinations. And then, I'll turn things over to Dr. Nunez Smith, and then we'll pick up with the rest of the program after her remarks. Again, it's great to have you with us, Doctor. Let's get right to it.

Our dashboard today is showing a total of 1,899,671 administered vaccine doses as of midmorning today. Without question, that number has now broken through 1.9 million. This count includes 1.262 million first doses and just under 637,000 second doses. Judy, I got the word as I was coming in here, the Burlington County mega site for the first time cracked 4,000 doses in a day, which I know you know, which is a huge milestone. Now we are eagerly awaiting the official word for the FDA and the proper follow-up guidance of the status of New Jersey icon Johnson & Johnson's application for an emergency use authorization for its vaccine. Should – and I say should – this application be approved, as it appears it may, we have been notified that we should expect an additional shipment of roughly 70,000 doses to be delivered to us next week. Needless to say, there will be a lot of meetings and calls this weekend on exactly how to deploy those doses.

Quite simply, an approval of the Johnson & Johnson application would be a game changer. First off, simply having a third tool in our toolbox is critical. An additional 70,000 doses in one week means another 70,000 vaccinated New Jerseyans. And this, remember, is a vaccination that would require only one dose, regular refrigeration, no follow up necessary. However, in terms of our continued efforts to ensure an equitable distribution of vaccines, this would be even more vital. With Dr. Nunez-Smith with us, I would put our efforts up against any other American state in terms of ensuring equitable access to the vaccines.

We have worked with our federally qualified health centers to undertake vaccinations right in the community clinics that many residents already rely upon and trust. And as I noted on Wednesday, we are partnering across all levels of government – federal, state, county and local – and joining our faith institutions and other organizations in ten cities, overwhelmingly communities of color, to open vaccination centers for residents who need us to bring the vaccine to them.

Judy, Pat and I had the opportunity to visit two of these sites. Judy and I were together in Trenton and Judy and Pat and in Franklin Township in Somerset County, churches with overwhelmingly respectively Latino and Black population congregations. Other cities where this partnership will be helping us vaccinate more folks are from north to south, Paterson, Newark, Orange, Jersey City, Elizabeth, Camden, Pleasantville and Vineland. The Paterson site is opening next week with Camden and Jersey City slated for the following week.

And it is in the same spirit that we also continue the strong community testing programs that we have initiated with our churches, which is seen through more than 500 pop-up testing locations we've been able to open over the past six months. Again, these have been held at churches and community centers and right in senior housing and other places where we know we needed to bring the resources into the community.

Through the federal pharmacy partnership, both CVS and Walgreens have undertaken the work of vaccinating every willing resident and staff member of our long-term care facilities. And again, we reached deep to bring as many of our facilities under this umbrella as possible.

Separate partnership, our partnership with Walmart and the Department of Human Services has also provided access to the vaccine for thousands of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities residing in group homes, another high-risk congregant setting and their direct support professionals. And as we move through the remainder of our intellectual and developmental disabilities group homes, we will continue allocating doses to this partnership for our seniors over 75 years old.

Dr. Nunez-Smith, I'm going to quote you, you said "Communities are the experts in what they need. They don't need to be told." We've taken that to heart throughout this pandemic. I am honored by the work we've undertaken with our communities, especially with our faith institutions.

Before I turn things over to Dr. Nunez-Smith, let's just run quickly through the rest of the overnight numbers. 3,149 new positive PCR, another 1,007 new presumed positive antigen tests. That's a one-day total of 4,156. The positivity for the 55,350 PCR tests recorded on Monday, as we predicted, Judy, was meaningfully lower than the ones that were tested on Sunday, back down under 7%. The statewide rate of transmission stays under one, 0.89.

Our hospitals were treating a total of 2,008 patients as of 10:00 p.m. last night; 1,850 of them are known confirmed COVID positives. Of that group, 439 were in our ICUs and 270 ventilators were in use. All three of these important metrics continue to trend downward: total hospitalizations, ICU patients, ventilators in use.

Some folks ask us and I think, Judy, you should feel free to comment on this in your remarks. Other states have seen this number come down even faster. Remember, we're the densest state in the nation. We're the densest region of the nation. And we have the highest per capita amount of long-term care facilities and patients of any state in the nation. Most of those things, in good times, are good attributes. With a pandemic, that makes it more challenging. And we've said that before, but we haven't said it in a while.

Yesterday, 264 live patients were discharged, another 255 patients COVID positive were admitted. And this is comparing apples to oranges because these fatalities are not confirmed. But hospitals reported 28 deaths yesterday. And today we must report, with a very heavy heart, 46 confirmed COVID deaths. And you can see there the staggering totals.

This pandemic has devastated our state across nearly a full year. We know that its impact among our Black and Brown communities has been outsized, and that it has shed light on and exacerbated inequities in our healthcare system that we are now committed to ending. But let's be clear: COVID did not create these inequities and they won't

simply disappear once we defeat this virus. But as it is said, everything brings with it an opportunity, and the opportunity afforded to us by the pandemic is to meaningfully take on and hopefully eradicate these inequities so we can emerge as a stronger, fairer and healthier New Jersey.

And with that, it is now my distinct pleasure to introduce our special guest. She is the Head of the White House COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force, before that co-chaired the COVID-19 Transition Advisory Board for the Biden Administration. And before that – I'm saying this, Doc, as a Harvard graduate, a distinguished career at Yale University, most recently as the Dean of the Health Equity Research. Before that, a professor. Just an incredible talent and we're humbled and honored to have her with us today. Please help me welcome Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith. Doc.

**Chair of the White House COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith:** Thank you so very much, Governor Murphy. What a warm welcome. You know, I did my residency training up in the Harvard system so, you know, lots of love there. It's a great pleasure to join you today for the COVID-19 briefing and the partnership between the federal administration and New Jersey is strong.

I really love how you framed that last part, Governor. Even though COVID-19 did not create the inequities that drive what we're seeing now, disproportionate impact of the virus in certain communities, we have an opportunity and responsibility to take these on to eradicate inequities now. That's what I'm going to talk about this afternoon with all of you just for a few minutes.

As the Governor said, I have the honor of chairing the Biden-Harris COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force, and additionally I serve as a senior advisor to the White House COVID-19 Response Team. In both of those roles, I would say my job is to spend every minute of every day really championing what we're doing now: this commitment that we're going to make as a nation to address and advance COVID-19 equity.

There are some things I get asked a lot about what makes this moment in our history perhaps different from others. I think there are several things. We have a President in Joe Biden who is genuinely passionate about ensuring an equitable response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Vice President Harris could not be more committed to the mission of ending this pandemic, really in part by tackling head on these inequities, and addressing the needs in the communities that have been the hardest hit. From the very highest levels of our government, we have the charge, we have to press on for equity.

With everything that the Governor just outlined, it's clear the commitment is strong here in New Jersey to equity as well – the efforts that are ongoing, the large mass vaccination sites of federally qualified health systems, working with the pharmacies – key approaches to equitable distribution strategy.

I think that it's perfect that those strategies mirror very closely the federally run programs that were launched in the first few weeks of the Biden-Harris administration similarly, with the intent of promoting equity. Our community vaccination centers, mass vaccination sites selected based on measures like social vulnerability and their likelihood of reducing inequity. That's how we think about where to place them.

Similarly, for the retail pharmacy program, the community health center partnerships, really getting vaccine and vaccination to trusted entities and communities similarly thinking about social economic disadvantage in that work. The federal government as well has stood up 400 mobile vaccination sites. And that's when we know, as my colleague Andy Slavitt says, when we have to take vaccines to people, we need mobile for those hardest-to-reach communities.

And then in a big picture, we have to think about expansion of high quality healthcare, really thinking about the public health workforce. How do we strengthen the social services safety net, always, always as our North Star equity.

I want to reflect some more what the Governor said because at its core, this work is always about the grassroots. Hearing about those churches, those faith partnerships in Trenton, Franklin Township, New Jersey clearly understands how you reach people, the people who have been the hardest hit, right? Not through just top-down messaging campaigns, but through real engagement, trusted spaces, trusted messengers. So we try on our end as well to keep our finger on the pulse. We make ongoing engagement just part of our strategy. Listening to communities is how we anchor our work.

And the communities that you referenced, from Paterson to Princeton, Newark to New Brunswick, Jersey City, Atlantic City everywhere in between, we have to understand the reasons why different communities express different levels of confidence in safety and efficacy of the vaccines. We have to. And so just this week, I have been hosting a series of listening conversations just to hear directly from communities. Engagement, as I know in New Jersey, it isn't for us either, not a one-time deal, ongoing. We have to be present, we have to show up.

So, you know, don't get me wrong, we're not under any illusions. The work is hard. We have to do it, though. The moment calls for it. The success of our country, the success of New Jersey, really demands that we address inequity. So I'm grateful to have in New Jersey in this fight. I'm hopeful, I'm confident we're going to get the job done. You know, just thank you for allowing me some time to join this afternoon. I just commend you on all the great work. I look forward to continuing to partner.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Doc, you are the best, May I ask you one question, and just underscore a point you made? I'll do the underscore actually before the question. Your point is that there's no one week or one event or one moment in time that allows us to declare victory. So those are important data points, but this is an ongoing reality that we're going to be with for a long time. And we see it that way as well.

I mentioned the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. The fact that it's one dose, appears to be one dose, that's not entirely decided, and regular refrigeration feels to us as though it allows us to be a lot more nimble with getting the vaccine to the point of attack, without having to track the second dose, without having to have the cold chain storage. That, to us at least, preliminarily, equity jumps out from that in the sense that assuming it's safe and efficacious, and it's a particularly effective weapon in the pursuit of equity inside the broader vaccine challenge. Is that too aggressive or too positive an assessment of the J&J piece?

**Chair of the White House COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith:** Yeah, I think we're all just very on edge awaiting FDA review, potentially ACIP as well. You know, it would be, as you said, just a game changer to have another vaccine candidate. The preliminary evidence suggests that for the J&J vaccine, you know, that is highly effective for the things that we care a lot about: preventing severe illness, hospitalization, quite frankly, death. And so to have three vaccines that are safe and effective is just good for our country.

You know, for us in the federal program, we are going to continue to just equitably distribute vaccine. We're confident that everybody in the states and locals is going to make sure that there is every vaccine available in every community, but there's no question that the more vaccine we have out there, the quicker we're going to get everyone vaccinated, and that's going to be good for everybody.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** So, so great to have you. Please, everybody virtually join me in a big round of gratitude and applause for Dr. Marcella Zunis-Smith. Keep up the great work. Thank you so much for your partnership with our state and for the work you do across the country.

**Chair of the White House COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith:** Thank you for all you do. Everybody be well.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thank you, Doc. God bless you. That was terrific. What a talent, huh? And I want to thank her again, Dr. Nunez-Smith, for taking the time to be with us today. Not just our work with her and her team on equity but more broadly, we are extraordinarily grateful for the partnership and leadership that she and her colleagues and President Biden himself and Vice President Harris are showing every day.

I had the opportunity yesterday to join with fellow Governors in a video call with the President, and I know the White House's commitment to all states and all communities in defeating this virus and moving forward with a broad recovery is real. They live it every second, and I have faith that we're going to reach our goals together. And again, I want to thank Dr. Nunez-Smith for the real treat of being with us today.

Before we move on to either items, I wanted to just sort of tick through a couple of things, some of which are off topic, but. Again, very good call as a general matter with Governors organized by the National Governors Association, a very good separate call with Governors with Pete Buttigieg, Secretary of the Treasury with whom I'd spoken to privately last week, and then a very good video discussion with President Biden.

I separately had a very good private exchange with Tony Fauci yesterday. He continues to be, for Judy and me and the rest of the team, an incredible inspiration and resource, both in his public pronouncements as well as in his private advice. We discussed variants and vaccines and whatnot.

Yesterday, unrelated, I was in Fairlawn at Thomas Jefferson Middle School for the announcement of our huge investment in public education, which was a treat. And then this morning, joined by Legislative leaders and members of our team. We put the Community College Opportunity Grant into law, which is just an incredible, I think, step. This allows folks up to a certain level of income to go to community college free of charge. The featured speaker today wasn't me, it was a woman who is living that very reality at the culinary department or aspect of Hudson County Community College. We were together in Jersey City, and it was an incredibly inspiring day.

Let me switch gears and get a little bit closer to why we're gathered. Yesterday, the New Jersey Economic Development Authority announced its awarding of \$14 million in grants to 27 organizations through the innovative Sustain and Serve NJ Program. These grants will be converted into roughly – are you ready for this? – 1.5 million meals purchased through more than 160 restaurants across 69 communities in 12 counties. Our restaurants, many of which are cornerstones of their communities, have been hit exceptionally hard by the pandemic, and the EDA stood up the Sustain and Serve Program to get our restaurateurs back fully in their kitchens doing what they do best, providing people with good meals.

The simplicity of Sustain and Serve, bringing community-minded organizations with our restaurants together to combat hunger among impacted communities and families is ultimate win-win-win. Sustain and Serve is another feather in the cap of the EDA, which has already done so much to help tens of thousands of small businesses, including countless restaurants keep their doors open so they will be poised to guide our recovery from the pandemic.

But other departments and agencies have also taken on the cause as well, and that includes the Department of Community Affairs under the extraordinary leadership of our great Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver. The DCA set up a program, Neighborhood Preservation COVID-19 Relief Program, which has put grants totaling \$6.2 million into 19 communities across the state. And those communities, in turn, have used the funds to strengthen their downtown business districts, whether it be helping restaurants acquire heating to make outdoor dining more comfortable, or for a sanitation stations, or PPE for visitors, among much more.

One of the communities that they've held down is Millville in Cumberland County, a great New Jersey community, who's Holly City Development Corporation designated more than \$335,000 in DCA grant funds to help their businesses establish gift certificate programs, acquire essential PPE and other materials, or get marketing assistance to broaden their reach among other services. And, some grants have gone directly to the small businesses that have needed them. One recipient was Tina's Hair Salon right in Millville. The business named after the woman herself, Tina Gilliam. Tina received a grant that allowed her to keep her utility bills and rent fully paid so she and her salon, a lifelong dream of hers, can remain open to support her clients.

I had the opportunity to check in with Tina on Wednesday and had a great conversation. I thanked her for her commitment to Millville and the people she serves. Check Tina out. Tina's Hair Salon is at 26 N. High Street in Millville. And again, my sincerest thanks go to the DCA for coming up with a creative and innovative way to help keep some of our historic downtowns going through some really hard times.

Now, as we prepare to enter this weekend, let's remember that we are still losing members of our New Jersey family to this virus. And this virus has impacted some families more than others. And that is the experience of Ed Kemble, Ed is on the far right with the eyeglasses, a truck driver and a volunteer fireman in Riverside in Burlington County. Across a span of just six weeks, Ed lost his wife, his brother, his mother-in-law and her sister, all to COVID. They all lived under the same roof in a multigenerational household. And now Ed, again on the right, is the only one left.

Ruth Allen, and that's Ruth on the far left of the picture, the mother of Ed's wife Barbara, was the first family member to be lost to this virus on December 2nd. Ruth was 89 years old. She spent her working years in nearby Cinnaminson and at O&S Research, a firm that makes high quality glass for the communications and aeronautics industries. And she spent her later years on numerous hobbies including knitting and crocheting.

In addition to Ed and Barbara, she also left her sons Robert, Donald and their wives Lynn and Fern respectively, and her daughter Susan and son-in-law Howard, along with her stepchildren Reedy, Stephen, Ethel and Lois, and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She is also survived by her brother Kevin, and was survived by her sister Eileen, who is sitting beside her on the left picture. So Eileen is the second person from the left. Eileen we will sadly meet in a moment.

Only five days after Ruth passed, Ed lost his brother John Kemble right there in the middle. He was a longtime EMT with the Riverside Emergency Squad in the neighboring Delran Emergency Squad, responding to more than 2,000 calls over his 20 years of service to Burlington County's families. He was also a bus driver for the Riverside Schools and a truck driver for United Refrigeration in Pennsauken. John was an avid fisherman and loved spending time on the Barneget Bay in Tuckerton, casting for weakfish and fluke. In addition to Ed, John left another brother Lester and his sister-in-law Donna, along with a nephew Ryan and nieces Crystal and Amber Kemble, and his four-legged best friend, his dog Midnight.

Just a week after John's passing, it's hard to fathom this, on December 13th, the previously mentioned Eileen Wolverton – and Eileen again is in the left picture, second on the right side of the left picture – the aunt of Ed's wife Barbara. She passed away at the age of 74. She loved being near the water and fishing and crabbing, and her downtime was often spent with her beloved cat Belle. She was also an avid bowler and bowled in a team made up by fellow members of the Delanco Ladies Auxiliary. She was a sports fan in general and despite living in the cradle of Philadelphia teams, she had the courage to be a huge fan of the Alabama Crimson Tide and the New York Football Giants.

And then, on top of all of this tragedy, on January 16th, Ed lost Barbara – and that's Barbara in his arms – after her battle with COVID. She was born and raised in Riverside. She worked for many years in the insurance industry for NJM and Triple A and was, prior to her passing, working at Walmart as a cashier, one of our essential retail workers throughout this pandemic. While Ed is a volunteer fireman, Barbara was an active member of the Riverside Emergency Squad, while also playing a huge role in firehouse life. She served as President of the Ladies Auxiliary with the Washington Fire Company in Delanco, as well as with the Riverside Fire Company where she was a life member. She was also a life member and President of the New Jersey State Firemen's Ladies Auxiliary and a life member of the Burlington County Firemen's Ladies Auxiliary.

In addition to Ed, Barbara leaves her brothers Bobby, Donnie and Robert and her sisters Sue, Brenda and Kathleen, and their spouses, as well as many nieces and nephews, and just as many great-nieces and great-nephews.

One family, one home, absolutely devastated by this pandemic. Our hearts and prayers go out to Ed with whom I spoke on Wednesday and it's just – it's hard to describe this guy and what he's gone through. Stay with him in your prayers as he works to carry on the many legacies that have been left. And while we pray that God has blessed Ruth

and John and Eileen and Barbara, and also pray that He blesses Ed and his remaining family, and Ed's got a whole host of challenges in addition to losing his loved ones.

Our flags remain at half-staff through the end of the day today, in honor of all the Americans who have been lost over the past year, including now the more than 23,000 New Jerseyans, including Ed's loved ones. When you're outside today, if you get a chance to look up, I hope you will offer a silent prayer for all of them, and for those who have been left behind. I also hope you remain vigilant in the work of defeating this virus and ending the pandemic. We are optimistic about having another vaccine, please God, to enlist in this fight as we await the FDA's final decision on the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which has been deemed safe and effective.

But vaccines are only one weapon and, Judy, you'd want me to say that. Social distancing still matters. Wearing face coverings, I've got two of them here, especially when indoors. And common sense remains just as vital as ever before. Everything together is how we will get through this into the other, better side.

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

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Thank you, Governor and special thanks to Dr. Nunez-Smith for all the work that she's doing. As Governor Murphy mentioned throughout this pandemic, the health department's work on COVID-19 response and our vaccination planning has been performed through an equity lens. Ensuring equitable access to appointments and vaccinations is among one of our highest priorities, particularly for communities of color, who have been not only in New Jersey, but nationally disproportionately impacted by this virus.

With federal, state, county, local and interfaith community partners, we are working to increase access and availability to the vaccine to these vulnerable communities. The department developed a vulnerable populations plan that addresses access to vaccines by partnering with religious and community leaders and FEMA to operate pop-up sites in places of worship, senior centers, community centers and local health agencies. The plan includes training community health workers, who will soon be deployed into hard-to-reach communities, primarily in urban areas, to educate and to help with registration and support access to the vaccination sites.

The plan uses the same strategies we used to ramp up our COVID-19 testing in urban centers. Community health workers will address concerns about the vaccine, the vaccine safety and help with scheduling vaccination appointments. They will discuss key issues, such as the fact that the vaccine is provided at no cost, no out-of-pocket expense, and that registration information will not be shared with immigration officials. And they will also address barriers to getting vaccinated, such as transportation.

To identify the priority or top 30 municipalities at high risk, we did an analysis that looked at the high percentage of the population that belongs to a minority race. We looked at the high percentage of COVID deaths per 100,000. And then, the high percentage of the population below the poverty line, and other factors including the percent of uninsured, the percent over the age of 65, and the percent of the population without a car.

After identifying the top 30 municipalities, we use this analysis to determine where the points of dispensing the actual vaccination sites should be expanded, so that all residents in New Jersey are within a 15-minute walk or a 30-minute drive to a vaccination site.

We also looked at what we call the uncovered population, that is within a 15-minute walk of a vaccination site, but for various reasons would not be able to get vaccinated within the next six months, based on current site capacities or other constraints. We used this analysis to inform the site selection of our pop-up community vaccination sites, along with FEMA, and to look at the potential expansion of our current PODS network through partnership programs, such as the retail pharmacy program with CVS, Rite Aid and Walgreens. And lastly, the potential expansion of our existing PODS network.

The key to this plan, of course, is our work with faith and community leaders and county and local health departments who have helped us make this plan a reality. Additionally, starting several months ago, and to combat vaccine hesitancy, I have spoken with over 10,500 stakeholders, representing over 100 different groups in New Jersey, to inform them about the vaccine and the vaccine rollout process. Earlier this month, as the Governor mentioned, we began a community-based vaccination partnership to provide equitable access to our underserved communities. To select the first 10 community-based vaccination sites, we used the same analysis of municipalities that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, and also are some of our most diverse and socially economically challenged communities in the state.

These community-based vaccination sites are true partnerships with the Department of Health, the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the US Department of Defense, in addition to our local faith leaders, nonprofit organizations, local officials and health departments.

The initial phase of the community-based vaccination partnership includes Somerset, Trenton, Elizabeth, Vineland, and Patterson. 15,000 residents of these communities will be vaccinated through the end of March. The additional five cities are Camden, Jersey City, Newark, Orange and Pleasantville.

Earlier this week, the Governor mentioned we visited two of these sites. As of yesterday, 4,068 individuals have received their first dose of vaccine at three of these sites. The First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens in Somerset alone has vaccinated 2,429 members of their congregation, 85% of whom are African American. More than 1,000 people have been vaccinated at the site in Trenton, where the vaccination rate amongst communities of color is inching towards 30%. And just since its launch earlier this week, the community-based vaccination site in Elizabeth has vaccinated 565 of its residents.

So we are working hard to build confidence in the vaccine. That includes addressing vaccine hesitancy because we recognize that there is a level of mistrust and resistance to COVID-19 vaccines across communities of color, due to longstanding inequities in the healthcare system. We are working with health professionals that represent communities of color to dispel these myths and share facts about the vaccine. We want the public to understand that these vaccines are being held to the same safety standards as all vaccines. They were tested in large clinical trials to make sure they meet safety standards. Many people were recruited to participate in these trials, to see how the vaccine offers protection to people of different ages, races and ethnicities, as well as those with different medical conditions. The vaccine data is reviewed by independent committees composed of scientific and clinical experts before it is authorized. Both the FDA and the CDC monitor vaccine safety and side effects once the vaccines are in use.

At a press conference at the church Wednesday, Reverend Buster Soaries, the Pastor of First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens, explained that addressing the concerns of his membership through education, and they registered 3,490 members within 24 hours of opening the vaccine registration and educating their congregants.

In the meantime, our mega sites continue to vaccinate between 200 and 550 individuals daily, with all sites planning on serving 4,000 residents a day. The Gloucester County site will mark a milestone on Sunday when they will deliver their 100,000th dose.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 2,008 hospitalizations with 439 individuals in intensive care.

Multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children cumulatively is 105. Fortunately, none of those children have expired from MIS, and two are currently hospitalized. The children affected have either tested positive for COVID-19 or have tested positive for antibodies, showing that they had been exposed to COVID-19 within four weeks prior to symptoms.

At the state veterans hospitals, there are no new cases among residents. And at the state psychiatric hospitals, there are no new cases among patients.

The daily percent positivity as of February 22nd in New Jersey is 6.53%. The Northern part of the state, 6.91%, the Central part of the state 6.81%, the Southern part of the state 4.96%. That concludes my daily report. Stay safe, continue to mask up, socially distance, stay home when you're sick, get tested. And remember, for each other and for us all, please take the call and download the COVID Alert NJ app. Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Judy, thank you and as always, great discussion about the plan to address the inequities via the vaccine. You mentioned with the multisystem inflammatory syndrome, thank God no fatalities. We haven't said this in a while but it is worth just reminding everybody that we have lost four blessed souls under the age of 18 in this pandemic. I believe, Judy, each of them had some other comorbidity, those blessed little kids.

And exactly 80% of the fatalities are ages 65 and up, exactly 80%. If you then go down to the age of 50 and go 50 and up, you get to 95.6% of the fatalities. So this has been a pandemic that has hit in places all over the state, all over demographics, all over age groups, but it has disproportionately clobbered older New Jerseyans. Judy, thank you.

Pat. I'm in the Brick City in Newark, the weather is good here, a little chilly. We had an outdoor event in Jersey City today, I have to say, which I had a pair of gloves on for that. But I know we have some rain this weekend. We'd love to get your take on that. You know, you think about snow melting and that's a question of whether or not we're expecting any flooding, and also anything on compliance or other matters.

**State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan:** Thank you, Governor and good afternoon. Yes, with regard to compliance first, ABC did conduct 92 COVID-19 inspections just last night and of those 92, 11 licensed establishments, Governor, were found in violation. I will go through those 11 right now. They did those in Atlantic, Gloucester and Union counties. The following establishments were cited:

Ventura's Offshore Cafe in Northfield, Oyster Creek Restaurant in Leeds Point, Pitney Pub in Galloway, Steakouts Homeplate in Buena, Villa Fazzolari, also in Buena, or 'Buna' dependent upon where you're from in the state of New Jersey, Munsey Restaurant and Bar, also in Buena, Lake House Restaurant in Franklin Township, El Chingon Tex-Mex Restaurant in Union, Stage House Tavern in Scotch Plains, Sheelen's Crossing in Fanwood and Patty's Place in Union. In addition to those, two other licensed establishments were found in violation, Gov, and those were GlenRoc Liquors in Ewing as well as Emerald Corner located in Clifton.

And with regards to the weather, yes, certainly warmer temperatures and it looks like although it's supposed to rain pretty much through Saturday and Sunday, not anticipated to be a heavy rain, I think less than an inch or even a half-inch on both Saturday and Sunday. And the National Weather Service, at this juncture does not see any substantial flooding based upon snow melt and/or the rain. So it will hopefully facilitate getting rid of some of that salt and some of that snowpack that we see. But, you know, certainly not as nice as today. But that's all I've got, Governor. Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thank you, Pat. A friend of mine was the late mayor, Chuck Chiarello of Buena. And you know Chuck, the first time I met him, I said, "Mayor, how are things in Buena Vista?" He said, "I don't know, you tell me how are things in Buena Vista?" So that was a good knucklehead moment on my part. Thank you for that. So rain, but not terribly concerned about any flooding? Is that fair?

**State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan:** That's accurate. That's what I've got as of this afternoon, Gov, but always the chance of that standing water. So folks, just be careful when they're out there. And hopefully, make sure that those storm drains are cleared too, to facilitate that at the roadways.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Amen. So thank you. We'll take a few questions. Before we do, I think we'll be virtual tomorrow and Sunday unless there's a reason to be otherwise. We'll be back on the Monday, Wednesday, Friday routine next week, at least as we sit here now.

Lots of moving parts. Vaccines, obviously we've talked a lot about that today. Looking at, I'm not going to make any news today, but looking at other steps that we can responsibly take to reopen, expand populations over time, access to vaccines. So there's a lot of a lot of moving parts here.

The variants, Judy or Tina, I don't want to practice without a license. The variants are real. So Judy said something I want to underscore: we know the UK variant is in New Jersey and we've given some numbers on that. We're operating as though this variant in New York City is in New Jersey. It would be imprudent and I think probably unprofessional of us to assume otherwise. That's a part of the topic I have with Tony Fauci yesterday. So I think, is that called the 536? Does that sound right, Tina? Yes. So listen, we assume they're here. I say that for two reasons: to remind everybody, as far as the science knows, and the experts like Tina and Judy know, the same basic stuff works against the variants as they do against the main virus. There may well be a degree of effectiveness. This was a point Dr. Fauci made, that at a minimum in preventing hospitalizations or deaths. So far, at least, the vaccines appear to be working across the board. They may not work as well on some of these variants on whether or not you get COVID-19, get the virus, but there's no evidence to suggest that they don't still work quite well preventing hospitalizations and deaths. Tina's nodding her head, so I got that. So far, so good.

And the second reason I raise it is, we don't want to lurch forward and have to take steps backward. And so the other reason I raise it is that it is at the back of our mind as we look at other steps that we can take to reopen the state. If we could do it safely and responsibly, and stay on a one-way street, preferably, strongly preferably, to keep something open that's what we want. And there's a lot of moving parts associated with that.

So Judy, are you good with that? I got things mostly in the right place. So thank you for that. Michelle will guide us, we'll take a few questions. We won't take a ton. We'll take the next 10 or 15 minutes of questions and then again, we'll be back with you, God willing, live at 1:00 p.m. at the War Memorial in Trenton on Monday.

#### Q&A Session

**Matt Arco, Star-Ledger:** Good afternoon, Governor. Commissioner, is the call center making appointments yet? If not, what's the holdup?

Governor, we've also been hearing reports of long lines at various vaccination sites. You've said that this is something you specifically wanted to avoid. Is this a makeup for shots for bad weather, or is there some larger issue?

And in your remarks you mentioned prioritizing people 75 and older. How will 75 and older people be contacted and served? And is the 75 and older rule only for IDD group homes or is DOH telling other facilities to prioritize this group?

And yesterday the State Chiropractic Board reinstated the license of a convicted sex offender after a denied motion for reconsideration from the Attorney General. Governor, do you agree with the Board's decision?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I'll let Judy weigh in behind me here on the call center appointments. Long lines are not something that we have any appetite for, so we may want to, Mahen or Parimal, I'd love you to follow up with Matt and get the locations from him. I do think, in fairness, there has been some digging out of the post-bad weather, less in New Jersey than nationally, but we still want to be overwhelmingly, if not entirely, an appointments-based system.

The 75-year-old was in IDD only, at least in my words. Judy can comment on that if she sees that differently.

I saw the action taken by the State Chiropractor Board, which I find reprehensible, frankly. The Attorney General is completely right on this. It is unacceptable and folks who voted to reinstate this guy should hear this loud and clear. We will be looking very carefully and very soon at the makeup of that Board.

Judy, back over to you.

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Sure, let me talk about the call center. Just interestingly, I got this this morning. That currently there are 80 operators that have been fully trained to make appointments. And that number will be scaling up over the next few weeks. They're expanding the number of vaccine sites that they can schedule for, and are especially focused on contacting those over 75 that are preregistered in the vaccination system.

The agents, even though it's limited as compared to the number of agents that we have, they are assisting those who call to make appointments. We did find out that the training was a little bit more involved than we had initially thought and that caused some of the problems in the beginning. We're working forward with this.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thank you, Judy. Thank you, Matt.

**David Wildstein, New Jersey Globe:** Hi, Governor, how are you?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I'm good. How are you doing?

**David Wildstein, New Jersey Globe:** Well, thank you. Governor, New Jersey judges have a mandatory retirement age of 70 that was established in the Constitution 74 years ago, when life expectancy was 62. Now it's between 77 and 82 and you have a President who is 78. I apologize in advance for saying this, but you are the oldest first-term Governor New Jersey has had since before the Civil War. So, do you believe that New Jersey should consider raising the mandatory retirement age for judges? Is it time for an update?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** David, as usual, very good to hear from you. I did know that I'm the oldest first-term Governor since before the Civil War because Joe Fiordaliso, who served in that administration, reminded me of that recently.

Listen, it's a good question. I don't have an answer. I've never thought about it. Honestly, the 70 has been a hard-and-fast age, as you rightfully pointed out for many decades, 74 years it's been in place. It's a fair question but I don't have a specific answer to it because I haven't given it thought. But you do have the reality. You've got a 78-year-old President who succeeded a 74-year-old President. So this is not a blip anymore. Good question. I'd love to noodle on it and come back to you at some point. Thank you.

**Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record:** Hello, good afternoon.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Good afternoon.

**Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record:** On Wednesday, you said that investing more than \$7.7 million in unemployment tech upgrades would be a waste of money, so to speak. Do you have any response to criticism that those comments were a slap in the face to residents who are out of work, that even some upgrades are better than none?

And could you expand on what you said about investing? You know, that was throwing good money after bad, just what you mean by that?

And then you said last year that you support dedicating state funding to the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, but I didn't see that included in any of Treasury's budget documents for the upcoming fiscal year. Any particular reason for that, and does it have a chance of being negotiated into the budget? That's all I have. Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thanks, Dustin. So no, that's not a slap in the face in the least. Here's what I said, and I checked it actually, was Rob Asaro Angelo, our Labor Commissioner right after the press conference, he and I had an exchange.

Here is the problem. The problem begins with an -- I'm going to put aside that President Trump chose to use already appropriated funds out of FEMA at one point during the crisis because he couldn't get a deal done through Congress to extend unemployment insurance. That created a whole other set of challenges to administer both at the federal level and at the state level. I'm not going to speak to that.

But inside the UI system at the federal level, it is well past its prime, it is long in the tooth. And so Rob and I and our teams have spent a fair amount of time on this. It's not a slap on the face; to the contrary, if we were to gold plate our system, it would only be as good as the weakest link in the federal system. And so the \$7.75 million is a significant amount of money and it's a significant investment.

To control everything we can control within the state system, subject to the fact, at least not yet, the feds have not taken on the task of, as I said the other day, boiling the federal system down to its elements and rebuilding it. If they were to do that, that would allow us to invest a meaningful amount of money beyond the \$7.75 million. That is the preferred reality. If we were to invest that money in the absence of any investment or updating on the federal side, that's what I meant by good money after bad. The investment would be to what end? You're still beholden to the federal piece.

The answer to the second question is absolutely. I can't commit. I obviously have not, you know, the process with the Legislative Hearings and exchanges is only in its early days. We had very good updates on the budget just before we announced it, good exchanges as a conceptual matter. But is that something that I would personally suggest could be on the table? Absolutely. All of which, subject to see how this turns out over the next three or four months. Thank you.

**Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ:** Hi, Governor, how you doing?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Well, how are you?

**Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ:** I'm good. Thanks. Regarding your Budget Address earlier this week, there's a lot of concern I've heard from people that a lot of these funding sources are one time, like the bond money for FY22 and we don't know how much federal aid there would be and what kinds of strings attached there would be. That could mean a sizable budget hole for FY23. How would that be filled? Like with fees or tax increases?

Do you agree with the assessment of Republicans that you're not raising taxes this year only because it's your reelection year? If they're wrong, then what is the reason that you're not increasing taxes this year? Thanks.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thanks, Daniel. Listen, let's remember what we inherited. I just want to repeat something I said at Fairlawn yesterday, and give you one example of the crap that we've had to clean up. We are making the first full pension payment in 25 years and I'm incredibly proud of that. It's a year before I thought we'd be able to make it.

The payment is just under \$6.4 billion. The last time, as I say 25 years ago in 1996, the last time the full pension payment was made was \$228 million. If we had paid the full amount each year from 1996 up until today, that \$228 million would have grown to \$800 million. You with me so far? We're paying, rounded up a little bit to \$6.4 billion. If you do the math, we are paying of the \$6.4 billion, \$5.6 billion to make up for underperformance by the state over the past 25 years in its pension obligation, \$5.6 billion in what I would call a delinquency fee in this budget, this year.

So listen, that's one example. The school funding formula, which wasn't even allowed to work in the prior administration, was underfunded by \$9 billion. We are making up for past behavior and the good news is that won't last forever.

Now, again, I'm not suggesting that next year's budget is a walk in the park by any means. But we are committed to addressing the delinquencies of the past, and getting this behind us as fast as possible. And guess what? When you do, I'll give you an example. In next year's budget, assuming the full pension payment is made of the proposal in this year's budget, you don't then have an increase in that pension payment. You sit at \$6.4 billion for the foreseeable future. So that's a mountain that we've had to climb each of the past number of years.

Our increase in school funding, I know in the four budgets is \$1.5 billion, I think it's \$18-something billion increases are in total payments to the pension system, of which several billion dollars of that are just increases. So the fact of the matter is, we will get through this. We will stop at some point having to make up for lost time.

And I will say one other comment. We had these discussions about where we're headed in the future. We don't give credit to the fact that New Jersey is growing again. More people are coming here, the economy is growing even in the midst of a pandemic. And when we get the pandemic behind us, we should see a snap back up even more significantly. And that allows you a bigger pie or degrees of freedom.

I have not paid a lot of attention to the criticisms that there are no taxes in this, because of an election year. But Daniel, I loved your question. Why aren't there taxes? I usually, by the way, get the opposite question in other budgets I put forward. How come there are taxes?

And so the fact of the matter is, we don't wake up every morning reflexively looking to raise taxes. If we don't have to, we don't want to. Tax equity has been very important to us, to make sure everybody does their fair share, and we have largely achieved that.

We have, as I mentioned in the Budget Address, three of the five all-time lowest increases in property taxes, notwithstanding the myths and the narratives that you may see from some quarters. I want to see those numbers, I want to see property taxes go down. But in the absence of going down, at least I'll take three of the lowest five increases on record.

And so that's where I'll leave it. Nikita and David on the same press conference.

**Nikita Biryukov, New Jersey Globe:** A rare treat, right? So Governor, I just have two. So on the Chiropractic Board, I just want to get a little bit more clarity on what exactly you mean by looking at the makeup of the Board. Do you intend to seek their resignations? Because as far as I'm aware, five of the board's seven or eight members voted for that so if you wanted to move them out, then it would no longer have a quorum. On that, are you ruling out just eliminating the body entirely?

And then separately, I'm sure you've heard by this point that Governor Cuomo has been accused of sexual misconduct by a former aide named Lindsey Boylan. I was just wondering what your opinion on those accusations were?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I'll be brief on both of these. On the first one, all options are on the table, period. I find their action to be repulsive and totally and utterly unacceptable. The Attorney General was completely right about this and we will take action. I don't know what it will be. But we will take action.

As it relates to Governor Cuomo, I have a general sense of things but let me just say this: A, my nose is pressed against the Jersey glass morning noon and night. And B, he has been an extraordinary partner at every step of the way in this pandemic. And by the way yesterday, chaired the session in his capacity as chair of the NGA, the National Governors Association, that we have with President Biden. He's been a great partner and his team has been as well.

With that, thank you, everybody. We will, again be virtually tomorrow and Sunday. I don't know if it'll be next week but we'll probably go from the three a week to the two a week at some point, at least in the formal sense of the gathering at the War Memorial. But I can tell you this, unless you hear otherwise, we will be together Monday at one o'clock in person.

I want to thank Judy and Tina. Tina, we didn't give you your money's worth today and I apologize. We owe you one. Pat, as always, Parimal, the cast of thousands. Folks, keep doing what you've been doing, because you've been doing it better than any other state in America. Let's keep masking up. Let's keep social distancing, washing hands with soap and water, taking yourself off the field when you've been exposed or you don't feel well. And with that, the numbers keep getting better. We get more vaccine supply. We'll be able to safely and responsibly begin to open this great state up even further. Take care, everybody. Be safe. God bless.

## Governor Phil Murphy

## Statewide

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