

Governor Phil Murphy

# TRANSCRIPT: February 10th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

02/10/2021



**Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing**  
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**Governor Phil Murphy:** Good afternoon, everybody. I am joined by the woman on the screen who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. We're also honored to have the state's former epidemiologist and current COVID-19 Medical Advisor Dr. Eddy Bresnitz. Eddy, great to have you back with us as well. As you can see, we've got Chief Counsel Parimal Garg. We're expecting another guy who needs no introduction, Superintendent Colonel Pat Callahan. He's had some technical difficulties, but he'll be joining us in a minute.

Thanks, folks for the flexibility. As you noticed, we put a statement out a couple of hours ago that a member of our family tested positive for COVID-19. We are being extra, extra careful here, adhering both to the CDC guidelines but also taking no chances. I tested negative a couple of hours ago as part of my regular testing regime but again, we're not going to go near -- as they say, don't go near the foul line, stay well off of it and that's exactly what we are doing. Thank you for bearing with us and doing it in this format.

Before I knew we had a family member who tested positive, I might add, Judy and I had a really good visit this morning at the Mary McLeod Bethune Community Life Center in Jersey City with Mayor Steve Fulop. Judy, I think you join me on this, but really impressive operation, really well done. Most importantly, we were joined as well by Senator Sandra Cunningham and Assemblywoman Angela McKnight and the whole health team from Jersey City. I think most importantly, Judy and I and others did a Zoom virtual call last night on how do we get the vaccine more aggressively and responsibly into communities of color? It was quite in that spirit as well that the visit was a really good one.

Speaking of vaccines, our dashboard currently reads 1,138,757 vaccine doses administered. That breaks down, by the way, 875,424 first doses recorded, 263,196 second doses. These numbers, they're not where they need to be or will be, but their continued rise keeps pointing us in the right direction. We anticipate having some additional help coming our way as well. First of all, through the federal government, tomorrow and Friday both CVS and Rite Aid will be receiving direct shipments of vaccines that they'll be making available by appointment at New Jersey locations. Through this federal pharmacy partnership, CVS will be receiving approximately 19,900 doses and Rite Aid will be receiving about 7,500 doses. These are certainly welcome additions to the doses we're already receiving for our state efforts, and every shot moves helps move us closer to our goals. As these doses are being delivered through the federal pharmacy partnership, they will not -- and this is an important point -- they will not dip into or otherwise impact our state allocation. I would encourage you to visit both CVS and Rite Aid online for a list of locations where the vaccine will be available.

Additionally, the Biden administration announced yesterday that it'll be providing an additional vaccine supply directly to targeted community health centers or FQHCs as they're known, federally qualified health centers. While no New Jersey centers were selected for the first phase of this federal program, our community health centers are already vaccinating residents they serve. These health centers provide care for underserved communities, communities which have been hit hard by COVID. And when we are selected, which we anticipate to be soon, this direct increase to our FQHCs will be an important tool for us as we continue to work to ensure equity in the distribution and administration of our vaccine program. As Sheila Oliver reminded us last night, Judy, the other advantage of the FQHC is it's an all-encompassing health center. It's not just a one-off vaccination pod. You go there for the whole gamut of family health needs.

As we mentioned here last week and again on Monday, a couple of days ago, we're expecting increasing deliveries of vaccines from the federal government for our mega sites and other vaccination centers. As these deliveries increase, that means we'll be able to open more appointments and be in position to put our efforts into the next gear and all of these advances will provide more places for more people to get more shots. With multiple variants starting their spread, we're in a race against time, so this added help is coming not a moment too soon.

Another area where help is on the way is for our small business sector, I'm going to switch gears for a minute. Yesterday State Treasurer Liz Mucio and I were pleased to announce that all loans received as part of the federal paycheck protection program will not be subject to state taxes and that all expenses paid through these funds will be tax deductible. This mirrors new federal policy enacted by the Biden administration to make sure these loans are tax free and expenses are tax deductible at the federal level. This is another welcome bit of news for our small business owners, more than 155,000 of whom received more than \$17 billion in support through the federal coronavirus relief plans. This is just another layer of protection our business owners need desperately to help them get through this pandemic so they can lead our economic recovery. And again, I want to thank the Treasurer and her team for all their work in helping us get this done.

Switching a modest gear and also for our business community, the New Jersey Economic Development Authority is reopening applications for its popular small and micro business PPE access program for businesses with up to 100 employees. That window will open effective next Tuesday, February 16<sup>th</sup>, thanks to a new infusion of \$2.5 million. All participating New Jersey-based businesses and nonprofits, regardless of size, can already receive a 10% discount with participating vendors, Boxed, Office Depot and Staples for personal protective equipment for their employees and customers. However, under the extension of the program for small employers, businesses and nonprofits with 100 or fewer employees, they can receive discounts of up to 70% from Staples and Office Depot. In the initial phase of this program, just to give you a sense of how popular it is, roughly 9,000 small businesses collectively saved more than \$7.6 million. Those businesses that were participants in the prior PPE discount program won't have to do a thing to rejoin. It'll be automatic. Business owners who need to apply for the first time should go to that website, [covid19.nj.gov/PPEAccess](https://covid19.nj.gov/PPEAccess). Once your business is approved, the discount will automatically apply to your online order, so there's no need to keep receipts or to submit paperwork. Again, I want to thank the EDA team, beginning with and especially Chief Executive Officer Tim Sullivan and the whole team for all the work they're doing, Kevin Quinn and the great board to help our small business community. We are not aware, by the way of any other state in the nation that is undertaking a program like this. I also want to thank our corporate partners at Boxed, Office Depot and Staples. As I said, a couple of press conferences ago, the corporate community has overwhelmingly stood up to this moment and behaved not just responsibly, but admirably, and that includes those three companies.

While we're on the topic of the EDA, let's give a shout out to another of the small businesses they've supported with essential grant funding, Verona is the home of Four Paws Stay and Play, a doggy daycare owned by that guy, Ken Brower. Four Paws is one of New Jersey's longest running pet daycare businesses with more than 16 years of helping dog owners ensure their pets are properly looked after and socialized while they're at work or school. On March 21<sup>st</sup>, when the pandemic tightened its grip, Four Paws was forced to temporarily shut its doors. But thanks to the partnership of the EDA, Ken was able to secure two emergency small business grants that allowed him to pay expenses and keep his five employees on the payroll, and as New Jersey starts getting back to work, Four Paws is welcoming back more and more of its four-legged clients. I checked in and had a great chat with Ken on Monday, and I know he shares our goal of getting our economy back as soon as responsibly possible, to where all the good dogs, once again under Ken and his staff's care, can go. Check them out, by the way. They are at 168 Pompton Avenue in Verona. Their website is not surprisingly, [fourpawsstayandplay.com](https://fourpawsstayandplay.com). Ken did caution me to remind folks, and we've got a couple of dogs, we're big dog people. Because of the size of his place, the clientele is limited to 25 pounds and under. Judy, make sure you make note of that, I noticed you're making notes there.

And one last check in before we turn to the overnight numbers, and that's one more look at the progress being made by the Department of Education to close the remaining digital divide among students in our schools. Last week, we reported that what once had been a yawning technology gap of an estimated 231,000 students needing either the hardware, internet connectivity or both had been cut to 413 students, today that gap has been winnowed even further and currently, only nine districts or charter schools are reporting a remaining need totaling 195 students. Believe me, we won't be happy until that 195 gets to zero.

Of this remaining amount, by the way, 85 are students in Sussex County who are lacking steady internet access. We're getting very close to having the digital divide 100% closed, and I know that the team at the Department of Education will continue their strong partnership with our county and local education leaders to get the job completed.

With that, let's turn our attention to the rest of the overnight numbers. Today we're reporting 3,740 newly received positive PCR tests, 885 new presumed positive rapid test results, that adds up to 4,625. The lab reporting error that we reported Monday was cleared through yesterday's report, so all outstanding tests have now been reported out.

Positivity rate, which again it's for Saturday, I think Judy and Eddy and I would all caution you to be careful of this 24,586 tests. We think you're going to get tested on a Saturday or a holiday for a reason, but that bounced up rather precipitously again to 12.16.

Statewide rate of transmission continues to go in the right direction, 0.81. We're also seeing good trends emerging from our hospitals, which we've spoken to, but that continues. Last night we had 2,605 confirmed COVID positive, 181 awaiting tests, 2,786 in total; 533 patients that are in intensive care, 341 ventilators in use. On Tuesday, 383 live patients were discharged; 307 new COVID positive patients were admitted. Sadly and again this runs the risk of comparing apples to oranges, hospitals reported 49 losses of life.

We can, however, report confirmed another 88 passings from our extraordinary New Jersey family. That raises the statewide total since the start of this pandemic to 20,004. The number of probable deaths has been revised today, by the way, to 2,246. Crossing that 20,000 mark for confirmed losses of life takes your breath away. Let's take a couple of minutes, as we always do, to remember three more of the blessed lives we have lost.

We're going to start with this guy, Vincent "Vinnie" Tavormina of Monroe. Vinnie was Elizabeth born and raised and also called Linden in South Brunswick home before settling into Monroe two years ago. He was a proud Army veteran, a graduate of Seton Hall University and made his career as a consultant for Verizon Media before retiring in 2014. He was a man of great faith and Catholic devotion. Vinnie was a member of the Knights of Columbus which was a big deal in his life, rising to serve as Grand Knight of St Cecilia Council No. 7046 and receiving numerous honors through his service, including the Star Council Award, the Circle of Honor Award, and Star District Award. He also served the Knights of Columbus as an elected officer and was in the midst of serving a term as State Deputy.

Vinnie is now reunited with his late wife Elaine, who passed away in 2012. He leaves behind their children, Anthony, Matt and Christie and their families, including his four grandchildren, Marcello, Jeffrey, Dominic, and Bryn. He also leaves his companion with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Monday, Tamara Cassidy and his sister Connie, and many nieces, nephews and extended family. Vinnie was 72 years old. He was a Jersey original through and through. We thank him for his service to our nation and may God bless and watch over his memory and those who left behind.

Next up, we remember Lyndhurst's Bernard Lanham, a longtime member of the family at the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority, who served as a solid waste enforcement officer for the past 16 years. Bernard is being remembered as a hard worker and a great friend. He enjoyed fishing and taking road trips with family and friends. Even though he worked for the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority, he remained to the end a diehard, as if I have to tell you this, Dallas Cowboys fan.

He leaves behind his daughters, Ivory, with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Monday, and Crystal and his beloved granddaughter Tessa, who was a special light in his life. He was predeceased in 2019 by a third daughter, Lisa. Bernard was 64 years old. And of course, he leaves his family at the Sports and Exposition Authority. One of his former colleagues said this about Bernard, and I quote him, "We not only just lost a colleague but a friend and a brother." To CEO Vinny Prieto, a dear friend and the whole team at the Sports and Exposition Authority, you are also in our prayers. We thank him for his years of service to our state and to his colleagues. Bernard's funeral, by the way, was at 11:00 a.m. this morning. May God bless and watch over him.

Finally today, we remember Cristina Crowell of Colonia. She was just 51 years old. Born in Newark, Cristina had a passion for helping children, a passion that led her to become a fierce advocate for our youngest residents as an elementary school educator and testing coordinator with the Plainfield Public Schools. Outside the classroom, Cristina always made room for two things: her family and Broadway shows. They were her two favorite pastimes, and the lights in both areas are a little dimmer because of her passing.

Cristina leaves behind her husband of 23 years, Jim, with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Monday, and her two beloved children, 21-year-old Jimmy and 18-year-old Emily. She's also survived by her father, Tony. Keep him in your prayers as well, by her brother and sister Anthony and Terry and their families, including her nieces Lindsey,

Julia and Maddie and nephews Tommy, Anthony, and Robbie. Plainfield has lost an exemplary educator and our state has lost a tremendous advocate for our kids. I want to thank former Commissioner the Department of Education and now President of Kean University, Dr. Lamont Repollet, for raising Cristina's passing with us. I also want to thank Cristina's mayor and a fellow Colonia resident, Mayor John McCormac of Woodbridge for bringing this to our attention. We thank Cristina for a lifetime spent preparing our youngest learners for success and may God bless and watch over her.

Three more blessed members of our New Jersey family lost to this horrible pandemic. We remember them, as we remember everyone who's been lost. For them, we will fight on to defeat this virus.

Finally, for today, before I turn things over to Judy, I want to acknowledge the passing of one of our Greatest Generation, and to the best of my knowledge, not because of COVID. Ocean City's Joe Caserta earned the nickname Tanker Joe because of the years he spent as the driver and commander of a Sherman Tank named Everlasting as a member of E Company 32nd Armored Regiment, 3rd Armored Division. That is Joe and that is the tank Everlasting.

Tanker Joe helped blaze the path from the beaches of Normandy to Berlin. Much of the distance under harsh enemy fire, he saw action in the Battle of the Bulge and the Battle of Cologne. Joe was, get this, a recipient of the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart, the American Campaign Medal, the World War II Medal, the European African Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, and the New Jersey Distinguished Service Medal. In 2013, he was appointed as Chevalier of the Legion of Honor by French President Francois Hollande for his contribution to France's liberation.

Back home, Tanker Joe ran an auto repair and auto body shop, but he always made time for reunions with his fellow servicemen. He was a member of VFW Post 6650 and American Legion Post 524. Joe was 98 years old. He's now back with his beloved wife Eileen. He leaves his four sons Joseph, Michael, Tom and Jess and their families, including eight grandchildren and 15 grandkids. Tanker Joe will be laid to rest a week from Saturday on February 20<sup>th</sup> fittingly, at the Veterans Cemetery in Cape May Court House. I want to thank friend and Assemblyman Antwan McClellan for bringing Joe's extraordinary life and passing to our attention. Thank you, Joe, for your service and heroism. Thank you for being an example of our great American values. Thank you for being a New Jerseyan and God bless you.

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

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon, everyone. Well, the Governor has provided an update on the federal retail pharmacy partnership with CVS and Rite Aid. They will be receiving more than 27,000 doses from the federal government to increase vaccine access in our state. Over 20 CVS sites and over 70 Rite Aid sites will begin vaccinating eligible residents over the next week.

Yesterday, as the Governor shared, we also received the good news that the federal government will also be shipping vaccine doses directly to the federally qualified health care centers around the country and in our state, so we look forward to New Jersey benefiting from this program when our time comes up. As you know, the FQHCs provide care to residents in underserved communities around the state, regardless of an individual's ability to pay. These centers are community based, all of them are accessible by public transportation, and many of these centers are trusted medical homes for the uninsured and the undocumented. Currently, more than 30 FQHC sites in New Jersey are signed up to provide COVID-19 vaccinations in New Jersey. The federal announcement of additional doses to the community health centers aligns with our continued commitment to the strategic aim of equity in vaccine distribution. Both of these programs will bring their own doses with them, so it will be on top of what our state receives every week.

As vaccine doses increase, we'll be able to open up more appointments, giving eligible residents more opportunity. The allocation of first doses this week is Pfizer 55,575, and Moderna 87,400 doses. This is an increase of more than 6,000 doses of what we expected to receive. For second doses, we will receive 55,575 Pfizer and 56,100 Moderna. As I have shared with you in the past, we have reserved all of the second doses for individuals who have received their first doses.

For the week ending February 21<sup>st</sup>, we are expecting an increase in the amount of first doses of Pfizer, an increase of about 12,000 doses, for a total of 67,860 doses. We expect the same amount of the Moderna first doses that we have received this week, and that is 87,400. For the week of February 28<sup>th</sup>, that amount will remain steady, 67,865 Pfizer first doses and 87,400 Moderna first doses.

But even with those increases, the demand for appointments is currently greater than the appointments we have available. If you are in a group that is eligible to receive a vaccine, you can preregister for the vaccine on the NJ Vaccine Scheduling System available at [covid19.nj.gov/vaccine](https://covid19.nj.gov/vaccine) and you will be notified when an appointment is available to you. Right now, all of our available appointments are full. Or, you can make an appointment at one of the designated vaccine sites directly, and you can also find that connection on [covid19.nj.gov/vaccine](https://covid19.nj.gov/vaccine).

Beginning last evening, we had placed a temporary pause on the call center's ability to schedule appointments. While the agents were working to assist those who wanted appointments, we discovered we needed to streamline the system on the agent end to prevent scheduling errors, and also offer further training to the agents so that they can best meet your needs. The call center can still provide information about vaccination sites, they can still preregister individuals and answer frequently asked questions about COVID-19 vaccine. We hope to bring up their scheduling capability in the near future.

As we continue to work to vaccinate residents of our state, we continue to reinforce that residents still need to follow all of the safeguarding methods until enough individuals are vaccinated to produce community protection. The state has seen the impact of public health measures such as physical distancing and masking as it helped us flatten the curve last spring. A new CDC report demonstrates the value of masking. Their data indicates that statewide mask mandates may be associated with reduced spread of COVID-19 and contributes to declines in weekly COVID-19 associated hospitalization growth rates for adults aged 18 to 64.

During the weeks following the implementation of statewide mask mandate, hospitalization growth rates declined 2.9 percentage points among adults aged 40 to 64. After mask mandates had been in place for three weeks or more, the COVID-19 hospital growth rates declined 5.5 percentage points among adults aged 18 to 64. It is vital that we adhere to masking. Research indicates that asymptomatic spread is responsible now for nearly 60% of COVID-19 transmission. Mask wearing can reduce the risk of spread from people who don't have symptoms or haven't developed symptoms yet. Wearing a mask consistently and correctly over your nose and mouth is one of the best ways to protect yourself against getting infected with or spreading COVID-19. So masking, social distancing, staying home when you're sick, can also help with preventing all respiratory viral illnesses. As we review our weekly flu reports, we are seeing that flu activity is unusually low this year in the state. Typically, we expect to see peak flu illness by now. However, flu activity remains low across the entire state.

Thankfully, there have been no new reports of severe pediatric flu illnesses or deaths in New Jersey to date this season but nationally, there have been reports, so New Jersey is doing a little bit better. Children can develop more severe illness in comparison to adults. While activity is low now, we are still seeing flu circulating so we want to remind all of you, those who haven't yet, there's still time to get a flu shot. It's not too late to get vaccinated against the flu.

Moving on to my daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 2,786 hospitalizations due to COVID-19 positive patients and PUIs. That's one of our lowest census in a while. There are no new reports, thankfully, of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. There are 88 cumulative cases in our state. Three of these children are currently hospitalized.

We are reporting two new reports of B-117 variants in patients, which emerged in the UK. The two new reports are in Essex County, so now there are 33 reports of this variant in New Jersey.

At the state veteran homes, the good news is there are no new positive cases among the residents. At the state psychiatric hospitals, there is one new positive case among patients at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital.

The positivity rate in New Jersey as of February 6<sup>th</sup> was 12.16%. The Northern part of the state reports 12.85, Central 12.72, Southern part of the state 9.62. That concludes my daily report. Please stay safe, continue to mask up, social distance, stay home when you're sick, get tested. And remember, for each other and for us all, please take the call and download the COVID Alert New Jersey App. Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Judy, thank you. You know, we've had this conversation, just to underscore something in part of your comments. We've had this conversation of late. We collectively, by the millions in New Jersey, broke the back of this pandemic in the spring into the early summer by doing the basics: the face masks, the social distancing, the washing hands with soap and water, taking yourself off the field as I'm now living, and you have lived recently, without a vaccine. That was done without a vaccine. We have to remember that as the vaccine's reach slowly but very surely and very steadily gets to more people, we still have those weapons at our disposal.

I think there's the further, I guess, one piece of emerging good news and one piece of caution and the caution is the variants. As you suggest, the so-called UK variant and Eddie would attest to this, is in our midst on the negative side. Again, no evidence that it's more lethal but it looks like it's more easily transmissible. And on the positive side, you fast forward, you can imagine I'm going to go two months out to Easter or just beyond Easter, you've got potentially a J&J vaccine on the field depending on how their EUA application goes, and you certainly have whether that's more cooperative than what we're dealing with right now. Those are not insignificant. Thank you for reminding us the basics still matter, and they still make a big difference.

Speaking of weather, he couldn't get on the Zoom, I don't know if it's a personal gripe that they have with him, but he's on the telephone and I would love to welcome in Colonel Pat Callahan. In all seriousness, we've got a number of different weather patterns right before us. Pat, anything you've got on weather, either of these two developments coming upon us, or compliance or other matters? Great to have you with us.

**State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan:** Thanks, Governor. Good afternoon. You would have thought after almost a year of virtual meetings that I could master launching a meeting or star six, but I hope you can hear me okay.

With regards to Executive Order compliance, ABC and Division of Criminal Justice went out over the weekend in Burlington and Camden Counties, and compliance was pretty decent. They only cited three establishments. One was Bobby Ray's in Pennsauken which was cited, Kaminski Sports Bar and Restaurant in Cherry Hill, and Fat Albert's Billiards in Somerdale. All three were cited for Executive Order compliance issues.

With regard to these two storms, one is coming in tonight. They're almost very similar, one coming in tonight after the evening rush, looks like it is ending some time tomorrow midday, two to four inches; and again, a very similar storm coming in Thursday into Friday. Again, another two to four inches. We had a call this afternoon at 2:15 with DOT, they are certainly ready to go. Again, just that cycle that we are in with regards to the weather, but we're certainly ready for it, Governor. Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Pat, thank you, we could hear you loud and clear so thanks for that report. And I do feel like we're in one of those -- last winter we were in a positive groove where it felt like we had near misses but we stayed pretty clean. This winter, we're seeing the other side of that reality. Thank you for that.

Before we go to Q&A, I think Michelle and Dan Bryan will coordinate that for us. My guess is, given my circumstances, we will be virtual, if I had to guess, on Friday and we'll try to do that at the regular hour at one o'clock. Today it was sort of last minute so we had to move our timing, but I would hope that would be regular time on Friday, but my guess is that we're virtual and then we'll take it from there and see where we go from there. Again, I want to thank everyone for their patience today for moving this around on very short notice. We'll probably stay until the top of the hour if that's okay with everybody and take as many questions as we can.

#### Q&A Session

**Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ:** Hi, Governor. You had mentioned, I believe, something regarding the combination of Easter and the vaccine efforts at that point in the spring, I was hoping you could elaborate on that. What kinds of reopenings would you consider next if numbers headed in the right direction? What would you need? Also, what would you need to see to reverse the recent reopenings that you did with indoor dining? Any thoughts on New York Governor Andrew Cuomo allowing stadiums to open at reduced capacity? Is New Jersey going to try something similar? Do you think that's a bad idea?

Do you expect with the marijuana bill that you'll have to go back and clean it up? It seems like there's still a lot of unresolved issues even if it does get to your desk and pass your desk sometime in the next week or two.

The NFL Commissioner is offering their football stadiums as vaccination centers. Have you heard anything about that from MetLife Stadium or from any other stadiums like Red Bull or Prudential or any of the other big ones across the state?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I think I can take most of these. Judy or Eddy or Pat, if you disagree, chime in. That's me, Phil Murphy, just saying, listen, let's go to a time that's not that far from now and think through what could be different than today, on this cold February day, with a lot of snow on the ground. And you can see, I mean, the variants are going to continue to be something we watch like a hawk, but you could see being in a dramatically different place not that long from now. Easter is the first weekend of April, so I picked that as something that's six or seven weeks away. There's no magic to that moment.

Other reopenings, Daniel, we will proceed with based on the facts as they present themselves. The facts lately have begun to trend in a good direction. Judy, made the observation that the census in our hospitals, which is one that we watch like a hawk, because we only have so much capacity, that's in better shape today than it's been in many weeks. Those numbers continue to go in the right direction. We'll be able to clearly open things up further. I can't tell you when or how much.

We would be open on the stadium front. In fact, had the Eagles played a full 60 minutes against the Cowboys in Week 17 and won, the Giants would have been in the playoffs and we had already reached out. I'm not sure whether we could have gotten there, but we had already reached out to the New York football Giants and they said, "Listen, this is something if the Eagles win, we're prepared to talk to you to see if there's something we could pull off." We've shown a willingness to do that. I don't have a specific step to be taken right now. We don't have baseball in the state so that's an obvious one in New York that they've got that we don't have. We've got minor league baseball, obviously, but we don't have the professional top major leagues.

Nothing new to say on weed, Daniel. I'm still optimistic. We've been working very well with our Legislative colleagues in the Black Caucus, with leadership. We're still working through to try to find that common ground. I've got a meeting with leadership tomorrow, which will now be virtual. But again, I continue to be cautiously optimistic that we'll figure a good solution out that adheres to the principles that we all collectively, not just me, feel very strongly about.

Roger Goodell is somebody I have spent a good amount of time with during the pandemic. We haven't spoken directly on vaccination sites but Pat, Judy, and I saw, the Meadowlands is already a site, the old racetrack, the stands that are no longer used is one of our six mega sites, and it is big. I think, Judy, they said they could do 2,400 shots a day. When we were there, they were getting 800 doses. That number is now up from there.

But I think again, I don't want to say this and look back and say, well, gosh, maybe we could have used it. But points of distribution, as a general matter, are not our gating factor. Supply is the gating factor. MetLife is literally a football throw from where we're actually already doing one of our mega sites. Thanks for the questions.

**Karin Mueller, Star-Ledger:** Hi, good afternoon, everybody. Thanks for taking our questions. We've been hearing from a lot of people who said that they had been getting incorrect information from the call center representatives. The Health Commissioner mentioned more training. Can you tell us more about why they're getting training, and what kind of training they're going to have?

Are all the call center employees located in New Jersey, or are they outsourced to other states, because we've been getting some interesting reports back from our readers. Some of the readers have also said that the call center representatives have told them that the system is down or had crashed, and you said that you're doing some retooling. I'm wondering if you can explain a little bit more about what changes you're making on your end, and if that's why they were referencing that.

Finally, there's just a little bit of confusion at the Gloucester County mega site in terms of when people can go back for second doses. Can you just confirm that if somebody has a date written on the back of their vaccine card, that they can go back to get their second dose on that date, rather than have to wait for an email from the location?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I think the answer is yes to that last one. But Judy, I'm going to throw all of these over to you other than to say the registration appointment system, we've had real challenges with our vendor. I'm on daily with Chris Ryan, our head of technology, and that continues to be an ongoing challenge. It feels like it's two steps forward, one step back with the vendor. But beyond that, Judy, any observation you've got on what sort of training are you referring to? Are these folks in New Jersey? And the Gloucester County mega site, if a date is on the back of the card, is that the date you come back for?

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Thank you, Governor. I'll start with the last one. If you have a date on the back of your card, that is your appointment date. You will get a follow up email just confirming that, so definitely go for your second dose. We have the dose and I want to assure everyone that they will get their second doses.

The call center, generally, the training will be on the use of the system to be able to not only register, a little extra training on registering, but more training on appointment scheduling. We were finding that that was not as easy as we thought it was going to be. It ended up with things like double booking, which is something we cannot have. The training will be mostly on the overall use of the system. They're doing pretty good on the FAQs. But remember, a month ago, we didn't have a call center and we brought up 250 individuals. Now that we've got a little bit more experience, we know the areas where they need a little bit more training.

Other than that, the system itself has had issues, and we are directly speaking with Microsoft, who's the vendor, almost every day to work out those bugs.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Judy, the location of the people, I think the other question was, where are they? Are they in Jersey? Physically where are they? They're working remote, we know that much, right?

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** The individuals in the call center are all working remotely and they all are from New Jersey.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thank you for that. Hello, Sam.

**Sam Sutton, Politico:** Hey, Governor, how are you? Thank you for taking a couple questions here, both for the Commissioner, actually. Just wanted to clarify when you expect FQHCs to begin receiving doses directly from the feds. Is that next week or a couple weeks from now?

Second, a few months back you used a couple of briefings to highlight how you were worried about declining mandatory childhood vaccination rates could lead to spikes of measles, mumps, that sort of thing. Did you see anything along those lines in the fall or winter? If that data is not in front of you, I can follow up.

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** On the FQHCs, we do not have a date from the federal government yet. They announced the program yesterday and they announced the first seven states. We were not in the first seven states, but we certainly put out some feelers to the Biden administration to get us in the queue and get us those doses quickly. I don't have information in front of me on the declining childhood vaccination rates, but certainly we'll get that to you either after the presser or I can speak to that the next time we have a conference.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** I would just say on the FQHCs, we have been in the first or second wave of most things with the federal administration, and that includes, by the way, with the Trump administration. So for instance, the FEMA partnership states, we were in the first wave of that group. I don't want to over promise and under deliver, but my guess is, I use the word soon, Judy, on the FQHCs. Remember, other states right now, as bad as it's been for us, other states right now, there are a lot of places in the country that are getting clobbered in a way that we were last spring. That's not to say that we're still not getting clobbered, but some of those places are getting hit in a really meaningful way right now. Thank you for that.

**Dustin Racioppi, Bergen Record:** Good afternoon. Governor, why hasn't the administration selected hemodialysis centers as vaccination locations? It seems like one of the ideal locations to reach a large number of people.

For Colonel Callahan, is there any reason or theories why traffic fatalities were up last year, despite reduced traffic?

And then lastly for you, Governor, this is a bit of a wind up. But my last question, you signed a bill last week that requires the health department to collect COVID data on healthcare workers, but that was drastically altered after lobbyists, most notably from the Hospital Association, advocated for changes and restrictive requirements to post information on the health department dashboard, collect data on workers admitted for treatment, and to adopt standards and protocols for lessening exposure risks, and submitting internal exposure analyses to the health department. I'm just wondering, how does that align with your stated commitment to transparency? Doesn't the public have the right to know exactly how the virus is affecting healthcare workers? Would you restore the requirement of the original bill through an Executive Order? Thanks.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thanks. On that last one, I think I'll probably want to come back to you. Parimal, you can help me. All I can say is this. This was a bill that the healthcare unions felt very strongly about. I spoke just before I signed it with the biggest union, HPAE, and then reached out to them to make sure that they knew that I had signed it. In both cases, they were very happy. But as it relates to the specifics of it, if you could bear with me, we'll get back to you. Parimal, you can help me on that front.

Judy hemodialysis centers, a question mark, and Pat, traffic fatalities. On traffic fatalities, it's my understanding that's the case in America, not just New Jersey. It turns out the open road is not necessarily our friend. But maybe Judy, anything on dialysis centers and then Pat on traffic?

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Yeah, this is the first time I've heard that dialysis centers should be or want to be considered as points of dispensing. Everybody seems to feel that the vaccination of COVID-19 is similar to the flu, where you can put up a center very easily and that's not the case. There's vaccine stewardship, there's very high level requirements for reporting. You need to be registered with the federal government, sign an agreement with the CDC, enrol in our immunization system. We know right now that we have over 1,000 physician offices that are perfectly situated and are already enrolled to vaccinate when more doses become available. You know, we'll use any appropriate site when we have the vaccine. Right now, the sites that we have are the ones we know can increase the throughput as vaccines become available, are centrally located within a population base for access and will help us promote the equity in the distribution.

Judy, you and I had, with the Lieutenant Governor last night, I mentioned earlier we had a very good virtual discussion about equity in the distribution. That was the most recent time we said this, but we've been saying this now for a number of weeks. We've got distribution points that are now bearing down on 300 locations. That number is going to go up. Last night we talked about I hope in a matter of days, and I hope to be back on the field to participate. By the way, I'm showing 295 points of distribution, 21 of which are closed pods, 274 are open. Both the places, Dustin, and the types of places, you're going to continue to see that expand. Houses of worship is the big one we want to get to next. We want to get mobile vans, mobile distribution, and certainly dialysis centers should be on the list of consideration.

Pat, traffic fatalities. Am I right that the open road is not necessarily our friend here?

**State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan:** Yeah, I think certainly that is the case, Governor, and I think what's also important to point out is that the total number of accidents last year were down 31%, so we were down from just over 45,000 down to 31,000 crashes in 2020, which is an indication that speed is generally the driving factor there. That lighter traffic in the most densely populated state in the union led to, you know, I think we ended up at 145 fatalities in 2020, up from 130. The open road definitely contributed to that. We also have an ask in to the National Highway Traffic Safety crew, I do believe it was a national trend but I just want to be able to go on record confirming. I should probably have that information within the next few days. Thanks, Gov.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Dan Bryan, help me follow up with Karin Mueller. She posted something that said she had heard one of the call center persons was in Texas so we just want to make sure if that's the case, that we know about it, because we want them to be in Jersey, serving Jersey people.

**Mike Catalini, Associated Press:** I was sorry to hear about your family member who had tested positive for COVID. I'm curious if you might be able to talk about how it is that you're not considered to be in contact with a family member? I don't know if you're willing to talk about who that person is, I'm just curious about that.

I also had a question, Governor, about the number of vaccines that the state is getting. Just doing some quick math, the Pfizer/Moderna vaccines the Commissioner laid out, it's about 155,000 a week. Do those figures include the new numbers for CVS and Rite Aid that you talked about today?

**Governor Phil Murphy:** They do not, to the best of my knowledge. In fact, I showed 254,000 first and second doses; 143,000 first, 111,000 second. Judy, am I right in saying that CVS/Rite Aid numbers are in addition to that?

**Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli:** Exactly.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** The CVS/Walgreens long-term care numbers are a part of that. Those are within those numbers, Mike.

I won't say who but I will say that it is not the First Lady, number one, although she's getting tested here shortly. I've said this publicly before, I won't go into the details, but we have gone out of our way since day one of taking a lot of precautions, even in our home, particularly when, for whatever reason, we're in the same room and that's invariably a meal. We've set up distances and other prophylactics that have allowed us – so the key is, are you within six feet? This is the CDC guideline. Are you within six feet for a cumulative 15 minutes in a 24-hour block? The conclusion that we have made and my wife and I thought very carefully about this, is the answer is no. But having said that, we are still living in the same house and we don't want to take any chances. That's how we get to that conclusion. As I said earlier, I tested negative this morning as part of our regular testing regime, and these days I get tested pretty regularly. I'm knocking on wood so far, they've all been negative. We'll keep it at that. Thank you, Mike. Let's try to squeeze in one or two more, if we can. Hey, Dave.

**David Matthau, NJ 101.5:** Thanks. By the way, Governor, I can attest to the fact that you are taking precautions in your own house. When I did an interview with Tammy about the Pandemic Relief Fund, she told me it was freezing in your house because all the windows are open.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Yes, we take some unusual precautions. I am thankful at this point that we do.

**David Matthau, NJ 101.5:** I know you had talked to Commissioner about the call center but for you and the Governor, any plans or thoughts at all about hiring more people to get more operators? Because some people are still waiting for more than an hour or two to get through, never mind that they're getting confusing information right now. I understand that you want to train them, but can we add more operators?

Governor, for you, the Commissioner as well as Dr. Bresnitz, we, I believe now have 33 UK variants confirmed in New Jersey. But since the state lab is not doing any testing yet, I do not believe and these are just sample tests, should we not really assume that there may be thousands of the variant cases not only from the UK, but South Africa and Brazil and at least be looking at it from that point of view in terms of dealing with potential problems? Or, getting ready to deal with potential problems? Because the 33, it sounds like it's really a lowball and unrealistic figure. Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thank you, Dave. I think it's fair to say, Judy, we are absolutely actively considering bulking up the amount of operators at the call center, there's no question about that. We talked about the call center like it's been up and running since the dawn of Major League Baseball. The thing has been up for three or four weeks, and it went from zero to 250 overnight. Not a lot of other states have been able to do that. I'm not patting ourselves on the back and I hate the fact that people are waiting but please bear with us as we find a happy medium here. But absolutely under active consideration.

I think we've been clear, at least about the UK. Eddy, we've got to get your money's worth for joining us this Wednesday here. You're in the on-deck circle. I think we've been pretty clear that we have been operating, even before we knew there was one case of the UK strain, that it was in the state, never mind now that we may have 33. We're assuming it's all over the place. Correct me if I'm wrong about that, but any comments you've got on either Brazil or South African strain, which was also part of Dave's question? Eddy, great to have you with us.

**Dr. Eddy Bresnitz:** Thank you, Governor. Right now, they are actually less than 1,000 of this B-117 or UK strain that are in the US. That's in 34 states, including New Jersey. There are literally less than a handful of either one of the other two strains that have been reported in the country, and none in New Jersey. We have not a lot of cases considering the population and the incidence of the strain that we're used to reporting. I think we can assume that the number of reported cases are probably less than what already exists in the country, because not every case is sequenced. We don't know what the magnitude of that is. It's been reported previously, by modelling, that we can expect the UK strain to become the predominant strain sometime in March. We'll see.

But at the same time, and our data shows this, every time we have one of these press conferences, that the number of cases and the number of hospitalizations and the number of ICU admissions are all declining, not just in New Jersey, but around the country. So even though that UK strain may become predominant, it's going to be on a platform of expecting a lot less cases.

After that, every day we're vaccinating thousands of new people both for first and second doses. We're continuing to encourage all these other non-pharmaceutical interventions such as masking and social distancing. And as you mentioned, Governor, the spring is coming when people are going to be flocking outdoors.

I do want to add one other thing. In today's CDC morbidity/mortality weekly report, they had a prerelease, looking at masking and how to better improve the fitting of these masks, and showing that if you fit better, like for example, knotting those masks that go behind the ear or maybe wearing a cloth mask over the surgical mask, you're going to get better protection. I haven't had a chance to read the article in great detail. I skimmed it just before this meeting.

There are lots of things that we will be doing and we will be doing to basically reduce the likelihood that we're going to have a lot of those variant cases in New Jersey. We'll have to see, but it depends on everybody doing the right thing.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** The basic stuff still matters and still works. And then you add to that the weapon of two safe vaccines that work and maybe a third sooner than later and as you say, it doesn't feel like it today but you go out six to eight weeks, you get better weather. I mean, there's a lot of things that we can be optimistic about. Thank you, Eddy. Elise.

**Elise Young, Bloomberg:** The family member who tested positive, can you tell me when and how the exposure came about? Have any family members other than that individual tested positive? Also, this is at least the second time, I believe, that you've been in quarantine. So are you now considering having your own vaccination sooner rather than later, so you can continue your day-to-day appearances. Thank you.

**Governor Phil Murphy:** Thanks, Elise. I just got a note that the First Lady has tested negative definitively, so that's good news. The family member's test took place, literally -- which is why some of you were on route to the War Memorial, including my colleagues -- took place late this morning. That was the test. Not clear on the exposure but there has been no, I will just say this. The person who tested positive has not been in any big room settings with lots of people on top of each other. This came from a smaller gathering of some sort, and I'm not sure that we know why or where, Elise. I can't remember the last negative test of the family member but it wouldn't have been that long ago. This is something that's relatively recent, I would say within the past week.

It's a good question in terms of -- and by the way, we went to Judy directly for the advice, and her colleagues here. We didn't practice our own medicine in terms of what we should do in terms of taking myself off the field. But we are in the better to be safe than sorry mode, particularly given that I had a little bit of a health scare a year ago. I want to emphasize that.

We are almost a year into this thing and it's probably a sad observation, but it's a true one. We're able to conduct business like this, including conduct the business of government. The good news is as I look over the next number of days, we're able to do this. It's not just that we have to do it, but that we're able to do it.

I haven't changed my opinion yet, Elise. I'm confident that at some point sooner than later, people in my category will be up to bat for the vaccine, but I continue to want to make sure that we're prioritizing right now two types of people, the folks who we need to help us defeat the virus and the folks that we know are most vulnerable; either 65 and up or under 65 who have chronic conditions. We also know that educators and essential workers are the next wave. Remember, if you're an educator, a retail worker, a transit worker, whatever you are, and you're under 65 and you've got a chronic condition, you are up to bat right now. You are eligible as we speak. I think that's the next wave we need to get to and I'm comfortable waiting my turn in line.

Thank you, everybody, and thanks for your flexibility. On behalf of Judy and Eddy, thank you both on the screen; we had Parimal Garg with us. Parimal, we didn't need to pull you in from the bullpen but thank you for being here, Dan Bryan for coordinating with Michelle, Pat Callahan on the phone. Again, I'm virtual for the next, I would think, number of days which tells me that it is highly likely that our Friday press conference will be usual time but it will be in this format would be my strong expectation. If it's different than that, we'll let you know. I promise we'll give you more advanced notice than we gave you today.

Otherwise, folks, keep being safe, doing the right things. Even though I'm sitting in this little corner by myself, use your masks, socially distance, take yourself off the field even if it's close; even if it's close, take yourself off the field. Thank you for your patience as the vaccine, without question is now well into a significant roll out but we have a long way to go and we completely understand supply is not remotely where demand is at the moment, but it is getting better. It's getting better by the day and week, and we will get there together. Thank you all. Take care, everybody.

## Governor Phil Murphy

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