

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: July 19th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon. Sorry to be a couple behind here. With 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 Department of Health's Communicable Disease Service Medical Director, Dr. Ed Lifshitz – Ed, it's great to have you back. To my left, another guy who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan. We have Chief Counsel Parimal Garg and a cast of thousands.

Before we jump in, I just – we didn't get this done in time for a photo, but I want to give a shout-out in memory of Paul Sollami, Sr., a Mercer County fixture – Judy knew him well – who passed at the age of 90, an extraordinary career of public service, administrative law judge, worked at the municipal level, I believe a 21-year freeholder and was also the director of the freeholder board here. I spoke to his daughter Paula, who's a dear friend, who's the Mercer County clerk this morning. He lived a great life, and we want to salute him. He's in our – his memory and family are in our prayers.

I want to start today on topic as it were with an update in the so-called breakthrough cases that Dr. Ed and his team have been tracking. There are the positive coronavirus cases that occur in people that are fully vaccinated, which is defined as those individuals who are 14 days past the date of their final vaccine dose. Again, Judy and Ed can add more color in their remarks here. The latest data carries us through June 28th, so these numbers include the 4,432,769 individuals who are considered fully vaccinated by that date or who received their final vaccine dose by June 14. From this total population – and Ed, you'll correct the record if it needs to be – the communicable Disease Service under Ed's leadership is reporting a total of 3,474 total positive test results. That means the vaccines in our toolbox, Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, are proving a combined 99.92% effective against contracting the virus.

When looking at the numbers of hospitalizations and sadly deaths among the fully vaccinated, the effective rate is even higher. Dr. Ed's team counted a total of 84 COVID-related hospitalizations among fully vaccinated individuals. This means that vaccines are 99.998% effective in protecting you against a case of COVID that would require you to be admitted to the hospital, and there were 31 counted COVID-related deaths from the more than 4.4 million fully vaccinated individuals, meaning the vaccines are 99.9993% effective in preventing – thank God, I might add – a loss of life. These numbers

Speak for ourselves and they speak volume as to why everyone ages 12 and up who is eligible should go and get vaccinated. Moreover, keep these efficacy rates in mind when we run through today's newly reported cases, new hospitalizations and deaths. Every single number we report today is in all likelihood someone who was unvaccinated. I cannot repeat it enough. We do not have a pandemic among the vaccinated. We only have a pandemic among the unvaccinated.

Thankfully, our vaccination numbers continue to climb. Today we are reporting a total of 5,175,076 individuals who live, work, or study in New Jersey who have now completed their vaccination courses either the one shot from J&J or the two shots from Pfizer or Moderna. A quick note of thanks to those of you who entered our Your Voice, Your Shot video contest to help inspire your fellow New Jerseyans to get vaccinated. I'm pleased to announce that the winning entry was Jersey Summer, which was created by Belmar resident John Walsh. John's video, as well as the other finalist, the Blue Plate Special Bluegrass Band – Pat plays bass in that band – and Christian Castillo can be viewed at covid19.nj.gov/yourvoice. I want to thank each and every one of them, and I want to congratulate John and the other finalists. To them and everyone who participated and contributed, we say thank you.

Now back to the numbers. We have an additional 324 newly reported positive PCR test results and 110 presumed positive antigen test results for today. Over the past week, we have seen an increase in cases, an average of 418 PCR and 157 antigen tests per day, but again – and I cannot stress this enough – the vaccine efficacy data tells us there are almost – these are almost exclusively of those who for whatever reason remain unvaccinated. These unvaccinated individuals are who are feeding the rapid increase in the rate of transmission, which is today at 1.37 meaning that each newly infected person is by themselves infecting more than one other person. The single day positivity rate for all PCR tests recorded last Thursday was 2.5%, and the rate across the entire prior week was also 2.5%. We are seeing positivity crest the 2% mark after being close to 1%, Judy, for many, many days. Again, this is being fueled because of the rapid spread among the unvaccinated.

Looking to our hospitals, the numbers are up moderately from last week with 274 COVID-positive and 64 PUI patients counted as of last night. The number of patients requiring intensive care is today 58 and there are 29 ventilators in use. You can see yesterday's discharges and admissions and unconfirmed losses of life. Again, you can almost bet that every one of these newly admitted patients if not every single one of them is someone who is unvaccinated. We cannot put it more clearly. The vaccines work. They are proving more than 99.9% effective in preventing people from contracting the virus, more than 99.99% effective in keeping people out of the hospital, and more than 99.999% effective in keeping people alive. For your family, for your community, for public health, for common sense, for your own health, please go get vaccinated. We are also reporting today with the heaviest of hearts four newly confirmed COVID-related deaths over the past week we have confirmed a total of 28 individuals to COVID or an average of four per day. Dr. Ed Lifshitz's teams further refined the probable death toll to a total now of 2,718. As is our regular practice, let's now honor three more lives lost.

We'll start today by remembering Bergenfield's Chuk Cha Chang, who was 80 years old when she passed on January 19th, just 40 days prior, she lost her husband of 50 years, the guy on the right, Yong, to cancer, and by the way, she herself had battled cancer. A native of South Korea, where she raised her brothers and ran the family's rice business after the deaths of her parents, she found her way back to the United States into North Jersey for a new life. She first found work in Denville but was better known for the Netcong nail salon she eventually opened and ran. She and Yong had two sons, Tae, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last week, and Kiho. Chuk Cha wasn't one to take lavish vacations or buy expensive things. She'd much rather save to provide for them and their futures. Along with her sons, she also left behind three grandchildren, Johanna, Christopher, and Cooper, who also undoubtedly benefited from Chuk Cha's selflessness and love. We take solace in knowing that she and Yong are reunited and watching over their family. May God bless them all, and we will be forever grateful that they chose to find their American dream in New Jersey.

Next up let's celebrate – look at that smile. Let's celebrate the life of Ethel Butler who passed on March 18th. She was known to most as Ellie. She was 77 years old. She was born in Bayonne and raised in Nutley and had called East Rutherford home for the past two decades. An incredibly selfless and compassionate individual, Ellie was an alcohol and substance abuse counselor serving individuals through both the Runnells Hospital of Berkeley Heights as well as at privately run treatment centers. She answered this calling through her strong belief in second chances, one she applied to herself as a recovering alcoholic and long-time member of AA. Even though she had retired, she kept busy as an active member of the YMCA, the East Rutherford Seniors, the Kip Center in Rutherford, and was a regular volunteer at the Bergen County Animal Shelter. Ellie is fondly remembered by her children Joan, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last week, George, Michael, and Don, and Don's wife Lillian. She also left behind her six beloved grandchildren Thomas, John, Christopher, Robert, Julia, and Donald, as well as her four great grandchildren Thomas, Izabella, Riley, and Rich. We thank Ellie for all that she did to help lift up those who were at their lowest. As some would say, she did the Lord's work, and may God bless and watch over her and her family.

Finally today, for this Monday, we remember Elmwood Park's Otto Bowless. He was 93 years old when he passed back on November 23rd. Born in Guatemala, he would split his time between his native home and his adopted home of New Jersey, traveling back south to take care of his mother. At the age of 21, Otto was inspired by the United States Marines he saw standing guard outside the US Embassy in Guatemala City, and he knew his future was coming to the United States and having his chance to wear his own marine uniform. There he is in it. In the spring of 1951, he arrived in the United States and several months later, his dream came true as he joined the US Marine Corps. He was always proud to be a veteran of the United States Marine Corps. Otto loved to travel just as much as he loved to walk through a local park and take in the fresh air and look at the flowers. He loved animals and never turned down a strawberry milkshake or a piece of apple pie. Who could blame him? He could make anyone laugh and made countless friends.

He left behind his two children, Sofia, with whom I had the great honor of speaking last week, and Fernando. Sofia, by the way, is a nurse who works at a long-term care facility in North Haldon. He also was survived by his six grandchildren and numerous nieces and nephews. In all, eight members of the family – get this. Eight members of the family battled COVID. They lost Otto, but everyone else continues their own paths to recovery, and we wish them all the very best of health, and may God bless Otto. We thank him for his service to our nation. We are proud to have him called a New Jerseyan. Three more names from the thousands we have lost. We honor everyone who has passed throughout this pandemic, and I again urge you to get vaccinated so we can get to that day where there won't be any need to tell any more of these stories.

Let's switch gears and get to some good news, and that is of great small businesses across our state who are open today and contributing to our economic recovery. Because of the partnerships they formed with the New Jersey Economic Development Authority. Today we're putting the spotlight on the Brighter Days Company, a Marlboro-based home fragrance and soy candle business that founder and owner Diana Ulke started in her kitchen in 2016. In early 2020, just before the pandemic hit, Diana signed a lease for a new workshop to not just keep up with the increasing number of orders for her candles but to expand her business to include classes and private events. As Judy and Pat and Ed will know when I say this, she signed her lease on March 1st, exactly three days before the first case of COVID in New Jersey.

Through the Emergency Grant Relief program offered by the EDA, Diana was able to secure the funding she needed to keep both her dream and her business open and viable. She used her grant to keep up with the rent, purchase raw materials, and buy personal protective equipment. I had the opportunity to check in with Diana and to thank her for all she continues to do. The name of her business, by the way, Brighter Days is one that has a special ring to it. We are entering a brighter day and because of Diana and thousands of small business owners like her, it's a day that is just beginning to dawn. Check them out. Please go by and visit Diana, 87 south Main Street in Marlboro. 87 South Main Street in Marlboro.

Finally, God willing, the Olympic games will kick off later this week in Tokyo, Japan. Among the US delegation of athletes are 24 New Jerseyans, so as they begin their Olympic journeys, let's wish them all the very best. On the men's basketball team, Newark's Bam Adebayo, in women's soccer, a legend, Delran's Carli Lloyd, and another giant in the sport, Tobin Heath of Basking Ridge. In track and field, we are especially well-represented, and several New Jerseyans are in prime position to end up on the medal stand. They are Florence's Curtis Thompson, Willingboro's English Gardener, Keturah Orji, a native of Mount Olive, Trenton's Athing Mu, Sam Mattis from East Brunswick, Dunellen's world record holder, Sydney McLaughlin, and Neptune native Ajee Wilson. In equestrian, Colts Neck native Jessica Springsteen, and I should add that New Jersey is also the home of the US Equestrian team whose headquarters are in Gladstone in Somerset County, so we're going to claim the entire team.

On the baseball diamond, another New Jersey legend, Toms River's own Todd Frazier. In women's rowing, Fair Lawn's Tracy Eisser and Molly Reckford of Short Hills – by the way, the entire US rowing team is based out of Princeton, practicing on Lake Carnegie, so we will just go ahead and claim that entire team as our own as well – Piscataway's Colton Brown in Judo and amazingly 20% of the entire US fencing team is in – is from Jersey, Avenel's Dagmara Wozniak, Riverdale's Jackie Debrovich, Teaneck's Khalil and Kamali Thompson, Alan Hadzic of Montclair, and Francesca Russo from Wayne. In rhythmic gymnastics, Caldwell's own Liza Pletneva. Triathlete Morgan Pearson who hails from New Vernon, and in the pool, Morristown's own Nic Fink. We will be watching and cheering on these athletes and every member of the US squad. We are with – we wish them, rather, all the very best, and we congratulate all of them on making Team USA.

On that high note, I think this is a great place to finish up for today. Again, I have to loop back to what I opened with. The vaccines are proving to be highly effective against this virus. There is no doubt they are saving lives. We now only have a pandemic among the unvaccinated. Let's end this. Please, if you have not gotten vaccinated, go out and do so. With that, 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. Good afternoon. Despite New Jersey's successful vaccination program, many residents are still unvaccinated, which is leading to increases in cases and hospitalizations in our state. New Jersey has seen a 20% increase in unvaccinated patients in our hospitals. These hospitalizations are preventable. We have safe and effective vaccines to prevent COVID-19 hospitalization and death. High vaccination rates protect not only those who are vaccinated but also provide a level of protection for those who cannot yet be vaccinated, for example children under 12 years of age. Nationally, the Delta variant, which is highly transmissible and virulent is driving cases in unvaccinated residents including children. It is expected that this variant will cause increasing cases among children who cannot be vaccinated including severe cases. We are concerned. In both Mississippi and Alabama, some children diagnosed with COVID-19 have needed care in intensive care units and also needed the assistance of ventilators. Mississippi reports seven children in ICU right now, and two are on ventilators. Health officials there worry that low vaccination rates are putting our children at risk.

In New Jersey, case rates among children under 12 have increased in line with our overall increase in cases but when we look at the data from June 12th compared to data from last week, case rates per 100,000 have increased 29% among those 4 years of age and under. For those 5 to 10 years of age, the case rate has increased 15%. For those 11 to 13 years of age, case rates per 100,000 have increased 36%. This is troubling because those under 12 cannot be vaccinated yet, so they don't have the protection that vaccine offers. On the other hand, those over 12 can be vaccinated. It is important the vaccinate rate in 12 to 17 year old group is strong as this age group are mixing with those under 12, whether it's in summer camps or in the fall when they go back to school.

The CDC has highlighted that Americans between 12 and 29 are contracting COVID-19 at the highest rates while being the least protected. Ten percent of our cases have been among 5 to 17 year olds, which represents 90.693 children in New Jersey between the ages of 5 and 17 who have tested positive. Currently in our state, individuals ages 19 to 24 have the highest percent positivity at 3.68%. The second highest is among those 25 to 29 years of age at 3.46%. Through the hard work of so many individuals, New Jersey has among the highest vaccination rates in the nation. Seventy percent of New Jerseyans over the age of 30 have received at least one dose of vaccine. However, even though some age groups have high vaccination coverage, younger groups are still lagging. In New Jersey, 61% of those 18 to 29 have received at least one dose, so more needs to be done to increase that rate. Only 42% of those 12 to 17 have received at least one dose of vaccine. To build greater protection for our state, we need more of those individuals and individuals in all of the younger age groups to get vaccinated.

On another note, we're seeing many of those who are vaccinated taking advantage of the Docket app to access their vaccination records electronically. More than 36,370 New Jerseyans accessed their COVID-19 records via Docket so far. Some individuals had trouble finding their records because their contact information is not in the New Jersey Immunization Information system. It is also possible that data submitted to NJIIS by the COVID-19 vaccination site had errors and does not match what the user is entering. To correct their information in NJIIS, the information system, individuals can visit njiis.nj.gov. At the top of the page, they should click on Submit a Request, which brings up a list of NJIIS support topics. Then choose I Want to Request a Copy of My Immunization Record from NJIIS. They enter details of their request on the online form and the support team will respond within one to three business days.

Moving onto my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 338 hospitalizations, and this number has been increasing. Since the last press briefing, there are two new reports of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children. There are currently 130 cumulative cases in our state. None of these children are currently hospitalized.

At the state veterans' homes, there are no new cases among residents of the homes, and at the state psychiatric hospitals, there are no new cases among patients. The percent positivity as of July 15th in New Jersey was 2.5; in the northern part of the state, 2.30%; the central part of the state, 2.73%; and the southern part of the state, 2.65%. That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe and let's get vaccinated to protect our family, friends, and our children, and enjoy a safe, healthy summer. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you for all, both the comments that are unique today in your daily report and as always, thank you. Pat, how are we doing? Weather feels like it's settled down a little bit, but we had some rocking and rolling here pretty bad, a lot of flash flooding, thunderstorms, some power outages. What do you got and thank you for everything.

State Police Superintendent Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Yes, with regard to the weather, it was severe in spots over the weekend. National Weather Service did confirm a tornado that came through part of Burlington County, through Columbus, but again, that was mostly tree damage. I was on with President Fiordaliso from BPU throughout the weekend monitoring the outages, and I think the service providers did a pretty phenomenal job in getting power back up where it went down. May be some storms and showers this afternoon. Again, Wednesday and Friday, chance of some severe thunderstorms and we are, maybe Wednesday afternoon, expecting some coastal flooding.

On a different note, I'm just happy to report that the 80-member team from NJ Task Force 1 did arrive back in Jersey from Florida's building collapse. They did a phenomenal effort in what was an extremely difficult recovery mission down there. We're happy to report back that they all came back safe and sound to Jersey. Thanks, Governor.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank God and hats off to the men and women of Task Force 1 who have consistently answered the call. We've never said no, and that'll always be the case. You got to balance to make sure we've got the right mass of people on the – of teammates on the field far as in New Jersey, but wherever we can we want to help out our fellow states.

Judy and Ed, can I ask – I meant to ask this as you finished up, and maybe Ed has a view on this. There were 31 losses of life among those breakthrough cases of the many millions who've been vaccinated. We know of at least one of them and bless her heart, I don't have her name off the top of my tongue, but she was a transplantee, and her family wanted me to make the point that transplantees are in a pretty unique category for many reasons including the drug companies did not include them in trials. I don't want that to come off as misleading; I think they did it because they wanted to make sure that they could – that the data was reflective of the trials they did. Ed, do you have any sense of comorbidities or any other health challenges that these 31 people had and/or if we don't, do you think there's a way in our reasonable future to get that?

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: We have some information; we don't have perfect information. The short answer is you're absolutely right; obviously the more what we call comorbidities, other health problems you have, the more likely it is that you're can have a bad outcome and coming death. People who are immunosuppressed and transplant people are commonly immunosuppressed are not able to mount the strong immune response to things such as vaccine, so they don't, in general, tend to be as well-protected as other individuals are. Certainly that's one more reason why we encourage everybody to be vaccinated, because you're protecting not only yourself; you're helping to protect those people for whom the vaccines may not work as well, so one more reason to encourage vaccination.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well, said, and thank you for that, and thank you, Judy and Pat. We'll start over here with Elise. Before we do, just to reiterate at least for the time being, we're going to continue in this rhythm which will be each Monday we'll gather. We'll gather a week from today unless you hear otherwise at the same hour. Then in the meantime, either – if any of us are on the road, we'll obviously be communicating electronically and virtually. If there's any news that we think we need to report, we'll revisit that cadence. Otherwise, we'll see everybody a week from today.

Q&A Section

Elise, nice to see you. Welcome.

Elise: Good to see you. Good afternoon. My question is about a New Jersey Transit project in Bay Head where the railroad is rebuilding a power station and locals say that there is potential to pollute Twilight Lake in addition to Barnegat Bay. Their bigger gripe is that NJ Transit is not electrifying this rail line. They say that's really not in keeping with your clean energy policy, that the railroad will continue to rely on diesel locomotives rather than electric. They want to know how does that fit in with where you're pushing this state on renewables. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Elise. I don't know that I've got a specific answer for you, so I'm going to ask Mahen to make sure that I follow up with you. This power station has been a topic of concern I know locally, and this is not a new concern. I suspect the reason is, in terms of electrification versus diesel, is that at least in terms of the infrastructure and their capabilities on that particular location and that particular line that that may be the only choice they have right now. I do know NJ Transit has made enormous progress. There's never a silver lining to a pandemic that takes over 26,000 lives, but in that vain, at least, they made tremendous progress in both the bus and rail lines including the clean energy part of it. With your blessing, Elise, I'm going to ask the team to follow up with you and give you a more specific answer. Mahen, you'll help me out there? Thank you.

Matt, good afternoon.

Matt Arco, NJ.com: Good afternoon. With cases rising and the seven-day average up 100% over this time last month and up over this time last week, how close is the state to reimposing any kinds of restrictions, and what metrics would you folks like – need to see for that to happen? For example, masks, is that – I would imagine that'd be something on the short list. It's something that's being reimposed in LA, so just how close are you to that? On the breakthrough hospitalizations, just given the, I guess, positive metric that – what that means for vaccines, is this something we can have regular updates on on the dashboard? Is that possible.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thanks, Matt. On the former, we're not there yet. We continue to be comfortable with where we are, but we watch this – Judy, I don't want to speak for you and Ed, but we watch this like a hawk. Our strong, strong, strong preference is to not go back. We are among the most vaccinated states in the country, and that's a huge positive.

We need more folks to get vaccinated. We are still doing thousands of first vaccines a day. We need that to at least stay that way if not pick up. Our strong hope is that we can stay as we are. As your questions implies, unlike an HVAC system, a mask is something that you can, frankly, move on a dime if you had to. I'll ask Judy or Ed to add to that.

I would think the extent to which we can get this on the dashboard in terms of breakthrough cases, we absolutely will, but I know it's a fair amount of effort to get to where we are today, so I'd ask any commentary, Judy or Ed, on are you still comfortable with where you are, although we're watching the data like a hawk? Secondly, the dashboard question.

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah, we – I mean, we look at this every day, as you can imagine. We are particularly watching children. I think if we see increases in cases for children, we'll be reaching out to make sure to really amp up our vaccination of all age groups. At this point, hospitalizations, although they've increased, they're somewhat flat and low. More importantly, ICU is 58, 60, so severe disease seems to be under control.

Governor Phil Murphy: Any comment, Ed, on the dashboard? A fair question from Matt on that.

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Yes, and I want to say one quick word about the breakthrough data in general. We are looking and should be able to continue to update it every week. You – one of the reasons why we talk about data going back to the middle of June at this point is because it does take a fair amount of time to bring in the data and compare it across different sources to get it as accurate as possible, so it's not as simple as some of the other data. It is, of course, subject to change as new data comes in, but every week should be very reasonable.

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

Alex Zdan, News 12 New Jersey: Good afternoon, Governor. For Dr. Lifshitz, with so many people in the state fully vaccinated, how is the RT still a reliable metric to gauge the spread of coronavirus? Isn't it different in a vaccinated person versus an unvaccinated person? Dr. Perry Alketa says the reproduction rate of the Delta variant in an unvaccinated person is seven. In a vaccinated person, it's less than one. Should there be separate RTs for vaccinated and unvaccinated briefings to give context? For the Commissioner, the state's death toll is approximately 2700 fewer than the CDC death toll for the state, which is sitting at 26,531. Why is there a discrepancy? Is there a difference in counting? Is the CDC simply adding the probable deaths, which comes to about that number? Are you and the feds using different metrics? For you, Governor, are you aware that Twitter briefly suspended State Senator Declan O'Scanlon over the weekend for his objection to vaccine mandates? Senator O'Scanlon is pro-science and pro-vaccine. He's simply anti-vaccine mandate. Do you agree with Twitter's decision?

The White House has said they've been reaching out to Facebook to try and flag COVID misinformation. Is anyone in your administration, your campaign, or the Democratic party reaching out to social media companies in order to censor posts? Finally, we talk about the Delta variant and the spread throughout the state. We heard some numbers today. One year ago today, we were celebrating the fact that hospitalizations had fallen below 800 for the first time in three months. Fortunately today, hospitalizations are below 300. Is the concern of the Delta variant overblown and is it being pushed for reasons to get people vaccinated or for political reasons?

Governor Phil Murphy: Ed, let me give a couple of comments. I'm glad you raised the RT because you're obviously right. That reality among unvaccinated – I wasn't aware of the seven versus less than one ratio, but that sounds reasonable to me. Seven's pretty high. We were at 5.31 I think was our all-time high, so I'm not sure I'd hang my hat on that. There's no question if you're unvaccinated, the Delta variant – we've been saying this now for months – is highly transmittable and more lethal. It doesn't surprise me, at least, the RT is up. I'll defer to Ed on that. On CDC deaths, I'll defer to Judy and Ed. I had thought they were adding probables into the total, but I'll defer to these folks.

I saw the Twitter action. I don't have any insight into it. I hope that they are consistent across – that their rules and the way they apply these rules are consistent across anybody. In other words, they call balls and strikes equally. I don't believe it was part of Declan's tweet, so this is not related to his tweet, but I do – I did note that he said to a reporter – it could've been you – about the – what had happened. He said listen, if it's – if nobody – if somebody doesn't want to give vaccinated, it shouldn't be the – something like it shouldn't be the government's job to mandate it. After all, they're doing no harm. That last part I would just say with respect is not true. You can – by not being vaccinated, you are choosing to put not just your own health at risk but you are potentially putting others' health at risk. I would beg folks to please get vaccinated. Beyond that, I don't have any specifics.

I'm not aware that we are in touch, although we're in touch with these social media companies all the time. I would broaden what President Biden said to anyone who's commenting on this, including talking heads on television. If they are speaking – if they're either allowing information which is absolutely false and at odds with the facts or they are speaking about things that are at odds with the facts, they're putting people's lives at risk. There's just no other way to put that. With all due respect, I love the premise of your question. We're – this is not overblown. Look at India. Look at Indonesia.

Look at the rates in our state of rate of transmission and the very question if you are unvaccinated, you are – and especially if you've got comorbidities, you are very exposed to a highly transmittable and more lethal form of COVID, period. There's no overblowing with that at all.

Ed or Judy, any comments on the RT and the extent to which it continues to be helpful or not? Any comments on how sadly the losses of life are counted?

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Sure, and I would also start by saying you don't even have to look at India or other places. We can only look at the states in the United States such as Missouri, Arkansas, and Florida, seeing huge increases as well, much higher increases than New Jersey is. Yes, you are correct in what you're saying as far as they are not being high and exactly how high it is, whether it's six, seven, eight. Nobody knows the exact number but certainly it's very transmissible. That tells you how quickly it would be transmitting around if people weren't doing anything, if they weren't being vaccinated, if they weren't social distancing, if they weren't washing their hands, if they're just going back to essentially pre-pandemic normals as far as things go whereas the RT is telling us what's going on right here in our reality given what New Jersey is doing, how many people are vaccinated and everything else that we're doing.

It's also true that there's only one number I look at because to start with, let's say the RT was one. Well, it could be 1 and the cases could be 20,000 every day and so long as the cases aren't going down or up, the RT will stay at 1. Or it could be two, and the cases could be two one day and four the next and in which case, they're doubling. That would certainly be concerning that they're going up so quickly but the numbers would be starting from a much lower number. It is still useful; it is one of the things we look at as far as the other numbers because it does tell us how rapidly things are changing, but it certainly isn't the only thing that we pay attention to.

Governor Phil Murphy: What about the fatality count?

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: As far as the CDC probables, I would have to double-check. I'm not positive on that answer. I'll get back to you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for both. You did not ask it, but I will repeat where I've been on this requiring a vaccine passport or not. I'm open-minded to it but I'm not there yet. My reasons continue to be equity. We know that we are making progress, but we know that we still have work to do in black and brown communities. I don't want to sign up. I suspect Judy, and Ed, and Pat would be similarly minded to something which even inadvertently discriminates against big pieces of our population. Thank you.

Is this – Ashley, is that you?

Ashley Gallagher, New Jersey Globe Yes.

Governor Phil Murphy: Please, congratulations, welcome.

Ashley Gallagher, New Jersey Globe: Thank you. Do you have any comment on Jack Ciattarelli's statement last week about teaching diversity and inclusion including gender and sexual orientation at the elementary school level? One hundred and twenty-seven individuals that you have nominated to state positions requiring Senate confirmation are stalled, many for a long time and some for a year and a half. Do you think the Senate should come back into session before November to act on these nominations, or is it okay for them to wait until after the election?

Governor Phil Murphy: On the latter, I think we've made a lot of good progress, particularly over the past 6 to 12 months working with our Senate colleagues, and I want to give the Senate President, Steve Sweeney, and the Judiciary Chair, Senator Nick Scutari in particular a shout-out and thank them for their partnership. It's a number that I now both they and we want to get at and move the needle in the right direction, and I'm confident we'll be able to do that.

I don't want to get too political. I was asked about this when I was in Washington for some very productive meetings, I have to say. Dividing us is the last thing we need as a state. I mean, we came through that with four years of the prior federal administration. It was a constant us versus them. I am proud beyond words that New Jersey is a beacon in terms of the LGBTQIA+ community including our transparency in education and telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth about that community. The last thing we need is division. The last thing we need is use of words that everybody knows are third-rail words that have a knock-on meaning to it as well. This is New Jersey. This is the United States in the year 2021. Enough already.

Thank you for that and welcome. Good afternoon.

Reporter: Hello. Governor, a new report finds that New Jersey's rental market is the sixth most expensive in the country and a person making minimum wage here would need to work almost three full-time jobs to afford a two-bedroom apartment. What needs to be done to change that, and what are your plans to change housing affordability in the state? We're now seeing more companies mandating vaccines for their employees including Hackinsack Meridian Health. Do

you have any plans for a vaccine mandate for state employees, and do you want to see more companies mandate vaccines for their employees? For Dr. Lifshitz, can you really say that the vaccines are 99%-plus effective with the data that you gave? Isn't it possible that many thousands of these vaccinated – thousands of those vaccinated have come into contact with someone who had COVID – who haven't come into contact with someone who had COVID and so the efficacy of the vaccines has not been tested yet by those cases. How do you tease out the differences and draw conclusions given the data's coming from the wild?

Governor Phil Murphy: I'll start, Ed, and ask you to come in. This is no surprise. New Jersey is one of the most expensive housing markets, rental or ownership, in the United States. We inherited an enormous affordable housing challenge when we came in three and a half years ago, and we've been chopping away at it as best we can. There's all-time high relief on housing and rental assistance in our budget in a lot of the federal money we've distributed. There's not enough supply, so when we talk to developers about a particular development, we have a laser obsession and focus on the percentage of that development that will have affordable housing units, whether they be rentals or for sale. Again, this has been building for decades, and we're doing everything we can to address the reality.

The good news is New Jersey's hot right now. It's been increasingly so and it is right now, and there are a lot of people who want to raise their family here. There are a lot of companies that want to start here or move operations here. That's great, but it further exacerbates a challenge – a very challenging housing market that was already among the most challenging We're going to stay at it.

I think it is different. I already addressed some of this with Alex's good questions. It's different to say I'm not comfortable with a passport requirement because of the inequities than it is to say you've run a hospital or you've run a nursing home. I think in communities like that, we have to be open-minded to the fact that for the safety and security of residents, patients, that you have to be open-minded to that. You started seeing this, I think it was in Houston first, then Barnabas came in, and now you're starting to see just as when Rutgers went with the requirement for higher ed. You're starting to see a big shifting.

An interesting piece online I read, vaccine skepticism for a number of reasons, according to the author, has been going in a good direction. It's still too high, but relative to January, so six months ago, it's going in a good direction. On the list of reasons that this particular author gave is one that we've spoken a lot to, which is your neighbor, your family member, your coworker, got the vaccine months ago and apparently nothing happened to them; they're still in good health. That's having an effect. The bully pulpit is working, including especially – forget about politicians but from doctors, nurses, faith leaders. Thirdly, at least according to this author, another factor is beginning to take hold and that is people realizing they will be boxed out of certain activities in society where they won't be able to participate. Again, I think it's very different when you're talking about a hospital system verses a broad societal reality.

Ed, anything you want to correct the record on, any of that, but I would ask – Ed, you were asked this question: are you sure your numbers are right? Ed, I now know you well enough to know that I'm pretty darn sure your numbers are right but please, address that.

Department of Health Medical Advisor Dr. Ed Lifshitz: Well, the first thing I say is our numbers do sometimes change a little bit, but they're very close You asked excellent questions about vaccine efficacy because it does get confusing and there are different ways to look at it. There's this way to look at it: I go ahead; I vaccinate 100 people and I know of one person who ends up having COVID. One out of a hundred people get COVID; the vaccine was 99% effective. When we're presenting the numbers here today when we talk about the over 4 million vaccinated and the 3400 roughly cases, that's what we're saying is that less than 1% of everybody that's been vaccinated has come down with COVID and been diagnosed with COVID. To be fair, some people will never have been diagnosed and they won't come into the system.

That's not the same way when you hear from trials and other places when they talk about the vaccine being 99% effective, which is another common number you hear about, because this is the way that they do that. They take that same 100 people who are vaccinated, that same one person who came down with a case. You now compare that to 100 people who weren't vaccinated, because that answers your second question: what if they weren't exposed in the first place? You're not going to get sick. Now if I compare those to how many people weren't vaccinated and let's say 20 of those people got ill, now I have 20 people who are ill who weren't vaccinated compared to one person who was vaccinated. Now what I'm doing is I'm comparing that 1 to 20 and I'm saying in that case, it's 95% effective, not 99% effective.

It's really the same numbers looking at it slightly different. It's a question about whether you're comparing it to – what most people want to know is if I get vaccinated, what is the change I'm going to come down with the disease as opposed to comparing yourself to the group of people who weren't vaccinated. Hopefully that answered the question.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well done.

Reporter: And employees?

Governor Phil Murphy: My answer stands. Thank you. Hey, Dave. Good afternoon.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. You talked a little bit about this with an earlier question with regard to the possibility of bringing the masking mandates back. If it is too early to make a call on that, as you suggest, what would your recommendations be? Maybe Commissioner Persichilli, you could also address this, and Dr. Lifshitz, as well. For people have been vaccinated, if they do mask up, who's benefiting in what way? I have a feeling it's mostly for unvaccinated people. Also, with the COVID cases increasing for young children as Commissioner, you were describing in the statistics you presented today, the American Academy of Pediatrics is now calling for schools to enforce universal masking mandates because so many kids will not be protected by the fall and schools will have no way of verifying COVID vaccine status yet unless the CDC very quickly does give the okay for younger kids to get vaccinated. We do know that some studies suggest kids are at very low risk for COVID but again, based on your statistics, Commissioner, there is still a risk. What's your reaction to the Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation and do you think parents should – because you see this a lot with younger kids. They're wearing the mask and then the parent is wearing the mask if they're in a supermarket or a big box store. What's your recommendation? What's your sense of this just from a common sense point of view? Does this make sense? Is it important for kids to still be wearing masks even though there may or may not be a mandate? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy and Ed, I'll start and please come in, if that's okay. First of all, again, I said – I had this very interesting conversation with a colleague this morning, outstanding colleague, who is fully vaccinated who was wearing a mask. This goes to school as well as you caveat, just general common sense. First principle, if somebody wants to wear a mask, let's not begrudge them that. You all are wearing masks because we're in a state building and that's still the MO unless a state building opts for a different track. We'll all put them on when we leave. It's okay. We need to keep that in mind, that we can't stigmatize against someone who chooses to do that, whether they do it for the absolute right, public health reason, because they're unvaccinated, or because they just feel more comfortable doing it.

Secondly, the conversation that we had with my – I had with my colleague is that she is in close touch with a 90 year old relative and she buys completely the data that Ed has gone through and Judy has gone through. She personally is not at risk, but she knows you can get it. She's not at risk to go to the hospital or God forbid worse. She's just – in the back of her mind, she wants to make sure that she's not inadvertently getting it and transmitting it. I think that's a legitimate reason. I don't want to put words in the mouth of the health professionals. These variants are not raging like this forever and for always. This is not a – like we've said a lot of things, this is not a permanent condition that we're in. That's just a couple of quick thoughts.

I saw the American Academy Pediatrics headline. I remain comfortable with where we are. Remember, they are – and the CDC is largely where we're looking to. Remember that they are making a recommendation on policy for an entire country that has huge variabilities on vaccination rates. They're trying to encompass everybody from Vermont and New Jersey and Connecticut on the one hand all the way over to Missouri, Alabama, other less vaccinated places on the other hand. I continue to be comfortable with where we are but to reiterate the question that Matt asked, the good news about masking is it's not like an investment in a building or building a new building. You can make decisions with the fullness of time and data and make them very informed and also make them very quickly if need be. Again, I want to reiterate unequivocally I don't want to go back but if we think that's the right public health thing to do, then that's what the experts will suggest.

Anything to add to either of those, Judy?

Department of Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I think it's important to note that the Academy similar to CDC recommends a layered approach to the prevention strategies, so not one activity is the end-all and be-all. It's testing, quarantining, cleaning, disinfecting, distancing, hygiene practices. I quickly read the Academy's statement. As the Governor said, they're appealing to a national perspective. I also obviously spent a lot of time reading the CDC recommendations and both of them talk about layered prevention strategies, so we have to look at all of it.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Judy. Thank you, Ed. Thank you, Pat, Parimal, Mahen, cast of thousands. I think we'll mask up here, speaking of masking. Thank you all. Again, just to – on the cadence front, we will be as we had suggested a couple of weeks ago. We'll be with you on Mondays at this hour unless you hear otherwise or unless we think there's a need to communicate more frequently. I can't recall, Judy, or Pat, or Ed, whether or not we're on the road together this week but if we are, we'll almost certainly have COVID updates at the ready. Want to wish everybody a continued great summer. Everywhere I look – was at Lake Hopatcong on Friday afternoon Pat, you and I had an exchange after that, just a magical part of the state if not the country. Sat with four of the lake mayors there for our annual sit-down. Had a couple sips of an adult beverage, I have to say, but we had a really good exchange. Like a lot of lakes, if not all of them, they're having a great summer. The shore is booming. We need people to make sure they're being responsible, something also that Pat and I talk a lot about. I was with one of the big shore mayors this morning. Just make sure folks are doing the right thing, having a great summer. Who can blame you for wanting to have fun, but do it responsibly. Keep doing

that. Please, lastly, please, please, please get vaccinated. That is the magic wand that we have in our tool kit. You heard the discussion from Judy and Ed. It is overwhelmingly compelling. Trust the science; trust the data; trust the medical data. Take that step, folks, if you've not done it. We'll continue to stay at it, knocking on doors, doing the contests. We're doing all that, but we will continue to stay at it until we have this thing completely in the ground. Thank y'all God bless.

Governor Phil Murphy

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