



Office of Governor Christopher T. Sununu
Press Conference
Tuesday, November 2, 2021 at 3:00 p.m.

Governor Sununu:

All right. Well, good afternoon, everyone. David, how are you? Good to see you. Good to see you. So, again, before we kick things off, just as a reminder, we will be continuing these press conferences on a weekly basis, given that we continue to see accelerated COVID numbers, as we unfortunately expected, as we hit the later-fall and early-winter. Obviously we hope that those numbers continue to drop.

But, again, my job unfortunately is to kind of plan for the worst, make sure we have the infrastructure in place for everything from testing to booster shots, to vaccines, all the resources going to the right place, working with Public Health. And again, hopefully the winter isn't as bad as we fear. But one thing is for sure. We are going to be prepared with the resources that the State needs. Let's kick things off with a Public Health update from Dr. Chan.

Dr. Chan:

Great, good afternoon. Thank you. So, several updates for today, first I'm going to start with a numbers update. We are reporting 341 new people diagnosed with COVID-19. Now, this number will be updated in the coming days, as we continue to work through some of the cases that were not reported to us during the IT system outage last week. But I can say we continue to average 500 to 600 new infections each day. And in fact, in the last few days, we've had some days with more than 600 infections reported.

Our test-positivity continues to be around 6%. When our Data Dashboard is updated later today, I think that number will be more precisely at 6.4%. But we continue to see a higher substantial level of community transmission statewide.

Hospitalizations continue to be high. There are 190 people currently hospitalized with COVID-19 statewide. And unfortunately, we continue to see people die from COVID-19. We have four new deaths to announce today related to COVID-19, bringing the total to 1,572 deaths. 2 of these individuals are associated with long-term care facilities. And in fact, in the last week, we have reported out 20 total deaths from COVID-19 in the last seven days. So we continue to see a high level of people dying from COVID-19 in the State, as well.

I want to talk for just a few minutes about COVID-19 vaccination for 5- to 11-year-olds. As I'm sure many of you are aware, on October 29th the FDA authorized use of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine in 5- to 11-year-olds. The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, or the ACIP, is actually meeting today to discuss and make recommendations about how to vaccinate children. And so, we expect that possibly by as early as tomorrow, CDC will make some general recommendations about vaccination of 5- to 11-year-olds. And then, more detailed clinical guidance will follow later in the week, hopefully by the end of this week.

CDC's recommendations are a key step for allowing Providers to begin vaccinating children. And so, once we have these recommendations, we expect that in the next one to two weeks,

COVID-19 vaccines will increasingly be available to children. But this occurs after we have the formal CDC recommendations.

So, we know that many parents are eager to get their kids vaccinated. We ask that parents and guardians be a little bit patient over the next few days. And then, once we have CDC recommendations, to check with their local Healthcare Providers, check with their local health systems and pharmacies about when vaccination may be available in their local area. And of course, people can go on vaccines.gov to find locally available vaccines.

Now, many pharmacies have already received their initial allotment of the new formulation of the Pfizer vaccine and have informed us that they are expecting to be able to administer vaccines within days after CDC makes their recommendations. I do want to acknowledge that this new vaccine formulation for 5- to 11-year-olds is a smaller dose, compared to what adolescents and adults receive. But even with this smaller dose, it has been shown to be safe. It creates a similar antibody response, when compared to the higher dose used in adolescents and adults. And it has been shown to be effective at preventing symptomatic disease, at preventing COVID-19.

So vaccinating our children is important not only to protect the community but also to protect the individual, to protect the person, to protect the child. We know that children can be infected. In fact, regionally and across the United States, currently about 1 in 4 or 25% of infections are occurring in children under the age of 18.

We certainly have seen hospitalizations nationwide increase across the country in children during this recent surge. And thankfully, in New Hampshire, the rate of hospitalization in children has continued to be low.

But there are other risks from COVID-19: Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome, or MIS-C, in children being one of these risks. Nationally, there have been more than 5200 episodes of Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children. About 44%, 45% of those episodes of MIS-C have occurred in 5- to 11-year-olds, which is the group that we hope is going to be recommended for vaccination shortly. And MIS-C can lead to adverse outcomes, like hospitalization and unfortunately even death.

Thankfully, no children have yet died from COVID-19 in New Hampshire. But there have been more than 790 deaths in children from COVID-19 reported nationally, all potentially vaccine-preventable. And then, finally we're still learning about the long-term complications of COVID-19 including in children.

So vaccination is an important step in our pandemic response. We want to strongly encourage and recommend that you get yourselves vaccinated, you get your children vaccinated, as long as children are eligible and recommended to be vaccinated. And that's important to protect yourselves and to protect your communities. And I will hand things over to the Commissioner. Thanks.

Commissioner Shibinette:

Good afternoon. Just a quick update, a long-term care update. We have three outbreaks to close as of today. We are closing the Courville Nashua, Merrimack County Nursing Home, and the Northern New Hampshire Correctional Facility. We have four outbreaks to announce: The Birches in Concord; Mountain Ridge Center; Oceanside Center; and Woodcrest Village Assisted Living. So there's currently 17 institutional outbreaks in New Hampshire.

Just a note on school-based clinics, inline with the approval of the 5- to 11-year-old vaccinations that we're expecting any day now, I'm pleased to share that we're anticipating several Contracts coming in front of Governor and Council this coming Wednesday for school-based and community-based clinics.

Many Contracts will be coming this Wednesday. But we will have several coming in the weeks following that at the following meetings.

We will be working with our partners very quickly to stand up these clinics -- both school-based and community-based clinics -- as quickly as possible, so that the delay will be minimal, and the access and convenience of getting the vaccine for the kids will be readily available right in the community in which you reside. Thanks.

Governor Sununu:

Great, thank you, Commissioner. And just to kind of follow up on a couple of those items, and then we can open up for questions, as Dr. Chan noted, we are eagerly awaiting a final and full approval of the vaccine for kids 5 to 11. And as soon as that approval's granted, we do expect some pharmacies will be ready to administer it almost immediately. Some may take a week or two to get their final shipments in. But we will have a lot of availability for parents, if they so choose to make that choice for their kids to get them vaccinated. And again, to sign up, I think you can still go to vaccines.gov to sign up, I believe, just to make sure. So you can go directly to vaccines.gov to see if your local pharmacy is offering pediatric appointments. But it's important to note that the White House, during our call, the White House is very careful to ask folks just to be patient while this new national program for kids really does ramp up.

Booster shots, very important. Obviously we're seeing more and more breakthrough cases of COVID. We're seeing more and more breakthrough cases within hospitalizations of COVID. So getting your booster shot, for those who have already been vaccinated, is incredibly important. And so, we urge eligible Granite Staters to get those booster shots.

I know I'm eligible for a booster shot. I'll be getting my booster shot very, very soon, I think in the next week-or-so. I'll go online and sign up, just like everybody else. But vaccines.gov is a great way to go on. And you can make an appointment locally. There's a lot of availability of the booster shots. And we'd just encourage everyone to take it very seriously, if we're going to get through this winter surge. And knowing that the breakthrough cases continue to increase, it's a very important tool to kind of round out the vaccine program. And then, we announced a lot of new GOFERR Programs last week.

So talking about new funding opportunities in a variety of areas: long-term care facilities, we're putting more money into those; senior centers; community food pantries; homeless shelters; emergency equipment matching programs for First Responders and local Fire Departments, and the such. So all of those Applications are now live and you can go to goferr.nh.gov/apply, so goferr.nh.gov/apply for all of the different grant programs that are available for all of these different institutions that we're trying to make sure have the financial resources so they can say as staffed up and be able to handle some of the challenges that COVID has brought on as easily as possible. With that, we can open it up for questions.

Q&A Session

Governor, can we talk a little bit about workforce? We're hearing anecdotally about some hospitals really running into problems now with Staff. Obviously that's not all landing on your desk. But what is the State doing to try and alleviate or help recruit or bring in...

Governor Sununu:

Absolutely, yeah. It's not just hearing anecdotally recently. I mean, this has been going on for months now. Hospitals are running short on Staff. There's no question about that. Virtually everybody who employs anybody in this State unfortunately is running short on Staff. We have a very strong economy, a lot of very high-paying jobs that are available. Very few people are even on unemployment. And for various reasons, different folks have pulled them out of the workforce.

So, what are we doing about it? So first thing you have to do is understand, okay, who are we talking about? Is it just one age group? Is it one demographic? Is it regionally one area? Is it just one profession?

It's not. We know that a lot of the 20-somethings have pulled themselves out of the workforce. A lot of teenagers that typically would be working afterschool or part-time, they're not working nearly as much.

But there's different reasons for that, right? A lot of the teenagers, we understand, aren't quite working as much because they were remote a lot last year. There's a lot more emphasis on getting kids and especially these teenagers to catch up with high school and making sure that they're doing what they need to do to make up some of that lost ground that they lost last year. And that's just doing some different types of surveys and understanding, talking to parents.

We know there's a lot of elderly individuals that have pulled themselves out of their retail positions because, for whatever reason, they're not comfortable with forward-facing positions. They're concerned about COVID, understandably, even if they are vaccinated, and especially as breakthrough cases increase. And then, there's a group where you have a lot of maybe two working parents that are now one working parent. And that could be because one parent has decided not to reenter the workforce, because they're concerned about schools having maybe to go remote again this winter or something like that.

Childcare continues to be an issue, of course. We continue to pump a lot of money into our childcare facilities and resources in the State. We pumped tens and tens of millions of dollars into that. And we will continue to support those services, because, again, it's hard for parents to go back if the kids are actually at home. So, we're looking at all those different pieces.

The number 1 thing I think we can do is look at, when we're providing opportunities, especially for our younger generation, if kids are in school, are we skilling them to the jobs that are available today? Are we making sure that, at 17 and 18 years old, our tech schools are getting kids the available certifications or whatever opportunities that they might want, so that, at 18, if they so choose, they can go right into the workforce? Or are community colleges connecting?

Are we moving forward with our Student Loan Forgiveness Programs, which, as most folks know, I'm a huge believer in. That incentivizes kids to stay here if we help pay down their student debt. Those types of things, making sure they're working and they're robust.

The expansion we put with UNH, we're doubling the number of Nurses that we can graduate out of UNH. That program is just kind of coming online now. Their construction is done. So that type of stuff is moving forward.

Investments that we're making in our private trade schools, sorry, we have a few different trade schools across the State. Trade schools are fine. But we also maybe need some in other geographic regions. So sometimes there's certain parts of the State that are doing okay. But geographically we're not getting some of that workforce into Grafton County or over into Sullivan County. And so, making sure that we're geographically expanding ourselves, not just focusing, which typically happens, in the southeast part of the State. We got 1.4 million people all across the State, 10 counties. And we have to make sure that we're spreading those resources far and wide as we can.

Another good example would be like our CDL Program. I just created a Program for over \$4.5 million so Employers can get their Employees a CDL License, go through the Program. We're expanding testing sites. We're expanding training and financial opportunities to get those individuals to get their CDL, to keep the supply chain moving. If the trucks aren't moving on the road, if we don't have enough drivers or we don't have enough school businesses drivers, that all really hinges on folks having their CDL License to have that flexibility to keep supply chain moving.

So, I didn't mean to go on so long, but there's a lot of pieces there. You kind of have to manage each one, individually, understand the core issue of it, and then really create a system not just to make it better but accountability. Like, how many folks are we going to graduate in that new CDL Program? Well, it's just getting off the ground. Hopefully in the next few months we will see a pretty robust number there. How many kids are we affecting when we put money into the childcare programs?

We got to make sure that those metrics are in place. And I think we're doing a very good job with it. But it's a national issue and I can tell you I think the workforce question that you just asked is going to be the same question that we have to answer for the next 10 years. I think, in America, we're going to have a workforce shortage for looking onto 10 years.

You have more manufacturers investing in robotics. You have more retailers investing in self-service or less people actually at the counter. And it sounds small. That's small potatoes. But it's not. We're also now going to look at a program that allows small restaurants, let's say, invest in technologies that, again, just make it easier to check people out and make it easier to order from the table, whatever it is. A lot of the big chain restaurants might have something like that. But what about smaller diners, right? Maybe if they can have more technologies, they can manage that floor instead of with six people, with four people. And business gets to be a little easier. So we're looking to use some of our ARP dollars for some of that one-time investment to invest in the things that I think are going to carry forward and be used year over year, over year, because I think it's going to be with us.

Sorry for the long answer, but it's a great question, number 1 thing we're dealing with. And then, there's housing, right? Doing a lot on the housing piece; if you don't have the housing, you don't have the Employees. If you don't have the Employees, you're not supporting the businesses. And so, I tell everyone from the Legislature to local Planning Boards, don't tell me you're supporting business if you're not going to do right by housing. And so, you can't have it both ways, right?

So, I believe in local control and all of that. But if local control gets to the point where a good housing project has to go through three years of permitting, those dollars are going out the door and back to Massachusetts. And somebody else is going to build an apartment building in Massachusetts, not in New Hampshire.

So there's got to be balance there, in terms of making sure we're still incentivizing those investments, which Developers want to make. But if our permitting process at the local level gets so cumbersome, they're just not going to do it. So we can incentivize that with tax credits or better education for the Planning Boards, or whatever it might be. But all of those things have to be put into the mix.

Can we...

Governor Sununu:

I could write a thesis paper on all that. But it's all good stuff.

Can we hear from Commissioner Shibinette on the long-term care, your workforce outlook right now?

Governor Sununu:

Sure.

We were looking online. It looks like the Belknap County Nursing Home has 28 job openings for RNs and LPNs right now. How are they going to weather this situation with so few Employees?

Commissioner Shibinette:

Sure; so we've heard from a lot of long-term care facilities that are experiencing Staff shortages that COVID obviously exacerbated over the last couple years. Belknap County, I think, dropped about 40% of their census. And that is one of the ways that our long-term care facilities are dealing with the workforce shortage is by dropping census.

It allows them to still deliver the high-quality excellent care that we're known for in New Hampshire, but to fewer residents. What that does is it backs up our system, because then we have the elderly in hospitals that are not able to get a bed in long-term care.

When we look at hospitals, they're able to contract their census or their occupancy by very, very little. But they look at staffed beds as compared to licensed beds. So right now 88% of the licensed beds are staffed beds. So that means we've contracted our beds by about 12% overall. Some facilities are higher. Some are lower. But overall about 88% of our staffed beds in hospitals -- or our licensed beds in hospitals are staffed. But it all backs up. It's all a continuum of care. So when long-term care has to contract census, that then burdens the acute care center, or the rehab center, that can't discharge the long-term care.

A follow-up, are there any connections between the shortage of staffings at hospitals, healthcare, and the vaccine mandates? That's one of the industries that has a very aggressive vaccine mandate.

Commissioner Shibinette:

I'm not aware of the shortages as it relates to the vaccine mandate. We've asked for additional information on have you -- specifically around hospitals -- have you seen Staff leaving -- resigning or being let go -- due to a mandate? And they're collecting that information. But many of them don't have a mandate yet. Some of them are through their first part of the mandate. The deadline hasn't past yet. So that information's still coming forward.

Have you been able to find a new funding source to backfill the money that was lost by the \$27 million that was rejected by the Executive Council?

Commissioner Shibinette:

We're working on it right now. I think what I can say is that the programs that were slated for that \$27 million, they will go forward. We will find a way to craft those solutions going forward in the coming weeks, if the Governor and Council don't reconsider that \$27 million, or if it doesn't come back on the table, somehow.

We are committed to finding a way to fulfill those programs. A lot of that has to do with vaccine, vaccine storage, shipping, datapoints, being able to track our data here in New Hampshire, so we don't have to rely on the CDC. All of this money is bringing us to a place where we can be self-reliant on our own data sources. So we will find a way to get it done, if they decide not to accept that \$27 million.

And will you ask them to reconsider it, Governor?

Commissioner Shibinette:

Sorry.

Governor Sununu:

Well, two things there, just to reiterate. We've already brought forth about \$4.6 million. We're going to bring forth maybe another \$7 million. I'm looking at the Commissioner. Total -- well, it would be a total of \$22 million. Yeah. So it could be, yeah, a total of \$22 million in the next few weeks. It could be from other funding sources.

But that also doesn't mean we're not going to necessarily try to get the \$27 million again. But, it's really up to the Executive Council that has to find the three votes to make sure that that can happen. It's good money. It is Federal money. They're just leaving it on the table.

But I think the message, if I can just reiterate what the Commissioner was saying, these are speedbumps. And they're big speedbumps to be sure. It doesn't stop us. We always find a way to work around it. We always find a way to engineer a solution here in New Hampshire. And we will continue to do that.

Governor, one of the things COVID changed is how people voted in 2020. And some people say that the changes, the new rules, etc., the surge in the number of absentee ballots is one of the reasons behind the Bedford ballot fiasco, where, as you know, 190 votes were not counted. And then, both State and Town Officials kept that fact secret until just last week. Do you think it was appropriate for your two Attorney Generals to keep that information secret and not tell the voters that 190 of their ballots had not been counted? And also, how do you think the matter has been handled?

Governor Sununu:

To be very clear, our Attorney Generals did not keep anything secret.

Yes, they did. They both declined to release information.

Governor Sununu:

No, excuse me. The process went forward as it should have. You don't talk about an investigation while you're going through the process figuring out what happened. As soon as they did, as my Attorney General released -- Attorney General John Formella released his Report. I think is it today or yesterday? It might have been yesterday he released it. It was very clear. The Attorney General's Office told the Town of Bedford, those folks that had been working with their Office since November, that they had to actually not just inform people but inform the voters, like told them you got to go tell the actual folks who submitted these ballots.

Right.

Governor Sununu:

So nothing was kept secret. And this was back over the summer. And they had to tell them multiple times. Now, ultimately, this all kind of came out in the past week-or-so that, for whatever reason -- and I can't explain why the Town didn't tell their voters. I can't explain why their Town Moderator didn't talk to their Town Council. And if I were on their Town Council, I'd be upset, too. But you got to ask the people, the folks in Bedford, who were right on top of this who were told to make it public and refused to do so. I don't know why they did that.

So you think that the Attorney Generals did the right thing by not releasing the information? There's no rule that they couldn't release it. They just chose, under their guidelines.

Governor Sununu:

I would hope an Attorney General would never release information in the middle of an investigation.

You think they did the right thing? Even the fact that 190 ballots weren't counted and they knew that that information wasn't coming out, given the doubts that some people have about the security of our ballots. There's a lot of concern, as you know, about how some...

Governor Sununu:

I don't think there was any attempt to keep something.

You think they did the right thing?

Governor Sununu:

Yes, I don't think there was any attempt on the Attorney General's Office in any way. I know there was no attempt in the Attorney General's Office in any way to keep anything intentionally secret or anything like that.

Well, they had the information and they never released it. Both Attorney Generals chose not to release that information. There's nothing stopping them. They chose, as part of their process, not to release it. Once it got one month, two month, three months later, you don't think, at any point, they should have stepped up and said, look?

Governor Sununu:

I think my understanding is as soon as the Final Report was ready to explain to the Town what the issue was and the remediation process.

But that wasn't necessary for the information to be released. They chose to wait until the -- it's not like a crime where you have to keep information secret so you don't confuse witnesses. They could have announced a week after they found out. We have these ballots. We're investigating. It wouldn't have changed anything. They chose to keep it secret in an environment in which people are very suspicious.

Governor Sununu:

No, I think you're absolutely trying to make a story here.

Okay.

Governor Sununu:

There was 190 ballots that weren't counted.

That's right.

Governor Sununu:

It was my understanding is there was nothing nefarious. It was simply recorded wrong at the Town level, placed in the wrong pile, whatever it was, at the Town level.

Right.

Governor Sununu:

This has nothing to do with voter fraud or anything like that. There are other Towns, as you saw from the letter that was released. Towns have these issues all the time. This was a bigger one, to be sure. You can have two ballots or five ballots here-or-there, because absentee ballots come in.

I don't think that the issue in Bedford really could be directly related to how we treated elections during the pandemic, given that this wasn't a statewide problem. If that were the case, then you'd see that problem in 220 cities and Towns across the State. So, again, they were very clear with the Town. You have to tell everybody. And you have to be very clear about it. And for whatever reason, they didn't do it.

Governor -- oh, sorry, go ahead.

So, the national polls show that a lot of parents are hesitant about vaccinating their younger kids against COVID-19. We also see from our own numbers, vaccination rates kind of dropping the younger we get. So where do you see -- who should be spearheading the (inaudible) to parents and kids about the safety and inform about the vaccine? Is that Doctors? Is that the State? Is it schools districts?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, so who should be spearheading the effort to make sure that parents are informed about the vaccine, as it pertains to kid? Well, first and foremost is their Doctor, right? As a dad, if I have a medical question about my kids about a vaccine, about whatever it might be, first person I'm calling is the Pediatrician or their Doctor and saying, what's the lowdown? What's the data? What do you know? Because they know the medical history of my child, they know the relationship there.

But of course, there's going to be, I think, a lot of strong and positive messaging about the opportunity to get your child vaccinated from the State, potentially through schools, potentially through a lot of different avenues. The State isn't mandating a vaccine for anybody. That is not what the State Government is going to do.

But we are going to make sure that people understand just how important it is. It's still a personal choice, of course. But there's no doubt that it is safe. It's viable. I think the CDC and the FDA have actually both done, in terms of regulating the vaccines, approving the vaccines, have done a very good job since all the way back in December dotting the Is, crossing the Ts, being very upfront about side-effects, about the negative possibilities. And pretty much it has all worked out as they said, right?

We know there were going to be some side-effects to all the different vaccines as they pertain to adults. They were pretty much at the exact rate that they said they were going to be. They use a lot of data and a lot of analysis, and a lot of study.

We thought that these vaccines were going to be ready back in the summer. But they said, no, we're going to take more time. We want to get this right, especially for kids. So I have a lot of confidence. I think not to speak for Dr. Chan, but I think we all, at the State level, have a lot of confidence in what the CDC puts out in terms of the stipulations and the rules, and the guidance around administering vaccines. And I expect nothing less for their final ruling later today, as it pertains to kids. And so, again, parents should talk to their Doctor.

It isn't just the Governor and Dr. Chan saying, you must and you have to. Talk to your Doctor, make sure you're comfortable with it. But it really is important, because kids getting COVID is very real. There can be very severe effects to that, as well.

Yeah, just a quick follow-up, Governor.

Governor Sununu:

Sure.

Should schools be collecting COVID vaccination status of their students to help them assess their own mitigation efforts and response?

Governor Sununu:

Should schools be collecting vaccination status, like collecting the medical data for their students?

Yeah, like to...

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, so, schools do require -- or I should say the State requires schools to have certain vaccines, not the COVID vaccine, to-date. And that vaccination status is recorded, I believe, at the school level. As a parent, I submit that information at the school level. So if the Legislature were to add the COVID vaccine to that list, then it should be treated the same way. But, short of that, no. That would be unauthorized medical information.

Governor, with the data issues going on, you've always said time and again you're a data guy.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

How frustrating is it right now to be in a situation where the State doesn't have the data it needs? I mean, obviously you can continue making decisions, but it's flying blind in some ways?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, well, we're not blind. Again, there's a couple things. So on the vaccination status piece, there's a bit of a data gap there, right? Luckily, the CDC's data, while it's not the direct, the State's data, it's fairly accurate. So we feel very confident we have a sense of where we are as a State, as it pertains to vaccines. We're very accurate, I think, when we look at the number of cases, and very accurate when we look at the hospitalizations and obviously the deaths. Those are the most important pieces of data.

Obviously we like to have our own system that can really verify a lot of that data, look at it a little more geographically and spatially to make sure that we're making the right decisions and not having gaps. So, there is a gap in the system. I'm not incredibly frustrated -- or it's a little frustrating. I get what you're getting at.

But I just know we can engineer right through it, right? We're going to find another way to do it. If this \$27 million doesn't go forward, that's okay. There's other ways that we can collect the data other than these high-tech systems. There's other ways to either survey the system, survey the Doctors, whatever it might be. There's a lot of ways to get the data, in terms of who's vaccinated. What's a booster? What isn't?

One thing I always challenge the Staff to do is to say, okay, let's pretend it's 1989 again. How would we get the data, right? Not everything has to be in the cloud and these high-tech systems. They're easier to do that and they cost a little money, much easier to do that, of course. But there's always a way to get data. And so, sometimes you just have to kind of revert to the basics a little bit. Engineer around it. So it's a temporary speedbump but nothing we can't solve.

Now we know where the floppy disks in the press room went to, I guess.

Governor Sununu:

Exactly, right? That's why I have the Apple 2E sitting behind my desk just in case.

How long do you think it'll take, I mean, until you're back on the real track?

Governor Sununu:

Well, I think it could take definitely more than a few -- could take a couple months, because it really depends how we do it. There's a few different options we're looking at, in terms of verifying the vaccine and the booster data, especially. All the other data is really rock solid.

One thing could be just doing more of a manual process. In some ways, that takes a little longer, but we could get the final results a little quicker. Some way could just be finding a different funding source to make sure that we have the connection, basically the technical connection you need to all the different Providers, so that they're submitting not just what was a vaccine and what was a booster, but all the other demographic information that typically comes with that. So there are pros and cons to each. But it could be a few weeks.

Look, the numbers are going to continue to increase. We have a pretty good sense of where we are with all of this. Whether we have very high booster rates or very low booster rates, we're going to keep pushing the booster message very strong, right? We're not sure what the rates of uptake with kids are going to be. We're going to continue pushing that message very, very strong.

So, it doesn't really hinder our short-term approach. I think, if anything, if we didn't address it, it could hinder us long-term, in terms of understanding where we are down the road. So, there's a couple different options there. I don't think it's going to affect us long-term. It won't affect us negatively because we will get right through it.

So 1600 kids have signed up for the Education Freedom Accounts, which is far more than people expected.

Governor Sununu:

Yes.

First question: is that good or bad? And secondly, do you think it's related to how some parents feel about how the public schools responded to COVID, with extended classroom shutdowns, really they argue seemed to not want their kids to be back in school, even though the infection rate among kids was very low and the negative outcomes was even lower?

Governor Sununu:

It's great. Sure.

Do you think that relates to the...

Governor Sununu:

Well, a couple things. One thing as being their first Governor in 25, 30 years to come up through the public schools of New Hampshire, our public schools are awesome. They really are. I mean, they're always ranked as one of the best in the country. Our public schools are absolutely phenomenal.

There's always a small percentage where the four walls of the traditional classroom aren't exactly working. And so, what the Education Freedom Accounts really provide, especially for low-income families, because it's only at 300% of the poverty level-or-below, low-income families now have an opportunity they didn't have. And if they want to take it, they take it. And if they don't, they don't have to.

But it can make all the difference in the world in terms of the opportunity, education, and workforce opportunity that you can provide your child. And that can be, as a parent, what a weight that can be lifted off of your heart in terms of, if it's not working for your kid, you struggle as a parent every single day trying to find a better solution.

About 1600 individuals in just the opening months have took advantage of this program, far greater than what we originally thought. That's a very good thing, because that tells us that a lot of people were looking for an opportunity. A lot of people were looking for some sort of alternative. And now, we're providing that path for them.

Remember, it is not the State's money. It is their money. The taxpayers own the dollars. It is their dollars. And all we're saying is you can use your State dollars how you see fit for your child. And having that parental input is so, so important, because a lot of States, as we know it's a national discussion point right now, don't have that same philosophy we do. And I think that's going to keep us on the forefront of keeping our entire system very, very robust. And is it a direct relation to the pandemic?

So, some of it might be, right? I think some parents might have seen, whether it was gaps in the system, because kids were more remote when it wasn't really working for them. I can't speak for all 1600 parents, but that could be.

But I think it's more just the opportunity that we're creating and folks say, this is great. I have an opportunity. We have, boy, 150,000 students in this State, maybe more. Don't quote me on the number. So it's a small percent -- a incredibly small percentage, if it's even a percent so far. But it's an incredibly huge opportunity for those kids. And so, I think it's great. And whoever can take advantage of it, let's make sure they can take advantage of it.

Quick education follow-up today, there's an election in Virginia that two months ago looked like the Democrat was going to win, because of the State's makeup. And then, the candidate for Governor said, I don't think parents should be telling schools what to teach. And suddenly it's changed. Now, it's neck-in-neck. Do you think there's a lesson out of that for Lawmakers in New Hampshire?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, I have to be honest. I think, I mean, to get a little political here, I think that the Republican candidate for Governor of Virginia is a phenomenal candidate. I don't think it's just the issue on parents and making sure that parents have a say.

Right.

Governor Sununu:

But without a doubt, that is a national voice that always has to be heard. I don't think that has changed. I just don't think a lot of States have listened to that in the past. And I think parents, rightly so, are standing up and saying, we have a voice. We have a very important say in the direction of our kids' education. And obviously a State like Virginia, which tends to be very blue, very Democrat State, is agreeing with that. And the independents, especially, are standing up and saying, yes.

All we're saying -- we're not saying agree with us on a political view or not. We're just saying, we get to have a say in our kids' education, too. And I mean, the fact that that's even debated is kind of bizarre to me. Of course parents have to have a huge voice in what that is, and a huge opportunity, and the flexibility to provide that chance for their kids.

So, without a doubt, it was a big boost, I think, when that issue really hit the forefront of that campaign. I don't think it's all that candidates that bring to the table. But I'll just say that hopefully that he wins and Virginia's going to be better off for it. So, couple on the phone? Oh, sorry. And I'll come right back.

Holly Ramer with The Associated Press:

Hi, thank you. My connection seems a little weak today, so I hope you can hear me okay.

Governor Sununu:

I can hear her.

Holly Ramer with The Associated Press:

Most questions have been answered, but I want to follow up on something you mentioned last week, when you were talking about reallocating some of the funding. You mentioned money. I think it was for equipment for First Responders who are struggling with staffing shortages. Can you talk a little bit more about that? I wasn't quite sure how that would work and how, if they're dealing with staffing problems, how equipment would fill that gap.

Governor Sununu:

Sure; was that the only one? Okay, great. Yeah, sure, Holly. I'm always ready for a couple Holly questions. So I just want to be sure. It's a great question. It's a great program. I'll give you an example to kind of highlight it.

An ambulance shows up but they're short-staffed. I mean, sometimes even one person might be in an ambulance, or a First Responder onsite. But they have to put someone in a chair and get them into the back of the ambulance. If there's not a second person to do that lift, it becomes an almost-impossible task.

So here's an example where this grant program being run by GOFERR, the local Fire Department or an ambulance company could come out and get -- I think it's up to \$100,000 or something like that, where they could actually get one of those new automatic lifts, right? A piece of technology where one person can put them in. It automatically gets that person in, off, and to the hospital to get the care that they need.

Same with Fire Departments, there are just a lot of hands-on, physical activities that First Responders have to do that, if we can invest in better equipment and technology, and kind of new opportunities, instead of needing a Team of four, you can do it with a Team of two. Or instead of a Team of two, you can do it with a Team of one. And so, it's a very common thing that we've heard all across the State.

I mean, this program wasn't created out of nothing. It was coming out of direct requests from a lot of these different Departments that were seeing these staffing shortages. But there is good technologies and good devices on the market that could help them.

It can be very expensive, to be sure, to get some of this equipment, especially for a smaller Town. But this grant program is millions of dollars that'll be available to all these different organizations -- First Responder organizations to simply help them out and still be able to respond. Give the best quality of care, even if they're a little short on Staff.

Paul Hayes with The Caledonian Record:

Yeah, hey, Governor. So hospitals in Coos County have operated at or near capacity for weeks. And obviously some patients were sent elsewhere, which affects other hospitals, as well. And that prompted Berlin and Gorham to implement temporary Mask Mandates. I wondered if there's a threshold where you might consider implementing a Mask Mandate on a greater scale.

Governor Sununu:

So, a couple things. I know that Berlin and Gorham, I did hear, implemented Mask Mandates. I think that wasn't just an issue in terms of hospital capacity. I think it was, frankly, an issue of we had some very high numbers of COVID cases in Coos County, which tends to be a more rural county. It really hasn't been overall hit as hard as other parts of the State, as it pertains to COVID. But when they saw those spikes in numbers, they took the action that they deemed necessary to move forward.

So it's not just about masks. Mask Mandates don't necessarily just knock hospitalization numbers down. That's really not how it works. It's all about keeping the community safe, implementing not just the masks but all these other pieces that you can put into place, whether it's social distancing, how you're managing gatherings, all of that.

Towns have always had the ability to manage those issues from a Public Health standpoint. Those Towns, especially, have chosen to take that action, given their increased COVID numbers. How long they stay in place and whether they stay long-term, that's really up to them.

But, no, the State has no plans to implement a statewide Mask Order. That would require us going to some form of State of Emergency. It would probably likely have to be taken up by the Legislature. It would be a whole different process.

We don't have a State of Emergency anymore in this State. We've really worked through the crisis of the pandemic and now it's managing the issues of the pandemic, which is the hospitalization increases, obviously the fatalities, making sure long-term care has the resources they need, getting the vaccinations and the boosters out. We don't need the State of Emergency to appropriately respond to that. And so, that's just where we are. We're not looking for any statewide restrictions or mandates.

I've got one more question.

Governor Sununu:

Oh, I'm sorry. I'll go. You know what? Can I go right back to the back and then I'll come right to you? Sorry. Yes, sir.

Just a quick one about pediatric vaccines, I think you mentioned last week -- correct me if I'm wrong -- that the State preordered 15,000. Is that right?

Governor Sununu:

That's right.

And pharmacies were having some shipped directly to them. I'm assuming pharmacy shipments are included in that 15,000 or...

Governor Sununu:

Some of them would be. Well, sorry. You're talking about the pharmacies. Yeah, the pharmacies do a direct request to the Feds. Theirs get shipped directly to them. Sorry, that would be separate from the 15,000.

Okay.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

And then, beyond that, is there a number that you look at in terms of how many vaccines you need for children?

Governor Sununu:

Well, we can draw down on a weekly basis. So we will kind of look at the uptake in the first week, and then we can keep adjusting. And we do that, not just based on the number of people that are getting the vaccines, but the requests from the Providers, themselves. So we will talk to the Providers. What do they need to see? How many are being taken up by CVS or some of the pharmacies that are out there? So, it's a good symbiotic team, right? We all kind of work together. We kind of share the information. And then, we keep drawing down as we need to. Sorry.

Dr. Chan, I think this one might be for you. Today, (inaudible) has sent notice to Providers about a facts outage. And I just wanted to clear, is that different from the surveillance (inaudible) that you're currently dealing with last week? And then, just more broadly, are there -- how many more caveats to the case data we should know when we're reporting those numbers?

Dr. Chan:

So a couple questions there, so, yes. We sent a Health Alert Network message today to Providers because there was a period of -- I believe it was about 24 hours, where there were no fax reports coming into Public Health. And just to be clear that there's multiple avenues by which data comes into Public Health.

Some of them are things like electronic laboratory reporting. And I think what was messaged in the HAN was that the manual fax machines went down. There was a separate IT issue that prevented faxes from coming in. And so, the HAN was simply to ask Providers if they had submitted Report Forms, for example, to resubmit them, if they had sent them during that time period. The second purpose of the HAN was also just to call attention to the fact that fax numbers also need to have the 10-digit phone number entered -- fax number entered into order to make its way to us, including the area code.

Regarding your other question about the data, the ability for our system to take new Reports was down not this past weekend, the weekend before, for a period of a few days. And so, during that time, there were Reports that accumulated that the Team is still working through. So there was a backlog.

We expect to be working through that over the next few days. And so, I think the hope is that the -- specifically the infection numbers and the test-positivity numbers will become more and more accurate and up-to-date over the course of this week and hopefully into the beginning of next, that things will be resolved.

But a lot of this really depends on the level of COVID in our communities. And so, as there's more and more COVID, there's more and more Reports coming in. And so, there is always a little bit of ladies and gentlemen between when there's a Report and when it gets included in our counts, but certainly not to the extent that we've seen over the last week. That was because of the IT system outage. And we're working through that this week. Thanks.

You've talked about the upcoming COVID winter. But some people in New Hampshire worry about the upcoming cold winter because of energy prices.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

Senator Hassan and Shaheen both sent a letter to the White House saying, what can you do? Please take actions to do something about rising costs. People on heating oil, which is 43% of the State, may see a 50% rise. People on propane, which is another 17% of the State, may see up to a 90% rise in the cost...

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

And at the same time the Federal Delegation sent that letter, the Biden Administration's shutting down pipelines, banning drilling and development on Federal lands, asking OPEC to generate more energy abroad. What would you say to our Federal Delegation and to Washington about energy policy and energy prices in New Hampshire?

Governor Sununu:

Talk is cheap, solutions matter, especially when it comes to energy and heating oil this winter. You got to come up with some solution. Give us an idea, anything. It'd be great if America had any sense. If somebody could stand up in Washington and say, look, here's exactly why the supply chain is such an issue. Here's why we're not getting the wood and the steel, and the bath products. I don't know, anything. I mean, everything under the sun seems to be trapped on these container ships. And it'd be great if somebody stood up and said, look, here's what drives inflation. Here's why we're now paying \$3.50 at the gas pump, right?

I think the frustration that America has is they're getting no answers, nothing, right? I can't control the price of gas at the gas pump here in New Hampshire. One thing I can tell you we're trying to

do is hedge off some of these. While the Federal Government has blown it on inflation, we're trying to hedge off some of these things by making sure that small businesses can group together, right? If they have more buying power, maybe they can get their stuff a little faster, or they can get their stuff a little cheaper, and therefore they don't have to drive the cost up on individuals, when they're reselling at a retail price.

So, we're trying what we can to hedge off some of this pricing stuff, same with supply chain. We're trying to make sure we can make CDLs. People are still going through the process. You got to make sure we're getting the right licensed people on the roads.

But we're making it easier. We're making it more accessible with more testing sites, and helping with the cost, so that more folks are actually getting those CDLs, getting that training they need to make sure the supply chain -- these are solutions. And we're doing it at the State level, and it's not even an issue that we directly affect.

So, I think that's the frustration with America. People can say, you have to do something, Washington. Please help us. But there's no information. There's no solutions. And so, just try something.

I mean, really, I think we're really good at it here in New Hampshire of saying, look, we're not just going to sit back, and we will let you know in a couple months how we're going to deal with this issue. We take things head-on. We stand up here and we answer questions absolutely head-on. If we don't have an answer, we will come back to you and get it for you in short order. That's leadership. You have to be able to provide it.

So, I'm not picking on any individual. But I think a lot of these issues are Federal. And I think communication and transparency -- I've always said -- is the foundation of public trust. And right now, Washington has very little public trust. And it's solvable.

Even if you're not solving the exact problem, even if you're not turning \$3.50 gas to \$2 gas tomorrow, at least let people know what the issue is, where the core of the problem is, and here's the five or six things we're trying to get to the core of the issue. I don't know.

But isn't stopping natural gas from coming to New England the fundamental problem, as State, many of led by Democrats, have done?

Governor Sununu:

And we're not getting any of that. Well, I don't think it's just natural gas. I think there's a fundamental problem with whether it's gas, or heating oil, or whatever it is. I mean, these make up -- there are certain things that make up our heating base mix, especially for homeowners. Again, you can't just turn that around tomorrow. A lot of people rely on heating oil.

Right.

Governor Sununu:

The oil has to get from Point A to Point B, one way or the other. We don't drill for oil here in New England and we are kind of at the end of the pipeline, right? And I think that's really the issue. Every bit of natural gas into New England has to come through Albany, New York, right? And if they're not opening

up the valve and opening up opportunity, then obviously we're just kind of managing through the restrictions that we have.

We're seeing, what \$3, \$3.80 gasoline on the roads? I mean, California, I hear, is hitting, like, \$6, \$7. I mean, it's just unbelievable. So, what do we do here? Well, I have all these massive tax cuts. Obviously, I love to brag about the tax cuts. But you know what that means? Consumers have to pay less. Families have to pay less. Businesses have to pay less, so therefore they have more financial flexibility to cut costs on the retail side in other things, in other areas.

We've done a lot to manage energy costs, frankly more than anyone else in the northeast, to make sure the energy costs as a whole aren't skyrocketing, right? Energy should be dealt with a do-no-harm mentality first, because it's so hard. And you know who has to pay those energy bills as much as anybody? An elderly person on a fixed income, a low-income family, whatever it might be, they have to bear that burden of turning on a light as much as anyone else does. And so, therefore, in many ways, those additional costs are regressive on low-income families. They hurt them the most, which is why it's so important the Federal Government gets their act together and starts doing something.

Wealthy families can afford to keep the lights on. They're going to keep their oil coming, and they can afford to pay the high prices. Middle- and low-income families, they cannot. And the Democrats in Washington are sitting there talking about everything under the sun that doesn't pertain to this. And I think that's just a giant frustration in America right now.

I didn't mean to go on so long. But inflation and supply chain is the issue that is really stopping individuals from moving forward, hampering us economically without a doubt. If you can take care of those things, everything else can really start coming into line.

I was just going to say, Commissioner Shibi, are any of the childhood vaccinations, school clinics going to run up against Christmas vacation? Is that going to be kind of an issue, I guess, on the calendar? Or are those going to ramp up in time to...

Commissioner Shibi:

The school-based clinics, yeah. I mean, obviously the whole point of doing school-based clinics is for really about convenience. The kids are there. The parents can come afterschool. But we will still have community-based clinics. You'll still have 500-plus Providers that are providing vaccines across the State.

So, our hope is we're bringing our Contracts to G&C this coming Wednesday, or at least quite a few of them, that will get ramped up. We will start the clinics before school vacation. And we will certainly be ready to do statewide access to school-based clinics after vacation.

Is it true the school kids get lollipops and how come I didn't get one?

Commissioner Shibi:

I can arrange that.

Okay.

Governor Sununu:

Adults have to earn lollipops. Sorry, Michael.

I never get it.

Governor Sununu:

You got to earn it.

I never get it.

Governor Sununu:

You got to earn it. Did you get any lollipops on Halloween?

We...

Governor Sununu:

I would love to know what you went as for Halloween.

I scared the snot out of my neighbors. I went as me. We did give out real candy: Kit-Kats and peanut butter cups.

Governor Sununu:

You got to.

What did you do?

Governor Sununu:

There you go. I do chocolate and I do Blow Pops. I have a chocolate basket with mostly Kit-Kats, M&Ms, Milky Way. And then, I do the fruity basket with Blow Pops and Skittles.

Okay.

Just circling back to some of the data issues, I know something you guys have talked about is vaccination clinics, specifically in communities with low vaccination rates.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

And if it's hard to know what the vaccination rate is, I know the State data did have that nice, like, breakdown by, like, town.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

And the CDC doesn't have something like that. So how is having to rely on CDC impacting efforts like that? You really don't have good booster data at all. How is it impacting not necessarily like the big overall approach, but some of those more targeted approaches that you, it seems like, really need that type of data?

Governor Sununu:

Right, sure. So a couple pieces there, really great question. When we're relying on the CDC data, the question is -- sorry, if I can just repeat it. When we're relying on the CDC data, how are we being hampered, if anything, in terms of our more targeted efforts in areas that are less vaccinated than others?

So, there's a couple pieces there. Number 1, we do have some regional data. We do know areas that have been traditionally been lesser served. Those areas, that hasn't really fluctuated too much. So the bad news is we know where they are. The good news is it's pretty consistent, so we can really target it.

The other piece is it's not that we don't have any data, of course. We do have some Providers, especially in the inner cities, the smaller cities of, like, Manchester or Nashua, and places like that, that tend to have pockets of underserved populations. And so, we can talk directly to those hospitals, talk directly to those Providers and get a sense.

The good news is, is when you're talking about vaccinations -- initial vaccinations and boosters, it's roughly the same stuff. So it's not like you have to go to a booster clinic or a vaccine clinic. When we set up a mobile van in one of those underserved locations, they can do both, right? So we know with one -- if you excuse the pun -- with one shot, we're kind of targeting both opportunities in terms of getting the vaccine and getting the booster out.

But that's a great example. That's the part that I like to be a little more precise, to be sure, and especially in rural areas. That's probably where we get the -- I get -- or going back to Adam's comment -- probably the most frustrated, especially in some of the underserved rural areas.

So, again, we're kind of going on the traditional data where we have -- keep going after where we're seeing it, keep going after where we might see pockets of COVID spring up, or the areas where we see hospitalizations increase the most. Okay.

I'll do one more.

Governor Sununu:

Oh, yeah, go ahead.

Speaking of the rural areas, I've been talking to some Providers in Coos County who are usually trying to do their own contact tracing and they got kind of overwhelmed with the big surge there.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

And I know you guys have scaled back on your contact tracing. You don't have all the National Guard helping out. I mean, are you looking at ramping that up at all?

Governor Sununu:

Well, any community that's having trouble doing contact tracing, we're always willing to help, obviously. Contact tracing has become easier, just because of the vaccine issue, right? Now, folks, if you're vaccinated, it just makes it a lot easier. Or if someone in your family's vaccinated, or the folks at work are vaccinated, it just makes it a lot easier. And the risk is simply less.

So we really focus -- I don't want to speak for Commissioner Shibinette, but we really focus on direct family members, most importantly, that would typically and most likely contract the virus from other family members that remain in close contact. We have a lot of situations where folks might have COVID, but other family members are staying away. They're literally kind of bunking in another part of the house for a couple weeks. They're kind of doing their quarantining. Other folks can kind of go on with their everyday lives.

So is it maybe schools? I know we will sometimes do different types of contact tracing. And that's kind of on them a little bit, because they might have different -- or I should say their metrics and standards for controlled might be a little bit different from the State's. But if there's gaps in the system, of course the State's always willing to step up and help. All right. Okay? Are you all set?

I'm good.

Governor Sununu:

I didn't know. I saw you take your glasses off.

I was just taking my glasses off.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah. Usually when someone takes their glasses off, they're ready for a real hard-hitting question with the Governor. Okay, great. Well, look, like I said we're going to be back here on a weekly basis just bringing folks up-to-speed. I think, by this time next week, the 5- to 11-year-olds will be fully authorized. We can give a little bit of an update, as we know more information, and how that's going to be distributed. I think we will just be that much further down the road. Until then, everyone have a great week and great weekend. Thank you.