



Office of Governor Christopher T. Sununu
Press Conference
Thursday, October 15, 2020 at 3:00 p.m.

Governor Sununu:

Good afternoon. Thanks, everyone, for joining us today. So, I'm going to turn it over to Public Health for our Public Health update. But one quick update prior to that, and I'm going to make the update a little bit prior to that so Dr. Chan can go into any details as a follow-on.

But throughout the last few weeks, we've seen an increase in cases. And we know we've had a small but a steady increase up as we predicted, not to the extent that I think the rest of the country has seen, but it is there. And we need to keep managing to that. And while our percent-positive has remained low, we're always just looking for data to pinpoint the reasons why we might see some of these increases around the State, why some of these clusters may be springing up.

And one area of our reopening that appears to continue to have issues surrounds hockey. By and large, New Hampshire's youth and amateur sports guidance has worked, as designed, with only a few instances of COVID-19. It's actually gone off across the spectrum of youth sports very, very well. However, there have been some recent incidents, specifically around hockey, that we appreciate present a unique challenge, not just to New Hampshire but really across New England. We've seen issues of this in a couple different States throughout the regional area.

And so, taking the advisement of public health, we're pausing on all activities on the ice within indoor facilities for a two-week period. And this will enable us to continue to work with Rink Owners, hockey programs, Public Health, and the Attorney General's Office to put additional safeguards in place, enabling the rinks to clean and sanitize, and time for the players and their families to get tested.

Our goal will always be to find ways to keep players on the ice in a safe manner for all involved. But for now, that involves taking a pause for the next two weeks. With that, let's turn it over to Dr. Chan to give us the general Public Health update and any of the other data surrounding hockey that folks might have questions on.

Dr. Chan:

Good afternoon. Thank you, Governor. So I'm going to start by giving just a general Public Health update and then talk a little bit more about some of the hockey-related data that we are seeing. So we are reporting an additional -- or 82 new people diagnosed with COVID-19 today. 58 of these individuals were tested and tested positive by PCR, and 24 tested positive by antigen testing. And so, as we roll out antigen testing, we're going to see, I think, more utilization of that testing technology.

The last couple of weeks, we have been reporting, on average, between 70 to 80 new infections per day. There are currently 829 people with active infection in the State. And that's up last week from 531, when we last reported at our prior press conference. And the rate of new infections in the last 14 days is 73 total infections per 100,000 population. Now, that's the rate. That also was up compared to last week, when we announced a rate of 53 infections per 100,000 population over the prior 14 days.

Our test positivity rate, however, continues to be low, at around 1%. We continue to monitor hospitalizations and deaths. There is one new person hospitalized with COVID-19 that we are announcing today. And we have been seeing one to two new hospitalizations reported per day.

Currently, statewide, there are 18 people currently hospitalized with COVID-19, which has also been stable over the last couple of weeks. And unfortunately, five new deaths today, four associated with long-term care facilities, including three who are associated with one of the larger long-term care facility outbreaks that we are seeing. We now have a total of 463 people that have died directly or related to COVID-19.

So, as we have been discussing and predicting for weeks now, our numbers are going up. This is occurring not only in New Hampshire but regionally in the northeast, and is a similar pattern to what we have seen occur in States around the country.

We believe that these increases do reflect increasing spread and risk for COVID-19 within our communities. Specifically, there are now five different New Hampshire counties which are currently categorized as having a moderate level of community transmission and spread. And then, the Cities of Manchester and Nashua are seeing substantial levels of community transmission and community spread.

So, we know how to prevent spread of COVID-19. We have been successful at this in the past. We know how to prevent it from spreading person-to-person. But it requires all of us to remain vigilant and to enhance our social-distancing practices, wear cloth face coverings when in public locations where close contact might occur, and pay good attention to hand cleaning and hand sanitizing. And we continue to recommend that people avoid those social situations and gatherings where groups may be coming into closer contact with one another, especially in indoor locations. So, that is the general Public Health update.

Let me give some numbers on hockey. Hockey has been one of the high-risk activities where we have seen a substantial spread of COVID-19, we believe, within our communities. So over the last two months, there have been a total of 158 New Hampshire residents diagnosed with COVID-19 who are associated with ice hockey. This includes 117 people that are connected to 8 different outbreaks, and then 41 people not connected specifically to an outbreak, but who are associated with ice hockey and we believe acquired their infection through ice hockey.

These 158 people with COVID-19 associated with hockey are from 23 different New Hampshire hockey-related organizations and teams. And there are additional connections with out-of-state ice hockey organizations.

So hockey has not only been a high-risk activity for acquiring COVID-19, but the people diagnosed with COVID-19 associated with hockey and the people associated with these outbreaks have likely led to other community exposures, including exposures in schools, businesses like long-term care facilities, social gatherings. We have some anecdotal reports of this.

But what we do know is that people who we believe have acquired COVID-19 through hockey have been associated with and potentially exposed others in at least 24 different K-12 schools throughout the State. And this type of spread and exposure to other facilities and organizations within the community increases the risk of introduction and spread of COVID-19 in other settings outside of hockey.

And so, this is some of the data that we have seen, with one of the particular high-risk activities. Thankfully, we have not seen a lot of spread of transmission in other sports. It appears to be primarily contained to hockey at this point. Obviously, we're monitoring the situation very closely. But this is a part of what we are seeing in terms of risk factors and spread within the community. With that, let me hand things over to the Commissioner. Thank you.

Commissioner Shibinette:

Good afternoon. I'm going to do a long-term care update for you today. So, we are announcing one new long-term care outbreak at St. Teresa's [sic] Rehab and Nursing Center in Manchester. They have seven resident cases and two staff cases. This is a really interesting outbreak to follow and very indicative of how quickly COVID-19 can get into a facility and spread. They had their regular surveillance testing last Friday, which everyone tested negative. And today, we stand here with seven residents and two staff. So, like I said, very, very interesting to see surveillance testing so recently and have all negatives in that, and now be in an outbreak status. So that brings our total outbreaks in long-term care facilities to four: Bedford Hills; Pine Rock Manor; St. Teresa's; and Warde Health Center.

Additionally, I'm just going to update the prevalence rates. As we've indicated in past press conferences, the degree in which a facility can open up and do visits, or do different types of visits, because they're all more or less, if you're not in active outbreak, you should be doing visits. But the type of visits, whether they're outdoor or indoor, and then type of activities that can be conducted, is really based on the prevalence rates in your community.

So the State has, for the most part, been either Phase 2 or Phase 3 for the last month or two. And what we're seeing now is that as the rates of COVID cases go up, the active COVID cases in our population centers -- Hillsborough, Merrimack, and Rockingham -- are now back to Phase 1 for the activity both within the building and for visitations. So this still allows for compassionate care visitation, which CMS has expanded the definition of that. This is not just hospice visitation. This is for people that need to visit their family members for multiple reasons. And it's a decision point that is between the facility and the family.

The yellow are our Phase 2s, which is where they've mostly been throughout the last couple months, as we've reported this. And Coos County remains in Phase 3, because they have very low prevalence rates.

So, as we move forward with our long-term care outbreaks and seeing this escalation in COVID cases, we need to be mindful that we have to strike a balance between both the physical safety of our residents in long-term care settings and their psychosocial wellbeing. So every facility is encouraged to develop a visitation plan, if you're not in an outbreak status, to make sure that their residents' quality of life is inline and incorporates their families and loved ones through a variety of different methods. That's all I have today. Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Great, thank you, Dr. Chan. Thank you, Commissioner. Couple different things we're going to touch upon this afternoon, and then we will open it up for questions. As we all know, earlier this year, on June 30th, the books for the State officially closed for the 2020 State budget. We go on a biennium basis. But our fiscal cycle goes from July 1st and closes on June 30th. And then, it takes a couple months to make sure that we've accounted for all the dollars in terms of revenues coming in and expenses.

The news is much better than we had originally anticipated. And that's a very, very good thing. Earlier, when we had updated you, we said we were anticipating revenue shortfalls that could be as high as over \$500 million, due to the COVID-19 pandemic back, I think, in June. We had originally stretched out where our projections could be over the State's fiscal biennium.

But because of good management, our general operating expenses have come down. We've ended the year in a much better position than originally projected. We're able to find savings and efficiencies that were clearly greater than what the budget was balanced on.

So our economy is recovering quicker than anyone thought possible and revenues continue to outperform our earlier estimates. And so, from a revenue standpoint, we're now estimating a budgetary shortfall of a little less than \$200 million for the biennium. This is no small amount, by any means. It is still an extremely large amount, but only a fraction of what we had originally anticipated, again given to the management of the finances at the State level, as well as the very strong economy coming back.

I still feel very confident that our Administration's continued management, as well as the underlying strength of our economy, will continue to have impacts that can further reduce that budgetary deficit, as we move further and closer to June of 2021, when the biennium will end. So there's still lots of time to make up a lot of ground. We're on a very good path. We don't take anything for granted. We know that COVID ebbs and flows. And so, we can still have negative impacts to our economy. We're not taking that as an absolute assurance. But we're definitely on a very good track and we've been able to close a lot of that budgetary shortfall.

Another issue today, back in June, New Hampshire made the decision to provide -- I think as a lot of folks remember -- a lot of direct support to local small businesses when we created and announced the Main Street Relief Fund. It was a very innovative fund that infused cash into businesses across the State, primarily small businesses, which is why we called it the Main Street Relief Fund. And to-date, we're very proud that it remains the single largest investment into small businesses from any State across the country with CARES Act funds.

We created an easy application. We made it very quickly available. And we provided assistance to over 5,000 businesses, totaling approximately \$340 million. And it is very heartening, if I may, when you are out and about across the State to hear businesses come up and say that it was a true lifeline for their business.

So, therefore, based on the very positive feedback we've received from that opportunity we created for businesses and their employees, we are going to, today, announce Main Street Relief Fund 2.0. Not the most creative name in the world, but it's simple and to the point, which will allow an additional \$100 million of opportunity for small businesses across the State.

Main Street 2.0 will be available to all qualified businesses, regardless of whether they have already received an award under the original Main Street Relief Fund. Businesses that received an award earlier this year are still eligible to apply again if they do have additional unmet needs, or businesses who missed the opportunity, for one reason or another. Maybe they thought their revenues would be okay, but they've come to realize that the shortfall is steeper than they anticipated. Everyone can apply.

Applications will be open on Monday, October 19th. So this coming Monday, the application process will be open and we're going to keep it open for approximately two weeks, until Friday, October 30th. And as always, more information is available at our GOFERR website, which is goferr.nh.gov/apply.

All of our funds are there. The Nonprofit Fund lived there. The Agriculture Fund was there. The Self-Employment Fund was there. Main Street one was there. And now we're doing Main Street part 2, which is just a way to make sure that, with our CARES Act financial opportunity, it's really getting out to the citizens and the employees to make sure that our economy is vibrant and staying with us.

Shifting gears, I also want to take a moment to provide an update on New Hampshire's Unemployment Trust Fund. This is a fund that we have in the State that pays out all the unemployment

benefits, obviously a very, very important fund as we hit this giant financial crisis, when COVID hit. And this is the group and the fund that really managed all of the additional Federal stimulus funds that had come into the State earlier in the year. It was \$600 that was reduced down to \$300. And this is the fund that expanded the eligibility requirements very early on to allow folks to take advantage of those unemployment opportunities, knowing that we were going to hit some tough times.

So, as we use the fund, the fund gets replenished with essentially a tax out of the businesses. But as you use it, the fund really does get drawn down. When the pandemic first hit, we had about \$300 million. Just over \$300 million, that's a very healthy Unemployment Trust Fund. And we've been able to manage fairly well, especially as our economy has come back. At one point, we hit 17% unemployment. Obviously, a lot of folks, 120,000-or-more individuals drawing off of that fund, as opposed to the 17,000 or 18,000 we had at this time last year.

Now that the economy's come back strong, we're now back to approximately a 4% unemployment rate. And that is very great news. And so, to keep moving in the right direction and to create a climate that encourages continued hiring, we need to create certainty for businesses to know that continuing to hiring workers will not end up with them having to pay more taxes that they pay to support that Unemployment Trust Fund.

You essentially pay based on the number of employees you have. You put your tax into the fund. So, in some ways, as the fund gets drawn down, you hit triggers. And the taxes ultimately end up going up for each employee that you have. It's a way to help keep the fund stable, but it does put a big financial burden on a lot of the businesses that are staying open and to help those that may be drawing off of the fund.

So, today, I'm announcing \$50 million payment from the State's remaining CARES Act funds into the State's Unemployment Trust Fund. This transaction will ensure that the fund remains solvent financially through 2021, without raising taxes on employers. So by directing these monies into the Trust Fund, it's an investment that really goes right back into New Hampshire's unemployed, so they know that the fund is there. They can keep drawing those unemployment benefits, if they're in tough financial times, as we know a lot of families still are via the COVID pandemic.

But it also helps those small businesses. It encourages job creation and economic growth. And ultimately not only does it get rid of the next tax hike that would ultimately come on January 1st, later this year, it actually, because the fund will reduce a trigger that had previously been hit, it'll create a tax benefit, if you will, a tax break of about \$65 million through 2021. So that's \$65 million in taxes that businesses will not have to pay into the fund by, again, allowing this money to go in.

So it's kind of a double-bonus, if you will, a triple bonus. It keeps the fund solvent. It minimizes -- I'm sorry, it removes the tax increase that would likely come on January 1st. And it actually provides a tax decrease through the first quarter of next year to the tune of about \$65 million. And as our economy keeps getting back on track, the unemployment numbers keep dropping. The solvency of that fund is more and more intact, as we go down the line. So I think it's a great opportunity just to make sure that we keep hiring and keep everything moving forward in a very productive way.

Yet another topic today, we appreciate everyone's patience. We're only doing one press conference a week now. So there's a lot here. There's a lot of good stuff. Today we are announcing a very significant investment into our public schools and the school districts that support them as they respond to the increased costs of the COVID-19 pandemic. I know the Legislative Advisory Board as part of GOFERR has been looking at this issue for the past two or three weeks. I believe they may. I'm not sure if they'd take up another meeting on the issue.

But we're getting to the middle of October and we're seeing the needs start to grow out there. So we want to make sure that we're providing these resources. Ultimately all these dollars have to be spent really within the next couple months. So there's an opportunity to do something today.

So as cities and towns exhaust their current Federal funding streams that are currently available -- and there's still a lot of money available to schools, to be sure -- we're very happy to announce an additional \$45 million to become available for schools in two separate funds. The first fund is a \$35 million fund that will distribute dollars on a per-pupil basis. Approximately \$200 per pupil will be allocated out of the CARES Act to every school district in the State, so everyone gets their pro rata share.

Those are dollars that can be spent very flexibly. They can be spent through 2021. They don't even have to be spent by the end of December per these new Federal Guidelines that have come down, which is great. And they can be spent on things like Chromebooks, or computers, or technology, or whatever they need to spend it on to make sure that these students have access to a quality education while they may be in a hybrid or even a remote-learning atmosphere. So that's \$200 per pupil and it equates to approximately \$35 million.

We're going to have another \$10 million in a secondary fund, I guess what we're going to call a reserve fund, an emergency fund, if you will, for those districts who have costs above and beyond. If they spent all of their SR money, that's the original dollars that had come in, if they spend this \$200 per pupil, now they can go and use this reserve fund. And that would specifically be for PPE or testing, or direct costs that the schools may incur because of the COVID crisis, specifically around PPE and testing. So this is, again, the \$35 million for every school district, and another \$10 million reserve fund, if school districts require some additional help, even above and beyond the two or three different funds that have been created.

We're still going to be there for them. We've always said funds are not going to get in the way of a quality education for our kids. And being able to provide this relief and this support, I think, is a way to really shore up some of the insecurities that some of the districts and schools might have, as these COVID costs may pile up. So we're going to continue to be there for them.

One last announcement, as we manage our numbers, one of the areas that we put obviously a great emphasis, as Commissioner Shibinette previously highlighted, was long-term care facilities. Our long-term care facilities are an issue that we're constantly talking about as unfortunately they are prone to outbreaks. And we know that the health consequences of COVID on those older populations can be very severe. And therefore, we do have to take quick action to protect the residents and the staff in those facilities. They continue to do just tremendous work.

So in addition to the steps that Commissioner Shibinette shared a moment ago, we are today announcing an additional \$7 million for PPE and testing for long-term care facilities. Again just more money in there out of our CARES Act funds to cover their costs, we don't want costs to be a barrier to getting the testing and the protection for the workers and the staff, and the residents. That is really, really needed to help keep the number of outbreaks low, minimized, and again hopefully back to zero at some point. These types of resources are just resources that save lives. And they have a huge impact on a lot of our loved ones that are currently residing in a lot of those facilities, so another great opportunity.

So I appreciate. I know there was a lot there in a variety of different areas, from taking an intermission in hockey. Is that what they call it, an intermission? We're taking an intermission for two weeks on hockey, to the opportunities with the Main Street Relief Fund, long-term care, and the Unemployment Trust Fund. It's great to be able to keep moving some of these CARES Act funds out and get that financial opportunity where it belongs. With that, we can take some questions.

Q&A Session

I have a couple on hockey.

Governor Sununu:

You bet, sure.

Some colleges, including UNH, have already started their practices. Does this affect them? And then, what about traveling teams that travel outside of the State? Does this affect them?

Governor Sununu:

It does. So any of the indoor hockey activities, whether it's a public skating, whether it's an established hockey team that might be playing here, we are taking a pause to make sure that we really -- again, it's for sanitary reasons. It's so we can test all the players, all the parents, everything that might be involved. We find a lot of the transmission between players and parents, as well, not just amongst the players, the Referees. We had an issue with a Referee that had been tested positive. So, we feel that the two-week period is enough to do that, as well as reestablish the guidance.

Now, we can't tell folks they aren't allowed. If they're going to another State, if other States allow that, that's allowed. We cannot prevent teams or individuals going to a rink in another State. But, again, we'd want folks to understand this isn't just to New Hampshire. We're taking these steps. I can't speak for other States. But we have had incidences around hockey, specifically, in other States. And we would just ask everyone to use every precaution available.

One of the things that we saw was, especially with the students, they may get COVID, or transmit COVID, within some of these hockey atmospheres. The fear is we're seeing it then come into the schools, right? And they're being some of the drivers with some of the -- we don't have a lot of outbreaks. I don't know if we have any actual outbreaks in schools. Do we have outbreaks in -- maybe one in Epping? So we've had four clusters of illness in our schools.

Nobody wants to be the driver of that. And so, there is a domino effect here. It isn't just within the hockey community. It does have a domino effect for our public schools. And that's something we take very, very seriously. So that's the real driver for us.

So, for two weeks, whether it's youth, high school, college, no hockey in New Hampshire?

Governor Sununu:

That's right. That's right. And so, again we're going to -- or skating, I mean, that counts for indoor skating, as well. So, again, it's really to make sure that the rinks, themselves, it's not just the Hockey Academies, the hockey tournaments, the hockey teams, the hockey rinks. Everybody really is part of that solution.

And again, we've had a lot of outreach from a lot of parent asking us to really take a close look, because they're nervous, as well. Those communities talk. Everyone understands that a lot of the outbreaks that have happened in the State are around that. I think we have six. I don't know if you guys

know the number off the top of your head. I think we have six official outbreaks related to hockey, not just cases, outbreaks, and over 40 cases, something like that.

So, again, we just want to nip it and again not cancel the whole season, but take a pause and see if we can kind of hit the reset. Identify those who may have it with our new Binax antigen testing. Allow that to really take place within that community, encourage all those individuals and families to go get tested.

And one more on that: is there a particular identifying risk factor that we know of that is causing the problems in hockey?

Governor Sununu:

No, there's not. I mean, there's a lot of supposition about what might be causing it. At first, I mean, one of the obvious things was, well, is it happening in the locker rooms? Well, it wasn't clear that that was happening. Is it happening on the ice? Well, that wasn't clear, either.

There's a lot of social gatherings that happen around hockey. We have had evidence of some of the transmission happening within those social gatherings. But we've had that with some other sports, as well.

So it's kind of a variety of things. And because I don't think anyone can put a pinpoint on any single issue, that's why I think we're going to come back with some new guidance, be able to take a break, disinfect the facilities, ask everyone to get tested. And I think come back and hit the reset button, come back for the next period of play, I suppose, right?

Governor, you had mentioned four clusters in schools. We saw Pinkerton Academy yesterday. They're going totally remote, at least for the rest of the month. What's your assessment of what's happening in schools? Some are like the Epping schools had an outbreak, but they're still going in, in small groups. So what's your assessment of that?

Governor Sununu:

Well, schools are making a lot of their decisions based on what's happening in their community. They tend to be using what I'm seeing as -- and maybe Dr. Chan can speak a little more to this. They're using different sets of data and different reasoning behind making those decision.

Dr. Chan and the Department of Public Health, I thought, put together a really, really good rubric, in terms of how to help schools make some good decisions, going from fully remote or hybrid, or from fully in-person to hybrid, when you should change and what datapoints to look at. Some schools are kind of making their decision based on other points of data. It's their flexibility and right to do so.

I think one thing we have shown is that, while there may be cases and individuals of kids with COVID in schools -- we knew that was going to happen -- I can be managed. There is very little identified transmission within the classrooms right now, which is a good thing. So these are kind of singular cases that might spread to one or two other classmates. But the good news is we don't have some of the massive outbreaks you've seen in other States.

And so, there's a pathway to manage this. I think the Teachers, the parents, and the Administrators have done a tremendous job. They deserve a lot of credit for the success we've had. So,

while I can't speak to the individual decisions of each of those districts, they do seem to be all kind of looking at different datapoints to make those decisions. But I'll turn it over to Dr. Chan for some more detail.

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, thanks for the question about school. Schools have certainly been a lot of work on the part of the schools, themselves, and the school districts, and the School Boards. And we've been continuing to have weekly calls and chats with School Nurses and school partners to help troubleshoot problems.

A lot of the schools, I think, are doing an excellent job implementing a lot of the guidance. There was intentionally flexibility incorporated into the guidance to allow schools to be able to adapt it to their local situation, the mode of learning or the instructional model that the School Board had selected. And I think the number and the data show that there is not a lot of transmission that we have seen occurring within schools.

So, as of a couple of days ago -- and again, the numbers in the data dashboard around this are continually changing day-to-day. But, as of a couple of days ago, there were over 150 students and Staff associated with 94 different K-12 schools, right? And out of those numbers -- so over 150 students and Staff, 94 different K-12 facilities -- there have only been four clusters identified. And those were small, limited clusters comprising in total maybe 15 to 20 students and Staff, right? So the clusters have ranged in size from, like, three to maybe six students and Staff per clusters, right?

So when you're talking about that many students and Staff potentially introducing COVID-19 into that many different facilities, there's remarkably little transmission that we have seen. And so, this is one of the questions that we get asked. Is school reopening causing or driving some of the community transmission? We don't believe so. We believe that the testing that we're doing is picking up students and Staff that have become infected from the community, the hockey issue being one of the situations that we've identified as causing increased community transmission. But I think that the schools have done a fantastic job at implementing the guidance. And we have not seen a lot of transmission within schools.

Governor Sununu:

Thanks, Dr. Chan. Thank you.

Governor, with the guidance to the education money you announced today, so that money doesn't have to be spent by the end of this year, even though it's CARES Act? Could you clarify that?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, so there's some flexibility that we received from the Federal Government that allows up to \$500 per pupil. We're allocating \$200 per pupil. That if given, doesn't have to be essentially reimbursed for, it's given and could be spent through 2021, technically.

Governor, do you know how much is left now for New Hampshire for the CARES Act funds?

Governor Sununu:

For the total CARES Act funds, it's hard to say. There's approximate \$100 million. And the reason that is, is a lot of the funds that we created early on have lapsed, right? So for example, a big part of the education spend is the Broadband Fund. We allocated \$50 million for broadband. Only about \$15 million of projects actually qualified, unfortunately, because of the really tight time constraints. So that extra \$35 million is being moved over to create a lot of the opportunity that we're talking about today. So that's being reallocated, if you will, again for the technology or Chromebooks, or whatever might be. And that goes to that \$200 per pupil that provides some flexibility.

The \$10 million secondary reserve fund, that does need to be spent, by Federal Rules. The amount of time we spend trying to figure out the Federal Rules is unbelievable. But that does need to be spent by December 31st. And that's specifically for COVID-related costs.

So they're slightly different, but it's \$45 million. I think the LAB, the Legislative Advisory Board, was originally looking at maybe a \$40 million expenditure. And if, down the road, we have to do something else, we can always do something else. But this is, I think, a great start. \$45 million, I think, is going to provide a lot of support and security to these schools, let them breathe a little bit of a sigh of relief. And then, we can always do something else down the road, if we have to.

But COVID numbers are going to rise, right? I think we've spent this money exactly as we should have, given the timing, because we still may have other costs down the road. Today, \$7 million more for testing costs and PPE for long-term care facilities, who knows what that requirement might be in November or December? So, we have to still have something in the till, if you will, at the end of the day, just in case we see large spikes or an influx that we have to deal with. Good, oh, sorry. I'll come right back to you. Yeah.

This question may be best for Dr. Chan or Commissioner Shibinette. But in the case of some school districts, contact tracing seems to have taken a little longer than expected, longer than 24 to 48 hours to initiate. I'm wondering if you can explain the delay in contact tracing for some school districts. And also, it sounds like, in some cases, if a person gets a positive test, but it wasn't from a State-run facility, that there might be a lag in getting that to DHHS. And I'm wondering if you could explain whether or not that accounts sometimes for a delay in contact tracing to be initiated.

Governor Sununu:

Got it?

Commissioner Shibinette:

Yeah. So, yes, we have heard recently especially with the rapid antigen tests coming onboard. And that explains a lot of the delay. So if you're sitting in an urgent care center and you find out that you're COVID-positive, you get that result immediately.

Oftentimes, we will have families start notifying their loved ones, maybe take to social media, call the Principal at the school. Meanwhile, Public Health may not get that official report until the next day

from that urgent care center, right? We usually look at getting reporting either at the end of the day or within 24 hours of that test. So, yeah, there are times that there is a delay. And it's mostly due to the rapid tests that we're seeing.

With that said, our contact tracing around positives in schools, the case investigation, itself, is becoming more complex. And when Dr. Daly was here a couple weeks ago, she highlighted the fact that the number of contacts per case is going up, as compared to spring. Although our numbers may be reflective of where we were in let's say March or April, last spring we were averaging maybe three contacts per case back then. And now, we're averaging five to six. And that is a big jump for us.

So the case investigations are more complex, because schools are back in and maybe they're playing on a sports team, or they're in a club, or something like that. And there is definitely a delay when there is a rapid antigen test involved between when the family and maybe the school finds out, and when we find out.

And just as a follow-up, it sounds like at least in some cases I'm hearing from schools, School Nurses have actually been asked to initiate some of the contact tracing, in part because DHHS has said they're backed up with other contact tracing. Can you reassure residents that there are enough Contact Tracers to deal with things?

Commissioner Shibinette:

There are. And just this week, we brought in an additional 30 National Guard Staff to help with our contact tracing. These are people that had helped us in the spring. And during our lull in the summer, they had been reassigned. And now, we're bringing them back to prepare.

Number 1, we're seeing more contacts. And our numbers are going up. So a lot of those Contact Tracers can hit the ground running, because they were trained back in the spring. So they have the training and the ability to do the COVID mapping for New Hampshire now. So we did bring in additional help.

It is not unusual in a congregate-living setting, when we have Infection Control Practitioners or Healthcare Providers, when we're in the middle of our case investigations, for us to say to them, if you know that these people are close contacts, go ahead and start the quarantine process. We've done that in long-term care. They have Infection Control Practitioners right onsite.

So what may take us a couple of hours or a day to do that full case investigation and notify everybody, we consider School Nurses, our long-term care partners, and our hospitals healthcare partners. So, absolutely, we're going to ask them. Please, if you know that this person's had close contacts, go ahead and ask them to quarantine until we finish our case investigation and get to that.

Commissioner, I wonder while you're there. Dr. Chan, I think, mentioned that three of the recent deaths were at one long-term care outbreak. Can you identify where that outbreak was?

Commissioner Shibinette:

What I can tell you is that the Bedford Hills Center is currently at 68 residents, 21 Staff, and 13 deaths. So I don't have the numbers specifically of where each one of those fatalities happened. But based on those numbers, there can be an assumption that at least some of them are from that facility.

Commissioner, is there a sense that we should link everything we're hearing about: outbreaks, hockey, community spread? In other words, five deaths today and the long-term care facilities are getting hit again. And in one case, all negatives on a Thursday and then seven positives today, or more. Is this all one big issue, in general, the community spread? People that work there have to be people we see out in the community. Is this all one thing?

Commissioner Shibinette:

No, I think that's a great observation that, as we see higher community spread that you can assume that the caregivers of people in long-term care facilities everywhere from your Licensed Nursing Assistant to your Nurses, to your Dietary Aides, they're part of our communities. So their risk increases just like every other member of the community.

I mean, there's a lot of reasons, when you look at our outbreak status in long-term care, how it's progressed in these last couple of outbreaks compared to in the spring. If you recall, we used to see creep in these facilities where we would see five or six new positives each week. And now, we're going from zero to 10 or 30 in some cases. But our testing capacity's so much quicker and so much better.

So you have to draw attention to that is that we are able now to go in, and we have antigen machines at point-of-care. And we have PCR turnaround times of a day-or-two. So some of it is testing. But I think it is a good observation to make that, as community transmission increases, you can expect to see the risk to long-term care facilities also increase.

Governor Sununu:

Great, thank you, Commissioner. Do we have some calls on the phone?

Donna Jordan with The Colebrook Chronicle:

Yes, good afternoon. I have just one question for you today. Here in Coos County, we have the tourists. We have the high volume of day visitors. And we have big sales on second homes. What we don't have is the virus, not on the same scale as the rest of the State. It's almost like we're in a bubble which we don't take for granted, trust me. We've had only 23 positive cases here since March. When our visitors are here, whether it's for a day or two, or seven, literally our population count can double or even more. What is different in Coos County over the rest of the State? Is it simply the basic population numbers and the density are that much lower, even though we have the added visitor population? Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Sure, so I'll kind of give my two cents, and I don't know if Dr. Chan wants to add anything to this. Obviously just being a more rural area in nature, there's just a lot more natural physical barriers, if you will, between households, even within communities, themselves. Coos and the northern part of the State tends to be more outdoors in terms of what they do, right, especially over the summer with tourism. There's a lot of outdoor tourism and that's a very healthy thing. That's a lot of good fresh air and whatnot. And that is also, I think, a positive aspect in contributing, or has contributed to the suppression of the virus.

But to be very clear -- and I'll let Dr. Chan add in here -- Coos is not immune by any means, my goodness. It doesn't take a lot. You've seen numbers in other rural States: Montana, North and South Dakota, Iowa, Utah. I mean, you can go down the list. Their numbers are skyrocketing right now. They really are.

So rural communities and rural States are still very much susceptible, if they don't take the proper precautions of wearing masks, social distancing, and whatnot. Obviously, they're less likely to have the outbreaks you see in a Boston or a New York, or even a Manchester, or a Nashua, just because of the close and dense populations.

But I would like to answer this with I think the most important aspect of this answer is by no means is Coos immune. And again, I think they're doing a great job. Their citizens are doing a fantastic job and they're the ones that deserve the credit for keeping those numbers down.

But I would really caution folks to look at other parts of the country where their percent-positivity rate is 25% in some States on a given day. Let me put that in perspective. If we had a 25% positivity rate, we would have about 2500 cases a day. Think about that. And that's happening in some rural States. So, again, those States are just dealing with it. I think those Governors and Mayors are doing a great job. They're trying to manage as best they can. But no one is immune from it, to be sure. And I think we all have to stay very vigilant in our practices. I'll let Dr. Chan throw his two cents in.

Dr. Chan:

Thank you. No, I think what the Governor said is absolutely correct. I just wanted to use this as an opportunity to once again reiterate that it's the crowds. It's the close contact. It's the indoor confined spaces that pose the highest risk.

And while Coos County and other more rural areas may have some natural benefits to minimizing those types of interactions, no place is immune. And so, anywhere where there are groups of people gathering in crowds, where there's close contact, especially in indoor environments, that is where we are going to see the highest risk. And so, we continue to discourage people anywhere in the State, even in areas of low incidence, from gathering and attending those types of settings and social gatherings, because we can certainly see this spark and set off new chains of transmission, and super-spreader events so to speak in any area of the State. Thanks.

Governor Sununu:

I would also add when Dr. Chan and I had the opportunity to spend a day with Dr. Deborah Birx, who visited the State last weekend, this was a key point of hers, as well, that rural States, especially in the Midwest and some other parts of the country, that were not immune, by any means, but their numbers were low, their numbers are really jumping. And it can happen in a matter of days, which is why we stay so vigilant and so adamant about that message and how important it is, as it gets a little closer, as our immune systems become a little more suppressed, and as we go indoors more.

Especially I'm going to add my two cents on family gatherings. We've heard a lot about it across the country. It's very, very important to hear, as we hit those types of events, whether it's Thanksgiving or just folks coming over for Sunday dinner. Just because someone's in your family, the virus doesn't say, oh, that's Uncle Bill. I won't infect him. It has no prejudice that way and the virus can be just as susceptible anywhere.

Someone brought up the example of Dwayne Johnson, right, the Rock, one of the healthiest guys, an individual who really prides himself and does an incredible job with taking care of himself and all that. And I believe his whole family, unfortunately, came down with COVID. And he was posting about it and talking just about that idea that everyone is susceptible. Everyone's immune system can be compromised with COVID. And so, we just have to keep that vigilance all the way through.

Paula Tracy with InDepthNH:

Good afternoon, Governor, and everyone. How are you?

Governor Sununu:

Hi, Paula.

Paula Tracy with InDepthNH:

Hi, I have a couple of questions. One of them relates to your next steps related to if we continue to see these cases go up. I know, listening to the Opening Up Taskforce, retail is still interested in going up from 50%. There are other requests that are on your table. Is it possible that there will be a pause in consideration of those things? Or are you looking also to perhaps close bars at 9:00 or 11:00. And then, I have another question after that.

Governor Sununu:

Sure, well, I guess I would say that the beauty of New Hampshire is we take every situation very particularly, as an individual situation or opportunity in itself. Obviously, as we enter the fall, we know numbers are going to go up. They are going up. And so, that is a variable we take into consideration with any flexibilities that we may be looking to provide.

So we will just keep looking at them individually. I don't think there's a blanket understanding that we're going to stop providing flexibilities, or a blanket understanding that we're going to start shutting everything down, by no means.

Hockey, today, is a great example. We looked at it very closely. Instead of shutting down all youth sports, that was unnecessary. We can pinpoint, because of the data that I think our Department of Health looks like, and the specificity that we have in those areas. We can be very surgical, if you will, about how we go after this. And so, we will just keep taking them on a one-to-one basis.

Paula Tracy with InDepthNH:

Okay. And this is a question. InDepthNH's newsletter asks readers to be able to pose a question to you generally. And we're going to try to do one question a week. And this question is very broad.

Governor Sununu:

I can only imagine what this is going to be. Okay. Go for it. I'm an open book, Paula.

Paula Tracy with InDepthNH:

Do you believe in climate change?

Governor Sununu:

Do I believe in climate change? That's your question?

Paula Tracy with InDepthNH:

Well, not mine.

Governor Sununu:

Oh, okay. Yeah. No, sure. I thought we are going to talk COVID. But I'll keep my answer brief, only because this is a COVID press conference. But, clearly, there has been climate change happening because of human events and human interaction for quite a long time. And we have to take steps to do what we can, not just on the governmental level, on a private level, on an individual responsibility level to combat it. Yeah, sure. Oh, that was it? Okay, bye, Paula.

Michael Graham at New Hampshire Journal:

Governor, we quizzed all the people at New Hampshire Journal for this question. So, this is the one we came up with. So, your colleague from South Dakota, Kristi Noem, is in town. And we chatted with her and asked her how things are going, and was she getting the support she needed. She says that President Trump has done an excellent job. And I think the quote was that "the facts have been buried. As Governor, I can tell you he got my back during COVID-19." And she said that any requests from any State, no matter how big or small, was responded to, usually within 12 hours. What you're hearing now is political. So, my question to you is: is that the experience you've had with the Trump Administration? And as you've expressed some frustration with FEMA et al. earlier on, how is New Hampshire being treated by the Administration?

Governor Sununu:

Well, I'll say this. Any time we had a request of the Administration, there was a response within about 12 hours. It wasn't always the response we were looking for. And again, I would never speak to Governor Noem's experience. I think all the Governors are doing their best to manage very different situations in their States.

And I've expressed a lot of frustration with FEMA. I'm not shy about that. When they sent us testing devices and no tests, themselves; when they sent us PPE that frankly didn't work, it was amazing to actually find out that PPE might not work, right, to have a gown that has no holes in it, and things of that nature. But we were always there. Luckily, we're very good about getting our own PPE and could supplant it.

So I've expressed a lot of my frustrations. One of my latest frustrations is -- and I've been very proactive, I think, about talking to whether it's Dr. Deborah Birx, Admiral Giroir, who's working with testing -- as we do more of this antigen testing, the efficacy of it, how it should be used, whether it should only be used for symptomatic individuals, or asymptomatic; whether it should be backed up with a PCR test or not; how tests like that en masse could be distributed.

So, between the CDC, the FDA, and some of the folks in the Administration, we always got slightly different answers. So, again, the fact that I could pick up the phone to Admiral Giroir, or Dr. Birx would actually come to New Hampshire and talk to us one-on-one, I think, is a sign of the responsiveness. They're not dodging questions. They're not avoiding issues. They know this is all happening very, very quickly. And I think they're doing their best to allay any confusion and provide as clear answers as they can, as these new opportunities arise.

So, we always get a response very quickly out of the Administration. That's for sure. Sometimes it's not what we're looking for. That's okay. I know they can't just make everything happen just for New Hampshire. But it can be frustrating when expectations are set at a certain level and they're not met. And so, I'm a big believer that a big part of working within this public sphere and the crisis is transparency and setting expectations appropriately.

So, it's been a little bit frustrating with some of the smaller administrative parts of the crisis. But overall, New Hampshire's in good shape. I take a lot of pride in that. I think our entire team deserves a lot of credit and the citizens deserve the credit for the successes that we've had. Wow, okay. Great.

Can I ask one more in hockey?

Governor Sununu:

Sure.

Just from initial reactions, there seems to be a sense of surprise on the college level, with their seasons getting started up pretty soon here. If the issues arose from youth sports, why would colleges be included in a two-week pause?

Governor Sununu:

So, I'm sorry. In other words, why wouldn't we exclude colleges from the decision?

Correct.

Governor Sununu:

Because we don't know exactly, as one of my previous answers was. We don't know exactly where the pinpoints are here, right, whether it's something on the ice or something in the locker rooms, or whatever it might be. A lot of our data is coming out of youth sports, because we can see that trickle effect into the public education system and individuals in schools that could potentially -- that domino effect of others getting infected.

I don't know exactly, looking specific to the few college hockey teams that we have and what that domino effect might be within those university systems. Again, I think the universities have done a very good job preventing things.

But this is really about cleaning the rinks. It's about new guidance. It's about looking at that youth sports guidance or even the guidance that we have for any sports going on within the university system. It's making sure everyone can get tested, so we can kind of hit a reset button.

But this is not a decision taken lightly, by any means. But we have six outbreaks now. We've been working with this community for a couple of months. It's not getting better. It's not in a crisis situation yet. But my job is to make sure that we're handling things before they become a crisis, that we're addressing the needs of whether it's parents or students, or players, or Referees, or Coaches. They're all in it. They really are.

And so, my job is to make sure that we're doing right by them, first and foremost, not canceling hockey for the season, but taking a pause, pulling back a little bit, looking at the data. And I think allowing us to make the right next steps to ensure that when we do put things back into motion, in just a couple weeks -- I think it's the 29th we're going to get going again, on Friday [sic], the 29th. We're doing it in the right way. And we're doing it in a way that could be safe and still save what is a huge part of the remainder of the season.

I know two weeks can sound like an eternity for a team that might have been playing. But considering how many sports teams and leagues have stopped playing their seasons for the fall, it's a small sacrifice, really, to make sure that we're saving the rest of the season and not ignoring what could become a much more serious situation down the road.

Governor, a non-COVID question, now that the confirmation hearings are over, do you think the Senate should vote to replace the Supreme Court Justice? And is Amy Coney Barrett qualified to replace Ruth Ginsburg?

Governor Sununu:

Well, I got to be honest. I didn't watch any of the hearings. So I'm not going to pontificate on that other than to say it seems like it went off civilly, which was my biggest frustration. I think I share that with pretty much everyone in America how badly the previous confirmation process happened a year ago with Justice Kavanaugh. It seems to have gone off well in that respect. I really haven't watched and participated. My sense is they're going to take a vote in a week or a couple weeks and move forward.

That's Washington. Again, I've really pulled myself out of making any sort of statements having to do with Washington. I think it's a big mess. I really do. My focus is on the 603. My focus is on the State of New Hampshire, dealing with COVID, economy back on track, PPE, and testing, and schools, and sports. I got enough on my plate than to pontificate or worry about what happens in D.C., because, frankly, most of those votes are baked-in anyway. It's not going to make a hill of beans. It's all politics, unfortunately. Did you record the eye roll there? Get that one? He said, with eye roll.

Okay. Well, thank you, guys, for joining us for another press conference. We will be back next week. We appreciate it. Lots of opportunity out there, we will keep tackling it. Thank you all so much. Have a good weekend.