



Office of Governor Christopher T. Sununu
Press Conference
Tuesday, December 22, 2020 at 3:00 p.m.

Governor Sununu:

Good afternoon. Good to see everyone. I know a lot of folks are tuning in, following kind of the holiday announcement and a lot of the questions that President-Elect Biden just took. And it was nice to see that he's out there and answering a lot of the questions that I know a lot of folks have, even though the holiday season is upon us. It's very exciting. I think it's going to be a good week for everyone. And we appreciate folks joining us on Tuesday. I know it's a little earlier than normal. Let's kick things right off with a Public Health update from Ben.

Dr. Chan:

Great, good afternoon. Thank you, Governor. So, some of the numbers, we are announcing 624 new people diagnosed with COVID-19 today. 484 of these are people that tested positive by PCR testing, and 140 individuals tested positive by antigen testing.

In the last week, we've been averaging about 750 to 800 new infections per day. This is stable and down slightly from the numbers last week. But, currently, in the State, there are 6,485 people with active infection.

Our test-positivity rate remains stable at 9.1%. Again, that's the average over the last seven days of both PCR and antigen tests combined. Unfortunately, the number of hospitalizations is up. There are 297 people currently hospitalized statewide with COVID-19. And thankfully, zero new deaths to report today, but the total number of people that have died from COVID-19 remains at 656. In the last week, however, there have been 52 people that we have announced that have died from COVID-19.

So, given the holidays and the potential for people to travel and to gather with others outside of their immediate families, the numbers remain at-risk for going up: both the numbers of infections, hospitalizations, and people dying from COVID-19. So it's critical not for people to let their guard down now, or over the next few months, especially as we have vaccine increasingly available over the coming weeks.

Vaccine will be the most important tool and the most important measure that we have to stop this pandemic. And Dr. Daly, in just a minute's going to give an update on some of the vaccine numbers. But until we have a high level of vaccination across our State and across our residents, people need to continue to follow the community mitigation guidance, which is primarily how we're going to continue to prevent the numbers from going up, hopefully drive the numbers back down.

So we continue to recommend and encourage people to avoid, or postpone, any unnecessary travel. Avoid gatherings over the holidays, if at all possible. If people are gathering and with other people outside of their household, to try and stay at least 6 feet away, and wear masks, even if that's indoors. And certainly if somebody has any symptoms, any new symptoms of COVID-19, even if that's simply a mild cold, we do ask that people -- and recommend that people get tested for COVID-19, because we

know that symptoms of COVID-19 can range from mild symptoms to more severe symptoms. These steps are still the measures that we have to control spread of this virus, until we have wider vaccination and vaccine available to our population. So I'm going to hand things over to Dr. Daly. Thanks.

Dr. Daly:

Great, so, good afternoon. I'm going to provide an update on our vaccine distribution efforts, starting with what happened last week. And then, I'm going to talk about the week ahead. So, over the last week, we've distributed 4,505 doses of vaccine to all of our hospitals in our State. This represents 92% of the vaccine that we allocated to hospitals this last week. The hospitals have used this vaccine to vaccinate 3,819 of our frontline workers to-date to protect them from COVID-19. On Monday, December 28th, we will begin reporting these data publicly, in terms of how much vaccine has been distributed to the hospitals and how much each hospital has administered.

The big news is that, over the weekend, Moderna's vaccine received emergency use authorization and is now approved for use in people 18 or older. This vaccine requires 2 doses 28 days apart. Like the Pfizer vaccine, it's very effective. And after 2 doses, it's been shown to be 94% effective at preventing COVID-19 disease.

Like other vaccines, people who receive this vaccine can expect to have pain, redness, and swelling at the injection site. A smaller number of people may feel tired, have muscle or body aches, fever, all of which will resolve quickly. These are signs that your body is responding to the vaccine and developing the antibodies that will protect you from COVID-19.

Today, we received 24,200 doses of Moderna vaccine instate, here in New Hampshire. About half of this vaccine will be distributed to our hospitals so that they can continue vaccinating those Healthcare Workers that are at highest risk. And about half are going to be used to launch our State-run fixed vaccination sites, as well as our mobile teams, which will be run by our Regional Public Health Network Partners.

The State-run fixed vaccination sites are set to open next week on Tuesday, December 29th, at 13 locations across the State. These sites will begin vaccinating our high-risk Ambulatory Care Providers, those Healthcare Providers that aren't working in hospital settings, as well as our First Responders.

We're asking people not to reach out to us and ask how they can be registered for receiving vaccine at these sites just yet. We're actually working directly with those First Responder Agencies to register their high-risk Staff. And we will also communicate broadly when we're ready to begin registering those Ambulatory Care Providers.

In addition to the Moderna vaccine, we were allocated 8,875 doses of Pfizer vaccine this week, which has been primarily directed to support the Federal Long-Term Care Facility Pharmacy Partnership Program. And this program started this week, yesterday, Monday, December 21st. Between CVS and Walgreens pharmacies, they've begun vaccinating a number of different facilities across our State this week.

We don't yet have confirmed allocations in terms of how much vaccine we're going to receive next week, or any week after. However, we've been told to expect approximately 9,000 doses of each of those two vaccines -- Pfizer and Moderna -- for a total of 18,000 doses over the next few weeks, each week. This number is absolutely subject to change, and we don't get our exact allocations until the week before we receive it.

We hope to have higher allocations made available to our State, as other vaccine formulations become available. So, based on our anticipated allocations, we expect to vaccinate all of our Phase 1A persons with at least one dose by the middle to end of January. So remember, again, those are our highest-risk Healthcare Workers, our residents and Staff of long-term care facilities, and First Responders.

At that time, we would expect then to begin vaccinating those who are in Phase 1B. And we're working on developing who is going to be included in that Phase now. And we will communicate this when we have it ready for you. It's going to take us several months to get all who want to be vaccinated, vaccinated. And this means that we must remain vigilant in the steps we take as individuals to prevent COVID-19. Thank you.

Commissioner Shibinette:

Good afternoon. I'm just going to do a brief long-term care update, an outbreak update. So, today we are closing five long-term care outbreaks: Evergreen Place in Manchester; Hackett Hill in Manchester; Maple Leaf Healthcare Center-Manchester; St. Anne's Rehab & Nursing Center in Dover; and St. Joseph's Residence in Manchester, all closer.

We are announcing four additional outbreaks today. We have Golden View Healthcare Center in Meredith opening. Keystone Hall, Cynthia Day Program in Nashua opened. Northern New Hampshire Correctional Facility in Berlin opened. And the Wentworth Senior Living in Portsmouth opened. That's all I have. Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Great, thank you, Commissioner, and Dr. Daly, and Dr. Chan. A couple things to kind of review and then we will open up for questions. There are a lot of discussion today surrounding the Relief Package within the recently passed Federal Omnibus Spending Bill. So I think there's a bit of confusion that this Coronavirus Relief Package was a standalone. It really was not. It was combined with another \$1.4 trillion in terms of the Omnibus Spending Bill keeping the Government moving forward, at least in the short-term.

And obviously, we're still digging into the legislation. I think the total package was over 5,000 pages. And I think it's only as early as yesterday that it was made available for folks to read it. Don't ask me how they voted on it without reading it. I'm not even going to get into that. That's unfortunately a long-term problem that Washington has.

But, we do expect some additional clarity in the coming days. And I think, hopefully, we will be able to get a better sense of some of the true relief efforts that we can expect specifically out of the COVID aspects and relief aspects of this Bill.

But there are definitely some good news within this Bill. There's no doubt about that. There is funding in there for everything from vaccine distribution, PPE procurement, contact tracing, tens of billions of dollars for schools across the country. Rental assistance programs got billions of dollars of support. Substance use disorder, childcare provisions, transportation; so a lot of really good stuff in there that will handle some of the costs that right now States are bearing. The Federal Government is going to come in and support specifically around the COVID pandemic.

Regarding unemployment, it does look like that they will be reupping the \$300-per-week unemployment stipend for an additional 11 weeks. So that's good news. While we have been doing very good with our employment statistics here in New Hampshire, I think we're ranked fifth in the country for unemployment. That's very good news. We're on a very good track.

But, there are still a lot of Granite Staters that are out of work. And this extra \$300 per week in the unemployment stipend, at least for the next couple months -- few months, actually, I think is well encouraged relief.

I guess one of the most frustrating parts of this, only if there's any criticism to be had -- I mean, again, we will dig into it to see what other spending there is. But it is frustrating. I think a lot of people share that it did take so long for this to get done.

The one thing they were touting was the flexibility that States now have with CARES Act funds. They have passed that flexibility with a week to go. So most States have actually spent all of their CARES Act funds. So, needless to say, that type of -- when you see Washington trying to take a victory lap without truly understanding the pushes and pulls of what happens at the State level, it can be very frustrating. And I think I speak for all 50 Governors in that realm.

But we are happy that they got something done. We will keep digging into it, as I think everybody will, to have a better understanding. There's a lot of money and a lot of support there. And we're going to make sure that every dollar of it gets to exactly where it is intended to go.

What we do know and what we were discussing a little earlier that is moving forward from Washington is a vaccine. And as was discussed, we did receive our 24,000 doses of Moderna today, 9,000 doses of Pfizer.

The Long-term Care Facility Program, as for the most part managing by CVS and Walgreens, is moving forward this week, which is terrific. We know a lot of folks are still getting their Consent Forms and things of that nature for their loved ones in long-term care. And we highly recommend folks do that as soon as possible.

I believe the vaccinations up at our Veterans Home are going to be taking place as early as this week, which is great. We're making sure that those folks are a priority. There is some -- things are definitely trending in the right direction at our Veterans Home. I think, as of today, we have about 21 residents and Staff that are COVID-positive. Originally, I think there were about 190. So we're down to about 21. But there has been a lot of loss of life up there, as well. And those Veterans, those are our heroes.

And God bless the Staff. Commandant LaBrecque and the Staff on the frontlines have done a tremendous job. We've been with them every step of the way. Whatever they need, we get them. But they've really been dealt a tough hand up there. But they really have done a great job mitigating the spread of the virus. And it seems as though we're on a very positive path. But, again, there are still some residents up there that are COVID-positive. And any prayers that we can go out to them and wish them a speedy recovery goes a long way, to be sure.

Another important announcement we are making today surrounds our schools and something we've been talking about a bit. But, we know that as kids and Teachers are on a well-deserved winter break, we know they've done a great job managing the COVID crisis, as it pertains to schools and trying to keep their schools open. There could be a lot of questions, as kids are looking to come back to school into the new year.

So, with that in mind, we're making sure that testing for students and Teachers, and Staff within those schools are prioritized, as they do head into the classroom in early-January. And as we know, there

have been a few cases associated with schools. There have been clusters around schools, very few outbreaks, which I think, again, is a testament to the guidance that we've put into place and the success that we know we can have within schools.

But many test sites across the State will now prioritize appointments for Teachers and students, and Staff with symptoms of COVID-19, within 24 hours. So individuals will either receive a rapid test or a PCR test. And if a PCR test is chosen, the Provider will send the test to another lab in New England that can get those faster turnaround times.

We just want to make sure that students that may require a test to get back into school aren't being held back three, four, five, six days, or even a week, while they're awaiting those results. We want to make sure those kids can get back into class as quickly as possible.

We just know that when symptomatic students, Teachers, and Staff have access to these timely tests, in-person learning can quickly resume. And the benefits of that have been proven out to be just enormous.

So individuals can go to nh.gov. Oh, you see a little map next to us. That's great. That's our testing map. You'll see that's something that you can see right on our website, our nh.gov/COVID-19. You click Get Tested right over there, the little blue button. And they can access that testing map. And you'll be able to identify yourself as a School Staff Member or a student with symptoms. And anyone who does should expect to get an appointment within 24 hours.

So it's a great development in just making sure that, once again, with all the flexibility that we've been able to build into our system, that allows us to prioritize areas of highest needs. And making sure Teachers and students have access is obviously a very high need, given the success that they've created for themselves within the school system here in New Hampshire.

So, before we close out, I just wanted to provide some just brief words on the upcoming holidays. I don't think it's anything that folks haven't heard before. We did a great job, as a State, over Thanksgiving. We saw a little bump in the numbers, excessive bump in the numbers after Thanksgiving. It wasn't nearly as bad as I think we thought it could be, and definitely not as bad as you saw in some States.

And I think folks understood that they had to limit their gatherings with immediate family. They had to be a bit innovative. They had to change what they traditionally do around Thanksgiving. And of course, we're asking folks to do the same over Christmas.

Now is the time to stay most disciplined. Now is really the worst time, if you will, to get COVID and to pass COVID onto others, knowing that a vaccine is here. It's underway. We're simply a few months away from really getting that relief that we need across our entire system through vaccine distribution.

So, knowing that, we're just asking folks to stay disciplined and keep up kind of those good habits hopefully that we developed over Thanksgiving. So, as we take it into Christmas and the New Year's, just a reminder that it's wearing your mask, social distancing, washing your hands. It's not about us. It's really about our loved ones and our coworkers, and our extended family that we really risk by spreading the disease, either symptomatically or asymptotically.

So we just ask folks to try to make the best decisions. We're not going to mandate. We're not going to force people to celebrate their holiday in a certain way or not in their homes. We don't do that here. But we are asking them to be disciplined and make good choices for themselves and their loved ones.

And then, of course, we do have a very significant out-of-state worker that will be coming in that we will be deeming essential. And of course, that's Santa Claus. We did it for the Easter Bunny. And we want to make sure Santa knows that there will be nothing holding back here. So we're deeming

Santa Claus an essential worker. He will be here on-time, much like the vaccine has been, which is good. He's not coming from Washington. So that's the good news. So that means he'll likely deliver on everything he promises us.

So, we think it's going to be a good holiday. We really do. The ski season is out there. People are out there snowmobiling. They're doing a lot of these very healthy outdoor activities. We just ask folks to enjoy everything New Hampshire has to offer, but do it in a safe way. Do it in a responsible way, understanding that we still have a pandemic. And hopefully enjoy the holidays, as best we all can. With that, we can open it up for a few questions. I was going to say good morning. Good afternoon, Paula. How are you?

Q&A Session

Merry Christmas, Governor.

Governor Sununu:

Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, Happy Hannukah.

I'm happy to hear about him, because I was going to ask about whether he would have any troubles at the border.

Governor Sununu:

Happy Festivus. No, no troubles with Santa. He gets a free pass.

Good; I know I'm hearing that somebody's not getting a free pass is the CVS, Walgreens, and the slow rollout, according to some nursing homes and long-term care facilities that would have liked to have seen the vaccines in the arms of their loved ones as early as Monday. How do you feel this is working? Is it working as you expected? And are you concerned about the public-private partnership?

Governor Sununu:

Sure, so we have always said that the Long-Term Care Facility Vaccination Program would begin on Monday. And it did. It was rolled out Monday. Again, we don't have enough vaccine for everybody in Phase 1A today. That's 100,000 individuals. We use every bit that we get. We kind of split up between Hospital Workers, long-term care facilities.

Within those facilities, they, then, cohort it amongst their Staff and the residents. Those facilities likely will not be giving all of their Staff all of their vaccine at once, because in case folks have side-effects or maybe have to take an extra day, if there's any sort of side-effects like that. You don't want all your Staff going out. So we've recommended, and the CDC has recommended, to kind of cohort your Staff, as you roll out the vaccine within your facility. But that process is underway, as was always anticipated. It's on-time. And we're allocating as much vaccine as the Federal Government's willing to give.

Do you have a date for when you'd like to see all of the long-term care residents and Staff vaccinated?

Governor Sununu:

I hesitate always giving a date, because I don't want folks to put it into concrete. But I can tell you if we get the vaccine at the rate we anticipate getting the vaccine -- and that's all subject to change. And Dr. Daly's very good. I know she's sweating over there, as I start making predictions on vaccine distribution.

But I think by the third week in January, the vast majority of Phase 1A will at least have had their first shot. Then, there has to come the second shot. And even some of the individuals that received their first shot a week-or-two ago may be getting their by mid- to late-January, which is good.

But that's the general timeframe for now. I think we would like to see all of Phase 1A be done with their first shot. And we can start with kind of moving into the first shots and to Phase 1B, and Phase 2. But that's obviously subject to change. But I think that's the relative timeframe we would like to see.

Governor, as you know, a couple hours ago, Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker limited social gatherings in public and private for two weeks, non-essential hospitalizations, and also set capacity limits at almost all businesses for the next couple of weeks, with 82% of their ICU beds at capacity. I know you're following this here. Are we anywhere near that kind of danger zone? And do we need to consider thinking about any restrictions?

Governor Sununu:

So, we've always said that as we kind of hit that peak of our numbers of COVID -- and hopefully we've hit it. We seem to have stabilized over the next week. We want to be cautious. But we seem to have stabilized.

Now, we know that the hospitalizations and even the fatalities will lag our numbers, will lag our -- that curve will lag. The second curve will lag by about two to three weeks, potentially. So, in saying that, yes, hospitalizations will likely continue to go up at some level. I don't think we're quite at -- we're just below 300 hospitalizations today in our census. It's manageable. But we're getting up there, to be sure. My sense is that we will continue to grow at least slightly over the next week-or-two.

But, no, we're not at the point where we need to start mandating more economic contractions, or things of that nature, or pulling back. We are in constant communication with our hospitals. I think they've been doing a great job and hat's off to them. A lot of them are making a lot of sacrifices, moving certain patients over here, sharing beds and sharing capacity. I think they all appreciate that we are all in this together and they're working as such. And for that, I really do commend them. I think at least a half-dozen to a dozen of them are really at or near capacity with a lot of their services. And so, some of them have chosen to pull back.

We're not looking to mandate a pullback on some of those services just yet. We can always open our surge facilities, if necessary. But the numbers, whether you restrict public gatherings, or you strict [sic] businesses today, the hospitalization number is likely going to keep trickling up, right, because that's just the way that the math works. It takes a week-or-two for some of those symptoms to get very severe in folks. And so, that's likely what we will still see is some potential increased hospitalizations over time.

But, hopefully we're at a peak. And maybe we will start seeing a downswing. It's a little weird. The good news is this second surge has occurred exactly as we predicted back in August and September. The bad news is, is that the second surge happened exactly as we predicted back in August and September, meaning that it happened as we thought. But the numbers are really high. And it's really aggressive. And we knew it would be. We were prepared for it. And I think the folks at Public Health and the hospitals, themselves, deserve a lot of credit for being prepared.

And we're just in a very different situation than we were in March and April. And we're a slightly different situation than Massachusetts, to be sure. So, they have to make their -- find their path and make their choices. And we have a little more flexibility on our end to make ours.

Governor, it's been a long 10 months to say the least. People are stressed.

Governor Sununu:

Has it been 10 months?

I think it's 10 months. People are stressed. They're tired. It's that time of year where you'd want to gather to maybe alleviate some of that stress and see your loved ones. But it's a dangerous time to do that. What do you sort of say to the people who are alone? They're stressed and tired. They're at the end of their ropes.

Governor Sununu:

It's hard to ask -- when folks who've given 110%, it is hard to ask them for a little more. But it would be irresponsible for us not to. It's just that's the way it is. And we're not asking them to do anything that we're not doing on our end.

I can tell you myself and -- I can't speak for our entire team. But I'll pop in to see my folks. I pop in to say hi to them once a week, where we used to go over and have the grandkids play with them all the time. And now, it's kind of a pop in for 5 or 10 minutes, socially distance, and see how they're doing. And move on. And Christmas Eve will be the same way.

So we really want to emphasize, at least here in this State -- I can't speak for other States or what's happening in Washington -- but we're not asking them to make any additional sacrifices that we're not willing to do ourselves. And it is tough, especially for the elderly. We have a lot of elderly that they just live alone and they live very well. And they can live independently. But it's been extra hard on them, because a lot of their social groups, or their gatherings, rely on technology. And we're trying to get everyone up-to-speed with using Zoom. But that's hard, too. Not everyone has the best access to technology all the time.

So we know the sacrifices that people are willing to make. There's a lot of mental-health aspects to the loneliness, to that isolation, which is why we try to keep things open and moving forward as best we can with that balance.

But it's a tough time during the holidays. We get it. We're at the beginning of the end now. There really is a light at the end of the tunnel. Stay disciplined a little while longer, especially as we get through this first phase where far and away the 100,000 are our most vulnerable individuals. If we can provide them the protection that they need and deserve over the next six to eight weeks, I think we will all be able

to take a little more of a collective breath. We will still have to be disciplined. But I think that light at the end of the tunnel gets a little brighter and brighter every day.

So hopefully that gives people some reassurance that we are -- if the vaccine weren't there, I think we'd be all in a lot tougher position, mentally, right? I think we'd all say, gee, how long is this really going to go? Maybe it never ends.

But I think we now know that it can and it should end. The vaccine is safe. It's being taken at a very high rate. It's being delivered. And over 30,000 vials showed up at our doorstep this morning. That was pretty awesome. That really was pretty awesome, between yesterday and today. And I don't think any of us thought it was going to be here even by New Year's. But we're already well underway. So, we hope people see that as a light and a bit of hope. And we're just asking people to stay disciplined a little longer.

Can I ask a question about the Legislature and any updates related to COVID-19? There was a post on a Facebook page about a Legislator who was asking for prayers, very seriously in the hospital. Could you just give us sort of an overview on where things stand as much as you can on...

Governor Sununu:

Sure, I do know. I can tell you just from a personal standpoint, I do know of a -- there is at least one Legislator that is in the hospital. And obviously we send all the prayers to them and their family. It's really tough when you enter a hospital setting. It's a really tough thing, if you've seen what those folks have to go through. So we're wishing them the best.

And again, I don't get any updates as to which Legislators are positive, and which ones aren't. We are providing testing as much as they want to be tested. I do know the Legislature's looking at different options, in terms of how they will meet. I don't know if any resolution has been determined. You folks may know even more than I would. So I'm not sure where they are in that process. But I know they're looking to do it. And they're looking to do it safely. And that's reassuring.

It'd be a good idea to wait until February or March for them to get actually to work, when most of them perhaps have been allowed to get the vaccine and...

Governor Sununu:

Well, if they can work remotely and safely, or socially distance and wearing masks, and doing all the provisions that we require of any other large group gatherings, then they should be able to do so, as long as they can vote and have the public hearings, and do the business of the Legislature. My sense is -- and this is just my sense -- they're looking at a fairly abbreviated schedule through January, doing only their most highest need activities until you get to the February/March range. So my sense is they're taking that approach. I mean, you're really have to ask them.

But they could get a continuing resolution on a budget perhaps for a few months, instead of the normal deadlines that were set, I suppose?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, the budget doesn't need to be done until June 30th. I mean, I think we will have plenty of time to get the budget done. I'll be presenting my version of the budget by January -- I'm sorry, February 7th or 8th. So if they just vote that up, we will get it done by February 9th. It could be that easy.

So, I don't think that's really going to happen. But my point there is they will have plenty of time, I think, to dig into it. They can do remote stuff. I think the hardest part is the public hearings aspect of it, because you want public input. We don't want to be in a situation.

Last year I had to veto a lot of Bills that were these massive Omnibus Bills with 40 different Bills piled into one that didn't even relate to each other sometimes. And there were some good Bills in there that ultimately got vetoed. But a lot of times, it was because they didn't have appropriate public hearing. And so, we just want to bring those back this time around and hopefully have another shot at them with the public input, because that's a very important part of the process.

Governor, we know there are some schools that have sports teams in quarantine right now, Bedford being one of them. With this surge happening, should kids be playing indoor sports right now? Or should we hold off maybe until spring?

Governor Sununu:

In terms of school sports?

School sports, yeah.

Governor Sununu:

Well, I think, again, schools can make their own choices. There are safe ways to do it, if they follow the guidance. They can be successful. There's no doubt. But, they -- again, we recommend that they're testing their kids, that they're staying right on top of finding out who's symptomatic, who isn't, making sure that communication is there. And if quarantine, or other provisions, have to be taken, then they should absolutely be taking those.

And I just had a question about some positive cases at DHHS Op. Center. I'm not sure if Commissioner Shibinette or Dr. Daly wants to take this one.

Governor Sununu:

That was a question request.

We just heard there were some positive cases at the Op. Center. Any information on that, what guidelines are in place to make sure folks there are safe? And with folks getting sick there, do you have enough people to continue?

Commissioner Shabinette:

Sure, so DHHS, both the Op. Center and our District Offices, and Brown Building, and all off our frontline Staff, they're at the same risk as everybody else in the community. We're really just a microcosm of society overall.

So, yeah, we've had positive cases at DHHS throughout the pandemic here-and-there. And we do have some current positive cases in our Op. Center for COVID. Public Health, as you would imagine, does a great job social distancing and with mask wearing. So, we've really limited the spread in those cases.

Those Staff go out and they go to the same grocery stores and do the same thing we all do. So, having positive cases isn't completely surprising or atypical. So, as of right now, we think it's pretty much contained.

But, DHHS' Staff and Employees are no different than anybody else. We have plenty of people to do the work we're doing. We're not understaffed at all. And we're still staying on top of everything we're doing.

As far as vaccinations for Teachers, I know Phase 1B's kind of in the works right now. But do you think they'd be included in that, especially with now testing priorities for students and Teachers?

Commissioner Shabinette:

Yeah, I think we've gotten a lot of requests from essential workers to be considered for 1B, everything from Utility Workers to Environmental Service Workers. So I think that's an undertaking that we're starting right now to look at what place in 1B, because, in a lot of ways, it's going to be whether it is the beginning of February or the end of February. It's not whether someone's included or not. It's what position do they hold in that?

And so, we really don't want to make winners and losers. But we want to look at who's at most risk for coming into COVID -- contact with COVID, and then also who's at most risk for having negative outcomes to COVID, which is why the long-term care facilities are getting the vaccine first.

I don't know if this is for the Governor or the Commissioner, but we're getting a lot of calls from people involved in the Prison System, whether inmates, themselves, or loved ones that are concerned that they're not getting access to the healthcare they need. They're concerned about distancing. Is that a concern that's being looked at or...

Governor Sununu:

Well, I can tell you that kind of those frontline Workers within the Prison System are part of the congregate living First Responders, if you will, that we're going to make sure that do get vaccinated.

Are there concerns about the inmates that say I'm not getting the treatment I need, or the testing I need, or we're too packed in there? Are those being looked at?

Governor Sununu:

So we're providing a lot of testing within the Prison System. And we know there have been some outbreaks there for sure. I think they've done a pretty good job containing them in a couple different settings, both some of the smaller County Jails as well as some of the larger Prisons that we have.

I think that the Staff is doing a great job mitigating and containing. But we're making sure that the testing is available. They can identify who might be asymptomatic, or symptomatic. Who's positive? Who isn't? Making sure that those individuals go into some sort of medical isolation; and then if their symptoms are severe enough and they do require additional medical care, above and beyond what the Prison can provide, they are transported to a hospital. And that is happening. So we have Prisoners that needed some additional care and have been utilizing a few of our hospital beds, as well, under security, of course. Yeah, close watch. Do we have some on the phone?

Holly Ramer with the Associated Press:

Hi, thank you. Dr. Daly talked a little bit about working directly with First Responder Agencies to get them ready for the vaccine. But when we get to later phases, the phases that include Workers in essential industries, or older adults, how does the State plan to notify the next priority groups that they're eligible?

Governor Sununu:

Sure, so I'm going to have Dr. Daly come up and talk just a little generally about that.

Dr. Daly:

So, as we develop the plans for future phases, we will communicate broadly with everyone, including all of you, letting you know which phases of our Vaccination Distribution Plan we're at. And we will provide detailed instructions for how people can register.

We're working with those First Responders for them to be able to roster their Employees that need to be vaccinated as part of this first phase. But that might not work, rostering individuals with companies, for the larger Distribution Plan. And we will have an online registration process where people can be put into line in order to get vaccinated and scheduled at where they want to receive that vaccine from. So it will be broadly communicated through many different platforms.

Governor Sununu:

Thank you, sure. Sorry, can I take one second? Ben and Dr. Daly, so just I'm not sure what's happening. There's a couple bees over there. Yeah. I just want you to be aware of that and just be careful. I don't know how we have bees in here and it's the middle of winter. But I just want to make sure everyone's aware. I don't want anyone to get stung. Sorry about that. Health and safety, it's what we're all about here.

Rick Green with The Laconia Daily Sun:

Okay. I have a main question and a follow-up. If the Federal Government does not provide direct aid to State and Local Governments, what kind of cutbacks will be required? And what are the chance that layoffs will be needed for some State and Local Workers, including Police Officers, Firefighters, and Teachers? And the second part is, State Representative Dawn Johnson linked on social medial to an antisemitic election conspiracy post from a Neo-Nazi website. Do you favor her serving in the State Legislature?

Governor Sununu:

Okay. So, the first question, sorry, I got the one on Dawn. The first question is about, oh, sorry, potential -- if the Federal Government doesn't come through and provide any sort of relief for States and Local Governments -- obviously, we hope that they do -- New Hampshire's done a great job. And I can only speak for our State. We've done a great job in terms of managing the budget. So you'd have a whole of somewhere around \$50 million. We could use our rainy day fund. That's what that's for, to kind of cover some of those backend issues from the previous budget. We'd have the ability to do that through June 30th. And we have plenty of money to do that.

And then, going forward, it's just about good management. I don't think we anticipate any massive layoffs, or anything like that. I don't think you're going to see any major cutbacks or anything. I think it's just about finding efficiencies in the system, being disciplined about your spending.

We still do have a lot of COVID relief dollars coming in that are helping supplant now what we're currently spending for just traditional State costs, but making sure that we're covering all of our COVID costs, so there's no additional extra burden on our system there. So even if the Federal Government doesn't come through, I think we've managed very, very well. And we're going to be in good shape. We really are.

And I still fully plan on, whether the Federal Government comes through or not, we're still fully planning on presenting a budget with tax cuts in it to really boost the economy. You have a lot of businesses moving in here, lot of economic opportunities. And those are really the things kind of July 1st-forward, because that's what the new budget will really be looking at. July 1st-forward that we look at, in terms of the revenue expectations for the State, and right now our economic outlook is very, very good, considering all that we've had to go through over the last 12 months.

As for this Dawn Johnson and this post, it was a disgusting post. Anybody who's in a position where they're of leadership where they're reposting things from websites like that, it's completely reprehensible. I don't know. You can't put a strong enough word of enough hyperbole on it, in terms of those actions. And I don't work with anybody that kind of lives in that realm.

Matt Leighton with NBC5:

Thank you. Governor Sununu, I just want to get your reaction. Saw some posts on your Twitter and Facebook feed over the weekend in regards to some Members of Congress getting the COVID-19 vaccine ahead of -- including here in New Hampshire -- ahead of some of those who are in long-term care facilities or on the frontlines, in hospitals and other medical fields. Just want to get your reaction to those Members of Congress who have already received the vaccine.

Governor Sununu:

Well, I guess, I think what I posted out and what I've said publicly really stands on its own. I think it's despicable. I think that anyone who thinks that just because they're an Elected Official thinks that they should go before a Nurse or an individual in long-term care facility has a really convoluted understanding of their self-worth and self-importance.

And I don't -- I know that sounds like we're using hyperbole. But I got to tell you. We are scraping for every last dose of vaccine we can to get through these individuals. And I think of the individuals sitting in a long-term care facility right now who are finally getting the vaccine, waiting for their number to be called. Now is the toughest time that potentially those individuals could get COVID.

So every vial that we can get out, every last bit that we can get out to the areas of highest need, it's really vitally important. And I saw some of the posts of these individuals, these Politicians in Washington getting the vaccine. And I just think it's a very, very important message that people understand how serious this is and how serious it is, how important it is that the vaccine go to exactly where it needs to be.

Jordan H. with New Hampshire Public Radio:

Hi. Yeah, I have one question. And I'd also ask that you please come back to me after for a follow-up. But, New Hampshire saw a pretty undeniable spike in COVID cases and hospitalizations in the weeks after Thanksgiving, as the State's own data shows. And some hospitals in the southern tier are now saying that they are pretty much operating at capacity, and they're definitely expecting another spike after the holidays this and next week. So the State's planning, as you've described it now and in recent weeks, it seems to be based on how to respond to increases in cases and hospitalizations. But is there any proactive strategy to prevent these increases from happening? And at what point will you take further policy action to prevent these hospitalizations and deaths?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, so let's be very clear. We've been taking proactive measures all along to help reduce and minimize the surge that we knew was here. Every step that we take, every day that goes by, we're looking at the data, looking to see what else could be done that could be effectively used to help manage not just the hospitalization rate, the fatality rate, the outbreaks that we see in a lot of the different facilities that are out there.

We took the very aggressive move prior to Thanksgiving to putting the mask mandate in place. We're seeing some of the benefits of that now. Our numbers have, over the last week, have stabilized, even come down a little bit, which is really good news.

Was there a bump after Thanksgiving? A little bit, to be sure, not as big as some other States. Do we expect another bump potentially after Christmas? Yes, we do. But right now, we don't think it's anything that we cannot manage.

I think we've done -- just the Team has done a very good job making everything from testing available, getting results back quickly, the contact tracing, even with the thousands of more cases that we deal with today than we were dealing with just a month, month and a half ago. The Team continues to do a very good job on the contact tracing, working with Manchester and Nashua, and some of the schools that are doing their own. It's a very good system.

So all of these are tools that kind of go into place to make sure that we are being proactive, and as proactive as we can. Making sure that if folks have a need, we're there. When hospitals needed some more dollars so they could find some more capacity, we provided more funding. When UNH needed more dollars last week, because they were doing more testing for us, we provided more funding.

When all these different pieces that have to come together to make sure schools are viable, we're constantly working with them to make sure that kids can actually stay in school and keep all those other health benefits moving forward in a very positive way. So I think we've done a very, very good job. I think the Team deserves a lot of credit for being so proactive and constantly looking at what can be done. And there's a follow-up?

Jordan H. with New Hampshire Public Radio:

Yeah, so are there no other further guidelines or restrictions that are being considered right now? I mean, other surrounding States have done that weeks ago, like Vermont and Maine. And their numbers are far lower than ours. So, are there any other types of restrictions, like curfews or limiting crowd sizes? Is that being considered at all right now?

Governor Sununu:

We're always looking at the data and we will always consider -- everything is on the table, really. And we've always said that. I would be very cautious to compare us to Vermont and Maine. Those are incredibly rural States, much more rural than the State of New Hampshire, especially the southern tier of New Hampshire.

If your argument is that States that have more restrictions have lower COVID, that is absolutely not true. Look at California. Their numbers are up 30% last week, where all our numbers are down. And they have the most restrictive policies in the country.

Look at what Massachusetts is doing. Their numbers, again, are higher and, again, they're putting more restrictions in place. I think it looks like even their numbers around New England -- Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts -- their numbers seems to have stabilized. And hopefully we're all at that level together. I think, in New England, we're kind of all tied together.

So, again, you can't just be so blanket as to say, if we just do more restrictions, everything will get better. I had somebody ask me today, well, why don't we just be more like Vermont? No, we're not going to do that. Vermont has their own path. And I think Governor Scott's done a very good job crafting his own path for his State, based on a lot of different variables.

We have just very different variables here, very different density variables, demographic variables, health considerations, industry considerations, school considerations. It all just works a little bit differently, State-to-State. And so, that's why each Governor is really tasked with crafting their own path.

But I think the path we're on is very good. Again, we're very encouraged that our numbers seem to finally start to be going down a little bit. And we will keep watching the hospitalizations. And we watch this data day-by-day sometimes hour-by-hour still. But we're on a good path here. Maybe she's muted.

Michael Graham at the New Hampshire Journal:

First of all, Governor, thanks for wishing us a Happy Festivus. We're looking forward to the feats of strength, whenever you're ready.

Governor Sununu:

I keep looking out for the Festivus Pole for all the Cranks that are out there. But it is the holidays, so we got to stay positive, right?

Michael Graham at the New Hampshire Journal:

And I've got a question. But first, I want to start with your Healthcare Team from DHHS. Nashua's going to vote on a curfew tonight. They're pointing towards restaurants and the restaurant business being open after 9:30. As you know, numbers coming in from around the country, in Minnesota, contact tracing found only 1.4% of cases were traced back to restaurants. In New York, 1.7%, and I have those reversed. California Judge just shot down the entire State plan to shut down restaurants, because the State presented, in his words, no evidence that the policy would have an impact on spreading COVID. Have you given any data to Nashua from the State level that would indicate that restaurants are a source of significant spread? Do you have any data to back that up? And is there any data that would show that a curfew would have an impact on reducing spread? And then, I've got a question for the Governor.

Governor Sununu:

So, no, again, there's no clear data that we see or have provided that say that restaurants are a clear super spreader, or causing super spreading-type events of COVID. In terms of whether curfews work or not, I would say this.

This is just my anecdote. I've talked to a lot of folks in Massachusetts where they've instituted a curfew. And what we're being told is that a lot of folks, instead of being in a restaurant in the larger settings later -- and I understand the concept behind a curfew. They don't want large gatherings at restaurants late at night, and especially a lot of the single scenes and things like that in Downtown Boston, per se.

But what's happening is a lot of those individuals, they're not just going home and saying, well, we're not going to socialize. They're going to someone's house, right? They're going to another private setting and sometimes staying later than they would. There's absolutely no real restrictions around that and no ability to monitor that.

And so you're still getting the spreading-type activity from social gatherings, the same type that they're trying to prevent within the restaurants. But it's actually happening behind the four walls of a private home now.

So, you got to weigh the good with the bad, right? It's like that tube of toothpaste analogy I always give. When you squeeze one end, something very well could give on the other. Folks aren't just going home.

And so, one thing about having a restaurant setting here in New Hampshire and not pushing the curfew aspect is that restaurants, for the most part, are doing a good job of watching their guidance, making sure people are sitting down, keeping the number of folks limited. We don't allow just standing in large gatherings around the bar area or anything like that. So when you're in that restaurant setting,

you do have guidelines that are in place that can allow people to be social, somewhat, but still within the guidelines and the parameters that we've put forward. And therefore, I think restaurants have done a good job and we don't see a lot of those super spreading events.

So, I'm not saying -- look, if Nashua wants to create that, that is their choice to do so. I don't know if it'll have a significant impact in the numbers, because, again, you still are going to get a lot of social gatherings, just not at restaurants but back at home. Did he have another one? Oh, yeah. Go ahead, Mike.

Michael Graham at the New Hampshire Journal:

And then, Governor, yes, I have a question for you, Governor, about the economy and how New Hampshire's doing, and whether or not you're getting some help from Governor Baker, because Massachusetts will be one of just three States that's entering the Transportation Climate Initiative. You announced in 2019 you were not going to enter it and took a lot of criticism at the time. Now, a plan that was supposed to reach from North Carolina to Maine only has three States in it. Even New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the new Democratic Governor in Maine have chosen not to enter it. Were you right? And do you anticipate a benefit to New Hampshire's economy, when we need it during COVID, from Massachusetts raising gas prices through the TCI?

Governor Sununu:

So, was I right in having us stay out of the Transportation Climate Initiative? Absolutely, there's no doubt about that. The financial impacts of that Initiative are huge. And that's why a lot of rural States, Republican and Democrat, are saying, no, it's not for us.

So, effectively that program would ask a lot of rural States to subsidize a lot of the larger mass transportation initiatives of States like Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York. And again, if those folks want to rebuilt the MBTA and all that, I think that's great. But they should pay for it, right? I mean, how do I ask a taxpayer in Franklin to get another \$0.20 a gallon on their gas tax so that they can subsidize the debt service on the Boston MBTA system? That doesn't make any sense to anybody.

So, of course, we were the first State to step up and step out of that. I know other States are looking to go forward with it. Yeah, that's their choice. Are we going to benefit from it economically? I got to tell you, if Massachusetts goes forward with it, yeah. I don't know how we wouldn't. And that's not why we're staying out of it. We're staying out of it so as not to penalize our citizens unnecessarily.

But there's no doubt that if you start putting \$0.20, \$0.25 extra gas tax, and especially around the border towns of Massachusetts -- the Haverhill or Methuen, Lawrence, Andover -- there's no doubt folks are going to come across the border to get gas and buy their groceries, and get whatever else they're going to be purchasing. And we've always been ahead of the game in that area. And now, it's going to really put us that much further ahead.

So, then you add on the fact that we're in a pretty big economic crisis in this country, and I've always said the last thing you should be doing is pulling another buck out of people's pockets, when you want them to have some economic stability for themselves and their families. Then, you add on the aspect that we're now going to be -- more people are remote working, right? So all of the financial estimates of how much money that gas tax was going to bring in are likely going to fall short, because more people are just working remotely and therefore they're going to come back and raise the tax yet again.

So this is one of those situations that could really snowball out-of-control in a very bad way economically. I understand if they want to do it for their infrastructure and investments. That's their choice, by all means. But it's definitely not fulfilling, I think, some of the ideas of having all these States in it together, as was originally visioned. And that will have a really negative impact on the finances and the reality of making some of those programs come to fruition. Great, sorry. I didn't know we're going to talk about TCIs.

Just to follow up on vaccine distribution, we have a lot of older folks in this State who head south for the winter. So if their Primary Care Physician is up here and their time comes to get vaccinated, how do you suggest they do that? Should they come back home, wait until they return in the spring, find a location where they are?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, that's a good point. Come on up, Dr. Daly. Luckily, we still have a little time to work that out. That'll be more Phase 2, Phase 3 of the general public. Is that the answer? Okay, for the most part. So what we will do is we're going to -- the Doctors are basically going to enter into a system that say, yes, we want to receive some vaccine.

And then, we will communicate to them who gets prioritized as part of that. And then, part of that communication, those Health Advisory Notices, will include some of the recommendations and guidances [sic], if you will, in terms of how to deal with folks that may be traveling, may not be back within a certain window of time for their second shot, or whatever it might be. Luckily, within Phase 1A, the Nurses are there. The folks in congregate living settings and long-term care are there. So it's much easier to manage as we roll this out.

And one thing that we're looking at is what's the uptake, right? How fast are people taking this up? It looks like a lot of folks are coming in to get that vaccine, which is very, very good news. But all those are variables that come into play, as we really define the 1B, Phase 2, and Phase 2 priorities, as well as making sure that we have that communication system in place so folks know for the rare cases where they might not be available for their second shot, or they're still looking to get their first shot, can they get it in another State? How would that exactly work? Yeah.

Okay. Well, great. Well, thanks to everyone. We want everyone to have a safe and healthy, and happy Christmas weekend, especially if you're taking time off. We thank everyone for the sacrifices they're making with some of their just meeting, having their Christmas gatherings with immediate family mostly. And we just want folks to stay safe.

We are at the beginning of the end, to be sure. This Team has done a great job. There's a light at the end of the tunnel. 2020 will be over soon enough. And I think we're really in a good position to make 2021 very successful.

Thank you, guys. And not next week, but we will be back the week after, right? So no press conference next week, unless something drastic hits. We're still on the job. We're still doing our stuff. But we know a lot of people will be traveling. So, thank you, guys, very much.