



Office of Governor Christopher T. Sununu
Press Conference
Thursday, May 6, 2021 at 3:00 p.m.

Governor Sununu:

Well, good afternoon, everybody. Thanks for joining us. It's Thursday at 3:00. So, this is where New Hampshire is. Everyone's watching. We have a lot of things to talk about today, all really good stuff, a lot around funding. It's not just the Federal funding but CARES Act funding, releasing a lot more of our dollars back into small businesses. And we will get to all of that. But first, let's start with a Public Health update from Dr. Chan.

Dr. Chan:

Thank you and good afternoon. Just a very quick numbers update for today, we are reporting 269 new infections in New Hampshire. In the last week, we have averaged between 200 to 250 new infections per day. That's a decrease from last week. And currently, there are 1,849 people with active infection, which is also a decrease from a week ago.

Our test-positivity rate, that's the percentage of all tests, antigen and PCR tests, that are positive for COVID-19, continues to slowly trend downward. We are currently at a 3.6% average over the last week.

In terms of hospitalizations, there are 88 people currently hospitalized statewide with COVID-19, which is about the same from a week ago. And then, unfortunately, three new deaths to report today related to COVID-19, one person of which is associated with a long-term care facility, bringing the total number of people that have died during this pandemic to 1,311.

So, overall, the COVID-19 numbers continue to slowly trend down, which is some good news. But COVID-19 still remains high in many of our communities. And so, the risk still remains throughout the State.

Both high vaccination rates combined with ongoing mask use, social distancing, and avoiding crowds and gatherings together will bring our numbers down more quickly, will help limit the number of cases, infections, hospitalizations, deaths, and will help end the pandemic more quickly, so that we can all get back to a more normal life. But we are in a transitional period at the moment. So, continue to stress the importance not only of vaccination but continued use of the mitigation measures mentioned, like social distancing and facemask use. With that, I will hand things over to Dr. Daly for some vaccine updates. Thanks.

Dr. Daly:

Okay, good afternoon, everyone. I'm going to provide a quick update on our outbreaks. We have one closed outbreak to announce. This is the Coos County Nursing Home. And then, we currently have two institutional outbreaks that we're monitoring. That's the Federal Correctional Institution in Berlin and the Sullivan County Healthcare.

In terms of our vaccination update, to-date in New Hampshire we have administered 1,190,000 doses of vaccine. This includes 725,000 people that have received their first dose. This is 53% of New Hampshire's total population. And of those, 505,000 now are fully vaccinated. And that's 36% of our population.

We continue to receive around 50,000 first doses of vaccine each week, between the doses that are allocated to us at the State as well as those Federal Programs. We are anxiously awaiting to hear the outcome of the FDA's review of the Pfizer vaccine for use in 12 to 15 years old. Once that approval is provided, we're prepared to begin vaccinating this age group and we will make further announcements regarding registering for that vaccination.

At this point in New Hampshire, 65% of people who are eligible to receive that vaccine, that's people who are 16 years of age and older, have already made the choice to get vaccinated. And again, it's a great start. But we want to continue to get more people vaccinated, have more people making that choice.

There still remains more than 300 different locations where you can get vaccinated across our State. And in fact, this weekend we have an opportunity for people to sign up for the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, if they'd like to receive that vaccine formulation. We have four of our fixed site locations across the State offering the vaccine on Saturday. It's Nashua, Salem, Newington, and Concord. And they'll be offering that vaccine between 1:00 and 6:00 p.m. this Saturday and actually every Saturday through the month of May.

If you would like to get that Johnson & Johnson vaccine at one of those four locations, you do need an appointment. And you can find them in VINI. And they are marked as a Johnson & Johnson vaccine clinic. So, you'll be able to see that very clearly.

And then, just lastly just want to again encourage everyone to get vaccinated at the earliest opportunity that they have. This will help protect us and help us move forward to a more normal way of life. Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Great, well, thank you, Dr. Daly. A variety of things to talk about, it's primarily having to do -- and then we will open up for questions -- but primarily having to do with some opportunities to release some funding out into the community across New Hampshire. I think, as a lot of folks know, we have now one of, if not the strongest economies in the country. Everyone is looking for Employees. So, if you are a jobseeker, there are a lot of job-lookers, as well, so a lot of Employers that are really looking for folks, lot of opportunity.

So, first, what I want to do is to provide an update on the CARES Act funds. If you remember the CARES Act funds are the emergency funds that were allocated to New Hampshire over a year ago. New Hampshire spent those dollars very quickly, I think very wisely, helped sustain our toughest times during the peak of the COVID crisis.

Last year, if you'll remember, I established the Main Street Relief Fund to help small businesses from going under and sustaining themselves through some very tough times. Within weeks of announcing the program, we were able to administer over \$340 million to small businesses across the State. About over 5,000 businesses, actually, were able to take advantage of that program. And that expedited and very targeted approach, without a doubt, paid off. Most small businesses remained open and operational and avoid permanent closure and layoffs.

In fact, as a result of the action of the State, frankly, an amazing statistic: less businesses closed in 2020 than closed in 2019. And I believe we're the only State in the country where that actual phenomenon actually happened. So, it was very successful, and we were able to keep a lot of those businesses viable. And at the time, when we announced the program, we made it clear that grants would be based on gross losses. So, if you were estimating a loss of revenue for the year, you could apply based on those estimates and receive some COVID relief -- just grants -- COVID relief grants based on that.

Had we not decided to base the grants on revenue losses and on net revenue, or COVID-related costs, things of that nature, the unfortunate consequence would have been that businesses would have had to wait months and months to receive their checks. So, we found a very simple, very fast way to get the money out, and it worked. It worked very, very well.

But that brings us to our announcement today. That's just a little bit of background into what we're talking about today. It turns out, because of, I think, a very data-driven response to COVID, many businesses expecting a loss in revenue, they obviously ended up having much better years in 2020, than they even did in 2019, which means they didn't actually lose money and, in many cases, made a lot more money.

Unfortunately, under the Federal Cares Act Rules, the Federal Rules that come with it, the State is required to recoup any unused relief funds. So, if businesses received funds for lost revenue but didn't have lost -- and ultimately didn't have lost revenue, the Federal Rules say that we have to recoup that.

I have sent a letter to the Biden Administration this week asking for more flexibility for our small businesses in this respect. The State does not need nor want to take that money back. Let's be very clear. We aren't looking to get the money back. But we are stuck with those Federal limitations today.

So, we have a plan. The recouped CARES Act funds that will have to come back to us could ultimately be in excess of \$50 million. That's a lot of money and a lot of opportunity. But we're going to rerelease that money back to the community to support other unmet needs of small businesses, still staying within the limitations of that CARES Act. But is there is opportunity to get that money right back out.

The Team at GOFERR is currently finalizing the details to reinvest back into New Hampshire. But the bulk of the opportunity will be as follows. First, we're putting together a program for businesses to submit COVID-related expenses, regardless of their total revenue. So, in many cases, revenue might have gone up. But businesses may have incurred a lot of different expenses, as they relate to COVID. We can create a new program, and we're going to, to actually look at those COVID-related expenses, and, regardless of revenue, be able to help reimburse for that. This will account for just a lot of those increased costs that businesses had to bear.

Second, we know tourism is really at the heart of our economy, especially over the summer. The Federal Government launched an SBA Restaurant Revitalization Program. It's great. It's a Federal Program directly targeted to restaurants, because restaurants and lodging were clearly hit amongst the hardest across the country. But the Federal plan doesn't include lodging. So, we're going to do it ourselves in creating a Hotel and Lodging Fund. That will be up-and-running in a matter of weeks, where

specifically hotels and lodging that were hit especially hard through the pandemic can apply to the fund. Not going to be exactly what the SBA does, but kind of New Hampshire's own flavor of it, something quick and easy to help a lot of these businesses that took an extra-large hit over the COVID crisis.

And third, aside from the recouped Main Street Relief Funds, we're also going to provide some additional financial assistance out of the CARES Act to live venues that were excluded from applying to the Federal Shuttered Venue Program. So, again, the Federal Government created their own direct investment into what they called shuttered live venue. A lot of ours aren't allowed to apply for various reasons. They're excluded from it.

But, again, many of those businesses are the cornerstone of their communities and we want to be able to help them. So we're going to be launching our Live Venue Program, which was very successful last year. We put about \$15 million into live venues. It could be playhouses. It could be larger venues. It could be a little bit of everything. But we're going to see who applies for the Federal Program. And then, our job is to really cover the -- some of those unmet needs. And that will be launched in the coming weeks, as well. And those three areas are really the bulk of how we're trying to get the last and remaining, and the recouped CARES Act dollars back out the door to help many of our small businesses across the entire State.

On kind of a similar but a secondary path, another update we want to provide today is -- for everyone is on the so-called American Rescue Plan. On March 11th, that Bill was signed into law out of Washington. It includes nearly a billion dollars for the State and possibly up to \$450 million for cities, towns, and counties.

Despite its passage back in March, over two months ago, we still frankly have absolutely no guidance from the Federal Government, very frustrating. So we don't really know how we can be allowed to spend these dollars.

So, instead of waiting, frankly even before the passage, when we knew that it was possible, I started meetings with legislative stakeholders, so we could really work collaboratively to finding key areas of need in the State to target these potential funds. As folks know, I'm not known for being very patient with Federal Bureaucracy. So the time is now.

We hope to receive the first half of the State allocation next week. We hope. That's what we've been told. We will see if it actually happens. And our Team has reviewed the legislation and its potential uses. We just don't have those details of guidance out of Federal Treasury. But we do plan to use these one-time funds in a way that has the greatest impact to reduce some of the other local cost burdens and local taxes that our citizens face. So it's an opportunity to reduce the tax burden on folks all across the State.

We know that a lot of other States will have to use these funds to maybe plug budget holes or a lot of States have very poorly managed unemployment systems and things of that nature. They're going to have to plug those holes.

Here, in New Hampshire, we're going to create opportunity. And we're going to innovate, I think, in a very creative way to, again, make these infrastructure investments, primarily, across the State, so our local taxpayers don't have to face some of those burdens.

Some of the opportunities that we're going to be talking -- that we have been talking about and what we're doing is putting them on the front burner so they are ready to go, as soon as we get the guidance, first, clean drinking water infrastructure, huge need across the State. Senator Chuck Morse has done a phenomenal job over the past couple years making hundreds of millions of dollars of investments in clean drinking water. But with the PFOA, PFOS issue in a lot of our drinking water systems, it's kind of

getting bigger all the time. We're not waiting for a problem to be a crisis. And we're making those investments. We're going to continue to make them. And it looks like we can, as part of these inv funds.

Broadband expansion, we were one of the only States in the country to even try using CARES Act money for additional broadband last year. We spent about \$15 million. It was a great program, got thousands of people hooked up on broadband. We're going to keep going and we're going to be very aggressive about it with some of these funds that potentially are coming in, in the next month-or-so.

Mental health services, it's always been a need. We've never taken our eye off the ball. And we have some real opportunity for some of the infrastructure surrounding mental health that we can make, whether it's in beds or community-based needs that are there. So it's going to be a priority of ours.

And State Parks, a lot of infrastructure needs and kind of deferred maintenance over time, with our State Park system, and State Park system is kind of the core, if you will, one of the foundations of our tourism industry. And when that system is working well, when we have these updated services and amenities, it really helps the entire communities that surround them.

So we feel very confident we can make investments in these areas with these funds, still awaiting that final guidance. But we wanted to give folks the sense of where we were going, how we were going to invest this money, that we weren't just waiting around. As soon as the dollars hit us, we're going to make sure those Contracts can go out. The dollars hit the street, and do our best to move it as fast as we could with the CARES Act.

The CARES Act had a lot of flexibility with it. There's no doubt about that. These dollars don't have that flexibility. It's more of a Washington-down-type operation. So we will see ultimately what comes. We keep asking for more flexibility from the Federal Government, and so we will see what actually comes at the end of the day.

One more piece along that same line, and then we will open it up for questions, the last item of the day really surrounds housing. As many folks know, you may have heard over the past day-or-so, the Federal District Court in Washington, D.C. recently invalidated the CDC's Eviction Moratorium, which was set to expire on June 30th. So, the moratorium on evictions potentially could go away very, very quickly.

There are a few steps to finish in that legal process. So nothing is final yet, and we're going to keep monitoring it out of Washington. But, as a result of this potential uncertainty, we wanted to first be sure we were reminding everyone out there of the Emergency Rental Assistance Program that is currently up-and-running. It has been running for a couple months now. It helps people in need cover either past-due or future rent payments, as well as utility costs, like electricity or internet, or relocation services.

Eligible Tenants and even Landlords can apply to these funds. And you go to capnh -- oh, I'm sorry, capnh.org. You can see it right next to me here. That's the website you can go to. Find a CAP Agency in your area. There's five CAP Agencies around the State that are administering these funds.

A very small fraction of what we've been allocated has been taken out. But the money's there. It's available. But clearly where I think approximately \$200 million has been allocated into that program by the Federal Government, we -- right now, we have maybe not even \$10 million taken out by that program. So we're going to have a lot of money left over.

Earlier this week, based on that, I wrote to Secretary Yellen at the Department of Treasury and the Biden Administration urging flexibility on how those Federal dollars can be spent, so that we can just use those housing funds to ensure our most vulnerable populations have access to safe and affordable housing. We just need more flexibility so we can design a system for New Hampshire's needs as, again, opposed to that very strict, top-down, Washington process.

Currently, we can only use those Federal funds for a limited set of circumstances. What do we want to use them for? We do want to use them -- things for actual investments in affordable housing or creating incentives for public/private partnerships to encourage the development of housing; reducing the risk to Developers and Lenders, or incentivizing and designing a benefit for socio and economically disadvantaged individuals.

Right now, we can't do any of that. We can only provide rental assistance. And in New Hampshire, that's just a limited pool of individuals. So, having the flexibility so we don't lose that money, having the flexibility to reinvest it for the infrastructure we need would be very, very helpful. And we're pleading with the Biden Administration to let States design their own systems.

With that, we can open it up for questions. So, I know that was a lot on the money side. But we just want to give people a little bit of a heads up and a taste of, I think, what's to come with some of these dollars coming out, and the opportunities that they may be seeing in their communities.

Q&A Session

Governor, with regard to one of the letters you wrote to Secretary Yellen was about how much of the PPP loans can be counted against the Main Street Funds.

Governor Sununu:

Yes.

If the answer -- you asked for 50% -- no more than 50% -- if the answer is no, are you going to have to recoup more than \$50 million?

Governor Sununu:

In theory, yeah. So it's a great question. So one of the letters I sent to Secretary Yellen and the Biden Administration was saying, look, if folks got PPP money, right now that has to be fully counted against what they received in support from the State. We just want to do a fraction of that, right? That would allow individual businesses to keep more of their money so we don't have to recoup as much. If they say no to that, then, by their own rules, we have to recoup it back.

There was discussion. It was either earlier this week or late last week, by certain folks, that said, well, there are no restrictions on CARES Act funds. There are a lot of restrictions on CARES Act funds. Let me tell you, a lot of them. And I wish there wasn't. But this is an area of flexibility that we really need, that businesses need, not the State. The businesses need it, so we don't have to pull as much of those dollars back.

Whatever we pull back, we're going to send right out again. The State doesn't need the money. The businesses do. And we're just looking for more creative ways to do that. But, yeah, hopefully they'll provide a little more flexibility for us and allow the businesses to keep the money.

Governor, I just reached out to the U.S. Treasury Department. And this is a statement from a Spokesman there in Washington. "The requirement to repay amounts in excess of actual revenue is not required by the Treasury Guidance regarding the use of CRF funds." So, how do you square what you're saying here? What they're saying is that recoup is not required.

Governor Sununu:

So, if the rules say that if you -- sorry, we give you some money based on estimated losses. If you overshoot those losses, that money has to be recouped back. And in theory, it would have to go back to the Federal Government.

So, I would defer people to the guidance documents that we were given. And again, we've pushed the realm of flexibility as much as we could, even with the previous Administration and this Administration.

So, the fact of the matter is, is that there are limitations on those CARES Act funds. And we just want more flexibility. We want them to be able to tell us, hey, you can cut it down to 50%, in terms of the PPP money that has to be counted against that. Any flexibility they can give us, because we don't want to pull this money back.

Every dollar we have to pull back is an extra effort on our part. It's an extra burden on those businesses. A lot of folks might have to have payment plans. We are going to do everything we can not to pull it back.

So, again, you're reading me a statement. I haven't seen, and nor have I spoke to them. But, I mean, we've crossed [sic] our Is and dotted [sic] our Ts. And at the end of the day, the rules say, if you received dollars that you can't account for -- put it this way. The guidance is very clear. It has to go to a COVID-related loss, right? So if they have more money than they lost, they can't claim a loss, right? So I don't know the exact wording. I'm just doing this off the top of my head, but that's really what we're going on. A business can't say they had a COVID-related loss if they made more money. And that's the Federal Government's rule, not ours. So, again, we will try to push as much flexibility. If what they're essentially saying is that...

There's no requirement.

Governor Sununu:

If they're saying there's no requirement, then that's going to be an awesome opportunity. But, again, I haven't seen -- they haven't written us back. I haven't gotten any direct communication from them. But, if that is possible, obviously that would be a great opportunity for the State of New Hampshire. Now, they can focus on my other request to use the \$150 million of extra housing money the way we need to use it.

Regarding the broadband, that kind of hit a wall at a certain point last time around. The projects just...

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, they couldn't get done in time. Yeah.

Right, so are there more projects on-tap? Or are we still going to encounter that same problem?

Governor Sununu:

Oh, no. So, that's a great, great question. We got 30 to 40 applications for broadband expansion projects. A lot of those projects just couldn't get done by the time the CARES Act money was going to run out at the end of December. So, again, Federal rules said if you can't get the project completed by the end of December, you shouldn't be doing the project, because we could have to recoup that money back.

So only the projects, about 14, 15 of them, thought that they could make the deadline, and they did, which was great. It got thousands of people hooked up. So we know that there's a lot more folks out there. And now that I think, on December 28th, they extended the CARES Act, our ability to use the money, so we have more time. We have more of a construction season. So my sense is a lot of those projects that couldn't get done before hopefully now have much more time to get done and completed. Do we have some on the phone?

Holly Ramer with The Associated Press:

Hi, thank you. That was fast. So, we're hearing that a lot of States are no longer placing orders for their full allocation of vaccine doses, because demand has fallen so much. So maybe Dr. Daly could talk a little bit about how much New Hampshire is ordering, compared to its full allocation, and how that has changed over time at all. And then, can you give us an update on the number of doses that are actually being -- that are being delivered to the State versus how many are being put into arms?

Governor Sununu:

Okay. Dr. Daly, you want to? Okay.

Dr. Daly:

So the first question was around how much vaccine we order each week from our Federal allotment. We order all of the vaccine that's available to us each week. In New Hampshire, we take in most of this vaccine directly into the State Health Department. And then, we redistribute out to the people who are administering vaccine. So we ensure that we have a process in place to ensure that we're ordering all of the vaccine that's available to us.

In terms of your second question, how many doses are we receiving in each week versus how much are we administering, as I mentioned, right now, we're pretty consistently, for the last few weeks, have been getting about 50,000 doses in. This is first doses. And then, we get follow-up with those second doses, when those become due.

For several weeks in a row now, we had been administering about 100,000 doses. So we were staying very much on track with how much vaccine was available to us. This past week, we administered about 60,000 doses. So it is starting decline, the number of people that we vaccine each day. And I think this is a reflection of the supply meeting the demand. And we expect that, as we vaccinate more and more people, again remember 65% of age-eligible people have been vaccinated. That's really great and it's one of the highest in the country.

And so, we're really reaching that point where we're going to have to push and try to get to people who are maybe hesitant. They're thinking about it, or maybe they have some barrier to vaccination that we want to address for them and get those people vaccinated. So we have to work harder to get people vaccinated, change up our strategies a little bit. And we will get there. But basically, we're using the vaccine that's available to us and meeting the need and demand that is in New Hampshire right now.

Governor Sununu:

Great, thank you.

Donna Jordan with The Colebrook Chronicles:

Thank you, good afternoon, everybody. I have two questions. The first one is tomorrow's May 7. And so, your Safer At Home expires, I believe it's around midnight or something like that. I'm wondering if there will be any further requirements or recommendations, what you've identified in the past as some of the higher risk activities, like fairs and festivals, and schools and colleges, or congregate settings, any recommendations that might be beyond the Best Practices Guidelines. And my second question is, the State has come really far with testing and vaccines available. And there's a widescale local network of healthcare facilities that have worked really hard to make sure residents know that tests and vaccines are available beyond the State sites. So I'm wondering how much longer you think you'd need to continue with your weekly COVID press conferences, or issuing the Daily Health Reports. Thank you so much.

Governor Sununu:

Sure; I can take both of those. So, first, no, there are no further requirements that we are going to be instituting for large gatherings, fairs, festivals, businesses, whatever it is. We are going to our Best Practices as of tomorrow at midnight. And those guidelines, I think, are very all-encompassing. They do a very good job of just reminding folks of how to make sure that they can keep themselves or their Employees, their customers safe, without the actual statewide-driven mandate. But to be very clear, there are no further requirements from the State, in terms of those types of events.

As far as going forward, at least through June, I think, we will probably -- well, let me back up. Our State sites are going to remain open in some form through much of June. The first -- the State sites will be administering first shots through Memorial Day. And then, they'll stay open primarily for second shots, maybe with a couple few exceptions, but primarily just for second shots, for folks to come back to the same location through the month of June. That will kind of follow the same pattern of just making sure that we do weekly press conferences. People know where they stand.

There still are some pretty big dominos to fall here. The next great opportunity I think we're going to see is the 12- to 15-year-olds to be fully authorized. And we're going to have a couple press conferences to make sure we can lay out how that could work. But that's already well into the mix. It's not authorized yet. But we're well-underway with the planning and the strategy for administering those vaccines.

And then, we're not sure where things go, as we enter into June, both with vaccine administration, PSAs, additional information that may come, and additional opportunities that may come for potentially those under 12 years old. So we will do weekly press conferences through June. And then we will do more of either biweekly or monthly, or something, I think, as we get deeper into the summer.

Again, I fully anticipate a lot of not just our case numbers to be extremely low, the fatalities. I think we're just going to be in a very good position, at least through the summer, until we potentially see another fall surge of cases. But I think we're going to be in a good position. So we will anticipate weekly press conferences at least probably for the next six weeks.

Nancy West with InDepthNH:

Thank you. Good afternoon, Governor. I have three questions here. And I'd like to ask your -- ask for your answers. I think some people are confused. Now, you're reopening much of the State, especially as of tomorrow, and yet we are still in a State of Emergency. When will the State of Emergency end? My second question is, as I'm sure you're aware, House Bill 417 has a lot of support. It's already passed the State House by a wide margin and it's in the Senate right now. And that would curtail the power of future Governors during a State of Emergency that, after 30 days, expire. I believe the Bill calls for getting legislative approvals to continue any further. And I was wondering. This one's from Paula Tracy. She couldn't be here today. But she was wondering if you're going to be posting on the State Dashboard the number of people in each community who has been -- and the percentage of people who've been vaccinated. Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Great, I'll definitely take the first two questions. I don't know. I got to think about the answer on the third. So, the State of Emergency, itself, just the -- I apologize for anyone who might be confused. We've been in a State of Emergency since March of last year. The State of Emergency allows not just the Governor but the Government, as a whole, to do a variety of things and react very quickly, whether it's in terms of expending funds or whatever it is, without allowing bureaucracy to clog up the works, frankly. And it's worked very, very well. And I think we've been very transparent about it, very responsible with it.

So, there's no timeline that we have set in terms of when the State of Emergency would end. A lot of it may depend on the additional Federal funding coming in, whether there's different stipulations on how those funds can and should be spent, and whether there's stipulations for the State of Emergencies to still be upheld in order to recoup those Federal funds or recoup money from FEMA, things of that nature.

So, what we are trying to do, though, is take those Emergency Orders that live within the State of Emergency. There's, I think, up to 80 Emergency Orders. The vast majority of those will either be codified into law through this legislative session by the Legislature, or they will go away on June 30th, which is the approximate time that the Legislature will dismiss itself, essentially. So we're waiting to see what the Legislature codifies into law. But the vast majority of the Emergency Orders that kind of are built within the State of Emergency will go away, or be codified into law. Finally, on the dashboard, do we have plans to show the percent vaccinated by community? Yeah, I'll ask Dr. Daly to come up.

Dr. Daly:

Thank you. So on our COVID-19 Dashboard, we are currently just reporting the total numbers of doses administered, how many people statewide are vaccinated with one-or-more doses, and fully vaccinated. And we do have a draft Dashboard that has much more robust breakdowns, in terms of race, ethnicity, age, gender, and geography, looking at county-based data, as well as town-based data, so much

like the rest of the Dashboard. And we're just doing some testing on that, making sure all the data looks good. And then, we hope to roll that out in the next week-or-two.

Governor Sununu:

And I think there was one more question, if I may. Yes, sorry, I missed that one. So, yeah, House Bill 417, we're working on that. I was meeting with Senator Bradley about it a little bit. So there's pieces that are good. There's pieces that don't really work. So we're always willing to find a compromise. And I feel very confident we will come to a good compromise ground. That Bill does a variety of different things. And so, I think we will be able to find a good compromise ground and hopefully get something done.

Andrew Mahaleris from the New Hampshire Journal:

Good afternoon. Like you said earlier, Governor, there are plenty of businesses looking for Employees. Montana Governor Greg Gianforte recently announced that he was opting the State out of Federal COVID-19 unemployment benefits, because he believes those benefits are disincentivizing people from working. He also announced a program to give Montanans a \$1200 bonus if they returned to work. Is New Hampshire looking to do anything similar?

Governor Sununu:

Not at this time; so there's no doubt that the very heavy unemployment benefits specifically coming out of the Federal Government can create a challenge in terms of trying to incentivize folks to get back to work. I think everybody understands that. But those benefits also provide right now at least a needed resource for a lot of individuals that just can't get back to work, for a variety of reasons. So, at least in the short-term, we're not looking at discontinuing that. I'm not sure. I think the program goes through maybe the end of June or maybe even September. I'm not 100% sure.

And the whole idea, we will have the opportunity to make investments, kind of workforce training, workforce incentive investments over the summer. And that's something that we are looking at. It gets a little tricky, because when do you start that program? If somebody got a job on May 31st, but the program starts on June 1st, that person misses out on the \$1200 incentive. And are you going to do it for all industries and all sectors? Do you just focus on certain sectors, like healthcare? So there's a variety of different things that come into play when you create incentives like that, specifically in terms of when you start the program, and when do you end the program?

So, right now, we're keeping the system as-is. It's working fairly well. If we had a very high number of individuals on unemployment, that would be potentially a different story. But we have one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country, which means we have one of the fewest amount of people in the country taking advantage of the unemployment system, which is great. That means a lot of people, if they want to be back to work, they are back to work.

So, that would be another factor that I don't know what Montana's unemployment rate is, but that would be another factor. But we don't have that here. We're doing great. Folks want to get back to work. They want to get back to a normal life. And they are, which is a huge opportunity. So we're not looking at any of that at least in the short-term.

Alli Fam with New Hampshire Public Radio:

Great, thanks. Yeah, sorry, thanks. So I have two questions today. And my first one is that I'm wondering if the CDC Eviction Moratorium does end soon, if the State is going to take any action and enact their own or not. And then, my other question is, so I've been corresponding with a woman and her friend, who both got their COVID-19 shots. And they've both gotten both of their shots. But on VAMS, they're only seeing that they have gotten one shot. They say they've contacted the State and they've also gone back to the site they got their shot at, but haven't really been able to resolve the issue. So I'm wondering how the State is addressing data issues like this.

Governor Sununu:

Sure, so I'll take the first question and then I'll ask Dr. Daly to come up. On the data side, I'll just say we have individual issues all the time that we are trying to work out. But overall, the system does work fairly well.

No, if the national moratorium on -- we got rid of our moratorium on evictions last summer. We haven't had that in place for a while. If the national moratorium were to go away, we're not going to take any additional action there.

We have an incredibly strong economy, the strongest in the country, frankly. We have some of the highest wages in the country, the most economic opportunity for individuals in the country. So, no, I mean, if you started an eviction moratorium now, I don't know when you'd ever end it, if you're not going to end it now.

So, the opportunity is there. Rental relief programs are there. And people should, if they're having trouble, should and can take advantage of them at an unprecedented level. So there's so many tools in the toolbox to help families and individuals make sure that they can pay their rent. Their Landlords can take advantage of the program, as well.

We have incredibly low vacancy rate. I mean, if anything, it's hard to find places to live right now, because our economy's just doing so well. So, no, overall, we are not going to create our own moratorium, if and when the Federal Government moratorium goes away. I'll ask Dr. Daly to take the second half.

Dr. Daly:

So, the scenario you described where someone was signed up in VAMS and they got one dose of vaccine, and then they got their second dose of vaccine and it does not appear in VAMS, the most likely explanation for this -- and I would need more detail to confirm -- is that their second dose was documented in VINI. And so, this did happen to a number of individuals during the transition that we made from using VAMS to VINI. So one dose is in one system. The second dose is in the other system. These all get aggregated together in our Immunization Information System, or our Registry. And so, they should feel confident that their doses are documented in our system and we are accounting for them.

This is one reason why we recommend people make sure that they protect their card that they received, which serves as their record of immunization. And if someone loses that card, they can reach out to 211. And we will work with them to get a replacement of their full record.

Governor Sununu:

That's it for the phones. Okay, great, anything?

We're not done.

Governor Sununu:

Oh, we're not done.

So, as restrictions start to ease and there's still a lot of people who are not fully vaccinated, how do you kind of see the summer playing out? What are your hopes and concerns, as far as this?

Governor Sununu:

Well, my hope is that people just keep coming in to get vaccinated. I mean, if you haven't been vaccinated by now, it's really, for the most part, as we kind of get into these last couple percent of folks that haven't had their first shots, I think, again, we talked about 95%, 97% of individuals who want at least -- who want the vaccine have at least received their first shot, if not their second, coming.

We just hope that people -- I think over time, people will talk to their neighbors. They'll talk to their coworkers. They'll talk to their family members. They'll feel more comfortable. They'll talk to their Doctors. And we hope that people just keep coming in to get vaccinated.

This idea that we're trying to get to a certain number, we talk about herd immunity and all that. It's not about a number, as I was talking to Dr. Fauci earlier this week. And everyone agreed. It's an illusive number. Is it 70%? Is it 85? No one really knows.

What's most important is everyone is coming in to get their vaccine. Now, we're not going to mandate it, but we are going to keep encouraging it as strong as we can, because of the community benefits of that. Every single person who gets vaccinated is another step closer to getting out of the crisis, as a whole -- not just out of the crisis, out of the emergency and out of the COVID story.

So, no, we're just going to kind of keep pushing it as hard as we can. But my sense is people will keep coming in for a first shot for the next couple years, right? It might take time for individuals to really warm up to it. But we're getting out of our restrictions. The numbers keep going down. We're coming into summer. It's all coming together as we planned.

So with that being said, is there anything that concerns you at this point? Or what's kind of keeping you up at night, as we go into the summer?

Governor Sununu:

What's keeping me up at night? Well, not as much that was keeping me up last year, I'm sleeping a little better, to be sure. We got a great Team. What keeps me up at night? Great question, give me 20 seconds.

I think just the transition, if anything, and I think Perry Plummer and his Team have done a great job of laying out a plan to transition from State-driven vaccines to pharmacy vaccines, hospitals, Doctors,

the kids coming in, the 12- to 15-year-olds, how that's going to look. But, we've done a phenomenal job, I mean, if not the best in the country. This is the best country in the world in terms of vaccine administration, really. And we're the best State in the country. So it's a lot to be proud of here. The system works very, very well.

So if anything, I don't want to say keeps me up at night, but the things that really occupy my time would be just making sure we get those 12- to 15-year-olds, we keep working with schools. Is it going to be made available for the under 12-year-olds down the road? What would that look like?

Things are on legislation that might come. Vaccine passports, we don't want to go down that road, making sure we don't do anything like that. But those are the things. Those are kind of those remaining issues. And then, just transitioning over, so the healthcare world is taking care of healthcare issues, as they should, right? The State is in the healthcare business right now of vaccines, because we really have to be to get the administration out as fast as we can, and the mass vaccinations that are our local Doctors, just it would be overwhelming on that system. And I think just transitioning back to normal is what really focuses our -- we focus our time on.

And with that, are you concerned that cases will go back up this summer, as people do start to kind of come together in large groups again?

Governor Sununu:

No, not so much this summer. I mean, we didn't have the vaccine. We didn't have anything last summer and we saw cases really plummet into June, into July. And we had a great July, August, September, October. And then, we saw a little bit of a surge.

My sense is we're going to see a similar pattern, just much less of a surge in November. And the vast majority will be a few of the breakthrough cases. Obviously that's just going to happen. Mathematics and statistics says it will, unfortunately, but then, also the few of the folks that just have chosen not to be vaccinated.

But as we hit next fall, schools are open. We're really -- the back-to-normal isn't just for this summer. The back-to-normal is really for the foreseeable and indefinite future, which is the good news. But we just know there's going to be cases that surge in next fall. But I feel very confident about this summer, in terms of low numbers, low hospitalization, incredibly low fatality rate.

So you feel this summer and fall, we will be back to normal?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, back to normal. I think we're going to be back to normal on Saturday, frankly. And I think that's going to continue, and with a lot of positivity into the fall.

Governor, with regard to the Employment Security, we've heard some stories, incorrect notices about accumulating interest, overpayments that aren't the fault of recipients that won't be refunded, deadlines not being met for appeals.

Governor Sununu:

Kevin, I apologize.

Sure.

Governor Sununu:

Could you give me the first part of that? What are we...

Incorrect notices about accumulating interest.

Governor Sununu:

For who? I'm sorry.

For people who -- essentially for -- there were rogue notices that were incorrectly warning that interest was accumulating and overpayment...

Governor Sununu:

From who?

From the Department of Employment Security.

Governor Sununu:

From Employment Security, yes.

Yes.

Governor Sununu:

Okay. I apologize. I missed the first part.

No, that's okay.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

That's okay. I was just wondering whether, I mean...

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, I got you. I know where you're going.

For all of these things, what Employment Security Offices saw across the country, dealing with the crush of business that resulted from the pandemic...

Governor Sununu:

Sure; so, we -- there were some notices that went out for either overpayment of systems, or -- again, I don't want to say it's an abuse of the system. But, either way, folks were getting money that they necessarily shouldn't have been getting.

Our issue here in New Hampshire is less than 1%, which is still one of the best in the country. Our Team at Employment Security did a phenomenal job managing this process. Early on, we were getting money out very, very quickly, still doing our checks and balances and our audit of those systems. But in some cases, maybe individuals, we thought they had qualified for the Federal Program but didn't, or they got an overpayment based on a certain expectation of hours. But later, when it was verified, it just turns out that they hadn't worked those hours previously. So there's a variety of reasons why it might have happened.

I think we have put out over \$1.8 billion, just shy of maybe \$2 billion, \$1.9 billion in unemployment in just over the past year, which is a staggering amount of money. And we did it really without increasing staffing and all that. We just had our core Staff just crunch right through it. And through all of that, less than 1% of waste, fraud, overpayment, whatever you want to call it, and that can come in a variety of areas. And so, we still remain one of the best in the country at it.

But really, those notices have to go out. We have to recoup those dollars. It doesn't look like there were any -- I think we were looking at some of the highest payments, the median, the averages. It's not actually a whole lot, in terms of the average payment. It's not like a couple individuals bilked the system for hundreds of thousands of dollars, or anything like that. It was a variety of different reasons. But at less than 1% waste, fraud, and abuse, I think we kept -- given the immense volume that we were dealing with, I think they did a phenomenal job. Yeah.

I don't know if you read it, but there was a column by colleague, Mark H., who wrote about a 91-year-old man in a fully vaccinated nursing home who just wants to go to Billy's Sports Bar and just wants to get out once and do that. I wondered. And I'm sure you get these stories all the time, which is now that the nursing home Staff and residents are so fully vaccinated, is it safe enough for them to be allowed to go outside the facility?

Governor Sununu:

Well, I would say yes. I mean, if you're going to get a -- if we're going to go down a path where we say, if you're in long-term care and you're vaccinated, but we're still going to keep these massive restrictions and you still have to -- we're saying you can't do this and you can't do that, then if you can't do it now, then when are you going to be able to do it? We're saying that this is your new normal. And I think that's a very tough message for folks, and not a message I like to deliver to my parents or anything like that.

So, at some point, if folks are vaccinated and they want to do something, and they want to be able to have that flexibility, we've provided a lot of flexibility here in the State. We essentially just defer to the CDC Guidelines in terms of what can and cannot be done in our long-term care facilities.

Commissioner Shibinette isn't here today. She's really the expert on this stuff. But we really just defer to the Federal level now. We provide as much flexibility as the Feds will allow us to give. And I encourage that.

I just think that folks just need to have that flexibility, that freedom. There's so many benefits that come from that. And knowing that, again, in New Hampshire, we had some of the highest rate of vaccine uptake with our residents and Long-Term Care Workers.

Again, I'm not just here to brag on our State. But we did a phenomenal job. And the Nurses and everything did a phenomenal job, believing the vaccine, taking the vaccine, ensuring the health and safety of their residents. And I don't want to necessarily use that should be rewarded, but the benefits of that is the flexibility that comes with that. The vaccine is that pathway to normal. And if we're going to say that, we have to live true to it. Hi. Oh, I'll come right back to you.

Go ahead.

Governor Sununu:

Sorry, hey.

You mentioned earlier there might be a emphasis on clean water infrastructure.

Governor Sununu:

Yes.

I've talked with Public Works Department Heads around the State who say that a lot of communities are living on borrowed time with regards to the infrastructure.

Governor Sununu:

That's right.

Does the State know how much funding is needed and how much is available?

Governor Sununu:

Yes, so the question is, how much funding is needed and what's available, in terms of clean drinking water infrastructure? So, we've done more assessments here in New Hampshire than virtually any State in the country, as it comes to clean drinking water. Obviously that was my business, cleaning out chlorinated solvents out of drinking water. It's one of my passions. And I do believe I've said before in these press conferences that one of the most trusting forms of Government that a citizen has is every time they turn on their faucet, fill their glass, and hand it to their child, you're really trusting that the Government did their job on a local and State level providing clean drinking water, because there's no way to tell, right? There's no way to really tell.

So, it's a very big responsibility that we have. So we've done an immense amount of assessment. We're constantly doing more. We've recently found some additional plumes of the contamination in places like Londonderry and some other areas all across the State.

We've made about \$150 million to \$200 million of investment in infrastructure in just the past 2 years, out of the Clean Drinking Water Fund that I established when I first became Governor. It's out of the Exxon Mobil, our settlement funds is really what we used. No taxpayer dollars, we used those hundreds of millions of dollars of settlement funds.

So that really launched the whole program statewide for local municipalities to find match funding, or whatever it was going to be, get their plans ready, get them as shovel-ready as they can. And especially in the southern tier, I mean, all the way up to Whitefield and everything, but a lot of these projects have just taken off like rockets. It's awesome.

Now, we have another chunk of money potentially coming in. We don't know how much exactly. But we know it has been written into the law of the so-called American Rescue Plan that dollars can be used for that. We don't know how much. We don't have the guidance. But without a doubt, we're going to have hundreds of millions of dollars on top of what we've already done for a lot of projects that are already in queue.

In fact, if I may, we got a list of projects about three or four months ago, when we first started talking about this. And just in the past couple months, we have to update that list, because those projects, some of them are already moving, which is great. So more are coming on. More projects are moving. It's very dynamic. But, at the same time, I think it just speaks to our emphasis early on. And we're just kind of putting more money on a big project that we're already well-underway with.

So I don't have specific numbers, per se, in terms of what we can spend. But there's hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars of need across the State. And we're going to put as much as we can to it to making sure that we're living up to that obligation for our citizens of clean drinking water. Anything?

A question for Dr. Chan, some schools are starting to relax their Mask Mandates. So what is your position on masks in schools? Should they be worn at all times? Should they be worn in recess? What are your thoughts on that piece?

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, so, as we've already talked about here, the State is transitioning to Universal Best Practices. And one of the messages that we have been emphasizing over and over, since the release of that document last week, is the need to apply the same general principles that we have been recommending throughout this pandemic to all situations, all operations, all businesses, all organizations. And that includes schools, and not relying on any one particular intervention, or measure, to control COVID-19, but really looking at this as a multilayered approach.

We are in, as I think alluded to earlier, a transitional period in the pandemic. And I think these transitions always pose difficulty for individuals, for communities, for businesses. And so, we continue to recommend that businesses, organizations, schools look to implement the layers of protection -- the masks, the social physical distancing, the cohorting, the hand hygiene, limiting crowding -- to the extent possible to continue to protect the students, protect the classroom, protect the Teachers, prevent introduction of COVID-19, and prevent spread of COVID-19. And so, masks are one way to do that. And so, we have been recommending, as is highlighted in the Universal Best Practices, that mask use continue to be implemented wherever possible, not only in schools but businesses throughout the State.

How long do you see -- sorry -- how long do you see kid -- recommending that kids wear masks? Can you put a timeline on it at this point or not yet?

Dr. Chan:

It's hard to put an exact timeline. I know that the recommendation for people to continue to practice social distancing, to continue to wear facemasks is becoming more and more difficult for people to hear and comply with. That's something I think we need to acknowledge.

But the ability to pull back on some of these recommendations, I think, is a factor of two things. One is the level of vaccination. And we're still at around 36% of people statewide that are fully vaccinated. And the other factor that we look at really is the level of community transmission, the level of COVID-19 infection spread in the community. And whatever metric you look at, whether it's State-developed metrics that we've released previously or other academic Public Health Agencies, or the CDC, there still continues to be a lot of COVID around New Hampshire and around the region, and around the country. And so, that is why we continue to recommend mitigation measures be implemented at businesses and organizations, even as we're increasing vaccination status.

In fact, there was a publication released this week by the CDC in their MMWR, looking at and modeling -- using the data to model different scenarios, looking at the trajectory of the pandemic, and found that with both high vaccination and continued use of these mitigation measures, like social distancing and facemask use, that we would have lower numbers of infections, lower hospitalizations, lower deaths, and that we would get out of the pandemic more quickly. And that's the reason we continue to stress the importance, not only of vaccination but, in this transitional period, particularly

over the next month-or-two, continued adherence and attention to the social distancing, avoiding crowds, and facemask use.

And I understand that, as we're looking to transition out into another phase, that that's a difficult message to hear. I think we're all getting tired of being in this pandemic. But I think the continued attention to some of these measures is important. And so, we've been continuing to have partner calls every week, or every couple of weeks, with places like schools, and continuing to help them through this transitional period in talking about the Universal Best Practices. Thanks.

Governor, can you give us your reaction to Former President Trump's comments this morning that there was "massive election fraud in New Hampshire in 2020"?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, well, I'll just say a discrepancy of 300 votes out of over 800,000 cast does not define massive voter fraud by any means. So, we passed a Bill. We're going to do an audit in Windham. If anything, I think the fact that we focus on 300 votes goes to the integrity of our system.

We have the best system in the country, a system where we will do an audit even if it's over a couple hundred votes. And it is not about President Trump or Chris Sununu, or Joe Biden. It's about the citizens who cast the vote. That's why we do the audit. And we make sure that every last vote is counted.

I don't know any other State that goes to such extents. But here, our system, 99.9% worked just absolutely wonderfully. All the recounts were verified and true. And now, we're going to audit 300 votes. So, that doesn't define massive voter fraud to anybody.

Do you consider those comments dangerous?

Governor Sununu:

Do I consider them dangerous? No, I wouldn't say dangerous. I would just -- I don't really consider them, to be honest. I mean, we're focusing on Windham and the State of New Hampshire, and our system here. We do it right.

We don't need the Federal Government passing HR-1. We don't need nationalizing our elections. We don't need any of that. We are the model that other States want to be, frankly. And so, I don't really consider those statements other than just making sure we do our job for the people here in this State so that, again, they just have assurance that every vote is 100% accounted for, every last vote.

I guess just to clarify that question a little bit more, we've already had one public meeting interrupted many times by demonstrators. The President's focusing attention on this. There's a lot of out-of-state, online focus on this. So, do you think that security is a concern for the audit, when that takes place? Do you have to pay greater attention, given the events of January 6th?

Governor Sununu:

Sure, are you talking about physical security, or security of the...

Yes, security for the audit.

Governor Sununu:

Oh, well, we will make sure that any security that needs to be provided is provided. I mean, it's a very good process. There's essentially three Auditors that come in and manage the process. It's not a recount or anything like that. It's an audit of that.

I think they pick a couple -- the Legislature picked a couple races. They're going to audit those and make determinations based on that. But really this comes down to either one machine, or just someone miswriting something. I don't know exactly what it was. But we're going to find out. We don't let anything kind of go by us.

But, of course, if there were security issues, we will make sure that those are tended to. But just because a lot of people show up, I don't think that that says that there's going to be a security issue. I think people are passionate. Their citizens want to make sure that it's done right. Their votes are counted, and they have every right to express those concerns, to be sure.

Yeah. Okay. Great, well, it's going to be a great weekend. We can all go out and work in our backyards. I know that's where I'll be, working in my backyard, maybe a little hiking, enjoying some springtime hiking for a lot of folks.

But we're on a great path. We will be back next week with some more information. And until then, everyone just keep doing what they're doing, because whatever the citizens of New Hampshire are doing, you guys are doing it right. We really have become a model for the rest of the country and it's a real source of pride for us here in New Hampshire. And hat's off to the Team and all the folks that are vaccinating, everyone's still putting in long hours, 110%, seeing it all the way through. And we just want to thank everybody for that. Thank you.