

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: August 9th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon. Joining me is the woman on my right who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli, to her right another familiar face, the state's epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan.

Great to have you both here. To my left another guy who needs no introduction, Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have Parimal Garg, Chief Counsel, and a cast of thousands.

We really don't have anything new to announce today, but I do want to reiterate the announcement from Friday that the upcoming school year will begin – and I emphasize will begin with all students, educators, and staff and visitors required to wear masks while in their school buildings. We're doing this for one reason: to protect the health of our kids and education communities so we can get back to full-time, in-person instruction. I cannot be more clear about this. I'm grateful for the support for the New Jersey chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics and the New Jersey School Nurses Association in particular among many other key validators from across our educator landscape of our decision, including the two folks to my right here. Judy was with me on Friday in East Brunswick.

I also need to be very clear about one more thing. There are now 13 kids with COVID currently being treated in our hospitals, two of whom are in intensive care. There are those on one side in this who will preface these numbers with the word only. They are essentially perfectly accepting of these numbers. Remember, we have seven losses of life since the beginning of this awful pandemic of kids under the age of 18. We can never say only to that. This is what only means to them. They are saying that they're fine with kids, many, by the way, still too young to be vaccinated, contracting COVID. They are saying that they will just accept an untold number of asymptomatic children spreading the Delta variant among their educators and friends in their schools or taking COVID home to spread among their families and communities. They are saying that they will accept outbreaks that shut down schools just like what's happened in other states without masking requirements where entire districts are shut down with hundreds if not thousands of kids and educators exposed.

When they say only, they are saying that they are perfectly willing to accept children landing in the ICU or dying from COVID. They won't say it out loud, but it's exactly what they are saying, and I cannot be kind about that. It shouldn't surprise anyone that we along with I firmly believe a majority of New Jerseyans wholeheartedly reject that in its entirety. We are not going to sacrifice the health of any child, any educator, any family, or any community. We're not just going to let COVID shut down our schools. Unless I need to remind everyone, having our schools open for full-time, in-person instruction is critical for our recovery, especially for working families and especially for working moms. We're not willing to surrender our kids to this virus, unlike those opposed to this commonsense plan. That is exactly what this is about. On one side, those willing to sacrifice our kids for politics. On the other, those of us committed to doing everything we can to protect them. As I said, I cannot be kind about this. This is exactly how this breaks.

Across the nation, we are seeing leaders reassess their past positions against masks, and we are seeing local leaders who want to protect kids push back against those who continue to make masks political. By the way, in Florida, as we speak, there's just under 14,000 people in hospitals with COVID. At last count, Judy, 174 of whom are kids in the pediatric category. It's jaw dropping. We pray for each and every single one of them, and we pray for folks, particularly leaders, to do the right things. The past 17 months have called upon us to all be a little bit more selfless and a bit less selfish. A few of our fellow New Jerseyans could use a reminder that this is not a me moment. This is an us moment. Also, a quick note that on Friday, I signed an executive order effectuating the policy we announced last week requiring workers and employees in healthcare facilities or high-risk congregant living settings to be vaccinated by September 7th or face regular testing. We expect robust collaboration between management and labor as entities craft their policies over the next month.

Let's get onto the day's numbers. As of this morning, the total number of New Jerseyans who have now received either the one dose of the J&J vaccine or the two from either Pfizer or Moderna is now at that number, 5,362,376, and by the way, Judy and Tina, we have to note that more than 640,000 additional folks have received their first shots of Pfizer or Moderna and are waiting to get their second. If you are one of them, please do not forget to go back to get your second dose. That's the only way you get yourself fully protected, and we continue to run ahead of the national averages on the second dose. I looked for the past number of days. We've had an uptick in first doses, and we need to keep it up. We need to get more folks vaccinated. Period.

We also have updated figures on breakthrough cases from Dr. Ed Lifshitz and his team at the Communicable Disease Service at the Department of Health. These numbers take us through July 26th, and as you can see here, the vaccines are still proving themselves highly effective, and well more than 99% of those who've received them are finding protection from contracting the virus, from hospitalization, and please God, thank God, from a COVID-related death. I do want to spend a minute on just the latest week in this data, and that's from July 20 to July 26th, and you can see that in front of you. During this week, we counted 4,332 new positive cases. 3,529 of these – that's 81.5% – were of unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated people. Additionally, of the 378 new COVID positive hospitalizations statewide for the week, 97% or 367 out of 378 were people who were either again unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated.

During this week we reported with the heaviest of hearts 21 COVID-related deaths. Again, those are deaths reported by our hospitals, not yet confirmed. Every single one of them was someone who was either unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated. That's the second week in a row when we did not have one death from among the fully vaccinated. Let me just say this unequivocally. We pray for each and every one of these people, whether they're hospitalized or God forbid passing, but we have to deliver the facts. This is a pandemic of unvaccinated persons in New Jersey. Again, if you are still on the fence as to whether or not to get vaccinated, please take these numbers to heart. The vaccines work. They are safe. They are free. They are widely, widely accessible. Just go to that website, covid19.nj.gov/finder to find somewhere near you, and again, remember, they work, they're safe, and they're free.

Here are the numbers of new cases for today and over the past week. There were a total of 11,333 positive PCR and presumed positive antigen tests returned. The rate of transmission's currently 1.35, which still shows a rapid space of spread. It's come down a little bit, Judy. Not yet below 1, but hopefully, it stays coming down. The positivity for tests taken last Thursday, 5.18% and for the entire week through Friday – sorry, from Friday, July 30th until Thursday, August 5th was 5.68%. That's on more than 167,000 PCR tests. Turning to our hospitals, as of last night's count, you can see 570 COVID positives, 78 PUIs. By the way, that's a jump of a total of 128 patients from last Monday. Our intensive care units counted 117, 22 more than a week ago. 59 of them were requiring a ventilator to breathe. That's almost a 50% increase from last week. While we are relieved to see so many leaving our hospitals alive, the fact that they are replaced almost to a person each day by someone else with COVID coming in continues to be worrisome.

Today we are reporting an additional three confirmed COVID-related deaths. Over the past week, we confirmed the loss of a total of 52 blessed brothers and sisters from our state. Given the data I just cited on effectiveness of vaccines, it can be easily inferred that these deaths or very likely to be almost exclusively if not exclusively folks who are either

unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated. The number of probable deaths has been revised to 2,720. That's an increase of one. Let's take a minute as we do every day to remember a handful more of the blessed lives lost in our New Jersey family.

We'll start – look at that smile. We'll start in Hackensack, which was the home of this guy, John Vettoso, who lost his battle with COVID on March 18th. John was a successful accountant having owned and operated his own practice for nearly a half a century. He had also served our nation in the United States Army between 1968 and 1974. From his professional and military days, he had made numerous lifelong friends. He was a lifelong Yankees, Jets, and Nicks fan – had a good run here with the Yankees of late – a country music lover, and a regular card player and frequent visitor to Atlantic City. He left behind his children Brian and Lisa Beth along with their spouses as well as his significant other JoAnn and her family, and I had the great honor last week of speaking to all three, JoAnn, Brian, and Lisa Beth. I should note that John had received his first vaccine dose and was awaiting his second when he fell ill, so again, if you've gotten your first, make sure you get your second, and I know John's family would want to be sure that you knew that and that you were around for your loved ones. May God bless and watch over John, and we thank him for our service to our nation and bless his family that he leaves behind.

Next up, we're going to remember this guy in the middle, Dennis Valenza, a Hackensack native who was living Saddlebrook when he passed on February 4th and who had also been a longtime resident of Jefferson Township and Morris County. A lot of folks in Lodi knew Dennis if not by name then by face as he was a letter carrier for the United States Postal Service in that community for many years, and when he wasn't walking his rounds, Dennis could still be found on his feet both as an avid bowler and an avid golfer. Dennis is survived by his companion Lorraine along with his sons Scott and his daughter Danielle, and I had the great honor of speaking with Danielle last week, and he's survived as well by Danielle's husband Ernie and his five grandchildren – you've got a couple of them right there – Olivia, Brady, Alexis, Mackenzie, and Zoe. Dennis also left behind his brother Dr. James Valenza and sister-in-law Christine. We thank Dennis for his many years of service to the community and may God bless and watch over his memory and his family.

Finally today, we honor the legacy of a renowned musician and River Edge resident Salvatore "Sal" Spicola. He was 72 years old when COVID claimed his life on February 22nd. He was born in Pennsylvania and raised in West Babylon New York by his adoptive parents. He showed tremendous talent early on as a saxophonist. I want to make sure the folks to my left and right are paying attention to this one, and by the age of 15, he was playing professionally alongside Chuck Berry and by the age of 19 was touring with the legendary jazz master Lionel Hampton as a member of his band. Sal took time to attend Boston's prestigious world-renowned Berklee College of Music and stayed in that city for several years leading his own band and performing with the Boston Pops among so many other gigs. I say this as a former clarinet player. He played with Woody – not a very good one.

He played with Woody Herman's Thundering Herd, he toured with Joe Walsh, and he took part in national tours with multiple Broadway shows as well as on Broadway, and he played – I believe he originated the famous saxophone solo in *Miss Saigon*. Sal called River Edge home for more than 25 years and spent the last year living in Paramus. He left behind his wife Bonnie, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last week, his daughter Jenny – and that's Jenny right there – and a tremendous musical family, his brothers and sisters in the American Federation of Music local 802, of which he was a longtime member and many others he performed with and met along the way. We trust Sal is somewhere where the stage lights are on for him, and may God bless him, and we thank him for a lifetime of music and bless his family he leaves behind.

These are just three from among the more than 26,000 members of our New Jersey family who have been taken by this virus. Please help us protect every possible life. Get vaccinated. Even if you are vaccinated, use your common sense to further protect yourself. Do things like wear a face mask inside when you're not sure of the status of – the vaccine status of those around you, particularly when you're packed in on top of each other. Not on COVID, but I want to go back to the topic of music. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the passing in the weekend of this guy, Montclair's own Dennis DT Thomas. He was a founder of the legendary Kool & the Gang. He was 70 years old. There's no denying the impact DT and his bandmates had, and his legacy will live on through timeless music that continues to be part of milestone celebrations around the world. We send condolences to his family, his bandmates, his friends, and his fans.

Moving on, I want to give a huge shoutout to Trenton's Villegas family. The Villegas family came to the United States from their native Guatemala nearly 40 years ago, and in 2003 they opened the first United States outpost of the famous Guatemalan bakery Guatepan right here in Trenton, and today they have three locations across the state. Throughout the pandemic, the Villegas family knew that they had to stay open to continue feeding the families and communities where Guatepan operates. For countless customers, Guatepan provides much more than a basic necessity but a taste of their native land. Thankfully, Annette Villegas, on the right, who runs the family business alongside her brother and sister was able to work with the New Jersey Economic Development Authority to receive a grant that kept Guatepan's ovens hot and

their customers' tables full. I had the opportunity to catch up with Annette last week and thank her for her leadership in our state's Latino business community. Check them out, guatepan.com. Spell it just like you see it there, G-U-A-T-E-P-A-N.com.

Next, I want to send one last congratulations to every New Jersey athlete who represented our nation at the Tokyo Olympics, which closed yesterday. We sent a super talented delegation of 24 athletes, and they did not disappoint. It seemed like we were cheering for a New Jerseyan in nearly every final in every event in which they competed, and a whole bunch are coming home with some hardware. Excuse me. Carli Lloyd and Tobin Heath, the prides of Delran and Basking Ridge respectively, have bronzes in women's soccer. We have four silver medals. They are hanging around the necks of Toms River's Todd Frazier in baseball, Colts Neck equestrian jumper Jessica Springsteen, Harding Township triathlete Morgan Pearson in the mixed relay, and Willingboro's English Gardener, who was part of the women's 4 x 100-meter relay team. In basketball, Newark's Bam Adebayo is coming home with a gold. Then there are Dunellen's Sydney McLoughlin and Trenton's Athing Mu who are each coming home from the track with two gold medals each. Sydney is also coming home with a new world record in the women's 400-meter hurdles.

A couple of notes on Sydney's and Athing's relay performances. They ran the opening and anchor legs respectively in the 4 x 400-meter relay. Sydney had the honor of being the last runner ever to hand off the baton to the legendary Allyson Felix, and Athing's closing lap in a scorching 48.34 seconds would have been gold-worthy – gold medal worthy on its own, and get this. Athing is 19 years old. Sydney turned 22 on Saturday. I think everybody joins me in saying I can't wait for the Paris games in 2024 to see what else they can do, but again, to every one of these athletes, you did your home state proud. God bless you and thank you. Congratulations again. Thank you for an exciting two weeks, and I know somewhere in our state is a young boy or girl who is taking inspiration from you all to begin their own Olympic journey.

Finally, a quick programming note that we will be with you remote for next week. I am trying to leave New Jersey tomorrow evening to join my family for some vacation time, and then I expect to return next Thursday the 19th, but as always, sooner if need be. I will never be more than a call or a text away, and I'll be in touch daily with acting Governor Sheila Oliver, and the woman to my right, Judy Persichilli, Pat, and others if need be. Before I leave, among other stops I will make between now and tomorrow night, I will have the great honor tomorrow morning to join the family of former colleagues of the late judge and state legislator, Peter J. Barnes III, a giant, to officially rename the Dismal Swamp, an ecological gem by the way in Middlesex County, the preservation of which was a passion of Peter's. We're going to rename that tomorrow in his honor. With all that said, please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor, and good afternoon. Today I want to focus my remarks on the concern physicians around the state are expressing about the rise in COVID-19 hospitalizations and the threat the highly transmissible Delta variant poses, particularly to our children. As I said last week, we continue to see an increase in hospitalizations, among those under the age of 18. As the Governor noted, as of last night there are 13 children hospitalized with COVID in New Jersey, including 2 in intensive care units.

In January, 0.8% of our admissions to our hospitals were among those under the age of 18. Today it's 2.6%. With the circulation of other respiratory viruses, pediatricians are reporting greater number of sick children than they normally see this time of year. While the numbers remain low in New Jersey, we see that states with lower vaccination rates like Florida or Texas are seeing higher rates of children with symptomatic COVID-19 entering hospitals sicker and with more serious symptoms.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, nearly 72,000 children tested positive for COVID-19 in the last week of July, an increase of 84% over the prior week. Long-haul or prolonged symptoms of COVID-19 are also occurring in children, although less than in adults. The symptoms include fatigue, difficulty concentrating, brain fog, and malaise. Also, children who have tested positive for COVID-19 may suffer from multi-system inflammatory syndrome. We've had over 130 cases in New Jersey, and the children generally recover, but that recovery can be slow.

All these developments point to an urgent need for everyone to get vaccinated, especially for parents to take their 12 to 17-year-olds to be vaccinated as soon as possible. Most schools in New Jersey open around September 8th, so getting a COVID-19 test or vaccination this week will allow enough time to receive a second dose before school starts, guaranteeing the best possible protection against COVID-19 and the highly transmissible Delta variant. As I've said, vaccination is the best weapon that we have against this unrelenting virus. At the same time, we must continue to practice all of our other preventive strategies, washing our hands frequently, physically distancing, staying home when you're sick, and getting tested if you have symptoms.

There will be back-to-school COVID testing and COVID vaccination events around the state this month, and I want to urge parents to take advantage of these opportunities and get your children vaccinated if they are 12 years or older. Our county ambassadors are working with county and local health departments, schools, community health centers, and community groups to host back-to-school vaccination and testing clinics right here in the capital city this week.

Beginning on Wednesday the city of Trenton, the Trenton school district, and the city health officials will offer free COVID-19 testing and vaccination in 15 city schools, ranging from elementary to high school in each city ward and the Trenton school district building as well. The Trenton back-to-school week in collaboration with the New Jersey Department of Health will begin Wednesday, August 11th and continue through Monday, August 16th.

Testing and vaccination will be open to all eligible students, faculty, staff, family, and community members. All are welcome and all are encouraged to get tested and vaccinated. All three vaccines will be available. Health officials will be onsite to provide medical screening and answer questions. The hope is that we will be able to increase the percentage of vaccinated 12 to 17-year-olds in Trenton, which currently stands at about 43%.

I also want to note that this is National Health Center Week, which provides all of us with an opportunity to thank our healthcare professionals for their dedication and tireless commitment to serving their patients and the communities, particularly over this past year-and-a-half. FQHCs, community health centers are treasured assets in our communities, providing preventive and primary care to more than a half a million of our most vulnerable members of our communities every year. During the pandemic, community health centers provided COVID-19 testing to individuals who otherwise may have gone untested, including going into farms to provide testing for seasonal migrant workers who come into our state. Now they are playing a vital role in helping to vaccinate as many individuals as possible. To date 62 health center sites across New Jersey have administered more than 470,000 doses. Many of our community health centers will be holding back-to-school events this week and several will be providing COVID-19 vaccinations during these events.

On to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 651 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive individuals or PUIs. A hundred and seventeen are in ICU, and fifty-nine are on ventilators. There are, fortunately, no new reports of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children. There are a total of 130 cumulative cases in our state. The state veteran's homes, there are no new cases among its residents. At the state psychiatric hospitals we are reporting one additional case among a patient at Ann Klein.

New Jersey's percent positivity overall as of July 29th is 5.18%, the northern part of the state 4.60, central 5.28%, and south 6.74. That concludes my report. Let's continue to stay safe. Let's get vaccinated to protect ourselves, our family, our friends, most importantly our children, and enjoy a safe and healthy summer. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. A couple of things, and tell me if you – I think you and I are in agreement on this. If you break the adolescent where they're eligible for a vaccine between the 12 to 15-year-olds on the one hand and the 16 to 17-year-olds on the other hand, a couple of observations; number one, the good news is we're running ahead of the nation on both. The more challenging news is the take up is not where it needs to be, particularly for that 12 to 15 cohort. For the folks who are eligible in both of those groups, 12 to 15 and 16 to 17, we need more of you to step up.

The other thing worth noting, just under 115,000 positive COVID cases cumulatively in the state for kids under 18 since this whole thing started. It's not like it doesn't hit these kids. Thankfully, thank God, as I mentioned earlier, only seven losses of life. God bless each of those precious little kids. I say only with the heaviest heart because don't tell that to any of those seven families.

We just need more folks period, but in particular in that adolescent range to get vaccinated. Thank you for all. Pat, over to you. Anything you've got on weather or other matters? Great to see you.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Weather, we are expecting showers and thunderstorms this week, particularly in the afternoon and evening hours. There's also excessive heat and humidity expected Wednesday through Thursday and our OEM folks and National Weather Service are watching two systems of interest right now down in the tropics in the Caribbean, just keeping an eye on those storms. Not sure what they will develop into, if anything, but as always, monitoring that 24-7, Governor. That's all I got.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Pat. Thank you for everything. I think with that, I mentioned we'll be virtually with you next week. Unless you hear otherwise, we'll be gathering here two weeks from today, same time, same station.

Again, particularly as we turn towards back to school, less in August than in September potential, we may well pick up the frequency of these discussions. We'll see how things look. I hope it's not because things get worse or get a lot worse. With that, Brent, let's start with you in the front row here. Good afternoon.

Q&A Session

Brent Johnson, Star-Ledger: Good afternoon. Given the explosion of cases across the country, does the state plan to bring back any travel advisory restrictions? All 21 counties are now on the CDC's high risk of substantial transmission list. Do you see more of a need to install a mask mandate statewide now? Now that masks will be mandated in schools, do you also plan to mandate teachers get vaccinated? New Jersey is now recorded 300 deaths per 100,000 residents. It's the first state to reach that mark. What is your reaction to that?

Governor Phil Murphy: Is that cumulative? On the last one, we've said this countless times; we are the most densely populated state in the nation. We got clobbered at the beginning. The second wave before the vaccines where they really found their footing was a lot longer for us than it was for some other states. The variants feed on our density. Our density is normally a really good thing. This just in, not in a pandemic.

Go back up to the top, that certainly is a possibility. You've got some real hotspots. Frankly, when you look at frequency of travel, far more domestically than internationally; Indonesia has got a big challenge at the moment. There's not a lot of traffic in and out of New Jersey to Indonesia. Historically there has been to places like Florida, which as I mentioned earlier, please keep every one of them in your prayers. They're just under 14,000.

I would just suggest to everybody, I've only taken two commercial flights since the beginning of this pandemic. Mask wearing is mandated and people are complying overwhelmingly. Just be smart about where you're traveling and what your posture is when you're in transit and when you get there. Not yet on terms of mandating masks, Brent, but we've said many times you have to leave all options on the table. Tina, you may have a thought on this.

I'm going to practice without a license here. The Delta variant in places like the UK, India, although that's starting to bounce, in Jakarta, I was on with some folks this weekend, takes off and looks like it's going to go to the moon. Then all of a sudden it starts to trail off. I don't want to hold out false hope, by any means, but that is one potentiality here if it follows the same path. That would be a good thing, I hope sooner than later. Is that fair?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Yeah, that's correct. If we can learn from what we've seen in the UK and India, there has been a rapid rise in the decrease. There are always caveats for that because it really depends on ensuring that we keep those vaccination coverage rates up. It also is predicated on ensuring that we take appropriate precautions. There are a lot of different factors that play into the potential precipitous fall. It's unpredictable. COVID is unpredictable, so we just have to be cautiously optimistic.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, this is a good opportunity to repeat something we hit over the past couple of weeks. Every time the experts like you all think we've got it figured out, it takes a turn. Frankly, more negative than positive turns. There are some positives that have taken.

In terms of schools and vaccinations, Brent, I think no news to report there. Just to repeat that we started with our most vulnerable communities, hospital, long-term care, corrections facilities. We've said we would consider and then put in place sending rings out from there. We're looking at all options in terms of what moves to make next there. The double-headed notion feels like the right one, Judy, to us, which is either require a vaccination or a very high frequency of testing alongside of it whenever it is that we get there. Thank you. Let's go back to Daniel, if that's okay. Daniel, good afternoon.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Good afternoon, Governor. What do projections show for when the Delta variant could peak? Also, what do they show in terms of high and low estimates for hospitalizations, daily cases, and fatalities? Are there any differences for vaccinated and unvaccinated people?

There's quite a lot of events, concerts, festivals this summer and fall. There's the Atlantic City Air Show, football season, MetLife and Rutgers Stadium. Should these be cancelled, should people not go to them, or should they be required to wear masks? On that note, should people reconsider their August or Labor Day travel plans, maybe alter those plans to note see high-risk family members given the trajectory of the Delta variant?

What's the status on alternatives to New York City's vaccine mandates for indoor activities? What restrictions will be next now that K-12 settings you have to wear a mask? Are there any public figure, elected officials, or members of public personalities on social media that you think are contributing to this information? If so, who stands out to you among them? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Projections, anything you want to say on projections, Judy? Sorry, before you answer, Daniel also asked is there a difference from unvaccinated versus vaccinated? The answer to that I can say without even asking you is absolutely. Please, go ahead.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: You know, we do predictive modeling, but I have to just make sure I emphasize the word predictive. We put in a set of assumptions, and we make an assumption about how many people are vaccinated versus unvaccinated, how many persons under investigation convert to confirmed cases, how efficacious the vaccines are against what we know right now. We think with all the predictive modeling we're doing that – it's done to make sure you have the capacity to take care of people. It looks like our hospitals have the capacity to take care of people, even if the doubling time of both cases and the hospitalizations increase exponentially. The most I can say is we do expect, I would think, 1,000 cases easily a day for awhile. It's a prediction. If that gets converted into hospitalizations, which should be higher than what we're seeing right now, but not totally through the roof at this point.

Governor Phil Murphy: It's important to note we've got just about 650-something in the hospital, and our peak was 8,270. We're not happy about the 650-something, but it's a heck of a distance from the 8,270. On the venues and the events, I think it's too – today is August 9th – too early to make the call what it looks like. Remember, this is a much different beast outside than inside. That's an important point to make.

As it relates to masking or any other realities, you could see a difference between an outdoor event and an indoor event. I'm not aware of anybody who's cancelling at the moment. I hope it stays that way. Travel plans, I think we mentioned this a minute ago, you've got to use your head. Again, I'd say even when you're not traveling, we're begging everybody not just to get vaccinated, but also to use your common sense.

Common sense to me in particular is wearing a mask when you're inside and you're not sure of the vaccine status of the people you're with. The more crowded it is, the more reason it is to do that. Is that fair to say?

Nothing new on mandates on the New York City question. Again, we look at everything. We want to make sure that we can also enforce getting back to – we haven't done this in awhile, Pat – executive order of violations. You want to make sure that whatever you put in place you can enforce. We continue to see the economy, thank God, is doing well and a lot of people are living their lives outside as opposed to inside. We have the weather on our side to allow that for a period of time longer.

The disinformation, there's probably too many to name. They're making people sick, and in some cases they're killing people. Other people are irresponsibly repeating stuff that they're hearing as though it's true. I'm not getting political, but the people I'm running against started repeating this ridiculous Fox News narrative that the reason why COVID is raging in Texas and other places like that is because illegal immigrants are coming over the border, encouraged by this president with COVID and then being put on buses and sent to states.

That's like tinfoil hat stuff. Let's call the balls and strikes as we see them. If you hear something that's crazy like that, be responsible. Don't repeat that, in addition to calling out the person who said it. I'll leave it at that. Nice to see you. Alex, let's go back to you. Good afternoon.

Alex Zdan, News 12 NJ: Good afternoon. First question is for –

Governor Phil Murphy: By the way, I was somewhere Saturday watching you on television with full face in a restaurant. I was in a restaurant. I hardly recognized you.

Alex Zdan, News 12 NJ: I had to shave. That's why. For Dr. Tan, I'd like you ask you going forward as the Delta variant spreads, what are the metrics that people should be looking at to find out how severe it is? Are cases or hospitalizations more important? If we look at the numbers that came out today and we have a situation where we have 650 people in the hospital, 651, but as the Governor said, that's nowhere near where we were during the 1st wave. Fortunately, just 59 of those people are on ventilators. What's the best metric to determine the severity of the Delta variant spread in New Jersey?

For Commissioner Persichilli, this is probably more of a question for the education commissioner, but you're here and you had a role in drafting those guidelines. If a student in September refuses to wear a mask in class, what happens? Are they disciplined? Are they sent home? What kind of punishment could they face? Could their parents face punishment? In any circumstances, would yourself or school authorities recommend a child or a parent to child welfare authorities? For you, Governor, you said that –

Governor Phil Murphy: I missed the part of that question for Judy.

Alex Zdan, News 12 NJ: Any situation where you refer to the child welfare authorities, a parent or a student, if the student is not wearing a mask, any circumstance? For you, Governor, you just said that you're not getting political, but you say your political opponents want to sacrifice kids. They say they want to surrender kids to the virus. Most of the people watching this are pretty smart. They know that just because you say I'm not getting political doesn't mean you're not getting political. It just means you might be being disingenuous. Are you disingenuously injecting politics into this issue?

I also wanted to ask you about the intensive care, the 13 kids in intensive care. Of course, it's a number that our hearts want to be zero. Our hearts want it to be zero.

Governor Phil Murphy: It's 13 in the hospital, 2 in intensive care.

Alex Zdan, News 12 NJ: Two in intensive care. Our hearts all want those numbers to be zero. As governor, aren't you compelled to make your decisions based on the facts? If you set a bar for the only acceptable level of COVID patients in the hospital, children or otherwise, to be zero, isn't that setting us up for years of lockdowns and mask mandates, especially since everyone from Dr. Fauci on down is saying that COVID could become a seasonal thing?

Lastly, on your vacation, you too much of time will you be spending in Italy? Can you at least tell us what country you're going to be in? Monday's briefing, is it going to be conducted by the acting governor or you from your Italian mansion? Finally, what kind of message are you sending the state by alerting them to a surge in Delta variant cases, alerting them to this danger, and then going off for a ten-day vacation?

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay, I love the way you ask your questions. Tina, I'm going to come back to you in a second. I think, Judy, on your and my behalf, we're going to defer on what the kid faces if he refuses or she refuses to wear a mask just because the rules of the road are being promulgated as we speak or being written. Is that fair to say? I don't want to put Judy in the judge and jury position here.

All kidding aside, not disingenuous at all. We've got to call things as we see them. With respect, I reject the premise that I'm either being political or disingenuous. I'm trying to call this as we see it. I was asked by Daniel in that case is there anybody out there that's causing particular issues. When you start to parrot conspiracy theories that have no basis in fact, you are making people less healthy and putting their lives at risk.

The answer is no on that front. I know you said this with respect. I don't doubt that. You're not saying only 13 and only 2, and I appreciate that. Judy and I heard a lot at the end of the week and over the weekend.

We heard a lot of only, and it's our job collectively to make sure – you have to put meat on the bones of what only means. As I mentioned, just under 115,000 cases of COVID positive for kids under the age of 18 since the start, that's a fact. There are those numbers of kids in the hospital. The vaccination rate of adolescents is not where we need it to be. For all those reasons, we've just got to make sure we're being honest with people. This gets to the back half of your question; does that mean we're in a forever and for always thing? The answer is I think we can say with great conviction no. I think Ed Lifshitz about a month or so ago compared a really bad flu season with the current annualized losses of life, at least at that point. It was worse than a really bad flu season, but it was coming down toward that.

I don't want to speak for Judy and Tina, and they'll chime in in a minute. I believe at the end of the day once we work our way through vaccinations, smart behavior in the near term, variants running their epidemiological course, that this will be in the category of it'll be with us, but we'll be able to live a normal life with it. The flu season is with us every year. Like clockwork I go in every October and get the flu shot.

If you have symptoms, whether COVID, flu, or what, you take yourself off the field. I think that's the reality that we are ultimately going to get to. I mentioned on the masking that we're saying the start of the school year is going to start that way. I hope the variant runs its course. I hope that by smart adherence to public health measures that we accelerate its leaving. We get more people vaccinated, all that, together.

I'm going to let you all come back to what we should be looking at to see how severe the variant is. On vacation with my family, I said on Friday I think someone asked me it's Italy. Sheila and Judy and Pat and Tina I think will do the briefing on Monday. We will be in touch daily, as I mentioned, Sheila, Judy, and I. We've already set up a protocol. Listen, I'm no different than any other family. After this past 17 months, just having a few days together is something that I think all of us want to do with our family, and I'm looking forward to that. They left on Friday. If that weren't enough, we've got an extraordinary, capable team here, and I'll be in touch with them every day.

Alex's good first question, if you're looking to measure the severity of where we are on the Delta variant, Tina and Judy, anything you want to add to that or anything I've said.

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Generally the metrics that we look at to assess severity of the impact of a disease are hospitalizations and deaths. Sounding like a broken record from last year, the idea is, again, we want to flatten that curve because we want to minimize the impact to the healthcare system because having an increased burden of hospitalizations will impact healthcare for every condition, not just for COVID. That said, what we do know is that the vaccines are really effective against hospitalizations. They're also very effective against deaths. CDC reiterated a lot of recent studies that have been done in the UK as well as they had released a report about a week ago or two weeks ago, rather, looking at an outbreak in Massachusetts that despite the fact that there were a lot of breakthrough infections in this particular community in Massachusetts, there were very – there weren't that many hospitalizations and no deaths because of this highly vaccinated group.

We recognize that also deaths – CDC has said nationally even though we've seen a big spike in cases, the actual proportion of deaths overall, even though deaths are a lagging indicator, have been much lower, again probably attributable to some sort of effect from the vaccination effort throughout the country.

I would actually just like to mention that since the Governor alluded to influenza, since we're talking about the importance of immunization and since August is immunization – National Immunization Awareness Month, it is really important to remind people to be thinking ahead about getting up-to-date on their immunizations and we didn't see,

during 2020 or 2021, flu season – much of a flu season at all, but let's try to avoid having a twindemic this year and just remind people to also get that flu vaccine, too.

Governor Phil Murphy: Great reminder. I promise you I will. Judy, anything you want to add, or you good? Two clarifications or one answer, actually, Alex. My team tells me that the school district itself would come up with the appropriate consequence in question that you asked That's number one. Number two, I think I said this earlier. I misspoke earlier. There's actually no briefing next Monday. I think Sheila and Judy will be out there doing events and briefings but there won't be an actual briefing, remote – virtual or otherwise. I get that right, Mahen? Okay, thank you.

Mike, good afternoon. Good to see you.

Mike Catalini, Associated Press: Good to see you, too, thanks. I'm wondering, Commissioner, if New Jersey hospitals have been hearing from hospitals in other states, doctors in other states whose ICUs are on divert because of COVID or other reasons. Have you been hearing from them? Are they asking to situate patients in New Jersey hospitals? If so, can you just give some detail about that? Are there any government rules in place governing how that works? Maybe they already exist.

Some of the other questions I had, Governor, been asked, I was just going to ask you for an update if you had one on Edna Mahan closure. I know it's been two months since you said you'd worked on that. You said it could take years. Curious whether there's anything new on that.

Governor Phil Murphy: No update on that but that's something we're very focused on but no news to make there.

Mike Catalini, Associated Press: Finally, when you signed the recreational marijuana law in February, you said it could be about six months before the recreational market was up and running. We're coming in on six months since you signed. I'm curious if you have any update on where things stand on that. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thanks, Mike. On that last one, they're working – the commission's working morning and night to get the rules promulgated and put in place. No update. I think I may've been a little bit optimistic, but I'm in the category of I'm much more focused on getting it right than getting it fast, although we'd like both, but nothing beyond that.

Judy, I was going to raise this one as well earlier. Given the raging numbers in places I mentioned – Florida, just under 14,000 hospitalizations. Are hospitals hearing a lot of help staffing or other PPE, other matters?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I'm on calls regularly with the Hospital Association and the CEOs of our 71 hospitals. We just had one last week. They did not report hearing any calls for staff or PPE. We may – as you know, we maintain an operational PPE and a strategic PPE and equipment. In terms of being in-state, we're comfortable that we have what we need. What they are doing is learning from what they're seeing in hospitals in other states. We're evaluating our pediatric capacity, not only bed availability but also critical care availability. They're all finalizing or they have in place agreements with the pediatric centers throughout the state for transfers if that becomes necessary. We're planning for what we're learning about what's going on outside of New Jersey, planning for the worst and hoping for the best. We'll be ready no matter what the circumstances.

Governor Phil Murphy: I mentioned and Alex asked about this, 13 kids in the hospital in New Jersey, too, in ICU. Florida has 174 last count in the hospital, kids. I'm not sure how many in ICU, but keep them all in your prayers most importantly. If they ask for help, we will be there. We've already done that with that awful building collapse a couple months ago. I know Judy and the Hospital Association will do whatever they need to do. Thank you.

You got something? Good afternoon?

Reporter: Good afternoon. I just have one for you today. Brent asked my first one. What is the threshold/data set you'll use to determine whether a mask mandate will be reinstated for interscholastic sports?

Governor Phil Murphy: I think it's the collection of – I'd repeat something I said to Daniel. I think you've got to look at outside versus inside where the evidence continues to be this thing is a lot more lethal inside than outside. Secondly, it'll be a collection of data that we look at in a normal course of business. I certainly hope that we don't have to get there. I mentioned we're going to begin the school year and I hope we can revisit that when we're safely able to do in terms of masking in schools. We also mentioned there were common sense carve-outs: high heat, the kid who's got some particular medical reality, and the sports piece. Let's hope it stays that way. Thank you.

Let's do Dave and then we'll end up with Nikita. How's that? Dave, good afternoon.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. First question for you and the Commissioner. I know Governor, you had mentioned with regard to the breakthrough cases you had given some statistics for the last – I think it was the last week.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, the last week we have data on, which is July 20 to July 26.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Right. I was going to ask the Commissioner – I don't know if you have the – for the last couple of weeks but what kind of trend are we seeing? The hospitalizations were so rare for vaccinated people and with the Delta variant, they seem to be going up. I've heard wide ranges of people saying all kinds of things about how effective or ineffective, in some cases, people think the vaccines may be with the Delta variant, so if you could just review that for us, that would be great. Governor, with regard to large gatherings, even if they're outside, there's been, I know, more lethal inside than outside, but there is some evidence lately, and I'm hearing and reading things, about the fact that in tight settings, you do have an increased risk with the Delta variant that we did not see in other forms of COVID even if you're outside. Somebody mentioned Giant stadium – MetLife Stadium, 80,000. At PNC, you have 7500 people; it is "outside," the seating area, but it's really tight together and there's not a lot of ventilation there at all. We've had actually several people, including a guy who emailed this morning, was shocked that none of these venues are requiring vaccination status or there's no social distancing. I understand everybody wants to get back to normal and so forth, but if you could comment on that perspective of that.

Lastly, with regard to what you said earlier in the briefing, Governor, your words and your tone with those who oppose vaccines and masks for kids in school seem to be tougher and more direct than they have been in the past. Could you talk a little bit about why that is so? We've actually heard from several people online and listeners who actually applaud your get real, no-nonsense approach and appreciate the fact that you're trying to get tough and cut the baloney with this stuff. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that. On your trend question, which is a good one – so if you looked at the lived experience over seven months, the numbers are in the 99.9, 99-point – that you won't go to the hospital 99.99. You won't go to the ICU unit, and 99.99 that you won't pass, something like that. The numbers just over the past week I know are 100% - I know this for sure, 100% of the folks who passed were either unvaccinated or not fully vaccinated. That's – I think we can say more than broadly consistent with 99.99%. Judy, I think the numbers on hospitalizations are in the 95% range versus the longer look including, by the way, 85% of that longer look that didn't include the Delta variant, that 95 is compared to 99 and change. Does that sound about right, folks? It's off a little bit but there's no question these vaccines work. There's just no question, and I don't think at any moment we ever said, the feds ever said in the Trump Administration or the Biden Administration that they were 100% effective I remember saying when they first came out the fact that they were in the 90s was almost unheard of, and that's what they're proving right now even against the lethal variant.

Yeah, no news to make in terms of what should be required, although that's something we look at and we talk to these venues all the time. The Jets, Giants, Devils, the ROIC itself, these venues are folks we're in regular communication with. I don't want to do Tina's job for sure, but the premise of your question has to be right. There's a bright line between outside and inside, but there's probably a little bit less of a bright line if you're sitting on top of each other even if you're outside. I would just say use your common sense. I suspect I'm not making news today because I don't know of any steps in particular, but I would guess as the weather turns a little cooler, as we get back – not 7500 at PNC, which by the way can accommodate 20,000 I think if you include the lawn but as we get towards football season and you're expecting capacity crowds or yet again, if you get to the Devils season a couple of months later, this is some stuff we're going to continue to review. Is that fair to say? No disagreement on that?

Yeah, I think we've had it. Is that fair to say in terms of being tougher and more direct? It's just – it's like this ridiculous thing about we have COVID because buses came up with illegal immigrants from the border. It's just fantasy land. Folks are saying stuff and believing stuff that's just not true. I don't think we've flipped a light switch. I still hope people get to the right place of their own free will, but irresponsible behavior, irresponsible words, actions or words that are not based on fact, they have to be called out. They have to be called out. I'll just leave it at that. Is that fair to say? Thank you.

Nikita, new organization but good to have you back.

Nikita, New Jersey Monitor: Indeed, greetings from the *New Jersey Monitor*.

Governor Phil Murphy: Welcome. Shameless commercial, there, Pat, if I don't mind.

Nikita, New Jersey Monitor: AFT President Randi Weingarten has come out in favor of a vaccine mandate, and I'm wondering if and how that affects your thinking on the matter. Similarly, the NJEA says that they're waiting for guidance from your Administration on the issue, and I'm wondering if you have any sort of estimate for when that might come. Then lastly on corrections, I'm wondering where the search for Commissioner Hicks's replacement is.

Governor Phil Murphy: Again, good to see you. I have a lot of respect for Randi. We do a lot together. By the way, people associate Randi with educators, which they should, but she and I actually spend at least as much time deliberating on healthcare matters because she represents a big chunk of the great healthcare workers in our state. I think I addressed this to some extent earlier. I think it was Brent's question. This is something we're working on right now,

and your question on timing is my guess is within the next two or three weeks we'll have something we'll be able to put out there would be my guess. Again, we wanted to start with the most time-sensitive and most vulnerable communities first: hospitals, long-term care, etc.

Nothing new on the search front, something we're taking very seriously, something that we mentioned we've got a very good acting commissioner. This is something that we have said we would pursue on a national scale and no news beyond that to report. Good to have you back.

With that, I think we're going to mask up and thank everybody. Judy, thank you, as always. Tina, good to have you with us; Pat, likewise, Parimal, Mahen, everybody else on the team. Again, I misspoke on the virtual. I know Sheila, and Judy, and probably Pat will be out there doing things over the next eight or nine days, but there won't be a formal briefing next Monday. We'll be back here two weeks from today.

Again, I would just ask everybody – and the overwhelming amount of you have done the right thing from moment one, even when it was really hard and really not fun. I just ask please continue to do that. Get vaccinated. If you're in an indoor setting and you're not aware of the vaccine status of everybody or alternatively, you're on top of each other, put one of these on. Try to live as much of your life outside as possible. Please, do what you've done from moment one: believe the science, the data. Know that we try like heck – we try to get it as right as we can, but we at every step of the way make these calls, even if they're really unpopular on science, fact, data. You all have joined us in that from day one. Please continue to do so. I continue to be very optimistic that if we do that, we're going to have better days sooner than later. We've already come a long way. I think we'll get to an even better place sooner than later, and we'll get there together. Thanks, everybody. God bless.

Governor Phil Murphy

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