



Office of Governor Christopher T. Sununu
Press Conference
Thursday, October 8, 2020 at 3:00 p.m.

Governor Sununu:

Hey, how are you? Good evening. Good faces in the crowd, this is good. Okay. I think we're going to get started first with a Public Health Update from Dr. Chan.

Dr. Chan:

Good afternoon, everybody. So we're going to change some of the way we report out Public Health numbers today and going forward, focus less on some of the extraneous numbers and more on numbers relative to the current situation in New Hampshire.

So, in New Hampshire today, we will be reporting 79 new people diagnosed with COVID-19. This includes 55 people who were tested and tested positive by PCR, and 24 individuals who tested positive through antigen testing.

In the last 14 days, there have been a total of 719 new people with COVID-19. This gives a rate of 53 new infections in the last 14 days per 100,000 population. And I'm putting that number out there, because that's one of the community-transmission metrics that we are starting to more closely follow. Out of the 719 new infections in the last 14 days, this includes 531 people with current or active COVID-19 disease and infection who are being monitored by Public Health.

There are two new hospitalizations that we're reporting today. This includes currently a hospital census of 14 people hospitalized statewide with COVID-19. So if you remember, in September, the hospitalizations numbers began to creep up. But the last couple of weeks have been stable and fluctuating up-and-down. And there is sadly one new death that we are reporting today in a long-term care facility resident, bringing the total number of people who have died from COVID-19 to 449.

In terms of test data, our PCR test positivity rate remains low at 1% or less. So I want to acknowledge that we have seen an increase in the number of people being diagnosed with COVID-19 over the last several weeks. As we said at past press conferences, we believe that this is, in part, due to the large increase in testing that is being conducted statewide, both at colleges and universities, but statewide in many communities, both PCR and antigen testing, which is leading to an increased identification of people with COVID-19.

However, we believe that there's also evidence of increasing community transmission, especially in the southern communities and southern parts of our State, in particular Hillsborough, Rockingham, and Strafford Counties. As we identify people with COVID-19, we continue to conduct Public Health contact investigations on each and every person to identify close contacts who are, then, tested to identify additional infections.

And as Dr. Daley has mentioned at past press conferences, we're seeing an increasing number of people who are close contacts identified through our investigations. And so, we believe that this represents a decrease in the relaxation of the restrictions in some areas of our State.

So especially as we enter flu season, when we know not only COVID-19 will be circulating and spreading, but also influenza and many other respiratory viruses, we want to continue to stress the importance of people maintaining social distancing. When people are in public places, please wear cloth face coverings. And we continue to recommend that people avoid crowds and large gatherings.

We know that COVID-19 likes to take advantage of these types of situations, the situations where there are many people in close contact to one another, especially in close, confined spaces. These are exactly the type of situations that the virus can easily take advantage of and spread quickly between people, what we call super-spreading events. So we continue to recommend that people avoid large crowds and gatherings where they may be in close contact with other people, particularly in closed, confined spaces.

So we know how to prevent the spread of this Novel Coronavirus. But we need everybody to continue to follow the Public Health advice and recommendations, and particularly be vigilant about our interactions with others and avoid those situations that risk spread of COVID-19 within our communities. And with that, let me stop and hand things over to the Commissioner. Thank you.

Commissioner Shibinette:

Thank you and good afternoon. I'm just going to do two brief updates today, one on long-term care outbreaks. Today, we are closing the Mountain View outbreak in Ossipee, New Hampshire. We will also be opening Pine Rock Manor in Warner, which currently has four residents and one Staff Member all testing positive for COVID-19. So that brings our total long-term care facility outbreak list to three: Bedford Hills and Pine Rock Manor, and Warde Health Center in Windham.

The other thing I wanted to update you on was last week we talked a little bit about our PPE stockpile. So, we have prepared just a small inventory of some of the things we carry. This is not everything we carry. We have a more extensive list than this. But these are the main things that you'd see requests coming in for.

So you'll see on this table, facemasks, our current usage right now is about 1.6 million a month. We have about 3.6 million in inventory. Our goal has been about 4 million. And we have about another 8 million on order.

You'll see, going down the list, that we are in very good shape, PPE-wise. Our goal has been to have two months' worth of PPE for each item on-hand. We more than exceed that in everything except for gloves. Gloves have been our limiting factor, I think, when it comes to PPE. But we are very fortunate that we have managed to put in orders and procure several hundred thousand gloves that we expect start arriving today. We had one order come in today. And we expect several orders over the week. And not all gloves are made equally. The sizes make a huge difference. So, large gloves are more in demand than let's say small or extra-small gloves. So, this is our total boxes.

But you'll see isolation gown, N95s. We have at least two, usually three or four months' supply, based on our current usage in our inventory today. This is a fulltime endeavor. We have two or three people that work on procuring PPE fulltime. That's what they do eight hours a day, and go to every end of the country and globally to make sure that we have what we need, if we see an increase in cases over the next couple of months. Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Well, thank you very much, Commissioner. And thank you, Dr. Chan. A variety of different things to talk about today, we're talking a lot about data. We haven't done a real kind of a data download and data update in a little bit. And Dr. Chan was touching upon some of those key aspects of data, specifically data that is focused on New Hampshire, and that's focused on our current situation, because, as everyone knows, through the pandemic, we see these ebbs and flows through whether it's our numbers, our percent-positive, whatever it might be, economic data that we look at.

So, just to focus on the things that we most highlight, here's just a sampling, if you will, of four key datapoints. I think there's a fifth one that Dr. Chan mentioned which is the number of cases per 100,000. That's another very key one. It's about just over 50 right now, about 53 per 100,000 across the State.

But, again, this is kind of our average seven-day positivity rate. We're doing so many more tests. That's one of the reasons we're seeing so many more positive cases, means a lot more positive cases, means a lot more contact tracing, to be sure. It's also the time of year we expected those numbers to rise. But the percent-positivity, as dictated by the CDC, is obviously a key factor, because it keeps it all relative. If you're doing more testing and you're likely going to see more positivity, but the percent-positive is a real key indicator for what's happening in your community.

Our total active cases today is 531. It used to be well-into the thousands. It's gotten as low as I think a couple hundred at one point. And now it's at about 531. So this is a very important number, because this gives you a sense of the amount of contact tracing that our team constantly has to do. And knowing that there's so many contacts per positive case, it gives a sense of really that amazing team effort behind-the-scenes to get folks quarantined.

Our active hospitalizations, we've always talked about hospitalizations being a very, very important statistic. If you go way back into March, when this whole thing began with the pandemic, the real issue was making sure our healthcare system did not get overrun, making sure our healthcare system could manage the needs for those who had the most severe symptoms, whether it's needing ventilators or other medications, and other services, within a hospital setting.

Again, this number used to be well-over 100, 120 at one point. We have about 14 active hospitalizations. We expect it to tick up, as well as our numbers tick up over in the fall. But the good news is we have thousands of beds of capacity here in New Hampshire, currently. And so, we're in very good shape in terms of being able to meet the need that the pandemic may have for those with the most severe symptoms.

And then, unfortunately, our total fatalities which we always say, everyone is a tragedy. There are a lot of sad stories and a lot of families out there where those numbers make a huge impact. Relative to the rest of the country, we've been able to manage in fairly good shape. But we're always keeping an eye on that fatality rate and that hospitalization rate.

Moving on past the direct -- oh, sorry. We have our percent. Oh, yeah, we remember this chart, the percent-positive chart. I forgot we had this. So this is where we're early on. This goes all the way back into the early days of the pandemic, back in April. March and April, you see our percent-positive rate was up in the 15%, 20% on any given day. And as you can see, since about June 30th, we've been well-below 5%, down right now at 1% or even slightly below 1%.

And if this number starts to really creep up, other States have seen a 4%, 5%, 6%, 7%, 8% percent positivity. You're seeing that in other parts of the country. And I think at those levels that's where we will start getting quite concerned in terms of making sure that all the other pieces of the puzzle, whether

it's the hospitalization, the testing capacity, the contact tracing, making sure that all those are working. It's like a watch. Everything really has to work in conjunction to make sure that you're getting the right output.

But as you can see, our testing is just through the roof. We're hitting multiple days where we're doing well-over 10,000 tests a day. But the percent-positivity rate remains at or below 1%, which is a very good thing. You couldn't ask for anything better, frankly.

Economically, what's our next slide? Just I want to stay on-track here. Okay. So the unemployment rate, this is a good one. We talk about this chart. A lot of folks have seen this before. This is where we were just pre-COVID. We got down to 2.4% unemployment just before COVID hit in late-February. And then, obviously, we had to make some very, very tough decisions, restrict folks around the economy, around different business sectors, putting a lot of guidance and regulations in place. We defined essential and nonessential businesses.

And then, the strategy was to create these guidance documents, ease the economy open at the right rate. Be careful that we're watching it, making sure we were very data-drive in what we were doing, and making sure we were moving with what we call consumer confidence. We wanted the citizens of the State to understand what we were doing and why so they would have the confidence to reengage with the economy, whether it's in retail shopping or hotels, or restaurants, whatever it might be, just going out to the convenience store, hospitals, making sure folks were reengaging with hospitals.

So, as we did that, obviously a lot more folks started to get back to work and back to normalcy, whatever that looks like. And as of, I think, this past week-or-so, we're at about 4.1% unemployment, which is just quite phenomenal, frankly, given where we were, where we've come, and such a year. It's been, as you can see, quite a rebounding year for us, all very, very good data, to be sure.

Okay. So now, one of the things we wanted to also focus on is the areas that have been most hard hit: restaurants and hotels, hospitality, if you will. These are the areas that have been most hard hit by the economy for a variety of different reasons.

A few datapoints we really looked into was the meals and rentals tax. And those numbers continue to be below expectations, to be sure, but slowly coming back, month-over-month. That's a very good thing.

We did look over a lot of data over the last six years. And one of the questions I had was how many businesses are closing? How many businesses are closing today versus other years? So this is some pretty interesting data and nothing I'd ever really looked at before.

In 2020, so far this year, 357 businesses that traditionally would collect meals or rooms tax for hotels and restaurants have closed, unfortunately, 357. Last year, that number was 479. And the year before that, it was up around 517.

So amazingly, I'm very pleasantly surprised. I think we all should be. The number of business closures in the hardest-hit areas is down this year. I think it's a testament to flooding so much of our CARES Act money into the economy, everything from the Main Street Relief Fund to what we've been able to do with our guidance documents, like we said moving with consumer confidence. The dollars around the nonprofits, the dollars we put around self-employed, all of those grants that have gone out, very unique to the State of New Hampshire, but all of those grants that have gone out have allowed folks to retain their jobs, keep the economy strong. And so, folks are able to go out and get takeout at a restaurant or actually go to some of the outdoor seating venues at a restaurant, maybe even go up to the White Mountains and stay a couple days in a hotel in a safe and sound way. And so, all very, very good news, to be sure.

To give another interesting datapoint, we didn't do a chart on it. But if you look at the number of businesses that actually collected room and meals tax -- not the closures, that was the closures that have clearly come down -- but in February there are about 5,000 businesses collected meals and rentals tax. And by April, I think that number had dropped to about 3,000. Folks just stopped collecting the tax. They didn't know if their business was going to be able to survive.

As we've come through the summer, those numbers have rebounded right back to where they were at February levels. We now are back up to having about 5,000 businesses collect meals and rentals tax, meaning they're open. They're viable. Doesn't mean they're thriving by any means, we know their revenues are down. And their COVID costs may be up. But they are surviving economically, which is a great sign.

And that's what 2020 is all about making sure that we're not just getting by and accepting the losses, but really injecting a lot of that CARES Act stimulus, if you will, back into the economy to make sure that the jobs are there. And when 2021 comes, which I think we're all waiting for desperately, we're really coming out strong. And I think we're very much poised to do that.

So all very good economic data, and next we will have some even more. I think we're looking at revenues and what's happening at the State level, State budget. We will have some information on that next week, as we kind of dig into that data. But we're just doing very, very well. I don't want to say surprisingly, but, yeah, it is surprising, given where I thought where we would be today.

And moving on, I want to talk a little about schools. We get a lot of questions in the Governor's Office about where the schools are. We know we have COVID cases with students in our K-12 schools. So when we talk about schools as opposed to the universities, this accounts for approximately the 450 maybe even 500 or 600, when you add in all the different schools, charter schools and private schools, and things of that nature, all of the K-12 schools that we have throughout the State.

Right now, about 47% of them are fully in-person. They're back in five days a week in a fully-learning model. They have a lot of their new guidance documents in place, which is good, and a lot of their restrictions. But there are about 47% of our schools are back in.

About 37% are in some sort of hybrid-learning model. That usually means they're in for a couple days. They're out for a couple days. Maybe there's a day-or-two highlighted for the school to do some extra cleaning, to making sure that the kids are in a very healthy and safe environment.

And then, about 14% of our schools are fully remote. They have not closed, but gone to a fully-remote learning model where all the students fulltime are at home in some sort of learning model. The good news is all schools are in a learning model. No one is going without that. But that gives a sense of the ratios that we see out there.

And this is just a way to thank a lot of the Teachers and the parents, and the students. They've done some amazingly hard work to manage through COVID, to manage with the new guidance documents.

One thing as we always say, if schools need more dollars, we are here. We're not going to let cost be a barrier to allowing schools the opportunity to let those kids come back into class. We know how important it is for students to come back into class. And we've been very successful with it.

And as I started out by saying students do have COVID, I mean, there are cases of COVID. But, as of today, there are no outbreaks, zero official outbreaks in our K-12 schools. I think we have a cluster in one of the elementary schools, but no official outbreak. And that's good news. It doesn't mean we're not going to have them. But we are prepared. It can be managed.

And I think through the first six weeks of the schoolyear, a lot of these schools that have remained either in a fully in-person model, or a hybrid model, have shown that it can be done successfully. It can be done smart. And again, it's not without a lot of extra effort, to be sure. And I think a lot of the folks at the local level deserve a lot of credit for making that happen and making sure those kids can come in and get the best out of their learning models.

Another focus of ours since the very, very beginning is childcare. In March, we created the Childcare Recovery and Stabilization Program that provided funding and support for COVID-19-related costs within the childcare or daycare community. This included things like operations, workforce, health, and safety support for the childcare programs. And we invested about \$28 million early on to this.

Our State childcare centers, they obviously play a hugely important role through this pandemic, allowing parents or other caregivers to actually reenter the workforce in various aspects, whether it's in healthcare or just making sure they can provide for their family. Childcare and daycare is just a huge, huge part of the puzzle to be successful economically and successful for a lot of the families.

The program that we've put out, that \$28 million, was a very big success. But we know there's more need. There's more need today and there's going to be more need down the road. Therefore, we're announcing today an additional \$10 million effort of financial support for those daycare centers that were part of the Childcare Recovery and Stabilization Program. So we're kind of adding in. We've talked to a lot of the folks on the ground, on the frontlines. And we're making sure that we're going to continue to be there for them.

The program is administered by the Department of Health and Human Services. It has a very simple, again, one-page Application. We're really tried to make it very, very easy for folks to apply into this system. The Applications are open and the deadline to apply is through November 6th. So childcare centers have a few weeks to apply for these funds, figure out what their costs might be. And again, anything that is COVID-related in that world can be recovered, which is great.

And again, our childcare centers have been there since the very beginning. We never shut them down. We never closed them down. We provided some guidance. We provided some flexibility. And they've been very successful, both providing that opportunity for families and keeping the kids safe, which is obviously of paramount importance here in New Hampshire.

Before we close out, just two more quick things, we do have a variety of open funds. I just always want to remind people that we do have a lot of open funds with our CARES Act funds, whether it is the agriculture funds.

Last week, we announced the Live Venue Relief Program, which is a \$12 million fund we just created to support performance venues facing revenue loss due to COVID-19. One of the reasons that we singled out some of these performance venues is that talking to some of the larger companies nationally, as well as locally, some of these large national acts are not coming back any time soon. It really could be into the third or fourth quarter of next year before you see that world pick up.

But the same time, many of these venues are just economic cornerstones in their communities. It could be the SNHU Center. It could be the Palace of Fine Arts in Manchester. It could be the Capitol Center. It could be Meadowbrook, a variety of different areas, the Casino Ballroom down in Hampton. These are all great venues. They're economic cornerstones. And if they were to go bankrupt, if they were to disappear, they likely aren't opening for quite some time, not even next year.

So, to enable to keep them viable, to keep folks employed, and through the extra-long economic downturn that they're likely going to face, we did create this fund that they can apply into. Those Applications are still open through Tuesday, October 13th. And again, you can go to the GOFERR site,

goferr.nh.gov\apply. That's where all of our funds are for any of the economic-relief funds that we've been able to provide. And we just encourage everyone to go in and check it out. There's an opportunity in there for just about everyone across the State.

And then, I'm going to open it up for questions, but I have a non-COVID-related item that we do want to talk about today. Today, the State drought conditions, we hear about the drought all the time. But, every Thursday we update the drought expectations and the status, if you will, across the State.

And as we unfortunately had to update today, our conditions continue to worsen. Now 20% of the State of New Hampshire is in what is classified as extreme drought status, with 95% in what we call severe drought status.

So in response, I've talked to a lot of folks, individual citizens that their wells are going dry. They're having trouble actually getting water from their traditional water sources. So in response, earlier today I spoke with Senator Morse from Salem, who's in charge of the New Hampshire Drinking Water and Ground Water Trust Fund. Chuck Morse has done a great job and he's really led the biggest clean drinking water investments in the State's history over the past two years. They've done a phenomenal job.

He and I spoke about helping the citizens who are facing these challenges, as their wells dry up. And so, in working with Senator Morse, I'm going to formally ask Commissioner Bob Scott of the Department of Environmental Services to submit a formal request to that Drinking Water Commission to set up an emergency trust fund to help create new water wells and new resources for some of our hardest-hit citizens.

I was out a lot this past week talking to businesses and homeowners. I was up in the small Town of Warren, beautiful town, by the way. I was up there and a lot of their wells are simply dry. Dug wells have to be turned into drilled wells. That can cost a lot of money, thousands and thousands of dollars to make that opportunity happen.

But we do have money in our Clean Drinking Water Trust Fund that Chuck has led the efforts on. And so we're going to ask for some of those dollars to be moved to an emergency fund so we can just open up the opportunity for some of those citizens to re-dig or redrill their wells and making sure that clean drinking water is available to everyone in the State of New Hampshire.

I know that was a lot. We appreciate everyone for bearing with us. When we try to compact everything into one press conference a week, it can be a little bit hefty. But I tell you, we're in good shape. One thing that Dr. Chan and I were talking about is, while our numbers continue to rise, I think they are going to continue to rise.

We can manage through it. But folks really have to take both wearing their masks, social distancing, washing their hands, all those basic things that we have done very, very well for the first seven, eight months through this. If we keep it up, there's no reason we can't make sure that we can continue to manage through what could be some of the toughest times to come.

But we're in good shape, whether it's the PPE we have, the incredible amount of testing that we have available. As we open things up, I think we can do it smart. And obviously the economics are showing that we're on a good track to be able to manage and get people back to work. With that, we can open it up for questions. Hey.

Q&A Session

Hi, Governor.

Governor Sununu:

Good afternoon. How are you?

Good, thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Good.

Dr. Chan was talking about the fact that community transmission is up, even though the positivity rate's down, and that that is as a result of more contact tracing. In understanding what's happening, could it be that maybe is it in kids, are sort of unknowingly spreading it now that they're back at school in sports, or that kind of thing? The second part of that question would be, we know that there are some clusters in churches. Some had to be reported, because those people were contacted. But is there an issue there? And is it communion? Is it handshaking? What is it?

Governor Sununu:

So I think the question was: are kids unknowingly transmitting it in a school atmosphere or whatever it might be, or churches, or some of these other areas where we've seen clusters of illness? Are those of higher risk? And the quick answer to all that is yes.

I think everybody is at-risk of transmitting it at a higher level than we were before, as it gets colder, as our immune systems get suppressed a little bit, and as, again, I think there's a little bit of -- I don't want to say we're getting lacksidaisical (ph). But folks really need to be wearing their masks and taking it seriously. We are not out of the woods yet. As our economy opens up, that doesn't mean that we can, I think, relax our personal responsibility.

So, with the university coming back into play, that's a big issue. We've seen a few different clusters at various universities, UNH and others. As the K-12 schools come back in, I'm going to ballpark this. Out of 192,000 students, we have 100-or-so kids in the K-12, which is a fraction of a fraction of a percent.

The issue with schools is really about quarantining. That's one thing that we're seeing. If a sports team might -- maybe one or two kids on a sports team have it. Very often, because the team is kind of intermingling so much, the whole team ends up getting quarantined. We've had schools that have shut down all of their fall sports not because everybody has COVID, but because the few of the kids that do have COVID have caused the teams to be quarantined for two weeks. So it's like a double-whammy. All those kids have to go to a remote-learning atmosphere for a couple weeks. The sports can't get played for a couple weeks. Ultimately it probably leads to a cancelation of most of their season.

So we think, through the contact training that we've done, it can happen on the field. But it also is happening in a lot of social activities done by these teams, a spaghetti dinner or something like that. And

so, these teams, we want to warn folks and be very cognizant that, even though New Hampshire remains one of the best States in the country, to your point, it can pass very easily, unknowingly from person-to-person, whether it's children, whether it's adults, whether it's in colleges or the workplace.

Wearing your mask is just so, so important. And it's been proven that wearing the mask, it absolutely works. It absolutely prevents the virus from spreading. Two masks are better than one in a conversation, to be sure. And social distancing's one of the best things you can do of all.

So, when you put all that together, there are a lot of risks out there. It's nothing that, as individuals, when we take that personal responsibility, we have to keep that up to manage it, ourselves. And Dr. Chan and I can't go to every event around the State and police them. That's not our job to do that. And again, we don't have to, because the people of the State do such a good job of it, right?

But we do want to keep reminding folks the importance of that so that that asymptomatic spread or that unknown transmission, because we are shedding the virus. For those who might have COVID, they are shedding the virus very often before their symptoms maybe even appear.

And the contact tracing's been a huge benefit, because as soon as someone's identified, we can quarantine them. But very often, unfortunately it means the rest of the team, the rest of the group, the rest of the church or whatever it might be might have to be quarantined, as well. Sorry for that long answer, but it's a very important question. So, thank you.

Governor, the seven-day PCR rate in Nashua is now 3.9. In Manchester, it's 2.9. Is there a metric at which you would consider imposing restrictions on a community level, where a community's an outlier compared to much of the rest of the State?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, so the point that Kevin's making is that such a high percentage of our positive rates right now are specifically in Nashua and Manchester. Both those communities have their mask orders in place. I think folks are doing their best to take those seriously.

They are just more densely-populated areas, naturally speaking. You're always going to see the outbreak be more pertinent around those densely-populated areas, whether it's New York and Boston, or whether it's Nashua and Manchester. That's just where unfortunately you're likely going to find it, because of how those communities operate.

So, right now, we're not looking at taking additional measures specifically within those communities. But it's always something that we're willing to look at, depending on how high those percent-positivity rates get, what other restrictions might be possible in those communities. And as long as those restrictions aren't just restrictions for restriction's sake, as long as we really firmly believe that they're areas that are addressing where the spread is, where the contact tracing tells us where the spread might be, and that we're going to get better health results because of it.

Governor, on the drought fund you announced, are you envisioning a certain amount of money being made available?

Governor Sununu:

I think at least a couple million. I haven't thought about the dollar amount. I think we will talk with Senator Morse and Bob Scott. We will look at what the need is. I can tell you that there's hundreds and hundreds of wells across the State at, at least, a few thousand or \$5,000 on average. I'm ballparking numbers here. So you're looking at a few million dollars, at least.

And luckily, the Trust Fund has it. I don't know what they'd be willing to expend and create. But I think it's definitely something in the seven-digit range, too. And we will look to get it up-and-running as quickly as possible.

And you mentioned the conversion of dug wells to drilled wells. Is that the sort of thing that you're envisioning? Or would it go beyond that, in terms of the potential use of those funds?

Governor Sununu:

I think those funds are really looking at the wells, yes, whether it's a dug well or a drilled well, or going from a dug to a drilled well. Dug wells can be a shallow 6 feet. I mean, a pointed (sic) well can be very, very shallow. Drilled wells can be 1,000 feet. So, obviously a drilled well is more expensive. But sometimes that's where you need to go, maybe going from a 6- to 10-foot dug well to a 100-foot or a 120-foot drilled well. That could cost \$4,000 or \$5,000, depending on the need.

So, yeah, I think there's a lot of opportunities. But it would be individual. But it's, I think, specifically to the wells is really what we're looking at right now. But I'd also look to the Commissioner and the Drinking Water Commission. If they have better ideas, that's fine. But we just want folks to know that we are recognizing the situation. We're going to put the funds out there to address it. We don't want anyone to go without clean drinking water. Hi.

This might be a question for Commissioner Shibinette just about churches and clusters. I know that not all of them have been widely publicized, because they've been able to contact everybody involved. Just looking to see, is it a growing issue with churches? Is it something that -- at what point do we make it public knowledge? Is it when you're trying to get into contact with people?

Commissioner Shibinette:

So, I don't think clusters at churches is a new thing. So we've been working on clusters in a variety of very public settings where people congregate. Churches are one areas (sic). But you can talk about a wedding, or a sports team, or a variety of other areas where people just generally congregate.

So our policies around doing public notification is, can we identify everybody that's been a close contact? And some churches do a great job. They maybe locating in their congregation or do something like that, so that they're able to pinpoint everybody that was at service that day.

You're high-risk wherever you choose to congregate. And I wouldn't set out and say churches are a specific issue. What I would say is any time that you get a group of 50 or 100 people that get in an

indoor space, in close contact without masks, and is there singing? Is there speaking loudly? Puts you at risk. Whether that is a church or a birthday party, it doesn't matter. What we would say is that it's high-risk if you're indoor doing any of those things.

Governor Sununu:

Great, do we have some questions on the phone?

Paula Tracy with InDepthNH:

Good afternoon, Governor. How are you?

Governor Sununu:

Well, Paula, I saw your seat was empty when I walked in. A small tear came to my eye. I hope you're doing okay.

Paula Tracy with InDepthNH:

I have a little bit of a slight sore throat today. So I decided to stay home and take the guidance of your professional team.

Governor Sununu:

Smart, wonderful.

Paula Tracy with InDepthNH:

So can I ask a couple of questions?

Governor Sununu:

Sure.

Paula Tracy with InDepthNH:

One related to you with rooms and meals tax; next week you said we're going to get a little bit more data perhaps from the Department of Revenue on where things are. You met a couple weeks ago with restaurant folks and you hinted that there was a possibility that you might consider asking the Legislature or going toward reducing the rooms and meals tax to help both lodging and restaurants. Is that still something that's on the table?

Governor Sununu:

Yes, absolutely. I have no doubt that we can not just manage our needs at the State Government level but provide the relief for hotels, lodges, restaurants by another reduction in the rooms and meals tax. And it's exactly what I'll be asking for in my next budget.

Paula Tracy with InDepthNH:

Great; and then actually I had another question about Substitute Teachers. I was doing some reading and hearing that a lot of the concerns among Administrators is finding enough folks to be Substitute Teachers. Is there any kind of incentive, or benefit, or program that the State could do to help locate or pay more to Substitute Teachers?

Governor Sununu:

Well, that's interesting. So I believe every district has different pay structures for Substitute Teachers, like every district has different Teacher Contracts, themselves. That would be potentially a COVID-related cost that could be reimbursed under both their education money or even the dollars that we sent back to cities and towns. So if there are additional costs and needs because of that demand for additional Teachers, additional Bus Drivers, additional Administrators, whatever it is, yes, that is all available, I think, under the CARES Act. And we stand ready.

So, I know that the Legislative Advisory Group that we set up as part of GOFERR is going to be discussing additional school funding I believe next week. I think they had a small discussion this week. I think they're going to take it up again next week. And so, I'm going to kind of look to them a little bit to see what they're hearing from the public, and, again, making sure that whatever additional relief we can provide to schools is something that we can all agree on and move forward with.

But the answer's yes. The Substitute Teacher issue is something that we started thinking about back in June and July. We just knew that this was likely going to happen. So just finding folks is one of the challenges. It's not just pay. It's just finding folks to come in.

It's really weird. The issues we were facing back in January and February with a lack of workforce, we've come almost full circle here in the sense that we're having more workforce issues all across the State. And so, whether it's in schools or finding someone to work at the Dunkin' Donuts, all across it's a real need. So, whatever we can do to provide those resources to help those additional costs that would be borne and due to COVID, we're going to be there for them.

Paula Tracy with InDepthNH:

Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Sure.

Michael Graham with the New Hampshire Journal:

Thank you. A quick question for the Medical Pros and then one of the Governor, if I can. Dr. Chan, two questions about where we are with COVID, the deaths have been almost entirely, if not entirely through September and October, people in long-term care facilities. At the same time, the schools reopened. And of course, the fear was that reopened school, that would cause an effect, etc. Is there any information, contact tracing, any data at all that would connect the deaths in nursing homes, where the deaths have exclusively been or almost exclusively have been, to the reopening of schools? And also, about half the increase in cases are in center of Nashua, where they already have a mask mandate. Someone asked earlier if the State

should consider more lockdowns, if their rate goes up. What more can you do, if there's already a mask mandate?

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, so a couple questions there. The first one: is there any connection that we've identified between reopening of schools and deaths at long-term care facilities? And I think that the short answer is: no, we haven't seen any clear connection.

With that said, however, we know -- and I want to tie both of these back to the community -- we know that what happens in the community, in terms of community transmission, is going to impact both schools and long-term care facilities, right? So, it's been good that over the summer we've seen such a dramatic decrease in the number of people dying from COVID-19 and so the number of deaths from COVID-19 continues to be low in New Hampshire. But certainly we remain concerned with anything that happens in the community subsequently impacting not only schools but also long-term care facilities. So I'm sort of redirecting the flow diagram there, if you will.

Regarding your second question about the increases that we've seen in some of the southern parts of the State, and in Nashua, and also in Manchester, I want to highlight, go back to what I think the Commissioner mentioned and one of the things that I had brought up in some of the opening remarks, which is the highest-risk activities here for spreading COVID-19 really are going to be the uncontrolled social gatherings and the social environments, where you have multiple people being brought together. Those are the crowds. Those are the gatherings where people may be in close confined spaces, in close contact with one another. Those are really going to be the highest-risk activities where we have seen not necessarily just in New Hampshire, but around the country. We have seen COVID be able to spread very, very easily in what we call super-spreader events.

And so, if there's one thing, I think, to focus on around controlling community transmission, it's trying to encourage people to limit those types of gatherings. And there's not one particular type. It's not necessarily churches or birthday parties, or weddings. There are multiple situations where people can find themselves in close contact with other people, in crowds or large gatherings, in indoor confined spaces.

And so, a lot of the guidance that we have out there really is focused on implementing multiple layers of protection to prevent those kind of super-spreader events. That's not just cloth facemasks, although cloth facemasks are one of the ways to minimize risk. It's social distancing. It's avoiding the crowded spaces to begin with. If people are conducting group activities, have them outdoors where there's good ventilation, where risk is minimized. So really the focus on controlling the spread of COVID-19 needs to be on implementation of all of these measures, not just one measure versus the other. Thanks.

Michael Graham with the New Hampshire Journal:

And then a quick question for the Governor, as you know it's the political season. The handling of COVID-19 is a big political issue, but so, too, in the last 24 hours is the issue of eliminating the electoral college. It came up in the debate yesterday. Senator Shaheen and Hassan both support eliminating the electoral college. Congressman Pappas may or may not. His answer wasn't quite as clear. I think you said in the past that you don't favor it. If a Bill to have New Hampshire enter the National Popular Vote Compact,

which would be end around electoral college, made it from Legislature to your desk, would you sign that Bill? And do you think New Hampshire should support eliminating the electoral college? That's it.

Governor Sununu:

Well, let me be unequivocal in stating eliminating the electoral college is probably the worst idea I've ever heard for the State of New Hampshire. It is a disaster. And that is not for Republicans or Democrats, or Independents. That's for all 1.35 million of us that have a national voice in terms of the leadership of this country, that have a national voice that understand that our four electoral votes are very important, otherwise we're essentially just giving the power of our vote, if you will, to the large cities, to the Bostons, to the New Yorks, to the Chicagos and the San Franciscos, and Los Angeles.

I mean, you get completely lost in the mix. You'll never have another presidential candidate walk through our doors if you got through the electoral college. It's appalling that anybody would support such an idea, frankly.

I get it. If you're from New York or you're from Boston, yeah, sure, you want to get rid of the electoral college so that you get all the attention, that your voice is the one that really drives the national message. But little old New Hampshire has one of the most tried-and-true systems, not just with voting, which actually demanding that candidates look us in the eye, that there's real accountability as individuals, that there's connection there, that it's not just big advertising and big dollars that drive the way.

The electoral college is probably more important to New Hampshire than almost any other State in the country because we lead the charge, because we do such a good job in setting that gold standard that other States are always trying to emulate. It's because of that.

So this is not a political issue from a Republican and Democrat standpoint. Anyone supporting getting rid of that has to really rethink whether they're part of a national movement, or really they're putting the consideration and the voice of our citizens first and foremost. And I believe, as elected officials, that's always what it has to be.

Tony Schinella with Patch:

Oh, thank you so much. Real quick, Governor, a few weeks ago I asked you about the CARES Act school spending money and the comments made by some School Boards as well as Superintendents that they just didn't have enough money for PPE, and they didn't have enough money to deal with the crisis and everything else. There was a meeting this week, as you probably know. A lot of Officials, again, talking about money, talking about their inability to be able to teach children, and the lack of PPE and everything else. Again, looking at the latest CARES Act Excel file, and there's like \$17.7 million in there. Now, granted, that is budgeted for specific schools. So there are some that have spent their money and will get it and some that won't. But, can you give us kind of your lay of the land with this, because, again, we're almost a month from the last time I asked you this question. And we're dealing with the same Public Officials seemingly getting very angry about the fact that they don't have money when they're not tapping into the money they have.

Governor Sununu:

Well, so, thank you very much for the question. It's a very important question, because we hear the same concerns. We've heard these comments made at these School Board meetings that they don't have enough money for PPE, they don't have enough money for this or that. So therefore they can't open. They can't provide more opportunity.

I don't know how many times I said it at these meetings. I don't know how many times Frank Edelblut, the Commissioner of Education, has said it to the Superintendents. The availability of funds is not the issue. We have, as you pointed out, we have funds here at the State that can be reallocated to the schools. It's something that we're currently looking at. And there's literally tens of millions of dollars that are still not drawn down from either the education's funds or the direct funds we provided to cities and towns for direct COVID relief. Those could be used, too. So they actually have two pots of money they could be drawing from.

For towns that have expired both of those funds, I know that Legislative Advisory Board is looking at a formula where more money can go out. We're going to absolutely do that. But, we get very few actual requests for dollars. We have had some. But it's nothing we can't handle. The money's there.

And anyone saying that, because we don't have enough money, therefore we can't open, I think the parent and the Teachers need to ask tough questions, because the money is available. It is absolutely available for PPE, for testing, for Substitute Teachers, for whatever is needed. That's how important it is to get these kids back into the classrooms. And so, everybody should be questioning that, when they hear that at a School Board meeting or whatever it might be. It's simply not true. It is absolutely simply not true.

I mean, the City of Manchester, alone, took \$3.5 million of infrastructure money we sent them. They could have used it to buy computers of whatever they wanted. And they actually decided not to use it for their schools, which was astounding. And now, they want more money for their schools. And so, we're going to be there. We're going to be there for them. We will take care of it, but I'm not sure how they're managing their finances there.

One way or another, we're going to get it done, whether it's Manchester, whether it's Pittsfield, whether it's little old Newfield, New Hampshire. If districts need funds, they are absolutely available. And parents and Teachers should not accept that as some type of excuse for why they're not opening.

We can help them get PPE. We have storages of PPE. We can help get the funds that they need. We now have the Binax cards. So they're going to have plenty of testing. If kids have sniffles, they can go get their antigen tests very quick with almost immediate results. We have the contact tracing that we're doing.

All those tools of success have been designed over the past few months. And the schools that are open, as you saw from this, the 85% of schools that are open, we don't have any outbreaks right now. We have cases, but we don't have any outbreaks, which means it takes a little extra work but it is absolutely manageable to find success for these kids. And that has to be the priority. Getting the kids back into the classroom safe and healthy has been shown to be done. That has to be the priority for every single school and every single school district in the State. Great, thank you very much. Yes.

I'm in Adam's seat, so I thought I should ask this. This week, the President, while recovering from COVID, told the American people not to be afraid of COVID. Don't let it dominate your life. What's the message to Americans when we're hearing the President and seeing the President handle it this way? At the same time, State Health Officials here telling people to remain vigilant, what's the message to people?

Governor Sununu:

I'm afraid of COVID. I think everyone should be very concerned about COVID. Yeah. I completely disagree with that sentiment that came out of the White House. I think we're still very much in this. The COVID virus didn't get weaker. If anything, our immune systems are getting weaker, right? The COVID virus didn't go away. Its attack rate didn't drop. Its ability to infect 100 people in a matter of an hour at a close gathering setting, that hasn't deteriorated one bit.

So, why all of a sudden we'd be pulling back on our messaging makes absolutely no sense. Here, in New Hampshire, we keep that message elevated. We want people to wear their masks, social distance. It's just as dangerous, if not more, now that we're entering at fall season.

We were talking about back in June and July, we were talking about the numbers rising in the fall back then. So we've planned for this. We've anticipated. We've built our stockpiles. We've got our testing. We are ready.

But make no mistake about it. Numbers will go up. It's going to be concerning. And we all should be concerned. And we should take that very seriously, not just for our own health and safety, but for those we interact with: our loved ones, our parents, the elderly, those with underlying health conditions.

You walk into a store, you don't know if someone next to you has an underlying health condition. They have asthma. Even something like obesity can be a very severe, underlying health condition with this, or someone that's elderly. That's why it's so important to take that extra step back, to give someone their space, to make sure you're wearing your mask.

It's just as dangerous today as it was back in March. And when we didn't have the tools and resources necessarily, we saw the numbers really climb back in April, right, our percent-positivity at 15%, 20%. But as we implemented a lot of the tools and resources, we got smart really about what we were doing and how we were doing, we're able to really allow things to flex open in a safe way. Keep our numbers down. Make sure the testing is there.

So, I just can't emphasize it enough. We are very much still in this and will be for quite some time, through Christmas, through the early part of next year. This is going to be with us. Nobody should think that it's going away. And we have a very serious approach to it. That has allowed us to be successful and we're going to maintain that vigilance all the way through.

Governor, you mentioned stores and importance of wearing a mask and being vigilant. Have you given more thought to requiring liquor stores to require patrons to wear masks?

Governor Sununu:

Oh, I'm sorry, having the liquor stores require masks?

Yes.

Governor Sununu:

No, we haven't really thought of that too much. It's something that we could do down the road. I don't know if we've had any outbreaks. Or I guess I could look at the contact tracing, see if that's a place. It's not about the individual store. I think it's, again, if folks weren't wearing their masks and doing the right thing -- and so far I think they've been doing a very, very good job -- I think that would be one thing where we start really pounding down on additional Mask Ordinances. And we can still do that. We have that card to play. I've always said, in some ways, it's one of the last cards you can play, right? How much more restrictive can you get than forcing masks other than going to a full Shelter-in-Place Order or something of that nature? So, we could look at the contact tracing there, but nothing we're giving strong consideration to right now.

Governor, with regard to the election day, City and Town Clerks some weeks ago asked you if you would give them permission to do more with the absentee ballot prior to the closing of the polls, so that they could get through the stack. As I understand it, Attorney General's Office has indicated they can't do that, under the law. And I wondered if you could speak to that.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, so just to reiterate the question a little bit, I did receive a letter from a lot of the Clerks in cities and towns asking for more flexibility for how they handle the absentee ballots, knowing that we did a great job in September but there'll likely be a lot more. Obviously, there's going to be more voters in November. And they just want more time to handle that.

I sent that letter onto the -- I'm on the ballot. So I have to be a little careful. I don't want to do anything that would influence the ballot one way or the other, given that I'm on it. So I had the Secretary of State, which I've always said is one of the best in the country -- I'm going so fast for David. I'm sorry. I feel bad.

The Secretary of State and the Attorney General to look at those requests; I believe what they came back with was the idea, you can't take someone off the voter roll because you receive their absentee ballot, because an individual actually always has the right to go in on election day and vote, even though they submitted an absentee ballot and basically it cancels the absentee ballot. So you don't want to take someone off the rolls, because then they couldn't go in and vote.

But there may be another way to indicate that their absentee had been submitted. And that, in itself, allows the Clerks a little more time and flexibility to manage the overwhelming number of absentees that are likely to come in.

So I think that's a long way of saying the Secretary of State and Attorney General are working directly with the cities and towns to make sure they're addressing their issue. I don't think they can do exactly what the Clerks asked. But they can definitely provide some flexibility so that the issue, itself, is remedied, if that makes sense.

Sorry for going so fast. He's so good. I don't know how you keep up. Okay. Anything else? Good. Great, well, thank you, guys. I know that was a lot today. We appreciate everyone having some time. For the most part, all good news, but, really, as we talked about a couple different times today, wear that

mask. Maintain your social distancing. Be careful of group settings. We're still getting these clusters of illness and we want to make sure, whether it's in a school or just at a backyard party, or a spaghetti dinner, whatever it is, please, please be careful about those interactions. Maintain that social distancing. And if we do that, even through as our numbers increase, it won't be anything we can't manage throughout the State. Thank you, guys, very much.