



Office of Governor Christopher T. Sununu
Press Conference
Tuesday, August 18, 2020 at 3:00 p.m.

Governor Sununu:

Well, good afternoon, everybody. Great to see everybody. I realized on my way over from the State House it is a really beautiful day. It is an awesome summer day. So I hope everyone is enjoying the week, as we get back to some normal temperatures and everyone get out a little bit, and get the fresh air. It's so important for COVID and for our own health. With that, I think let's just start with a public health update from Dr. Chan.

Dr. Chan:

Good afternoon, everybody, and thank you, Governor. So we are approaching 22 million people infected with COVID-19 globally. And that includes more than 5.4 million people within the United States. For New Hampshire, we are announcing an additional 13 people with new confirmed COVID-19 infection, for a total of 7,017 people with confirmed COVID-19 in New Hampshire. There are three new individuals who have been hospitalized with COVID-19, for a total of 712 people who have been hospitalized at some point during their illness with COVID-19. And then, sadly one new death to report in a long-term care facility resident, and so we have had a total of 424 people that have died either directly or indirectly as a result of COVID-19.

We continue to see low but persistent transmission in our communities. That assessment is based on the ongoing number of infections that we identify on a daily basis, which continues to be low statewide at around 20 to 30 new infections identified per day. That has been stable, if not decreased slightly over the last one or two weeks.

Our percentage of all PCR-based tests continues to be low and, in fact, has continued to go down slowly. We're now at less than 1% of all PCR-based tests that are positive for COVID-19. And our hospitalizations remain relatively low. The last several days, on any given day, there have been between 12 to 13 people hospitalized with COVID-19 within our State. That is lower than the numbers have been in the prior few weeks. And it's actually at the lowest level since the early days of this pandemic.

So, we are still seeing, we believe, transmission within our communities. The risk is still out there. We have been successful at managing and controlling spread of COVID-19. So thank you to all of you that are taking this seriously and continue to take this seriously, and follow Public Health guidance.

We need people to continue to practice social distancing, use cloth face coverings when in public places. Still please continue to avoid large gatherings. And as we always say, practice good, frequent hand hygiene, which will protect you against any number of different infections that are currently circulating, or are going to be circulating in the coming months. So with that, let me end and hand things over to Commissioner Shibiante. Thanks.

Commissioner Shibinette:

Thank you, Dr. Chan. Today we don't have an update on the two outbreak long-term care facilities. They both remain open, although very slowly petering out. We're getting single cases here and there that are keeping them open. But we do anticipate hopefully closing them in the next couple of days to the next week. Thanks.

Governor Sununu:

Great, it is good news Tuesday, apparently, as it comes to COVID. So that's all really good stuff. And again, I just reiterate what Dr. Chan said. We really appreciate everyone taking this so seriously, wearing the face coverings and social distancing. That's why our numbers remain to be low. And it's really a testament to all the folks across the State that are doing really good things around it.

Today we do have a couple announcements, and then we will open it up for questions. A significant announcement today responding to unemployment benefits; since the beginning of the pandemic, New Hampshire has moved very quickly to get out the door. If you remember, we made unemployment insurance available for out-of-work Granite Staters even before the Federal Government initiated their CARES Act here in New Hampshire. So, I think it's a testament to the very good work and kind of the on-the-ball response that the entire team at the Department of Employment Security, from the moment this pandemic hit, they've been very responsive and innovative in trying to provide some supports to families all across the State.

Since the pandemic began, New Hampshire to-date, back in March, has paid just over \$1.2 billion in State and Federal unemployment benefits. On August 8th, a lot of folks remember, the President did sign an Executive Order that allows States to opt-in to what they're calling the Lost Wage Assistance Program, which is additional Federal unemployment relief, which takes basically the \$600 stipend that the Federal Government, per week, had been providing, down to \$300, provided that there's a 25% match. So the State has to put up basically \$1 for every \$3 that the Federal Government would put up for the stipend. The Executive Order was signed in an effort to continue the relief to the American people, after Congress failed to pass a Stimulus Bill of their own.

Today, we're announcing that New Hampshire will submit our Application to FEMA in order to participate in this new opportunity. It's a chance to provide support to those who are currently unemployed, or maybe individuals, family members that have to be home with their kids, if their kids are in a remote-only learning program this coming fall.

In total, participating in this program will pump another \$340 million into the State's economy over the next 22 weeks at a minimal cost to the State. It's really a very, very good deal. And I'm going to go over some of the technical aspects of this. There were some technical eligibility requirements around this program. So bear with me a little bit.

When originally proposed, if we can take a step back to a couple weeks ago, when this original Executive Order was signed, the State was facing up to \$120 million cost out of our general fund with the potential of maybe only a fraction of our citizens eligible to receive the new Federal \$300 stipend. And given those parameters, that would have made it very difficult for New Hampshire to participate.

But we're happy to announce that, based on the guidance received over the past week from the Federal Government, it now appears that we will be able to cover 100% of those currently receiving benefits at a cost of less than \$10 million from our current unemployment insurance trust fund. It

doesn't even have to come out of the general funds. It comes out of our current unemployment trust fund, which creates a lot of flexibility and ability to move forward.

So, once approved, the State is able to access \$300 in supplemental benefits for Granite Staters that currently collect unemployment benefits. And they will be eligible going back to August 1st. So all of the eligibility gets retroactive to August 1st, which is, again, a very good opportunity for folks.

Here's somewhat one of the nuances. Those who are already receiving a minimum \$100 in State benefit, which is about 95% of the claimants, that is almost everybody gets at least \$100 in State benefit, can now receive the additional \$300 weekly benefit from the Federal Government. And they should see that in the next few weeks, which is great. That \$100 minimum that they currently receive counts as the State match.

There are a few individuals, not many, about 5% that currently receive less than \$100 per week from the State. And what we're now going to do is increase those individuals. So the minimum amount received for State benefit will now move to at least \$100 for everybody in our unemployment system. The only stipulation there is that group will require a little more additional time. The programming's a little more complex on the Federal Government side. They will be eligible for benefits also going back to August 1st. But their checks probably won't come for five or six weeks. It's just matching the system. The Federal Government system has to tie into ours with this new change that we're making. But it will all be retroactive. So the checks will be coming and we definitely thank everybody for their patience on that. And that's, again, for about 5% of the current unemployment population.

Also, it is really important to note the Federal Government has allocated only so many dollars into this program. It's about \$44 billion. That sounds like a very big number. But that's on a nationwide scale. So if the money runs out before Congress were to act to either extend the program or make sure that the funds are there long-term, the program would end on the Federal side. The State unemployment benefits would continue. But the Federal Government, when those dollars are done, they're done. And that's why I think it's so important that Congress acts and either allows this program to go forward, or refunds FEMA, or however they're going to do it. There's a variety of ways to do it. But they really need to come together in the next few weeks and make sure that these opportunities aren't just temporary. They're really there for our citizens going forward.

And again, just a big thanks to the team at Employment Security, they've done an incredible job not just here in New Hampshire working with the Federal Government, finding this kind of very unique way of doing this. So, again, 100% of folks in our current system are able to participate at a cost of what I believe is probably pretty significantly under \$10 million. We're trying to play it conservative. And it all comes out of our unemployment trust fund for the benefit of about \$350 million coming into the State economy. It's a great opportunity for us. It really, really is.

Two more quick things, one on Bike Week, some folks were asking just on an update. Bike Week is coming up in Laconia, our next big event here in the State. I think a lot of people are excited about it. But, again, we've tried to really put a lot of guidance around it, making sure that it goes off safely, making sure that it goes off in a way that people have confidence that we're not going to be spreading COVID any more than we currently have.

State and City of Laconia Officials do continue to work very collaboratively to ensure that Bike Week is safe and successful. Organizers continue to talk between the State and local level on a daily basis. And I think everyone shares that goal of finding the right balance.

The New Hampshire Liquor Commission continues to do outreach and education to the restaurants in the area. And those discussions continue to be very positive. So that's been great moving

the ball forward. We know that the vast majority of restaurants do a great job. They'll continue to do so. However, we have made it very clear that any intentional or reckless disregard of safety guidance is not acceptable. We're going to do aerial flyovers, billboard trucks, signage just so everyone knows to mask up, to stay social distanced.

We've also been communicating a lot with the lodging industry, as well as our campgrounds, so that everyone understands the quarantine requirements. So we're just trying to be very proactive with folks about what the rules are, what the guidance is, answer their questions on a one-on-one basis so there's no confusion going forward. It's exactly what we did with the NASCAR race. And I believe it's exactly why the NASCAR race was so successful in how it was held, the safety that we had to provide with the guidance, and the balance that we had with allowing the event to continue. I have no doubt that Bike Week will be as successful.

One last item before we take questions, it has to do with health insurance. So there's some, I think, very good news that we're announcing today in the State with regard to the cost of health insurance for New Hampshire citizens.

The Federal Government has published information on the proposed rates for the individual market for 2021. They do it usually on a yearly basis. And as of this morning, for those purchasing their coverage on the Health Insurance Exchange -- we have thousands of people that buy their insurance on the New Hampshire Health Insurance Exchange -- for the next year they will see a premium decrease of over 20%. This is critical. It's a huge opportunity as we navigate through the COVID pandemic, as many people are still trying to find that financial flexibility for themselves and their families. So by seeing these premiums drop by over 20% next year, that's just a great opportunity of making sure that people have the insurance. They can keep getting care for themselves and their families.

We worked very hard over the past several years to lower the cost of health insurance. We've been successful. And last fall, I was very successful in obtaining what they call a 1332 Waiver, kind of a technical thing out of Washington, from the Federal Government. And that Waiver has allowed us to create a new pool, essentially a new offshoot of insurance pool, which allows a better balance of insurance coverage, and therefore also allows those rates to decrease. And that's really the primary reason we're seeing over a 20% decrease on the Health Insurance Exchange.

And as we all know, health insurance can be very costly. We want folks to be accessible to it. We want it to be available. And we want folks to use it, right? We want folks to make sure they're getting that preventative care for themselves and their families. It really is quite important in such times when you're dealing with it, whether it's COVID or with testing, with other medical needs that individuals and their families might have. So with that, we can open it up for some questions.

Q&A Session

Hi.

Governor Sununu:

Hey, Paula. How are you?

Good, how are you today?

Governor Sununu:

I'm great.

I want to talk about absentee ballots. Are you going to take an absentee ballot this year for the primary, or the general election? Or are you going to go to the polls?

Governor Sununu:

I'll go to the polls. I always go. Yeah. I usually go. I've done absentee ballots in the past. But I haven't really planned. I can literally walk to my polling station. So my guess is I'll probably go to the polls.

Do you have any fear about getting COVID-19 in your town?

Governor Sununu:

Because of voting?

Yeah.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, I mean, do I have fear of getting COVID-19 specifically around voting, or just in general?

Yeah, just going to the polls and having...

Governor Sununu:

Look, I carry a little bit of fear and worry of getting COVID every day. I mean, I think we all should, right? That's why we wear a mask and we maintain social distancing. Again, talking to both the Secretary of State and the Attorney General's Office, and knowing all the different mitigation measures that we're putting in place, whether it's in September or November, I feel very confident that people can go to the polls and vote in a healthy way, in a safe way.

If not, if they don't feel comfortable doing that, they can take an absentee ballot. I mean, now you can take an absentee ballot and just walk it over and drop it off in one of the safe drop boxes at all the polling locations now. So there's a variety of ways to do it in a safe way, if people don't feel comfortable going to the polls. But I plan on going to the polls. And I know they can do it right.

Do you feel confident that the Post Office will be able to handle New Hampshire's expected higher volumes?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, I have a lot of confidence in the Post Office. I spoke with the District Manager, Regina Bugby, I believe is her name, a lovely lady that runs basically Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. And just talked about all these issues, about the confidence in the system. She assured us -- and I have full confidence -- that the system can handle, whether it's absentee ballots. She has given full confidence that delivery will not be interrupted in any way, and that the system is safe and secure, and people can and should rely on it, as if it were any other year.

Do you think the State should require masks in polling places?

Governor Sununu:

Do I think the State should require masks in polling places? I don't know. I think I would have to take a look at that. I mean, every polling place is so different. You go into Londonderry, for example, you could have potentially giant crowds, maybe even more than 100, which would potentially trigger, I think, a lot of concern, when those crowds get larger. Some polling places are very, very small, right? You only have a few folks in.

I think as long as you're maintaining social distancing, as long as you're providing a lot of the, whether it's PPE at the door for folks, whatever it might be, I think you can do it without making it a requirement. If you start requiring masks, you could potentially get into a question of, are you not allowing people in to vote, if they didn't bring their mask with them, or whatever it might be? If people have a health condition, you don't want to, again, suppress their ability to vote. So I think you just have to be careful with that.

But I guess it would probably lean to the Attorney General's Office to see how legal that would be if requiring mask was appropriate. And again, making sure that it was done in the right place and time; but people should be wearing masks. If they feel comfortable wearing a mask, I think the way we've set it up with making sure that there's distancing between all the ballot boxes that are going to be there, making sure we have enough poll workers, if folks don't feel comfortable working the polls that day. There's going to be an abundance of poll workers. And we're trying to get those folks trained up. I feel very confident that the day's going to go off, at least in New Hampshire, very successfully.

I mean, my understanding is that the potential absence of a mask mandate is making it hard for some polling places to recruit poll workers, people who are concerned about their own...

Governor Sununu:

Because of absence of what?

Well, because basically they're saying, well, if people were required to wear masks in polling places, then I would feel safer.

Governor Sununu:

If the argument is that poll workers need a mask mandate to feel safe to work there, then a town or jurisdiction can do that. They have every right to do that. So, great. It's on them.

So as far as unemployment, for parents whose children are going remote-only, is there an option for them to jump in on this, as well, if they can't go to work because they have to stay home with their child?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, if you're unemployed for a COVID reason, the eligibility requirements effectively stay the same. And we've widened our eligibility to allow folks to stay home. Yeah.

Governor, with regard to the original guidance you've got from the Trump Administration, how restrictive was that? How many people would it have covered, if we got this agreement? And even at \$10 million, does this mean the unemployment trust fund will run out of money quicker than it otherwise would?

Governor Sununu:

So, a couple things there; there wasn't a whole lot of original guidance. The original discussion was kind of out of -- I called it a bit of a curveball out of Washington when they said we're going to put up 300 but you have to put up 100. And originally they told us you couldn't use it out of your unemployment trust fund. And if we were going to cover everybody with that, with our own \$100 stipend effectively on top, that would have been in the realm of \$120 million out of our general fund, which is already going to have budget issues, already.

So, again, just working with both FEMA and the Department of Labor really aggressively over the end of last week and even into yesterday and as of this morning, as well, I think George Copadis and Richard Labors had great discussions and just allowed for that flexibility that we really needed to make sure the program could go forward. I apologize. I missed the second half of your question.

In terms of the trust fund running out of money, at some point it is going to run out of money, even at the reduced rate amount.

Governor Sununu:

We've always know that, based on the economic situation here in New Hampshire and across the country, frankly, every State will likely have to borrow to support their trust fund. So that is nothing new. We still anticipate borrowing in late-1st quarter or early-2nd quarter of next year. And that is still on target.

So, it is an additional \$10 million. But considering it allows us to tap into an extra \$350 million-or-so potentially out of the Federal Government, that's a huge win. And those are dollars that come right into our economy. They're likely to be spent, whether it's rent. It helps people not get evicted. It helps people not have to go through foreclosures, pay utilities, all those sorts of things that are just really necessary through tough economic times. That's going to be a huge economic boost to us once again. Hi.

One for Dr. Chan; is there any reason that you're aware of that New Hampshire has a higher-than-average proportion of our cases among children? And do you have any update on our situation with Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome?

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, a couple good questions about children. So I'll answer your second question first. We previously had reported one individual in New Hampshire that was diagnosed with MISC. That's Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children. That is still the current number. There have not been any new identifications of MISC in New Hampshire. So that's some good news.

Regarding the question of the impact of COVID-19 on children, and I think a couple of points here is that there's been a lot of national discussion and dialogue around what the likelihood of children are in terms of getting infected and then passing it on. And we have always said that everybody, including children, are able to become infected with COVID-19 and are subsequently able to pass it along to others. And so, it's important to implement the precautions that we have at a community level, in all settings, including to protect children and prevent children from getting infected, as well.

Now, other States have seen numbers of infections in children go up, in some States associated with gatherings, parties, bars, for example. Our total number of infections in children has remained relatively stable over the course of the pandemic. And I don't have the exact numbers for you. But the total numbers of infection in children has remained stable.

What has increased slightly is the percentage of our infections that are in children. So, as a proportion, the percentage of infections in children has gone up. And I think there's probably a couple of explanations for this. One is that, as we do more testing in children, we're going to find more positive cases in children.

The other is that we have managed to bring our outbreaks under control in long-term care facilities, and in most of our long-term care facilities. And so, the burden of infection in the past had been in older adult populations in long-term care facilities. As we've been successful at bringing those outbreaks under control, the proportion of cases, proportion of infections in other age demographics, other populations, proportionately has increased. But the overall number of infections in children overall has not seen an increase in New Hampshire.

Obviously given what we've seen and heard from other States in terms of infections increasing in children related to gatherings and parties, and schools, we're obviously keeping a very close eye on that. Thanks.

Dr. Chan, while you're up there, maybe I can grab you for a couple questions. First, some positive news at the start of today's meeting about those low numbers, less than 1% testing positive. First of all, can you just reiterate how important it is to stay on that track? I think some people might get excited seeing that. And then, do you want me to wait to ask you my next one?

Dr. Chan:

Sure, yeah. Let me answer that question that first. Thank you for the flexibility. So you're absolutely right. New Hampshire is fortunate, thanks to the work of our State and local partners, and residents, and visitors in New Hampshire following the guidance. We know how to prevent spread of COVID-19. It's those community mitigation measures that we have continually recommended: the social distancing, the cloth facemask use, the hand hygiene, staying home when people are sick. All of those measures are how we control spread of COVID-19. And they still remain critically important, because COVID-19 is still present in New Hampshire and in States around us, and nationally.

We are not going to be eradicating COVID-19, like some select other countries around the world perhaps have been successful at, like New Zealand. We are not an island in and of ourselves surrounded by water. We know that what happens in neighboring States, we know that what happens in the rest of the country is going to impact us. And so, the goal here is to manage and control spread of COVID-19. And we have largely been successful at doing that.

But risk remains within our communities. And the way that we prevent COVID-19 from spreading, the way that we prevent another surge in New Hampshire, like we have seen in some other States, is to follow the social distancing, the cloth facemask and hand hygiene guidance.

And my next question was, we've heard about the saliva test that the FDA approved. Is that something that's here in New Hampshire? Or we plan on using, especially with the schools going back and testing being so important?

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, great question about testing, specific to the saliva test. There are a number of new and emerging testing technologies, or platforms, that are out there. Saliva test is one of the newer testing platforms.

What you've heard about in the news recently is a new protocol out of Yale University that doesn't require some of the additional steps for testing that typically have been required when testing using a PCR-based test. Saliva testing, itself, is not new. Saliva testing has always, I think -- one of the difficulties with saliva testing is that it's a lower accuracy, typically, to some of the nose or nasal swabs. And so, it's been out there. It's been talked about. But it's always been a lower accuracy test than doing one of the nasal swabs.

So we're looking at and talking about this new protocol that Yale came out with, in terms of how to conduct a saliva test that maybe showed similar accuracy with some of the nose swabs. That's currently in discussion. But we're constantly evaluating new testing technologies and new testing options that are out there, because you're right that one of the goals is to try and decrease turnaround time for tests.

We've been successful, as a country, in terms of improving turnaround times for some of the nasal swabs around the country. We're looking at how we can facilitate rollout of additional testing platforms, like antigen-based testing. And saliva test is another option that we're looking into. Thanks.

Governor, in regards to college towns, as students make their return back, what's the State's plan to monitor what's happening in those towns? Will those schools have to report their data to the State? And if so, is that daily, weekly, monthly?

Governor Sununu:

Sure, so the State is working kind of hand-in-hand with the colleges and universities, as well as the towns in those areas, in terms of contact tracing. We have some of the best contact tracing in the country, frankly. And so, making sure that we have a consistent system through the State and through the universities is going to be very important, and so therefore we will have access to that data, if someone's infected, or whatever it might be.

We've already engaged both the colleges and universities their leads. Each one of them has kind of a COVID lead, if you will. Folks at the city and town level, whether you're in Durham, or Keene, or whatever it might be, making sure that they're part of that mix, and, again, we just want to make sure it's seamless communication, right? Well, there's a reason we do a couple press conferences a week. We want to be very transparent about what we do. We want to make sure that that process is very transparent when the universities come back for the teachers, the staff, the students, the community, the parents, right? We just want to make sure that everyone understands what the pros and cons are and where our data is.

If there are large gatherings or things of that nature, we're really making sure that we help the towns and the universities with the right messaging, the signage, whatever it takes. And be there to support them in any way that we can.

We've provided a lot of funding to the community college, to the private universities, to the public universities, pretty much everything that I think they needed and asked for. But we're going to be there for them in whatever we need to. They've assured us that they're getting their PPE in, which is great. UNH has their new testing capability coming in. They're going to share that with other parts of our university system.

So, all the pieces are really there to be successful. It does not mean that we're not -- we're likely going to get COVID in our colleges. I mean, of course we are. We just know that that's an unfortunate situation. But we're likely going to get COVID in our public schools, right? It doesn't mean you shut everything down. It doesn't mean that you pull the panic button. We have the tools, resources, and funding to manage through a lot of these with the transparency of communication on a seamless level. That's going to be, I think, a big asset to us that we've kind of planned and structured that out early on to make sure that we can have a successful fall.

Last week, we learned of a youth hockey player who played in a tournament out in Exeter. He's from out-of-state. He played in that tournament, while unknowingly after he contracted COVID down in Connecticut. Should we reconsider allowing sports teams from other States coming here to use our facilities?

Governor Sununu:

No, I don't think we need a reconsideration of that guidance right now. You had a single event that an individual, whether it was intentionally or knowingly, they were not from the New England area, is my understanding. I think they were from out of New England. So they really didn't meet the requirements of our youth sports guidance right now.

We are working with that rink. The Attorney General's Office has contacted them, working with them, educating them on what the guidance is, how to make sure that teams that might be coming in are assuring that they meet the qualifications.

So, again, one case doesn't dictate that you throw the whole system out. The system actually works very, very well. And you know that because we caught it, right? There was one individual. Luckily, it didn't spread to anybody else. It was caught and we're able to work with them in a very constructive way to make sure and help mitigate that that situation doesn't happen again.

I've just got a couple of nursing home questions. Maybe the Commissioner could please help. Good afternoon. Do I remember your tone correctly that you believed that transmissions in nursing homes, we're kind of at the tail end of that?

Commissioner Shibinette:

So we went from a high of 29 outbreaks in nursing homes. We're down to two. And the reason they're still open is having kind of one case maybe per week, which we need 14 days of having no exposures. So if they even have one positive staff member, we leave them open. So we are at the tail end right now of these two last nursing homes in their outbreak status. And all of the other ones are closed.

We've been doing some reporting on the Greenbriar in Nashua. And we've talked to a woman whose mother is at the Greenbriar who contracted COVID and she was disappointed with the response of the home and said she reached out to the State, including correspondence with your office and the Governor's office, and felt that the Greenbriar was going to be ill-equipped to deal with COVID, due to past deficiencies. I mean, what do you say to somebody like that who thinks the home is operating in a way that was going to put residents at-risk, and then the State was in a position to know that?

Commissioner Shibinette:

So, I'll give you my reaction to the entire article, because I did read the article from NHPR yesterday. So, I was pretty disappointed with that article, to be honest with you. NHPR was given access to Melissa St. Cyr, who is our Chief Legal Officer at the Department. She was the former Bureau Chief of Licensing and Certification, and a former Nursing Home Administrator. She talked in length about all of

the things that she did with the facilities in New Hampshire. And a lot of that was omitted, because I think there was a predetermined narrative to that story.

In the story, there were a couple of Experts that were in. One said that our focus on ventilation systems was ridiculous. The Experts said that the focus should be on PPE, testing, and infection control practices.

So between May and June -- or probably March and June, we procured enough PPE to supply every nursing home in this State with PPE. We probably have one of the most robust surveillance testing in nursing homes across the country. And we've surveyed every facility, including Greenbriar, probably multiple times.

We hold weekly press conferences. We do virtual infection control reviews with them. We have a dedicated Public Health Team for nursing homes that just does education with nursing homes, when they have outbreaks.

So, when we accomplished those three things, of course we said, what else can we do? What else can we do? We've accomplished PPE. We've accomplished a robust testing program. We've accomplished infection control, education, all of those things. So, of course we said, what else could we do? So ventilation was definitely somewhere we went.

The attempts to correlate prior survey deficiencies to COVID outcomes only makes sense when you report part of the data. So, what wasn't reported is that several nursing homes that were deficiency-free in 2019 also had significant COVID outbreaks. So the story that you reported on tried to correlate Greenbriar and their prior deficiencies in their prior surveys. So what wasn't talked about was that some of our significant outbreaks, like Hanover Hill and Hillsborough County Nursing Home, were deficiency-free in 2019. Facilities that have long histories of excellent care have been significantly impacted by COVID, and have had...

So there's no correlation between past poor performance and handling of COVID? I mean, you tell me.

Commissioner Shibinette:

I'm not saying that there is no correlation. But I think you have to look at all of the data. What you see, when you look at the data, is you see nursing homes that have a long history of excellent outcomes, excellent surveys, and had horrible COVID outbreaks. You have nursing homes that have had bad surveys and have horrible...

Are you sure you read the story properly, because I don't think that the story is making some huge case that there's a 1:1 kind of correspondence and correlation between...

Commissioner Shibinette:

It certainly highlighted everything in Greenbriar's past. It certainly did put the spotlight on Greenbriar and their prior survey history and tried to make that correlation that we should have known that Greenbriar would have an issue, because of their past deficiencies.

And what I'm saying is that we've had horrible outbreaks at facilities that have a long history of great survey outcomes. And that wasn't reported. Like I said, facilities like Hillsborough County Nursing

Home, facilities like Hanover Hill who has not just one year of great surveys, many years of great surveys. And they had horrible outcomes.

The families and the loved ones, that family absolutely may have reached out to me. I've talked to dozens of families on the phone. And I don't remember if I talked to that family, in particular. But I get dozens of calls every week from families at nursing homes, some saying our nursing home is doing a great job. We don't want visitors. We're scared. Some saying, please let us in. We have concerns about our family. So, I try to answer every call. So if that family member, in particular, wants to talk to me, I'm happy to talk to her.

I think part of the issue is the families and the loved ones in nursing homes are scared. And they should be scared. We've watched COVID have horrible impacts on our elders all across the country. COVID is scary, for sure. But we shouldn't be moving them towards being scared of their nursing homes and their caregivers. The place that they should be scared of is COVID.

These caregivers have provided love and nurturing care in those nursing homes for decades. And for some of those residents, they've been in that nursing home for a year or two years. And they've provided wonderful care to those people. And the fear is over COVID. COVID is having a very negative impact on the elders across the country.

They're doing the best they can. And obviously this is a scary time.

Commissioner Shibinette:

I don't think anybody is perfect. And I think what I've seen in this article and in many of your reports is trying to place blame. And I don't think there's room for blame here. Is everybody perfect? Absolutely not. Nobody is perfect. The State hasn't done a perfect job. The nursing homes haven't done a perfect job. And the hospitals haven't done a perfect job.

But we're doing good. Our case rates are low, 13 cases today. We were under 10 earlier this week. And we have a positive rate of under 1%. We have two outbreaks left. Whenever you're provided with data, yes, 80% of our deaths in this State are in nursing homes. And what I've said is you need to look at more than one cherry-picked datapoint to accurately assess the state of our nursing homes.

And so, when I provide further data to look at and say, let's look at a whole scale of data around nursing homes -- percentage of deaths, as compared to licensed beds; the several datapoints that I've provided -- I always get a yeah, but. Even in that story, when we've said, New Hampshire nursing homes fair better in surveys than many of the States across the country, in that article we had another yeah, but. Yeah, but everybody surveys differently.

So, are we perfect? Absolutely not. Can nursing homes do better? Absolutely. And every single day, every call on Wednesday, every virtual infection control survey we do, we say, have you tried this? Maybe we could do it better this way. And when we've accomplished PPE for everybody, probably the most robust testing program in the country, and infection control practices, then of course we say, what else can we do? Let's look at the ventilation system.

I don't want to belabor this, but all the data on the strong performing homes was in the story you're complaining now about for five minutes. That's in there. We don't need to litigate that now. But you're mischaracterizing...

Commissioner Shibinette:

The focus of that story was on Greenbriar and their past history. That's what the focus was on, right? And when you pick that datapoint, that one facility to focus an article on, and not focus on the collective result from all the nursing homes in our State, we've also had facilities that have had very bad surveys in the last two year who have no COVID. If there's a correlation, I would have to look at the data a little bit more closely. And that's what I would encourage everybody to do is to look at the totality of the data and not one datapoint.

Governor Sununu:

Great, thank you, Commissioner, great job. Other questions here? Can we take a few on the phone?

Holly Ramer with the Associated Press:

Hi, I have two questions, one for Commissioner Shibinette. I wanted to see if you could give us an update on the efforts to look at the ventilation system. I think originally you said that was going to be about a two-week process. And I think it's been about two or three weeks. And then, for the Governor, it appears that the Post Master General is now halting some of the operational changes to mail delivery. But how concerned were you about these reports that some of the mail sorting machines that were targeted for elimination, or removal, in Manchester? And would you consider joining the other States that are suing over this issue?

Commissioner Shibinette:

So, thank you. This is Commissioner Shibinette. The ventilation system, I was asked last week about that. And I did say that the information and all of the data was put on paper last week. And it has gone to the Engineer. So we currently have an Engineer reviewing all of the datapoints from all of the facilities and looking to see if there's a correlation between the type of ventilation system, the amount of air exchange in the buildings, just looking at everything to see, is there anything that we can correlate? Or is there anything that we can improve? So, Engineer has the dataset right now. So I'm thinking I've asked for a Report on that by Friday, or by the weekend. So hopefully I'll be able to report out on that next Tuesday or Thursday.

Governor Sununu:

Great, and as for the statement from the Post Master General today that a lot of those cost-cutting measures would be postponed, I think that's great news in that, look, when we talk about the confidence in the U.S. Postal System, I have a lot of confidence in it. I always have. It is a great system.

You're going to find some of the hardest working individuals, as they say through snow and rain, and whatever. They get the job done, especially here in New Hampshire.

So, their statements prior to the halting of those cost reductions from the Postal Service were they can meet the expectations of getting, whether it's ballots or whatever it might be, delivered and done on-time. I had the conversation with Regina Bugby, the District Manager that represents the three States even after those reductions were stopped. And again, she just reassured me that, yes, we're going to be able to meet those on-time. As for joining a lawsuit for fighting cost reductions that are no longer going to happen, based on the election, obviously there's no need to sign onto anything like that. They're going to get the job done.

Eric Scott with WASR radio:

Good afternoon. My question is about the mask mandate for more than 100 people, especially with Bike Week coming up. How is that going to be enforced? And what is the penalty for defying that mandate?

Governor Sununu:

So the guidelines around the greater than 100 requiring a mask are for fixed scheduled events. So if people are walking down the road, or like they're on Hampton Beach, or whatever it is, that is not a scheduled event. There aren't any mask requirements in those situations.

In the few circumstances where there's an event that's happening that isn't in a restaurant that currently has guidance, or in a retail location, or at Loudon, maybe at the racetrack, those all have guidance documents in place that manage that. These are just for the scheduled events that really didn't have any guidance built around them, greater than 100 people.

If events like that were to take place, obviously we know the events that are "scheduled". We're working with those organizers, both the State and Local Officials, to make sure they understand what the guidelines are, what the expectations are. We did that in a very constructive and proactive manner. And we have a lot of confidence that people understand that and can manage to that. And if they can't, we've already folks say, well, I don't know if I can manage that. I don't know if that's a reasonable expectation. And some folks are even pulling back either on the size of their event, or the time, or location, or even having the event at all. So we're just working with them to make sure that things go off safely. And we have a lot of confidence that that can be done.

Eric Scott with WASR radio:

Thank you, Governor.

Governor Sununu:

Thank you. Oh, that's it? Great. That's it for the questions on the phone, anything else here? Yes, hi.

What do you say to people who remain worried about Bike Week, given that the nature and a lot of the social interaction that happens at that gathering is not necessarily in a restaurant or at an established event, and don't see this mask rule as particularly effective?

Governor Sununu:

Well, I'd point to have a couple things. In New Hampshire, we've had large gatherings. We've had large events with good guidance. And we've done it very, very well. Look at Hampton Beach. You have tens of thousands of people at Hampton Beach on any given weekend. And when you allow for that social distancing and you have folks that understand the rules and regulations, things can go off very, very successful. So we have a proven track record of success in doing this, which gives us confidence.

It doesn't mean that it's going to be 100% perfect and no one's going to get COVID, or anything like that. But we have, I think, designed this in our guidance documents, and kept our message in a very elevated way, I think, to help give us, again, that confidence that it can go off. It can be successful.

I don't think you're going to see the large crowds that you typically see at Bike Week. They've moved it to the end of August. You've already had some of the events and venues close down. You don't have the vendors up there like you typically do.

So I think I'll be a very subdued weekend, to be honest, compared to previous Bike Weeks. But it could still be very successful. And I think if you just look at similar events that have happened, whether they were scheduled or at Hampton Beach, or NASCAR weekend, or whatever it might be, we've been able to pull those off really, really well. And that, again, all a testament to the people in New Hampshire taking those guidance and requirements very seriously, maintaining them.

Nobody wants to get develop. No one wants to put themselves in that kind of dangerous situation. And I think again we have low numbers not by accident. It's by careful design. It's because we've got an incredible team here at New Hampshire. And we worked really hard at our guidance documents and getting them right.

And that's not a knock on other States. But we work really hard at our sentinel testing. You don't go to 29 outbreaks in long-term care facilities and then down to two on accident. Takes a lot of work, a lot of effort, and a lot of success on the part of those folks on the frontlines. So, I'm giving you more of a broad answer because people are working really hard every day to keep our numbers low, to help maintain that, to get that message out there, but still provide that flexibility in our economy to allow events like this to take place.

Our unemployment numbers right now, I think, are now around 7% or even lower, it might be. Later this week, we will get the final numbers. Unemployment in Massachusetts is still way up there. Other parts of the northeast are way up there.

So we're providing that balance of economic success with managing our low numbers of COVID. And it's not luck, by any means. It's really, I think, a testament to the people of the State and the great team we have up here in Concord, and at the local level. I mean, the folks at the local level in Laconia, they're out every day right now making sure that all the venues know what's going on. Everyone's communicating. They're doing a great job.

Governor, with regard to the Democratic National Committee Convention, Governor Kasich spoke last night. He said Joe Biden would be better at unifying the country and that he wouldn't go hard left. Your members of your family endorsed Kasich in 2016 for President. What do you think of what he had to say?

Governor Sununu:

I'm not going to lie to you. I did not watch the Democrat National Convention. I'm surprised anyone did, to be honest. So I have no comments on John Kasich and his speech.

He endorsed you, Governor.

Governor Sununu:

He did. He did. Hey, I'll take an endorsement. Yeah. I'll take an endorsement. If you wanted to ask about my family members endorsing him, you'd have to ask them about that. So, John Kasich, I haven't spoken to him in probably about a year or two. It's been a while. I know he's got his opinions.

Everyone has their opinions and their thoughts about where the country can go, what leadership should look like, what this election should look like, all that. Everyone's got that right. That's the beauty of America. Anyone can get up on those stages at any time. Yeah, I think it's a great process. You got to respect that. Even through times of COVID, we're having conventions. We're actually having a political process. People are having the say and the voters will decide where this all goes in November, right? Oh, we got one more on the phone, great.

Michael Graham with New Hampshire Journal:

Yeah, Governor, I wanted to follow up on that Post Office topic. When President Trump suggested that the election might be delayed, you promptly stepped up and said, wait a minute. We're having the election. Everything's fine. And you pushed back on this message that might undermine confidence in our democracy. Now, Senator Shaheen, Representative Pappas, and other of your fellow Elected Officials in New Hampshire are attacking the Post Office, making claims that are just demonstrably untrue about Post Office Boxes being taken away or some secret plot. They're actually using memes off the internet from conspiracy sites. And I'm just wondering. What do you say to Elected Officials who are making statements and claims that tend to undermine our confidence in our democracy? I was going to ask you about the performance of the Post Office. You already answered about what the District Manager said. But you see what's going on. You see the Post Offices working normally. Is it healthy for Elected Officials to tell voters you can't believe that the election is going to work? Or do you have any concerns about that?

Governor Sununu:

Well, I guess I would say I don't have a specific message for Elected Officials. I don't have a specific message for that constituency. My message to everybody in the Granite State is our Postal Service is a tried and true, safe and secure system. It has always done a great job. It's going to continue to do a great job. And it's going to make sure that if folks are sending in something on absentee ballot, the votes are going to be counted. They're going to be there. And they're consistent. And it's a safe and secure method of voting, safe and secure method.

You have to remember folks every day are counting on the Post Office to get their unemployment insurance checks, to get their prescription medications in the mail, right? I mean, the system has to work. And here in New Hampshire, it has. It has. Whether it's a busy holiday, whether it's a lot of absentee ballots coming in on an election day, I mean, obviously they have been able to handle a lot of capacity. They're able to, I think, be flexible. And folks should really believe and know that the system here has worked and will continue to work election day and beyond.

Great, okay. Well, thank you all very much. Enjoy the beautiful weather. We will likely be back, I believe, Friday. We're not going to be here Thursday. So we're going to have our press conference this week on Friday at 3:00 p.m. Just make sure that we wanted to get it in. I'm sure there'll be lots to talk about. The COVID issue has really moved things along and makes things move very quickly. But we always want to make sure we're transparent and here for everyone. So, have a great day, everybody.