

Governor Phil Murphy

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good morning. We are extra early today because from here I'm going directly to Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, to welcome our National Guard troops as they returned from their service in our nation's capital. They're coming in, beginning today, in waves into different locations around the state and they've done an extraordinary job. I'm honored to be joined today by the guy to my right, Deputy Commissioner of Health for Public Health Services, Dr. David Adinara, great to have you back. To his right, another familiar face, COVID-19 Response Medical Advisor and former state epidemiologist, Dr. Eddy Bresnitz. It's great to have you both here. The guy to my left who needs no introduction, the Superintendent of the State Police Colonel Pat Callahan, the Director of the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness Jared Maples, Chief Counsel Parimal Garg.

Commissioner Judy Persichilli continues to observe a self-quarantine. She sounds like she's doing very well, David, at least on the phone and my guess is we may see her on Friday. This was not intended, but I do want to make the observation that as we sit here, the memorial service for Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick is taking place in the rotunda in the United States Capitol. As you've heard us say many times, as recently as yesterday where Pat made the point that Jersey Troopers and Delaware Troopers and Maryland Troopers had the honor of escorting his family to the Nation's Capital. Brian is a South River Middlesex County native, a former member of our National Guard. He deployed, I believe, twice overseas into combat or action overseas. God rest his soul, he's a hero and please keep his memory and his family in your prayers.

We have a lot of ground to cover but at the risk of referring to the snowstorm in the past tense, as I walked in here it was snowing. This thing does not want to go away. I want to extend my appreciation to everyone who stayed in and off the roads over the past couple of days to allow our crews and first responders to attend to their jobs during, and I wrote after this brutal winter storm but we're still, I think, at the very, very tail end of it. Across our state, especially in Central and North Jersey, communities and neighbors are still digging out. We would ask that as you dig out, obviously be careful but if we could ask you to clear the space around fire hydrants. I would caution everyone to still take care when you're out in the roads or walking in your communities, as high snow piles may inhibit some visibility and cold nighttime temperatures may turn some snow melt into ice.

The storm-related state of emergency will remain in effect as we clear our roads. We have gotten largely through this storm and the next several days should have temperatures above freezing to get things melting just in time for some rain, I believe, on Friday, Pat and another potential snow on Sunday. I know you'll talk to that briefly today, with below freezing temperatures on the back end of that front.

We referenced this over the past couple of days. This vies for the most accumulation of any snowstorm in the history of our state. It's in the neighborhood, we mentioned yesterday, it was more than 2010 the day after Christmas. It's competing with I think 1996 and 1899 at this point. Someone will certify whether or not it actually beat those storms. But the fact that we have black roads out there, the fact that we had so few power outages -- I know we had a lot of accidents and motorist aid calls which Pat will go through -- but it was a remarkable effort by thousands of people. DOT had 4,000 pieces of equipment on the road for a lot of that storm. State Police were up and down the state, the Board of Public Utilities, the utility providers themselves and the men and women who are going up on the lines, county and local support whether it be in first responders or otherwise, it was an extraordinary effort. To have the ferocity of a storm like this and to be sitting here largely moving around, maybe not entirely normally but pretty close to normal is a testament to those thousands of folks. Pat, to you and yours and to all the other folks who are out there, hats off to you.

Next up, we've got a fairly significant announcement. Today, I will be signing an Executive Order that will carefully and responsibly increase indoor capacities at a number of our businesses and venues from 25% to 35%. This order will take effect at 8:00 a.m. this Friday, February 5th. I feel confident in signing this order because of the recent trends in our hospitals and our rate of transmission. For instance, on January 13th we reported 3,726 confirmed and suspected COVID cases in our hospitals. Today, three weeks later, we're reporting a decrease of about 20% from that number.

Now, while some of these numbers are still high, and we'll get to that later, we believe that we can make this expansion without leading to undue stress or further stress on our healthcare system. Let there be no mistake, the proprietors have done an exceptional job but so much of the credit needs to go to the millions of you who have taken your responsibility for ending this pandemic to heart through constant social distancing, wearing your face masks, and just exercising common sense. By the way, that was Pastor John Taylor, who calls me every so often to tell me that he's praying for me, so I will tell him when I call him back that you and I were together, State Police Chaplain and friend.

First, as of Friday, all restaurants will be able to expand indoor dining to 35% of their listed capacity. That's up from 25%. I'm proud that we've been able to protect our restaurants from the rollercoaster of openings and closings that other states have had to implement. We have been consistent in our approach. Because we opened indoor dining responsibly, never once have we had to reduce capacity. And now, because of your compliance, we can further expand indoor dining.

Let me just say two things on this. We opened indoor dining on Friday, September 4th to 25%. I said this, I don't know this to be the case but I believe it to be the case, we're the only state in America that hasn't wavered up or down from that. Today, we go up and we go up responsibly.

Secondly, as David will attest, there are variants out there. I think if there were not variants, we can see where this curve is headed, and you add the vaccine on top of that. That is the one caution or footnote we would put on this. As you would hope we would, we're going to closely monitor this and make sure that we stay ahead of it.

So in addition to the 35%, the statewide requirement that all restaurants and indoor service as of 10:00 p.m. will be lifted. However, and this is important, municipalities or counties may continue to regulate the hours of operation of in-person restaurant service after 8:00 p.m. as they've been permitted to do, by the way, since mid-November. This approach gives local officials the ability to respond to unique situations where they are noticing non-compliance. The prohibition on seating at indoor bar areas will remain in effect, as it creates a danger of close and prolonged proximity between and among patrons, bartenders and servers. Additionally, indoor entertainment and recreation areas, including casinos and gyms, may also accommodate 35% of their capacities, as may all personal care businesses, such as barbershops and salons.

Finally, the order will allow indoor gatherings that are religious ceremonies or services, wedding ceremonies, political activities and memorial services or funerals to be similarly at 35% of capacity, but no more than 150 total individuals. Performance venues may also expand to 35% of listed capacity, but no greater than 150 individuals. Remember previously, the rule for these gatherings, whether it was worship or indoor performances, was 25% of capacity, up to 150 individuals. Even with this expansion, all public health protocols must be adhered to at all times, including the requirement for wearing a mask indoors except when eating or drinking and for stringent sanitation and hygiene. Again, we're able to take this step today because the data says we can. The data says we can because of the hard work millions of you have put in. Again, we're watching this and we'll continue to watch it very, very closely particularly with these variants in our midst.

Remember, folks, we're taking this step but remember in the back of your mind, if we look at David's habits and you look at my habits, and I've got more indoor habits than David, the chances that I've been exposed or have gotten the virus are higher than David's. There's no one particular place that we're worried about but when you're inside and when you're taking your mask off to eat and drink, just remember that you are taking on more risk. We think it's responsible risk, it's risk that can be safely taken, but you are nonetheless taking on additional risk.

Let's turn our efforts to end this pandemic so we can get back to 100%. Our dashboard is reporting a total of 837,225 total vaccine doses administered as of this morning; that's roughly 691,000 firsts and 146,000 seconds. All six of our mega sites are back open today. In addition to those who were already scheduled for their vaccinations today, our mega sites will also begin serving those whose appointments for the past two days were rescheduled because of the storm. This will not create any sort of domino effect for future vaccinations and all doses are accounted for.

We know that appointments remain hard to come by but please understand that this is because we just don't have the supply we need to satisfy demand. As our supply which we receive from the federal government increases, we will be able to open more and more appointments. As we've said many times before here, this is not a matter of capacity. We have purpose built a program that can meet demand in terms of capacity, we just need more doses. We ask for your continued patience, and overwhelmingly you've been great.

I also want to say that the Biden team, there was another call with our team yesterday. They're doing an extraordinary job, particularly given what they walked into. They're already showing meaningful progress. I know that progress will only get better in the weeks and months ahead.

I also want to reiterate something that we've referred to but haven't gotten into in a lot of detail, which is our across-the-board commitment to ensuring equitable access to vaccines. As it pertains to our mega sites, we have chosen locations which are all readily accessible not only by car but by mass transit. Many of the individual vaccination sites listed on [covid19.nj.gov/vaccine](https://www.covid19.nj.gov/vaccine) are similarly accessible, and many are located within community health centers which already are a cornerstone of their neighborhoods. To further bolster these efforts, I'm pleased to share that an additional federal retail pharmacy program will launch next week through our continued partnership, in this case with Rite Aid and CVS. Since most Americans live within five miles of a pharmacy, this program will expand our footprint in areas of high need and is poised to receive direct allocation from the federal government without tapping into the state supply. This is in addition to our state's supply.

I had the good opportunity to speak to incoming CEO, now she started I think this is her third day, Karen Lynch. David you were on with me on Friday, talk about walking into a blizzard literally and figuratively. We are also actively supporting local vaccination efforts being undertaken by our cities. And through our partners at CVS and Walgreens and through the federal pharmacy long-term care program, we have what I would put up against any other state as far and away the most inclusive and equitable system for vaccinations in our long-term care and congregate care facilities. As we move forward, we will be working directly with our communities of faith to turn houses of worship and other community gathering places into vaccination centers for local residents, essentially bringing the vaccines to them. You'll remember that we undertook these partnerships throughout last spring and summer to ensure access to COVID testing and we are going to follow the same game plan and model for COVID vaccination.

I want to give a shout out, Pat, to partners of ours who have been with us from the beginning, and that's FEMA. FEMA will be very involved with us, whether it's at the mega sites, whether it's working with us in places of worship or community centers to help us execute the plan.

As it relates to one of these community gathering places, I'll be visiting one site next week when I travel with Mayor Steve Fulop to the Greenpoint neighborhood of Jersey City. In the Mary McLeod Bethune Life Center, a place I've been many times over the past number of years to visit with residents, receiving vaccinations there. We know that this virus has had an outsized impact on our Black and Brown communities, and in communities that have been historically under resourced, especially in terms of medical care. Read about Los Angeles County in today's New York Times, and it's a graphic example of what that means. And by the way, this is after all, as of three days ago, Black History Month and I think that we all share a common goal of using this month wisely to help make COVID-19 history.

Now before we get to the rest of today's numbers, two more quick announcements. First, I want to give an update on the effort we've been engaged in since the summer to ensure that all of our students have the resources they need for remote learning, whether it be computers or internet access. Please join me in looking at this eye chart. Moreover, closing our digital divide is just as crucial for when this pandemic ends. We can't provide a 21st Century education if any significant percentage of our students don't even have 21st Century tools.

When we began the work of closing the digital divide, it was estimated that more than 231,000 students statewide had fallen into the gap. Today, that number stands at 413. There are just 266 students still needing devices, 132 in need of internet access, and 15 who need both. These students also are not clustered in one specific school or district. As we mentioned a few weeks ago, Lakewood had a particular supply issue. That's not the case today. The department will continue to work with the educational leaders in these schools to get these students what they're lacking. To be sure, 413 is still 413 too many, but it's a whole lot better than 231,000. We have closed 99.99% of what we uncovered in the summer, and we will get this to 100%. I have to give a huge shout out to Acting Education

Commissioner Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan and before her, let's remember the great work by Interim Commissioner Kevin Deemer and their team for all they have done in partnership with our districts. Our investment in closing the digital divide is paying real dividends.

And then one more announcement before the numbers, yesterday we announced that we're putting another \$5 million into the New Jersey Redevelopment Authority's small business lease emergency assistance grant program. The program has already assisted 1,000 businesses located in the 64 municipalities where the Redevelopment Authority operates. Applications will be available on the Redevelopment Authority's website, which is that one, njra.us, when this new funding window opens at 9:00 a.m. on Monday, February 22. They will be reviewed and fulfilled on a first come, first served basis. I urge you to join the 1,000 business and organizational leaders who have already received critical lease assistance and here's one of them.

Christine Smith, the CEO and cofounder of InSpira Performing Arts and Cultural Center, with operations both in New Brunswick which is where they were founded in 2002, and Newark. By the way, you talk about timing, Christine reminded me that they had their grand opening at Teacher's Village in Newark on January 25th, 2020. InSpira is providing a creative outlet for youth through dance including ballet, tap, hip hop and modern dance and by inspiring young singers and musicians to take up the piano, violin, clarinet which I used to play as a kid, and the flute. Along with arts education, InSpira also hosts performances for under-resourced communities, such as at homeless shelters and senior citizen homes, and assist with food drives by partners like Elijah's Promise in New Brunswick. My family and I had the great honor of being at Elijah's Promise a few Thanksgivings ago. Thanks to the NJRA's emergency lease assistance, Christine, with whom I had the great honor of speaking on Friday, received grant funding that is ensuring InSpira retains its homes in New Brunswick and Newark, even while much of its work has moved virtual for the time being. Check them out at InSpiraArts.com.

So again, if you're a small business, and a small business owner in one of our urban centers in need of rent assistance, I urge you to visit, again, njra.us to learn more and to prepare to send your application in when the window opens in two-and-a-half weeks. Again, I thank a great leader, NJRA President and CEO, Leslie Anderson and her team for their leadership.

With that, let's get to the rest of the numbers. 2,529 positive test results. That breaks between 2,021 PCR tests and 508 presumed positive rapid tests. The positivity rate from 23,030 PCR tests recorded last Saturday was 11.65%. I've said this many times and I want to underscore it. When you have the results from a weekend, you tend to have numbers, on the positivity at least, that gets skewed because you've got fewer folks getting tested, and they probably only getting tested on a weekend in most cases, or least disproportionately, put it that way, because they need to. They've got a symptom or they've been exposed.

The rate of transmission remains below one although up a little bit, 0.95. In our hospitals as of 10:00 p.m. last night, 2,986 patients, 2,820 of whom were known COVID and 166 awaiting tests. Intensive care, 525 of those patients, 374 ventilators on use. Throughout the day yesterday, 162 live patients were discharged. However, another 288 patients walked in. At the risk of comparing apples to oranges, hospitals reported 41 not yet confirmed losses of life in the hospitals.

However, we can confirm that we are announcing 52 blessed lives lost from COVID. That brings the statewide cumulative total of 19,506. The number of presumed losses of life has been adjusted to 2,187. Let's take a couple of minutes, as we do every day, to salute a few of those we've recently lost.

Here, and this is an incredibly tough one. Carolyn and Penny Hubbard, mother and daughter. Penny on the right left us on January 15th. Carolyn followed eight days later on January 23rd. Penny was raised in Hackensack and a member of the Hackensack High Class of 1984. She lived in East Brunswick, an animal lover as you can see, an advocate in the truest sense with a bachelor's degree in biology from Glassboro State College, currently and now Rowan University. She spent the past 25 years as a customer care representative for Animal Healthcare in Marlborough. She was also an adoring mother to her own three pets Coburn James, Livi and Aussie. I do not know which one that one is in the picture. All the animals who were in her care would surely know Penny by her aura, and she'll also be remembered by the humans who knew her for her kindness of spirit. Penny was just 54 years old.

Carolyn on the left was 78 when we lost her. She was a retired teacher's aide and was an assistant with numerous extracurricular programs for the Hackensack Public Schools. But she didn't take her retirement sitting down, and was an active member of seniors clubs, not only in her hometown of Hackensack, but also in Rochelle Park and Maywood, where she enjoyed her exercise classes and trips. She did all of this on her own, sadly, having lost her husband, retired Hackensack Police Lieutenant Richard Hubbard back in 2007.

Carolyn had a special bond with her neighbors and friends and she was often remembered by many of the schoolchildren she taught over the years. They each leave behind Carolyn's other children and Penny's siblings, Richard, Shawn and Nancy. I had the great honor of speaking with Nancy on Friday, and their families, which includes Carolyn's grandchildren and Penny's nephew and niece, Aiden and Adrianna. Carolyn was predeceased as well by her brother James but leaves her sister and Penny's aunt Nancy, and her children Marguerite and William. Penny and Carolyn each dedicated their lives to serving others and we hope that legacy sees their family through this time and may God bless them both.

Let's stay with this just for a second. We heard about Carolyn and Penny from Glen Rock Mayor Kristine Morieko and I thank the mayor for raising this with us. Nancy, with whom I spoke, is a postal worker in Glen Rock for 30-plus years. When the town heard about the loss of her sister and her mother, the town just literally gushed out with money to help her pay for the services and all that went with it. Just extraordinary. So to Mayor Morieko and to everybody in Glen Rock, hats off to you.

I also noted to Nancy that in the background on Penny that she was a Rick Springfield fan and General Hospital fan, which was where he got his start. It turns out she wasn't just a fan. She's known him for 18 years and she said extraordinary things about Rick Springfield, who's not in New Jersey. I think he's in California. So two extraordinary lives lived and lost.

Also today, we remember Denise Allen. Born in Newark, Denise called East Orange home and she was just 61 years old when she passed on January 11th. After graduating from East Orange High, Denise attended Upsala College and for the past 25 years, she was a member of the close-knit family at UMDJ, and University Hospital in fact reached out to me and to us to make sure we knew that we had lost Denise and asked that she be memorialized. Denise leaves behind her three daughters, Shavon with whom I had the great honor of speaking of Friday, Montez and Jamie, and two granddaughters, Lauren and Ava. For a career of service, we salute Denise and honor her memory. May God bless and watch over her.

Finally today, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge this guy, a notable passing from our tremendous arts and education scene, albeit not from COVID. We lost Edward "Ed" Fletcher, the Elizabeth-raised rapper who took on the moniker Duke Bootee, and who wrote what is considered the single most important rap song in the genre's history, The Message, which was released by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five in 1982. This was at the height of the Sugar Hill Gang and Sugar Hill Records, all the nexus right here in the great Garden State. The Message was the first rap song to highlight socioeconomic inequities and to talk about poverty and jail and despair. It has been a noted influence of Jay Z, praised by Quest Love and it continues to influence new artists to this day.

But Ed was more than Duke Bootee. The son of a truancy officer and an elementary school educator, when his music career came to a close, he chose a new path in education. He had already received an English degree from Dickinson College before his rap days, and he went on to earn master's degrees both from the new school and Rutgers University. In 2019, he concluded his career after spending two decades teaching at Savannah State

College. All of it though always circled back to the message. In a 2013 interview in Savannah, he listed what were called the Fletcherian Principles, and I quote Ed. Figure out a way to take care of yourself (legal), find somebody you can stand that can stand you, pay your taxes and take care of your teeth. God bless him.

He leaves behind his wife and high school sweetheart, Rosita. They married in 1976. He's also survived by two children, Owen and Bernice, and five grandchildren. Derek Roseman, our colleague, reminded me that Owen, for a time, worked at the New Jersey General Assembly and was an impressive guy. A tremendous life indeed.

That's where we'll leave things today. It is now my pleasure to hand the briefing over to the Deputy Commissioner for Public Health, the guy to my right, Dr. David Adinaro.

Deputy Commissioner for Public Health, Dr. David Adinaro: Thank you, Governor. Good morning. With the storm behind us, regular vaccination is resuming in the state. As you know, our vaccination mega sites were closed on Monday and Tuesday due to the storm but have reopened today. Anyone affected by the closures Monday and Tuesday should have received a call, email or text from the healthcare or other operating partner at the site to have their appointment rescheduled. Those who received cancellation notices through the New Jersey State Vaccination System will receive notice of their rescheduled appointment. If they made their appointment through another system, rescheduling should take place through the same system.

Thousands of appointments at the state's mega sites had to be rescheduled, but sites were able to accommodate those individuals with appointments through the week. As of 9:00 a.m., all mega sites have received their vaccine shipments and we expect the bulk of our weather-delayed vaccines to arrive today and tomorrow. The vaccine call center remained operational through the storm and continued to preregister individuals, answer questions and provide contact information for sites. They did not schedule appointments Monday or Tuesday due to the storm causing appointment cancellations at vaccination sites. They are currently assessing the full impact of the storm on appointment availability and hope to begin scheduling soon.

We initiated sending second dose appointments Saturday evening from the state's vaccination scheduling systems. Several thousand appointments were successfully sent, but due to the storm-related emergency, we had to pause additional notifications to focus on storm-related appointment cancellations. We expect to resume sending those notifications soon, likely today. Second doses will be delivered within the window of time recommended by the CDC. Any delivery of vaccine that was scheduled for Monday or Tuesday has been moved to today or Thursday. We continue to see increases in allocations and the federal government continues to assure us that we will receive all second dose allocations.

Although the storm did disrupt operations, we continue to see more and more individuals getting vaccinated. Just last week, 230,000 doses were administered in the state. Our hope is that the federal government will continue to increase vaccine supply, but currently doses are still very limited so we continue to ask for the public's patience. There is still an imbalance between supply and demand.

Moving on to the department's daily report, as the Governor shared, our hospitals reported 2,986 hospitalizations of COVID-19 positive patients or persons under investigation last evening. There are 525 individuals in critical care. 71% of those in critical care are on ventilators.

There are no new reports of multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children. There are 84 cumulative cases in the state. The children affected have either tested positive for active COVID-19 infection, had antibody tests that were positive, or COVID-19 exposure within four weeks prior to symptoms. In New Jersey, there are no deaths reported at this time. Two of these children are currently hospitalized.

The Governor review the new cases and deaths reported. In terms of deaths, the breakdown by race and ethnicity is as follows: White 55%, Black 16.7%, Hispanic 19.1%, Asian 5.1%, other 3.6%.

At the state's veteran homes, there have been no new reported cases amongst residents. At the state psychiatric hospitals, there have been no new cases amongst patients.

The daily percent positivity as of January 30th for the entire state was 11.65%. The Northern region 11.27%, Central region 12.11%, and Southern region 11.94%. That concludes our daily report. Stay safe, continue to mask up, social distance, stay home when you're sick, get tested, and download the COVID New Jersey App.

Governor Phil Murphy: David, thank you, and thank you for stepping in here for the past couple of our press conferences, and for your leadership. Pat, you've got a lot in your plate these days so compliance, any post mortem on the storm, we would love to get the final if you've got it, accidents and motorist aid calls. And remember, that's just State Police. You've got on top of that local, county, DOT personnel. Any sense of the weekend weather? I know it's early and we'll probably hit that pretty hard on Friday, I would guess. But all of the above, thank you for everything. Take it away.

State Police Superintendent Col. Patrick Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good morning, everybody. With regards to Executive Order compliance since we last met, there's been three that were reported to the ROIC. In Hoboken, the Hoboken Elks Lodge, police responded there and issued a summons for a violation of the Governor's Executive Order. In Gloucester Township, investigators from ABC responded to the Texas Roadhouse. That was at almost 70% capacity, in violation of the EO. In Ventnor, police responded to the Island Gym and noticed several EO violations and the owner was issued for that.

A post mortem on the storm, troopers again to the Governor's point, this doesn't include law enforcement local or county, but our troopers handled 918 motor vehicle accidents and 1,693 aids, so over 2,600 calls for service through what was, also to the Governor's point, one of the worst storms that we've had. The storm that we're monitoring for Sunday could bring certainly measurable snow. We anticipate those preliminary snow maps by Friday. One thing that we are fairly certain of though, Governor, is the bitter cold temperatures that are going to come in next week behind that storm. We're keeping a close eye on that and Friday we should certainly have more confidence in the forecast.

I will just close with, although I was no Benny Goodman, I too played the clarinet when I was a kid. Thanks, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: You don't get Benny Goodman invoked at press conferences often these days. I've got to adjust to that for a minute. Acker Bilk, another one, look that one up, Stranger In the Shore. It's one of the songs I always wanted to play and could never get there. This gives me the opportunity to say we'll start over here with Matt Arco. Tomorrow we will be in the rhythm, weather providing, that we have wanted to be in which is tomorrow virtual, we will be back Friday at one o'clock unless you hear otherwise. We'll hit the weekend weather at that point with up-to-date information. Your point about the cold temperatures, you look at the weather for next week. Clearly whatever is on the ground on Sunday is going to stay on the ground for quite a while.

Folks, again, 211 for a warming center, 211. The lack of power outages on this storm is a huge, aberrant pleasant surprise. It was far below any fear and expectation. Hats off again to the men and women who were up in the poles, putting people back into power. I don't have a number right now but it's 78, so it's literally under 100. And to the electric service providers who did an excellent job, and again, Joe Fiordaliso at the BPU. Again, more on the weekend weather on Friday. With that, Matt, we'll start with you. Good afternoon.

Q&A Session

Matt Arco, Star-Ledger: Good afternoon, Governor. With the announcement today on restaurants, any consideration in following New York's lead and making restaurant workers eligible for the vaccine? Governor, do you know how soon houses of worship will start giving out vaccines? Will people sign up through the state directly or through the site? Can anyone go to those houses of worship, or only members of the houses of worship?

How many people will be vaccinated next week at Bethel Center in Jersey City? Have they already started vaccinations there?

CVS announced yesterday that it will start vaccinations on February 11th. What more can you tell us about Rite Aid?

Real quick on marijuana, the deadline on pot legalization and decrim is on Monday, and the Legislature isn't scheduled to vote on a cleanup bill. Any announcement on a plan or whether you'll sign the bill?

Lastly, Doctor, is there any update on any of these highly contagious strains? Have any new ones been found in New Jersey other than the UK one?

Governor Phil Murphy: Let me jump in and then maybe on that last one, Eddy Bresnitz, if you could weigh in. I was going to tee you up on that one as well. Also, we've got 11 cases of the UK strain in the state. That's the one variant we know. The other part B of that question I'd love to tack on to that. Any updated sense, Eddy, of the efficacy of the vaccines against the variance?

Nothing to report on restaurant workers but very happy to be able to take the steps we're taking.

On houses of worship, working that plan through as we speak, so don't have any specific details. We've had a lot of extraordinary leadership among our faith leaders. We saw it, as I said, first in testing and now in vaccines. FEMA will be a big partner of ours in that endeavor, so details are coming.

I can't tell you the specifics on Jersey City. Mahen, can you follow up with Matt? I believe they are administering already. I just can't give you a number. We'll get back to you. Yes, CVS got out there a little bit ahead of the plan but the details are still unfolding on that front as well. Both CVS locations, they started to talk to some of the locations they were going to target in New Jersey and Rite Aid not yet. We're working with each of them.

Again, the big point there is, that's another channel in addition to the doses that we're getting as a state. Those are, by definition, I think I mentioned everybody lives at least within five miles of a pharmacy. These in particular are in densely located communities. We didn't hit this, by the way earlier, but I meant to so allow me to just say the following. Remember this is, again, putting CVS, Rite Aid, what we're going to do with our faith partners, over here for one second.

Of the two main channels, what the state can control, the mega sites and the community centers and then over here are the CVS, Walgreens, administered long-term care programs. A couple of weeks ago, a week ago Friday, in fact, the CVS/Walgreens amount of shots administered divided by amount of shots that they had received was 12%. David's been all over this. That number stands this morning at 50%. So it is clearly, as we had predicted, they've got these scheduled appointments. They're going to your mother's nursing home, they know how many people work and live there, they put it aside, and then they chop through it. On the state side, number of shots in arm divided by doses that we've gotten, 70%. Bot of those numbers, as we predicted, moving in the right direction. We just need more supply.

Nothing to report on cannabis, Matt, other than to say – and I may well have said this already on Friday – we had a really good Zoom with the Black Caucus on Friday morning. Really productive. Not to say that we solved all the challenges, but it was a really good, frank, constructive discussion. With the pandemic that, just like a lot of things, we haven't had as much of those of late as we had wanted to, so it was really good to be back in there but I've got nothing new to report beyond that, other than it was constructive and our coordination with the Legislature continues to be a constructive one, generally, as well.

Eddy, variants. Any new update? Any particular assessment of how the vaccines work against them? Great to have you with us.

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: Thank you, Governor. In the US and in New Jersey, the vaccines are still working well, as far as we know, against the variants. There have been I think about 500 or so that have been reported of the B117 or the so-called UK variant in the US. I'm not aware of whether they've looked to see how many of those might have actually been vaccinated previously, over the last month and a half. And if they had been vaccinated and they basically were infected with this, we would call that breakthrough disease. But I'm not aware that they've actually looked at that yet, but they will be.

New Jersey, as you mentioned, has had 11 reported cases of the UK variant, and the other two or three are just a handful now in the country, none in New Jersey. There are now reports from five vaccines in Phase 3 trials in the US and the western world that have looked at this. We are seeing that in places like South Africa and Brazil there is some sort of decreased responsiveness to the vaccine. Basically, those individuals who've been vaccinated are potentially getting those variants. But I think the jury is still out, again, in terms of what the impact will be from a population level.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that. That's something obviously, as I mentioned earlier, when I referred to the opening steps that we're taking, we're watching this obviously very closely. That's a very important context. But we think we can responsibly do what we're proposing to do this Friday. Thank you for that. Mahen, will you get back to Matt on the Jersey City numbers? Daniel, Good morning.

Daniel Munoz, NJBIZ: Hi, Governor, good morning. I did want to follow up on the South Africa and the UK strains. Does the potential strain jeopardize the reopening plan and vaccination strategy if either strain becomes dominant in the state? Are you worrying about having to re-impose restrictions or tighten or reverse what you're announcing will take effect this Friday?

Any thoughts on the OSHA guidance that the Biden administration put out last week? Do you do think those orders will be effective at protecting New Jersey workers? How would the prior worker safety orders you signed last year coalesce with what is being put out there?

With the vaccine delays in New Jersey, you've faulted the federal government you've faulted Walgreens in the past, but do you accept any of the responsibility for any of these delays or these confusions or other problems such as problems with this statewide online scheduling system? Any thoughts on the Republican counterproposal in Congress for a new COVID relief bill? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: I feel like I have to go in the confession booth to answer some of these. I want to make sure Callahan heard that. Yeah, I don't think there's anything new that we've got on the strains. I've said it already that we're watching them. We've got 11 cases of the so-called UK strain. It's a contextual reality that we're keeping a close eye on but we think we can take these steps responsibly. Obviously, we're going to watch it very, very closely.

I'll repeat, we may have been the last state in the nation to open up indoors but we haven't wavered since then, and that's now many months. We wouldn't be taking these steps if we felt we couldn't be in a similar mode going forward.

OSHA guidance, I have to admit I've not read it in chapter and verse, but thank God guidance has come out. Remember what I signed in New Jersey, and I want to thank Congressman Don Norcross for fighting the fight so aggressively in Washington. We did what we did because the federal government wasn't doing anything. I don't have a particular answer of how well this syncs up but we welcome it, period. Parimal, anything you want to add to that?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: We're having good discussions with the administration on how our state worker protection will interact with that federal standard.

Governor Phil Murphy: We are having good discussions with the administration, period, which is a good thing. I'm not worried about it, we're working it through, we're good. But again, bear with me because I don't have a full and complete answer for you.

Listen, with all due respect to the premise of the question, do you have any responsibility? This isn't a blame game. We're calling the facts as we see them. We've built a distribution system with 270 points and that number is going to grow. We talked about, at some point sooner than later, houses of worship, we talked about CVS, Rite Aid with points. We said we're going to build that out ahead of any certainty on the supply. The supply is less than what we were promised and indicated in early December. It is what it is. The Biden team are making great progress to back and fill on that. The long-term care piece of this was not acceptable. I don't know how else to put that.

There's a federal program. We put in the broadest definition of long-term care facilities of any state in the nation, and I want to give Judy and David and Eddy and their team a big thank you for that. And then they started scheduling them, and they're now finally picking up the pace that we need them to pick up.

We've had vendor issues with the preregistration and the ability for folks to preregister online. We've worked aggressively with the main principal vendor and it's gotten better. Nobody is blameless here. This has never been done in the history of the United States of America. By definition, you're not batting 1,000. I would just say to the millions of folks out there who have had extraordinary patience, we thank you. Please keep it up.

Listen, I'm all for bipartisanship. In fact, I've been on with several Republican Legislators today, very constructively, on whether it's the steps we're taking today or John DiMaio, who's a good friend, reached out with a particular healthcare question or hospital question. I believe when you can find common ground it is incumbent, it's our responsibility to find that common ground. They went to President Biden on Monday afternoon with zero dollars for state and local aid, zero. They're not watching the same reality that we are. Zero dollars of state and local aid means we have to cut services at a time when we need them the most; people would lose their jobs, frontline workers like firefighters, police, educators, health care, EMS. I don't know what movie they're watching, but it is not the one that is playing out.

I spoke to Speaker Pelosi, I'm losing track of days, Monday afternoon. Several members of our delegation, Leader Schumer's team. The President is right to proceed wanting bipartisan support but the needs here are overwhelming and they are crystal clear what needs to be done. They came up with \$600 million versus \$1.9 trillion, so less than a third. I do know one of the gaps was state and local. That's the one that we focus on the most. That's \$350 billion. That's my quick answer. Thank you. Good to see you, by the way. Alex, how are you?

Alex Zdan, News 12: For either of the doctors, can you explain how vaccinations that were scheduled for Monday and Tuesday are being rescheduled without producing a domino effect? Are the vaccination centers going to be open later, alternate hours? Can you just go through the mechanics of how that's going to happen?

For the Governor, you said that your increase from 25% to 35% on indoor dining was due to, you said a 20% drop in hospitalizations over the last three weeks. If hospitalizations dropped by 20% over the next three weeks, will you raise indoor dining to 45%? When do we get to 55%? Do you have a blueprint going forward here?

Governor Phil Murphy: Only if you buy me dinner?

Alex Zdan, News 12: Okay, I'll see you afterwards. I hope you like a big steak. Lastly, on indoor dining, you tried to bring back indoor dining Fourth of July weekend. You brought it back Labor Day weekend. You're expanding it Super Bowl Weekend. Is it time to just admit that dates determine data, instead of the other way around?

Governor Phil Murphy: Does your mother know that you beat your dog? That sounds like one of those premises. May I say, David, you should answer the first question about the domino effect, but remember, and I'll use the Meadowlands Racetrack as an example. The reason why, in layman's terms, why this isn't going to create a domino effect is a simple observation. They have a capacity for 2,400 doses a day. They're doing 800 a day because of supply. I don't want to get out over my skis, David but if you take Monday and Tuesday and add it to Wednesday, you can still cover everybody at that particular location. I think that's probably a similar reality at each of the mega sites.

Deputy Commissioner for Public Health, Dr. David Adinoro: I agree, Governor. Most of the sites have excess capacity and some of them are not open every day so they were able to shift over. Clearly, all these teams are going to have to scramble to make sure they have the needed personnel. They certainly have the vaccine, but all of them really had, going into this, contingency plans of which days they would move these individuals over and which days they would cramp up. I'm sure they're all scrambling but most of them entered the weekend knowing that this was going to happen and had a plan of how to get it done this week.

Governor Phil Murphy: I can't promise you down by X leads to Y, but if the numbers keep going down, there's no question our strong desire, and I believe our actions will be to continue to open things up. I just can't tell you this particular move triggers that. I used the 20% comparison today just to put a fine point on the fact that the numbers are going in the right direction. But the answer is as a conceptual matter, without question.

You know, this happens to be before the Super Bowl but a far bigger chorus was asking us to do something in particular for Sunday, which we were not going to do. We've been noodling on the steps we're taking today for at least a week to 10 days. We've also got other steps that we're trying to grapple with as well, potentially, to take which we're not comfortable yet taking. It does so happen that it is at this moment.

We did open outdoor dining on Monday, June 15th. That was not related to any holiday. We had to push off indoor dining, as you rightfully point out, to September 4th. I think gyms were a little bit before that. I would say this on the Super Bowl. I'm glad you asked, because it gives me the chance to say, please do that responsibly. We haven't said that enough. Folks, we said that around Thanksgiving, around Christmas, around Hanukkah, New Year's. Please, please, please. This is not the year to let it rip. I ask everybody to be really responsible, particularly if you're indoors and I assume that's most everybody. Thank you.

Reporter: Governor, the earn your way out law you signed last year took effect Monday. Has the Department of Corrections begun implementing it as required? If so, what changes have been made to do so?

The CDC has recommended since December that essential employees like grocery store and transit workers be prioritized for vaccines in Phase 1B. Advocates say many of these workers are people of color who've been more vulnerable to COVID. New York already allows these individuals to be vaccinated. Why aren't these workers being prioritized for vaccines here in New Jersey, along with other frontline workers?

Finally, the City of Paterson is now using the NJVSS for residents to make vaccine appointments but several people we spoke with today at the Paterson vaccine site got confirmation emails for the first doses, but were turned away at the door with no warning. The city says the state website should have informed people that their appointments had been cancelled. What is your response?

Governor Phil Murphy: On the last one I had not heard that but that's not to say it isn't happening. I'd like to get specifics, if Mahen or Parimal or somebody can get the specifics. Obviously, that's something we don't want to have happen. I've got nothing on the earn your way out law. Do you have any update on that, Parimal?

Chief Counsel Parimal Garg: We are working on implementing the earn your way out law and we'll circle back with more specifics.

Governor Phil Murphy: And we will come to you with any news on that as we have it. On essential workers, we were crystal clear we want to get to them. I mean, I've spoken mostly in that group that is not yet eligible. Again, if you're under 65 and you're working and you've got a chronic condition, you are eligible right now. I want to reiterate that. If you've got a chronic condition, you are eligible. But as a broad community reality in terms of essential workers, we absolutely want to get to them. The group that we have spoken most frequently about are educators

who I'm on with all the time; I've got another call this afternoon. I had a very good, constructive discussion with ASME, for instance, yesterday. We try to do that with the HPAE folks, obviously the healthcare workers. We want to get as broad as fast as we can. The more supply we get, the more quickly we can do that. Thank you. Dave.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. You guys covered some of this, but we are continually swamped with emails from people trying to get a second shot appointment. I know, Dr. David, you had mentioned because of the storm, they had cut it off a little early on the weekend. But we're talking about appointments weeks from now for a second shot. Why should that – how does one affect the other? I don't understand that.

People are continuing now to try to get through to the call center. Those that have gotten through say it's taken hours and they still don't get an answer. People have been promised that they were going to get responses from different vaccination sites about a second appointment. It continually seems to be not happening.

With the call center, can we add more operators? Would that help? Understandably, the limits on supplies are the reality of the day right now. Wouldn't it make sense just to email people to say we will get back to you, we are aware you are looking for a second shot appointment but we can't help you at the moment. But we promise we'll get back – something. In other words, not just ignore them, because people then get nervous and desperate and scared.

On raising the indoor limits, could you, Governor, and perhaps the doctors explain besides hospitalizations, what are the other factors that are at play here? The positivity rate is still fairly high; we still have a significant number of people dying and the hospitalizations have not really dropped that much if you look at it in terms of a pattern here. I know the concern that I've heard about with the variants is huge, talking about a major spike coming in the next four to 16 weeks. The timing just seems curious. Could you guys talk a little bit about other factors that were considered when making this decision? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you, Dave. The factors we look at are the ones that we've been looking at from day one. As I said, even though numbers have gone in the right direction, some of them remain higher than we would like but rate of transmission is below one and it stayed either just below or just above one for now months.

Sadly, I don't want to diminish for one second ever, ever, ever loss of life. Every one of these lives is a precious life lived and lost, but that's a lagging indicator. Deaths would not be in that first round. It would be who is actually getting sick with this? The positivity is higher than we'd like without question to that point. But as I mentioned earlier, Saturdays and Sundays are ones we almost have to throw out because you're self-selecting into a pool of folks that I think distort the numbers. These guys on my right can add to that.

I mean, the variants we've mentioned is a contextual important factor right now but we have 11 known cases of the UK variant in the state. That's not to say they're not going to go up. That's not to say other variants won't come but we watch that like a hawk.

The call center, I'm told, it will begin in waves. We had hoped to begin pre-storm on Sunday when the storm started, making appointments with folks. That'll begin to happen in waves, I think as early as today. That's a good thing. Would we put more operators on? Yes, absolutely. Notifications, I think that is the intention but David, any color you want to raise on second shot, call center, notifications? And Eddy, any other – I think you've already hit it – but anything else you want to say on variants? David.

Deputy Commissioner for Public Health, Dr. David Adinaro: In terms of the second dose appointments, obviously we did get several thousand out on the weekend and then really shifted our efforts. These are the ones that we owed people, and then we really shifted, as they go out in bulk, to making sure that we were handling the needs of the cancellations for the appointments on Monday and Tuesday and focusing on the rescheduling of that. My understanding is that functionality to now get out the required secondary appointment and then the automatic creation of a second dose appointment for anybody who's been moving forward getting their first dose is they're going to get back on track and get that moving today.

Governor Phil Murphy: And again, not willingness, but looking at whether or not we can bulk the teams up, getting the vendors to punch at their weight. All of this, again, this reminds me so much of testing in March, April and May. This is, literally, we're seeing the same movie. It's different raw material but it is literally – that's why we have got to ask folks to have patience, because we're building this as we fly it. Eddy, anything else? You've really hit it, but anything else you want to add?

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: I would just say that yes, we're concerned about the variants but to date, considering how many reported cases there are in the country on a daily and weekly basis, it's a handful that have been reported both nationally and certainly in New Jersey. We're looking at that, we're paying attention to it but at the same time, we're vaccinating lots of people. David mentioned, a quarter-of-a-million people last week got at least one dose. Every week we're going to actually have more and more people, weather permitting. As we vaccinate more people, the risk of having more variants spreading or new variants will decline, because there'll be fewer people who will be infected and fewer viruses replicating and having the chance for additional mutations.

As we improve with everything, policy changes. And so things like the Governor putting forward changing the occupancy, that's a minor change, really, from 25% to 35% all things considered. I think that we're moving forward.

Governor Phil Murphy: Eddy, let me ask you, we get a lot of questions. Folks did not ask this one today but Dave, I'll add on and put my journalist hat on to your good questions. The debate between more first shots to more people versus the rigorous adherence to the one-two punch. I say rigorous adherence, you've been pretty clear, it doesn't necessarily have to be Day 21 or Day 28. Both of you guys have made that point. But how do you assess that question, particularly given the sense that the variants will become more prevalent?

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: Yeah, that's a great question and at the federal level you see a lot of debate around that. People who we respect who are experts fall on either side of that argument. It's not a one shot, and people call it a one shot. It's really a delayed shot policy, not a one-shot policy right now, because right now we only have two vaccines that are two doses. It's a matter of do we give it on the day that the clinical trials show that they had efficacy or do we extend it five weeks, six weeks, 10 weeks, 12 weeks? We know that there is efficacy after one dose and right now, we don't know that it declines. It is a difficult decision. I don't know that there's a right answer for it.

Right now, the ACIP and the NIH are saying we stick to what the clinical trials showed. We don't have any more data to change our approach. There was a report this morning, I haven't had a chance to read the paper but I did see the press release that the AstraZeneca trial, they had a single-dose version of that and after about three months they had 76% efficacy with no change. Which shows, again, after one dose you do get reasonable efficacy with that particular vaccine, but the others have shown that as well.

Here's the problem. Dave and I were talking about this earlier today. Right now we have everybody geared in in the state, all our pods do 21 days or 28 days. There might be a variation of a day or so and we've gotten people to think that way. It's important because we don't want people hoarding for that second dose. If we change it – and it might change, I'm not saying it won't – if it's changed because the federal policy says that, now we're talking about our pods having to figure out, well, when are we going to schedule these people? It is going to put a complexity into the logistics if we change it at this point without really any good scientific data to support it right now.

It's a long answer, but there is no right answer right now. Right now, I think we're sticking to what we're doing.

Governor Phil Murphy: Eddy, one more for you. Either J&J or AstraZeneca, do we know enough to know what the molecular makeup is? In other words, are they also modified RNA approaches or are they based on a completely different approach?

Dr. Eddy Bresnitz: Well, the current vaccine – all the vaccines right now target the spike antigen. That's the antigen, I'm not sure if that's the question you're asking. But I know Moderna and AstraZeneca are already beginning to think about developing a different vaccine with a different makeup based on the mutations. I'm not sure about J&J just yet. I'm sure all manufacturers are thinking about that. It's really preventive in a sense, right? Because it's about developing a potential new vaccine to address the possibility that these variants might become predominant, and those vaccines would then be used potentially as a booster dose.

Governor Phil Murphy: Well said. This is completely off topic. Mahen, I hope you won't be mad at me but we got a bunch of questions over the past 48 hours on unemployment benefits. I've invited Labor Commissioner Rob Asaro Angelo to join us, I believe Friday. That's one area that I was expecting, Matt, you to hit it. We want to make sure that he addresses quite clearly what the state of play is there, particularly with the supplemental.

With that, we will mask up. Thank you all, David, Eddy, each of you. As always, Pat, Jared, Parimal, Mahen and the cast of thousands. Please, keep at it folks. We will be virtual tomorrow. We will be with you, unless you hear otherwise, Friday at one o'clock. Please especially keep the late Brian Sicknick and his family in your prayers. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy

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