

Governor Phil Murphy

TRANSCRIPT: April 28th, 2021 Coronavirus Briefing Media

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Governor Murphy Holds COVID-19 Briefing



Governor Phil Murphy: Good afternoon. Sorry to be a minute or two behind. With me to my right is the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli. To her right, another very familiar face at this point, the state's epidemiologist, Dr. Christina Tan. Great to have you both. To my left is not only a guy who needs no introduction and the Superintendent of the State Police, Colonel Pat Callahan, but he is the birthday boy. Happy Birthday, Pat. I'm going to resist the temptation to sing to you, particularly given how good a singing voice you have. Parimal Garg, our Chief Counsel's with us. Jared Maples, by the way, is not here and he is – the reason is he's testifying before the House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee. We wish him well on that endeavor.

Let's start today, if we could, with a quick look at our latest vaccination numbers. As of this morning, we have administered a total of more than 6.8 million doses statewide and as you can see, more than 3.9 million New Jerseyans are now fully vaccinated. Judy, I'm showing that with today's report, we have now crossed more than a quarter of a million residents being vaccinated with the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine. We continue to make progress toward our goal of 4 – our initial goal, by the way. We've said the word initial almost every time out, and I don't want to lose that word today because obviously our hope is we can do even better. Our initial goal of 4.7 million fully vaccinated adult residents by the end of June. With these numbers today, we are exactly 62% toward that goal. Looking just at those who are receiving either a Pfizer or Moderna vaccine – in other words backing the J&J numbers out in which today if you combine Pfizer and Moderna, you get more than 3.9 million residents. You can easily chart out where we will be inside of the next month as more than 1.25 million of those folks return for their second shots. I will be among them with my wife this Friday in Atlantic City.

Also, CVS and Walgreens recently completed their last rounds of vaccination clinics in 1,193 long-term care facilities. This is the ultimate eye chart before you. I want to send my appreciation publicly to CVS and Walgreens who completed – I know, Judy, you join me in this – who completed three and sometimes four clinics in each facility, which was no easy task to coordinate, especially since we ensured that as many facilities as possible participated in this program including nursing homes, clearly, veterans' homes, assisted living residences, federal housing and urban development senior housing, developmental centers, and homes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. All total, 145,775 doses were administered to residents and 127,643 to staff. Vaccination rates are broken down by county and facility on the long-term care tab on our data dashboard at covid19.nj.gov, and that is one page from that dashboard.

Although CVS and Walgreens have now completed their long-term care vaccination clinics, we remain committed to ensuring continued access for long-term care residents and staff through other pharmacy partners. Ensuring ongoing access is necessary, obvious reasons, but let's remember as new residents are being admitted to these facilities daily and new staff and individuals who may have initially been hesitant may now wish to be vaccinated, and, by the way, new members of staff coming on board. This commitment does not only apply to seniors living in congregate settings. Although 83% of seniors over the age of 65 across the state have received at least their first shot, we continue to prioritize vaccination access for this group. Seniors needing assistance booking appointments can contact our senior hotline right there, and this is specific to seniors, 856-249-7007, 856-249-7007 – shaken not stirred – to access reserved appointments. Dave, making sure you're paying attention there for the James Bond reference.

More broadly, we continue to be a nation-leading state in vaccinations. If you look at the report submitted to the CDC, New Jersey ranks, as you can see, 10th in total doses administered per 100,000 residents, 8th in percentage of all adults with at least one dose, 8th in the percent of our adult population who are now fully vaccinated. We're not patting ourselves on the back. This is a journey that is not nearly over yet, so please know that, but as I have noted before, and it bears repeating, most if not all of the states that are ahead of us in rankings have far fewer residents than we do, and that's no disrespect to them, but I think it pays a whole lot of respect to our vaccination effort and especially, folks, to your willingness to raise your sleeves by the millions.

Now, even though we are 62% of our way to our initial vaccination goal, we know that we still have 38% to go, and as much as Judy, Tina, Pat, and I can urge you to get vaccinated, we know nothing can be more vital than hearing from family and friends, so to help us reach our goal – I expect to see a video downloaded by you and Tina soon. To help us reach our goal, we want to empower you to help us get the word out about how easy and important it is to be vaccinated. Just spending a few minutes on Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok tells you that our state is home to countless talented, creative, and passionate individuals. Social media has meant that anyone with a cellphone, a story, and a vision can become an influencer, so today we are announcing our Your Voice, Your Shot video contest calling on you to share why you are getting vaccinated.

One 30-second video will be voted on by your fellow New Jerseyans to become a central part of our statewide COVID-19 public health campaign. Go to covid19.nj.gov/yourvoice to learn how you can enter Your Voice, Your Shot and be a part of our effort to win the fight against COVID. No state has our grit, our determination, or our creativity. I

can't wait to see how you put all three of these together, and I want to thank Judy and the Department of Health as well as Beth Novak in the Office of Innovation for working together to put this contest up and get it running.

Next up, the Department of Community Affairs under the extraordinary leadership of Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver wants to remind everyone that the application period for tenants and landlords, tenants and landlords – I did a town hall last night. I got a question from a tenant right back-to-back with a question from a landlord. There's pain on both sides here, so this is a reminder that the application period, again, for both tenants and landlords to apply for the latest round of COVID-19 emergency rental assistance remains open. Eligible households are selected on a rolling basis from the overall pool of applicants through a randomized process based on lottery criteria. The application is online and is available in English and Spanish among multiple other languages.

This current round of rental support covers back rents owed through mid-March of this year. For eligibility requirements and to apply, visit nj.gov/dca – that's the website at the bottom – or call 609-490-4550. Again, that's 609-490-4550. We encourage everyone to apply even if you are unsure if you meet every requirement, and these funds are available to every renter, regardless of immigration status, so regardless of immigration status, and don't spend a lot of time wondering yourself whether or not you meet the criteria. Pick up the phone and call. Let the DCA folks tell you whether or not you're eligible based on the requirements, and landlords, again, are allowed to submit applications, by the way, on behalf of tenants that they know need a helping hand. Again, visit that website, nj.gov/dca or call 609-490-4550.

While we're talking about the Department of Community Affairs, let's also highlight once again their Neighborhood Preservation COVID-19 Emergency Relief grant program that has pumped millions of dollars directly into our downtowns to help our small businesses stay strong. I have to say between the DCA and the EDA, they have not only put a ton of money on the street, but they've done it incredibly creatively. The Sustain and Serve program by the EDA which works at both ends of the spectrum, restaurants that desperately need to be pushing food out the door and folks who have food insecurity, and this program, which is a home run, putting money into communities, into downtowns, and then having that community figure out how much will go into the greater good and how much of that grant from the DCA should go directly to establishments, and you can see – that's a preview to this.

One of the DCA partner communities in this effort has been the city of Garfield, one of New Jersey's greatest, in Bergen county. The city, in collaboration with Greater Bergen Community Action, received a grant of more than \$220,000, which it directed into the city's River to Rail neighborhood district for everything from providing PPE and face masks to business owners and visitors all the way to providing, as I mentioned, direct grants to businesses, and one of those businesses was this guy, Steve's Burgers, part of the growing burger empire grown – owned, rather, by this guy, Steve Chrisomalis.

Steve's Burgers is located in an old rail car diner at 68 Passaic Street. You have to check this place out. The reviews, Pat, on the burgers – and by the way, they're real burgers, notwithstanding all the political noise around burgers. The noise around this, they're just apparently off the charts. By the way, as luck would have it, he opened the place just a few months before the pandemic took hold. A direct grant allowed Steve to purchase outdoor dining furniture and traffic barriers to serve and protect his customers. He installed a mobile point of sale system and was able to keep current with his rent and utilities. The grant also allowed him to become a bit creative. He held his own contest for his patrons who took selfies at a mural installed outside the Garfield train station. Of course, the prize was burgers, and he stepped up for the community offering school kids facing food insecurity a free meal during the pandemic's darkest days. I had the chance to catch up with Steve on Monday. He's a great guy. I thanked him not only for believing in Garfield but for supporting his community throughout the past year. He reflects the tremendous spirit we feel across our state. Again, check him out, 68 Passaic Street in Garfield in Bergen County.

Finally, before we turn to the rest of today's numbers, as I indicated on Monday, today I am signing an executive order allowing for our summer camps, both day camps and sleep-aways, to open for the upcoming season, and accordingly, the Department of Health under Judy's leadership released the necessary health and safety guidance. We are all committed to a safe and fun summer for our kids. The guidance the department released includes many of the protocols that allowed our day camps last summer, especially for indoor masking and daily health screenings. These screenings will be especially important for kids at overnight camps. The guidance also provides areas where greater flexibility will enable campers to enjoy day trips and other off camp activities. As an additional safeguard, we will be requiring that unvaccinated overnight campers and staff receive a COVID test before the camp begins and within the first few days of their session.

The department has been in direct contact with our camp operators who are ready and willing to comply with this requirement. Judy, as I read the laundry list – and it's a good list. It's a smart list. It's very consistent with I know at least New York state is doing, so there is some commonality with – a lot of commonality, in fact, with New York state and probably with other neighbors. Again, we are pleased – I know I speak on behalf of all of us – that our health metrics are allowing our summer camps to plan for the season ahead, and we hope everyone can make the most of the summer and take away some great Jersey summer memories.

Now, let's move forward and track the rest of our progress. Today, we are reporting an additional 2,268 combined positives. The statewide rate of transmission continues to moderate. Today it is down to .80. May it continue to drop. The positivity rate – this looks a little bit higher – for the 18,622 PCR tests recorded on Saturday was just under 9%. This is significant because we have been in double digits every Saturday, Sunday, and holiday for months, and you can see that sawtooth pattern on the chart. This is the first weekend day, Judy, I can recall literally in months where we're below double digits. For all of last week, Sunday through Saturday, so both – two weekend days and five weekdays, the statewide positivity rate was an even 7%, and on each of the weekdays, it was under 7%, so seeing the weekend numbers coming into the range of what we see during the rest of the week is incredibly promising.

We're also seeing the broadening benefits of these lessening numbers. In our schools, for example, as of today, only 25 schools or districts statewide remain in an all-remote posture. That's down 22 just from two days ago. This impacts roughly 115,000 students. Just 8.5% of our total population are on remote. That number on Monday was 179,000. May I say this of the 25 schools or districts, I believe 11 are actual public-school districts. The balance are largely, not entirely, largely individual charter schools. When I did my math, Judy, and I – again, if the school district is in a hybrid mode, I split the number in half. By my math today, we exceeded the 85% goal of getting our kids either remote or all – pardon me – either hybrid or all in person. We are at 85.96% by my math today. We have every expectation that number continues – will continue to rise.

Over to our hospitals, we've got 1,768 in the total census, 1,646 are confirmed. ICUs, 375, ventilators in use 232. All those numbers are going down. Throughout Tuesday, 214 live patients were discharged statewide while another 188 were admitted, and these are not yet confirmed, but we had 24 reported losses of life. Today, however, we are reporting with the heaviest of hearts an additional 35 confirmed COVID-related deaths. That gives us a total confirmed losses of life from our extraordinary New Jersey family of 22,884. The probable deaths has been revised as we do on Wednesdays by the team at the Communicable Disease Service under Ed Lifshitz's leadership. That number is now 2,625. That is a net increase by my math of, I believe, of 14 from last week. Let's take a couple of minutes as we do every day to remember several more of the New Jerseyans who have recently left our state and left their lives.

We'll begin today by honoring the life and legacy of a pretty darn special woman, Morris County's Olga Zarate. Olga was born in Quito, Ecuador, but like so many across our state's history, she came to New Jersey in search of better opportunities, of her American dream, and a better life for herself and her family. Professionally, Olga worked as a secretary for the Mitsubishi corporation, but she would be quick to correct you that her favorite job was as a grandmother. None of her grandchildren dared to call her grandma, a word she did not like, and she was simply and lovingly referred to as Mica. Mica and her husband Hector enjoyed 34 years of marriage, 34 years of weekends spent together, of family dinners, and of sitting together watching a lot of soccer matches.

Along with Hector, who was also COVID positive but I'm told he is in good shape physically, she also leaves her two daughters Silvana and Marcela and their husbands Edison and Hugo, respectively, and the seven grandchildren she loved so deeply, Romina, Gabby, Leslye, Sebastian, Emily, Nico, and Eddy, and she's also survived by her siblings, Gladys, Loly, Mercedes, Yolita, and Washito. I want to thank Parsippany mayor, Michael Soriano, for bringing Olga's life to our attention. I spoke with her granddaughter Leslye. You can imagine how she felt about her grandmother, but one particular reminder she wanted me to make sure everyone knew that Olga at the time of her death was on her way toward US citizenship. God bless her, and may God bless and watch over her and her extraordinary family.

Next up, let's remember Westfield's Rosella Carden. Ro, as she was known, was 90 years old, and had called Westfield home for a scant 60 years. She was raised in a proud Italian American household in Youngstown, Ohio, an upbringing that instilled in her both the importance of family and the art of good cooking. In 1952, Ro married her high school sweetheart, that guy Jim, who was a budding Air Force pilot. His career as a military officer meant living on base in Delaware where their daughters Cathy and Jamie were born, but as Jim left the military and began flying for commercial airlines, the family found its final destination in Westfield in 1961, and Jim and Ro welcomed a son Jimmer shortly thereafter.

Across the years as her children grew, Ro was a surrogate mom for numerous kids on Belvidere Avenue, but when the house emptied, she volunteered her time at the Westfield Community Center and Children's Specialized Hospital, taught Bible school. She was a docent at the Miller-Cory House Museum, that's the 1740 farmhouse that was one of Westfield's first settlements, and she was a member of the rake and ho garden club. Ro is now back reunited with her guy Jim who passed away in 2018. She leaves behind her kids, Cathy, Jamie, and Jimmer. I spoke to all of them on Monday. Kathy and Jimmer are in Jersey. Jamie is in Tennessee where she headed back yesterday. She also leaves behind their spouses and her four grandchildren, P.J., Lydia, Miles, and Aidan. I know her family would want me to say this. She was a big, big dog lover. She also leaves behind many cousins, nieces, and nephews, and she leaves many fond memories among the kids who grew up on Belvidere avenue. We thank Ro for her love of family and community, and may God bless and watch over her and her extraordinary family.

Finally this Wednesday, let's remember Mary Fiorani. That's a great shot. Mary was 85 years old when she left us and was a resident of Southampton in Burlington County. Born and raised in Pennsylvania, she and her husband Leonard raised their family, daughters Renee and Angela and son Anthony, on that other side of the Delaware, but they lived in Levittown, so Jersey was always in sight. With the kids grown, Mary went back to school at the age of 40, training in – trading in the job of homemaker to take on – Judy, you ready for this – a new career and challenge as a licensed practical nurse, from one nurse to another. She would serve her patients over a 14-year career before retiring.

In 2010, Mary moved to Southampton to be closer to Renee and Angela and her grandchildren Zachary, Jake, Bridget, and Kyle, and while she remained her son Anthony's primary care provider right until the end. She was a devoted gardener, and an avid – I'm going to have trouble saying these words, by the way, so Pat, bear with me – an avid Yankee's fan who took in many games with Anthony at her side so they could root together against the Boston Red Sox. I spoke on Monday with Renee and her husband Shawn and son Anthony and had an extraordinary conversation with them.

Angela was not on the phone, but they wanted me to give a shout-out to our colleagues in the back of the hall here because Angela is deaf, and we discussed as a point of pride the fact I believe every single one of our press conferences – it started out physically you'll remember these guys were right to my left, Pat, maybe even to your left, and they've been in that small box in your screen there in the back of the room, and so it's a real treat. I'm reaching out to Angela right now saying Angela, we are honored that you can participate in this conference today and help us salute your extraordinary mom. While we only had Mary in our New Jersey family for a short time, we are grateful that she chose to make her home here. May God bless and watch over her and her family.

Of course, Olga, Ro, and Mary are only three representing thousands more. We honor each of their lives. We remember their contributions to our state, and we will always remember them. The best way we can honor them is by continuing to do everything we're doing to defeat this pandemic, especially, folks, go out, get vaccinated. If you've been vaccinated but you know a neighbor, a family member, a friend, a coworker remind them that the risk of not getting vaccinated is far and away more than the risk, any small risk associated with getting vaccinated. Getting vaccinated and helping us reach our goals will open up many more degrees of freedom for all of us moving forward.

We'll get to where we all want to get to, but we'll get there faster, and even with the updated CDC guidance yesterday relaxing the necessity of wearing a face mask outdoors where we know the virus is much less transmittable, remember that both under the CDC guidance and our directives, masking up remains mandatory in indoor settings except obviously when you're eating or drinking. Remember, outdoors, Judy, from moment one, our – frankly, the feds have basically mimicked what we've been doing all along, although they've added the added dimension of having been fully vaccinated, but from the get-go when you're outside and you can socially distance, we've not asked you – we've not required you to wear a mask, but if you can't, if you're on a crowded boardwalk, if you're in a park, if you're some place where you're on top of each other outside, you've got to wear a mask, and inside where we know the virus is a lot more lethal, you still have to wear a mask. It's the right thing to do. It'll save you and help you, and it'll save others around you.

Finally, we have all been seeing in the news the ravages of this virus in India. We mentioned this on Monday. This is now the global epicenter of the pandemic. As the home of one of the nation's largest Indian communities, the pain in India is being felt deeply right here in New Jersey. I mentioned on Monday that I had a moving conversation with the ambassador of India to the United States, Taranjit Singh Sandhu – by the way, his wife is the Indian ambassador to the Republic of Italy – and I committed New Jersey's support to his country in whatever way we can provide it. Our team then followed up with his after our call. We are awaiting guidance from them. We'll likely follow up again. Please keep our Indian brothers and sisters in your thoughts and prayers. There's lots of different organizations that are raising money. We want to vet those before we go live with our recommendation, but if you can vet them on your own and you can do something, we encourage you to do that. Remember that the world rallied to our side last year when we were in our darkest hours and we were the epicenter. Now is the time for all of us to do the same for our Indian brothers and sisters. Please keep them in your prayers. With that said, please help me welcome the woman who needs no introduction, the Commissioner of the Department of Health, Judy Persichilli.

Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. The Governor covered the progress of the federal pharmacy partnership program for long-term care facilities. We are now in the maintenance phase to ensure access to vaccines for new residents and staff as well as staff that may have been hesitant in the past. Long-term care facilities have pharmacies they work with routinely, and three group purchasing organizations are supplying those pharmacies with vaccines. Through this program 5,160 vaccines have been administered since March.

A CDC MMWR, morbidity and mortality weekly report, released last week remonstrated how important it is for staff at these facilities to be vaccinated. At a nursing home in Kentucky where 90.4% of residents have been vaccinated and 52.6% of staff were vaccinated, an outbreak occurred brought in by an unvaccinated healthcare worker. During the outbreak, 46 COVID-19 cases were identified including cases in 26 residents, 18 of which were fully vaccinated, and 20 healthcare personnel, of which four were vaccinated, so the risk is there. The risk of poor outcomes among unvaccinated residents was demonstrated by the hospitalization of four of the six unvaccinated infected residents and two subsequent deaths occurred, including in one previously infected resident.

Unvaccinated residents and healthcare personnel had three and four times the risk of infection as did vaccinated residents and staff. Vaccine was 86.5% protective against symptomatic illness among residents and 87.1% protective among workers. To protect long-term care residents, vaccination of nursing home residents and staff is essential to reduce the risk for symptomatic COVID-19 as is continued focus on infection prevention and control practices. In New Jersey, we must increase our vaccination rates among our long-term care staff. While we have

seen from progress, only about 56% of long-term care and assisted living staff are vaccinated. As part of our public awareness campaign early this year, we provided these facilities with tool kits to communicate with staff about the importance of vaccines and to help address their hesitancy. The toolkit can be found on the department's long-term care webpage.

Among residents of long-term care facilities in the state, 84% are vaccinated. So far, 35 facilities out of our 378 have mandated the vaccine as a condition of employment, 35 facilities. Additionally, by survey, 80 more informed us that they are considering a mandate. The department posts vaccination percentage data by facility on our departments long-term care landing page at www.nj.gov/health/ltc (<http://www.nj.gov/health/ltc>). I encourage individuals with loved ones in these facilities to look at this data and ask the administrators how they are working to increase vaccine levels at their facilities. As the Governor shared, the number of doses administered in the state continues to climb, and there are plenty of opportunities right now to get vaccinated. For next week's state allocation of doses, we are expecting 474,420 vaccines. Pfizer, we are expecting 132,210, 98,500 Moderna and 20,200 J&J.

We continue to see progress in vaccinating our senior populations, those most at risk. 83% of those 65 years and older have received at least one dose of vaccine. The CDC just released data that found fully vaccinated adults 65 years and older were 94% less likely to be hospitalized with COVID-19 than people at the same age who were not vaccinated. The findings provide additional support for recommendation for COVID-19 vaccination among people 65 and older as the risk of severe illness with COVID-19 increases with age with older adults at the highest risk. As you remember, we had – excuse me – we had specific initiatives aimed at increasing vaccination rates for this population, so we recognize the strength of these targeted initiatives and we'll be broadening these efforts to other populations. As the Governor mentioned on Monday, the department will be releasing updated guidance for youth day- and overnight summer camps. The multilayered use of public health interventions such as face masks, cohorting, distancing of six feet, hand hygiene, cleaning and disinfecting were successful in mitigating transmission of virus at these camps last summer.

Thankfully there are no outbreaks were reported during the last season. We're looking forward to another summer where children can safely enjoy their camps. All camps must conduct staff training on basic principles of infection control, hand-washing practices, personal protective equipment and symptoms of COVID-19. Healthy hygiene practices should be taught and reinforced to all campers and staff. A policy for daily screening of campers, staff, and visitors should be developed. Outdoor activities are strongly encouraged. All heating ventilation and air condition units should be inspected to ensure proper operation and routinely serviced.

Camp operators should group the same staff and children together to minimize staff and camper movements between groups, otherwise known as cohorting. Camps should stagger arrivals and drop-off locations by cohorts to limit contact. Mealtime should also be staggered to ensure cohorts remain intact. During any busing, social distancing must be maintained between riders and drivers. Cleaning and disinfecting of frequently touched surfaces should be done on a daily basis, and shared objects cleaned between uses.

In indoor setting, staff must wear face coverings at all time except when not practicable and camps must supply their staff and campers with face coverings. Indoor, campers should wear face coverings at all times, particularly when physical distancing is difficult. When six-foot distancing between groups is not possible outdoors, campers should also wear a mask. Campers are not required to mask when they are in their bunk or within their assigned cohort. Camps must have a policy in the event that an individual gets sick or tests positive, which includes immediate isolation and reporting to local health officials.

This year with additional layers of vigilance, sleep-away camps will also be operational, allowing another opportunity to engage in outdoor activities with friends. Unvaccinated staff and campers must have negative test results within 72 hours of arriving on-site. After arriving, unvaccinated staff and campers will be required to receive a test within three to six days of arrival. Operators should strongly encourage staff and campers to quarantine prior to arrival at camp. Camps should try to align beds so that campers and staff sleep head-to-toe and at least six feet apart. Operators should ensure adequate ventilation within the sleeping quarters.

Moving onto my daily report, as the governor shared, our hospitals reported a low of 1,758 hospitalizations. There are 2,959 reports of CDC variants in our state, variants of concern; 2,721 of those reports are what is known as the UK variant, or the B-117. Additionally of variants of concern, we have 91 reports of the Brazilian variant, or P-1, 6 reports of South African, B-1.351, and 141 reports of the California variants of which there are 2 types, B-1.427 and 1.429.

Fortunately, no new reports of multi-system inflammatory syndrome in children, and there are no children hospitalized at this point in time. No new cases among residents at the vet homes, and no new cases among patients at the psych hospitals. The percent positivity as of April 22nd as shared statewide is 8.99. The northern part of the state reports 9.41; central, 8.14; and the southern part, 9.17.

That concludes my daily report. Please continue to stay safe, mask up, physically distance, stay home when you're sick, get tested, and let's get vaccinated. Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Judy, thank you. A couple things that I'm – worth noting We've been asked about regional approaches in the past, and we've thought that made sense. We've done it in one form or another, so you manage the whole health crisis on a regional basis. You look at the sub-regions as it relates to developmental and intellectual or physical disabled group homes, etc., in terms of the visitation. It is worth noting just listening to the positivity rate in the regions. The fact of the matter is we are a very small state and a very dense state. When you got 941, 813, and 917, we're all in this together. Folks, I think that's a point that is worth underscoring. We haven't said that in a while.

The other point I wanted to underscore is you brought up a great point about long-term care. Folks, this is a really smart thing for all of us. This is another thing we do collectively. If you've got a relative, a mom, a dad, a sibling, a relative of some sort in a long-term care facility of some form or another, ask that facility what are they doing to get their staff vaccinated? What's the plan? We can keep hitting them through the Department of Health or through our offices, but again, if it's your loved one in there, raise that question You want to know, and you deserve to know, what is the plan to vaccinate the staff? We know that the vaccination take-up of residents has been overwhelmingly high, well above the 70% threshold that we've stated as our initial goal for adults more broadly. The staff is lagging. It's still in the 50%, which is better than it was but not as good as it needs to be. I think I just want to underscore. I think that's a great collective action that all of us can take.

Completely unrelated to anything, an American hero passed away. Dan Bryant reminded me. Michael – Astronaut Michael Collins died, age of 90. You know him?

Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: He's from Arco. Yeah, I used to have a place next door.

Governor Phil Murphy: You're serious.

Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah.

Governor Phil Murphy: Wow, I didn't realize that. That's not why I brought it up. Well, God bless it. I didn't know that. This is the guy who was orbiting the moon while New Jersey's Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong were on the moon. We were discussing this earlier. Both sides got asked the question what would you have happened if something happened to the other guys? I think if something had happened to Michael Collins, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin would've spent the rest of their days on the moon; that's pretty clear. Collins, I believe, answered the question if something had happened disastrous on the moon, he said, "I would've gone home alone." God bless him, an American hero, passed at the age of 90. I did not know the connection, Judy, you had with him.

Pat, Happy Birthday. I hope you're able to raise some hell tonight. Be safe out there. Weather is good; thank you for that. We'd love to know if you've got anything on compliance. We had a pending disaster declaration with the Biden Administration and we got some good news. Would love you to give some color on that because that means more money into New Jersey to help top up our money to help folks get back on their feet.

Superintendent of State Police Col. Pat Callahan: Thank you, Governor. Good afternoon. Nothing to report or nothing was reported to the ROIC over the past few days with regards to executive order compliance. Yes, I was very pleased this morning, to your point, Governor, to receive a phone call from FEMA Region 2 Administrator Tom Fargione who said that President Biden had approved our Presidential Disaster Declaration with regards to that snow storm at the end of January. That public assistance will be granted to Cape May, Morris, Ocean, Sussex, and Warren Counties. There's additional what we call snow assistance in there for Morris, Sussex, and Warren, which covers that 48-hour period which those three counties specifically did everything they could.

Governor Phil Murphy: Sorry, I apologize. This was the storm Jan 31 to Feb 2, in that range?

Superintendent of State Police Col. Pat Callahan: That's correct, yes, sir, and just preliminarily, those preliminary damage assessments for those five counties that I mentioned was \$22.7 million. Again, to your point, Governor, to have FEMA public assistance funding, hazard mitigation funding, coming back into New Jersey in a time when we need it most was certainly greatly appreciated that President Biden and his team and FEMA saw fit to approve our request. That's all.

Governor Phil Murphy: That's great. By the way, again, we've proven that we can work with the federal administration regardless of which side they may be on. One of the last – actually it was the last conversation I had with President Trump when he was President was giving us a disaster declaration for a storm that had come through in the fall, as I recall. That was around late December, early January when I spoke to him. This comes from the Biden Administration as well, so hat's off. Those counties need that help and they were disproportionately impacted. The whole state was clobbered by that storm, but those counties were the ones that – would you mind repeating? It's Warren, Sussex, Morris, Cape May...

Superintendent of State Police Col. Pat Callahan: Sure, it was Cape May, Morris, Ocean, Sussex, and Warren for the public assistance portion, and then for the additional assistance, it was Morris, Sussex, and Warren Counties.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'll refrain from singing but any window on how you'll celebrate later today?

Superintendent of State Police Col. Pat Callahan: I trust it'll be on the back deck with my wife and my blue tick coonhound.

Governor Phil Murphy: Okay. An adult beverage or two.

Superintendent of State Police Col. Pat Callahan: Yes, perhaps.

Governor Phil Murphy: We got some good weather for you. Happy Birthday, Pat.

Superintendent of State Police Col. Pat Callahan: Thanks, Gov.

Governor Phil Murphy: We'll start over here. Before we do, I think we'll be – we'll continue to be in the mode that we've been in, which is we're obviously with you today. We'll be virtual tomorrow. Not sure what our schedule looks like tomorrow. I know I'm getting my second shot with Tammy on Friday, so I know at least I'm in Atlantic City. You don't have to come to the second shot, Judy, only if you're in the neighborhood. We may be on the road doing some other stuff. We will do our best to relay the COVID overnight data, at least the highlights, whenever we can. Otherwise, we'll do it virtually.

Q&A Section

Matt, we'll start with you. Good afternoon.

Matt Arco, NJ.com: Good afternoon, Governor. So New York is ending outdoor and indoor curfews next month for bars and restaurants. New York City will allow seating at bars, excuse me, as soon as Monday. Given our proximity, how does this affect when y'all announce more loosened restrictions here, and are you concerned about how many people in northern New Jersey will just take a path over to New York to grab a drink as a bar as soon as Monday, something they can't – they still can't do here? Could you walk us through how New Jersey matches the new CDC guidance on masks and where the state's rules differ? Are you concerned at all that the rules are getting complicated, or nuanced, or for vaccinated, non-vaccinated people so that people may just throw their hands up in the air altogether? It's been 22 days now again since undocumented workers began their hunger strike. Candidly, how is it possible that New York and California were able to provide funds for their excluded workers but New Jersey, which like those states also has a real high rate of undocumented workers, can't so far?

Governor Phil Murphy: Let me go through these. I'll go in the order you asked, Matt. Literally was on with New York colleagues earlier today having a very similar conversation I don't want to make news, so Dan will get mad at me, but I think on Monday, I think Monday, you can expect two things from us. Number one, I had mentioned this this past Monday; I think it'll be this now coming Monday where we talk about a suite of proactive steps that we will take as it relates to getting everybody vaccinated and reaching our goal by the end of June. Some of these steps we're already taking. This video contest is an example of that. I think we want to spend a few minutes and just go through the breadth of our program.

Then secondly, I think you're going to see – and Parimal will correct me if he disagrees with this. You're going to see us accelerating opening up of the state. There's just no other way to put it. My guess is if I had to predict, we'll have more news on that front on Monday, so bear with us on that. That's a – the basis of your question, the premise of it, is one that is a legitimate concern, a legitimate reality, that you're doing something broadly similar on one side of the Hudson than you are on the other; likewise on the Delaware, so that you don't have unintended consequences where people rushing you – by the way, we don't want that and New York doesn't want that, so stay tuned on that front.

Yeah, Judy, unless you and Tina see this differently, the mask guidance outdoor – I'm going to leave indoor aside. We still are mandating indoor wearing of face coverings unless when you're literally putting food or drink into yourselves. Our outside guidance is and has been – has not changed – we're asking you to wear a mask outdoors unless you can properly socially distance, in which case you don't need to wear it. The only wrinkle between what we've been saying from day one and as I understood the feds saying yesterday is they've added that you need to be vaccinated to do what you've just said. We've not had that as a requirement, and I don't expect that we will. I don't want to speak on behalf of Judy and Tina, but we're going to leave it where it is. I do worry about if it's Tuesday, is it 50% versus Wednesday when it's raining and you're outdoors. The question is so we want to keep this as simple as possible, and we're going to keep it unless something unforeseen comes up, and we're going to keep it where it is.

Listen, I know there were some folks protesting outside. I don't blame them for one second. We are doing our level best. I don't have a window into New York or California, but I do have a window into New Jersey, and we are trying our level best to get folks who have been left out of support – the support that they deserve, and that includes undocumented brothers and sisters. That's whatever we can do on our own. We have a robust exchange with our legislative colleagues on that front. We are still awaiting guidance from the feds on how we can or cannot apply the American Rescue Plan money as well. Again, I'd like to be able to say I've got a crisp answer for you, but I promise, folks, this is a high priority and we will stay on it until we get to some resolution. Thank you. Sir?

Reporter: Hi, Connecticut's legislature has voted to repeal the state's religious exemptions for vaccines and the governor says he will sign it. A similar bill failed to get enough votes in New Jersey last year. What's your reaction to Connecticut's bill, and do you support ending non-medical exemptions to vaccines, especially amid this pandemic?

Another question, did the pause on the J&J vaccine affect its supply here in New Jersey? What does the supply of that vaccine look like now, and where will those shots – where are those shots being allocated? A question from the livestream, are you planning to impose quarantine restrictions on travelers from India or any other foreign countries?

Governor Phil Murphy: I've got no color on the Connecticut question you asked. I know of no plans to readdress that. Our hope is that we – and I think it's our expectation, Judy. It's not just our hope. It's our expectation, that we will get to that 70% initial phase by the end of – 70% of adults getting fully vaccinated by the end of June of our own free will. We'll get there based on the parameters that we currently have in place. We were having this discussion earlier. You have to add to that really, honestly, folks who have had COVID who have some sort of whatever you'd call it, immunity or natural resistance against the virus. You get a much higher number.

I think as painful as it is for me to say it, our travel rules of the road remain in place. That has not changed, but I think right now, we would say without having checked with anybody that it's a bad idea to travel to India right now. That pains me to say that because it's a country I've been to many times in my life, most of them on business but some as pleasure and one as official state visit as governor. Just as we said about Brazil and the UK several months ago, South Africa, when you've got a hot spot as hot as it is right now in India, I think we got to do everything we can to stay apart. We will do everything we can to help India, and we're going to get through this, and they will get through this. The last thing we need is anyone stigmatizing anyone of Indian nationality or descent. There's none of that, period. I think the more we can stay away from each other right now, the safer we'll be.

Judy, you mentioned the J&J supply earlier. Do you want to review? We're over a quarter of a million administered, and I think you said you had 20,000-plus for next week?

Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Yeah, we're getting 20,200 next week. You may recall before the pause, we had about 5300 for two weeks in a row. We had gotten a lot of J&J, and then it dropped down to about 5300, 5300, pause, and now we're getting 20,200.

Governor Phil Murphy: And the places we're going to go with it are going to be not in every case but a lot of it defined by equity, right? Because this is a weapon that we've got that can get places that other – the other vaccines – it's a lot harder to get to.

Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: Actually, we're focusing on what we call hard-to-reach individuals, and that's a whole array of individuals for whatever reasons can't get to a mega-site, a doctor's office, or are so mobile we'd never be able to get them into a second shot.

Governor Phil Murphy: Thank you for that. Thank you. Sir, good afternoon.

Reporter: Hi, Governor. A question regarding the home-bound AARP has called on the state to centralize efforts to vaccinate the home-bound in particular. About a month ago, you said plans were in the works to reach the home-bound First question, where are those plans now and will the state use a more centralized approach to reaching the home-bound? Second question, what are the status of the triplets at this point? Well, you took one question. I was going to ask the Colonel Callahan what type of hell he was going to raise. Third question –

Governor Phil Murphy: You can take that one off because we already –

Reporter: Right. Final question about the contest, other than being featured, what is the prize, or is there a grand prize?

Governor Phil Murphy: The prize, as I understand it, is your video will be featured in our statewide PSA campaign. Dan, are you topping that up with any cash or anything else, or is that – have I got that right? So it'll be – you'll be the one that's featured, which is a big deal. This is going to reach all over the state.

Judy, if you could address – again, I think we've covered Pat's plans. The home-bound plans, where do they stand? I think your Part B of that was to what extent will it be state-centralized approach versus a distributed approach. I think I can say with conviction it'll be a little of each, all of the above. Then status of the triplets, which I knew you addressed on Monday, but any update on the home-bound plan? J&J, by the way, a big part of that we just answered in the prior question. Any more color you got?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: We're working with local health departments who have a responsibility, by the way, to vaccinate home-bound individuals. Many of them have already mobilized those plans. We're working with some visiting nurse associations. It is a combination of, I guess, oversight from the State Department of Health but operationalized on the local level.

More to come on the vans. Stay tuned. You'll probably see one very soon out on the streets.

Governor Phil Murphy: Driven by you?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Pardon?

Governor Phil Murphy: Driven by you or not?

Commissioner of Health Judith Persichilli: Yeah.

Governor Phil Murphy: I'm going to be by phone with your colleague, Nancy, tonight. I look forward to that. That's right. Thank you. Dave, good afternoon.

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Hi, Governor. On the schools that you mentioned, a grand total of 25 are virtual only. This is great, I would think.

Governor Phil Murphy: But remember, 11 of those are districts, so that's going to be a collection of schools in each case, but the point I wanted to make was 11 districts out of over 600 districts, of the balance of those 14, I think 12 of them are charter – individual charter schools

David Matthau, NJ 101.5: Do you have the statistics on – the most up-to-date on how many are hybrid and how many are all in person? Do you think that it's possible we could actually get all our kids back into school in some way, shape, or form, by the end of this year? I know that this is such an important issue for parents, how it affects their work schedule and so forth. With regard to the question on workers at long-term care facilities being hesitant to get vaccinated, do we have any idea why? What is the message to them, Governor, from them and Commissioner, what is your message to these people as well?

Finally, a message from – sorry, a question from our State House Correspondent, Mike Simons. Now that the 2020 census shows Jersey's population is nearly 9.3 million, do you think you need to increase the state's vaccination target? The 70% goal amounting to 4.7 million adults is based on the 2010 count, but the total population is about half a million larger than that. Wouldn't the 70% goal now be about 5 million? One point, because Mike is very detail-oriented, as you know, one point related to the vaccination rate, more than 41,000 shots have been given to 16 and 17 year olds, and we're counting them in our vaccine totals, which makes sense, but they're not actually adults. They skew the math on the vaccine goal. They're in the numerator but not the denominator. Similar story with the 98,000 out-of-state residents who've gotten vaccines in New Jersey, should the vaccine progress report account for these details? Thank you.

Governor Phil Murphy: Say hi to Mike for me. Is it possible – again, my math is just under 86% of kids are either in a hybrid or all in-person as of the numbers that we're reporting today. Is it possible that that number gets to 100 this school year? I'll bet you there's some reason it won't, but I think now it can come very close. In other words, I would

bet you there's going to be a given school in time between now and the end of June where that – just for whatever reason, but I think we're – my objective was 85% or more hybrid or in person this year, 100% in person back in the fall. We're already passed the 95. I think we can get close. I really do.

Judy, I'll come back to you on the question as to why in the long-term care workers but what's our reaction? We're not happy with it, just unequivocally unhappy with the take-up on workers in long-term care. We're extremely happy with the take-up by residents and again, CVS and Walgreens, they did a fabulous job, and now the other pharmacy partners will come in behind them for either new residents, new staff, or folks who change their mind, or they may have been sick and couldn't have taken it. I'll leave it to Judy to speculate in a second as to why. I may as Tina. We've got to give Tina's money's worth here to come in as well.

I think Mike's question a good one. We've thought about it. We're going to stick with our initial objective, which is to get to 4.7 and then I think once we get to 4.7 – and we will get there, and again, more color on that on Monday because we're going to – we're at the place we always knew we'd get to. We knew just as Judy had done a SWAT team approach to 75 and up and then 65 and up, there are variations of that that we're going to have to do to different communities in the state. We'll get to 4-7, but please tell Mike, A, we miss him, and B, he should expect that our – let's get there and then we'll reassess where we go from there.

Judy, anything you or Tina want to add to that or any speculation as to why long-term care staff numbers are not higher than they are in terms of vaccinations.

Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli: I think in terms of the long-term care staff, as you know, many of them are from communities of color who have some long-standing concerns about vaccines overall and clinical trials. We're empathetic to that. We need to listen more; we need to build awareness and educate better. Then there's a number of them who are young who take their information from the internet, and there's a number of myths on the internet around particularly the mRNA vaccines somehow affecting your DNA and fertility. I believe Dr. Bresnitz at one of the press conferences explained how that just is not so. We have a lot of education to do. I think the owners need to play a part in that, and I think we will get those percentages up. It's imperative that we do, so more to come on that.

Governor Phil Murphy: Yeah, and we will. I would just say we will. With that, Tina, how are you? Any – let me ask you a question which is really not necessarily the one that Dave asked. Numbers have started to come in the right direction here in a meaningful way. Again, we'll come back to folks on both vaccines and other opening steps that we expect to be taking when we gather again on Monday. It does feel like we're beating the variants. Is that too simple? I know we're not going to let our guard down, but how do you see that? We know the variants of all shapes and sizes, right, Judy, are all over New Jersey, all over the metro New York area, a repeat of what we saw when the virus first hit us last spring. It feels like there's growing evidence that the vaccines work against the vaccines as well. Any color you've got?

State Epidemiologist Dr. Christina Tan: Yeah, so I think the trends that we're seeing right now, I don't think that we need to necessarily view this as beating just the variants. It's beating all of the SARS CoV-2 virus that's out there. While we do have a predominance of B-117 circulating in New Jersey, in other areas of the country, different variants are circulating. There is definitely a lot of evidence right now that the current vaccines that are authorized for use here in the United States are effective against the variants. Particularly we have a lot of evidence related to B-117, effectiveness against that. Fortunately, we don't have that much B-351 circulating here. Again, the evidence shows for the most part, the vaccines are effective against some of these other variant strains as well.

Governor Phil Murphy: Which is a big deal, right? There's no other way to put that. Today's a great example of more of the weather, Pat, that we can expect, and that is living more of our lives outdoors. That's another positive that's going to help us.

I'm glad you asked the census question, which I had meant to refer to upfront, not related to Mike's question about our vaccine totals. I said this yesterday in Hillsboro. We had a great event on widening of Route 206, which if you've been in Hillsboro or Montgomery or some of those other communities there, you know widening of 206 is not an optional endeavor. It's extremely needed. I mentioned this, and I'll repeat it here today. Apparently a lot of those moving vans were bringing people into New Jersey, not just taking them out of New Jersey, so I'll just leave it at that. Nikita, good afternoon.

Nikita Biryukov, New Jersey Globe: Good afternoon, Governor. A couple of questions for you on elections today. I'm wondering if you will require poll workers working the May 20 and June 8 races to be vaccinated and if a voter who wishes to vote in person for one of those races refuses to wear a mask, will they be prohibited from entering a polling place? Then separately, the Reproductive Freedom Act is still stalled as some lawmakers question the need with a Democrat in the White House. I'm wondering what you and your Administration are doing to get that bill moving.

Governor Phil Murphy: Is that it? I don't know – I don't expect that we will require poll workers to be vaccinated but strongly, strongly, strongly encouraged. Parimal may get cross with me on this but I think if you refuse to wear a mask, we're not letting you in. It's that simple. You got to wear a mask if you're going into a store, going into a restaurant. You got to wear one going to the Motor Vehicles Commission. Wherever you're going, if you're indoors, you got to wear a mask. I don't expect that our indoor masking guidelines will change. They're certainly not going to change between now and the May 20th election, I would guess, and unlikely to change before June 8th. You okay with both of those comments? Want to make sure.

Listen, the Reproductive Protection Act is a big deal, and we need it. I think anyone – I don't want to get political here but just because you asked the question, I think anyone who just relies upon the fact that there's a Democratic President is missing the bigger picture. I'm not arguing with your premise, but that's not reason enough here to sit on our hands. The Supreme Court is overwhelmingly on the other side of this issue. The need for it and the need to do it preemptively so that we're not being dragged by some decision not yet taken by the US Supreme Court. I think it's imperative. We're working it. We're working it with legislators, with advocates. Again, I won't comment on the specifics of it, but that really wasn't your question. The general fact of the matter is it's not moving at the pace it needs to move. I think people are, in fact, lulled a little bit to sleep on this one at the moment. They should not be. This is needed and it's needed right now in the state of New Jersey, and we will do everything we can to push it toward a positive outcome.

With that, get our act together here, Judy. I didn't mean to surprise you with the Michael Collins news. Again, an American hero by any measure. Again, we will be on the road tomorrow, Dan, and we will be – I know at least I'll be in Atlantic City at the convention center, AtlantiCare and state police, OEM, National Guard, Atlantic County, Atlantic City itself doing a great job down there. Looking forward to getting our second. We'll do our best to relay the COVID number wherever with the media whether it's tomorrow or Friday.

Folks, keep it up. It is now quite clear that this thing has turned and turned for the better. That's really good news. Don't let that lull you into not getting vaccinated. Please, please get vaccinated. Again, stay tuned for a lot of different elements of proactive steps we'll be taking. Don't let your guard down. If you're outside, you can be a lot more free with your actions than you can when you're inside. The only thing we're asking if you're outside and you're on top of other people, please wear a mask. Otherwise, if you're on your own or with your bubble, with your family, you're good. Again, to each and every one of you, bless you and thank you. By the millions, you've done the right thing.

Look at the lack of compliance, Pat. It really has come down only to the surprise ABC county sweeps that they make. That's 99% of the compliance issues that we're having at the moment, which it really says an enormous amount. Even then you had 11 – 10 or 11 establishments. Was it in Union County?

Governor Phil Murphy

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