



Office of Governor Christopher T. Sununu
Press Conference
Wednesday, November 10, 2021 at 3:00 p.m.

Governor Sununu:

Is this for me? Is this from you? Sorry. David left me a friendly reminder, as we kick off. Friendly reminder, please breathe and slow down, which is always good advice for the Governor. I'll do my best. I'll do my best. Good to see everyone. Good to see everybody here today. Well, thank you, everyone, for joining us.

Before we get going with a Public Health update, I do want to talk just a few brief moments about today's Executive Council and the importance of getting these Federal vaccine funds approved. I'd like to thank a bipartisan majority of the Executive Council for voting to approve the funds. My Administration worked with the Council to find a solution to move forward in a bipartisan manner and ensure we got these funds out to help with vaccine distribution and a variety of other issues, as well.

The vote by the Council to approve the funds will definitely help speed up that distribution process, which is a good thing for all of our citizens, putting funding behind the efforts and help battle the pandemic. It's important to note that as part of the vote to accept, a bipartisan majority of the Executive Council also voted to approve this Nonbinding Resolution that has made it abundantly clear that the State of New Hampshire does stand firmly against the Federal Vaccine Mandates. With that, we can turn it over to the Department of Public Health for an update. Dr. Chan?

Dr. Chan:

Great, thank you, and good afternoon. So just a very brief numbers update for today: our Data Dashboard is up-and-running and the backlog of cases has been worked through. So the numbers being reported today are accurate.

We are announcing 736 new people diagnosed with COVID-19 today. In fact, we're averaging in the last week about 650 new infections each day. And there are 5,455 people currently with active or current infection.

Test-positivity has also increased over the last week. We're currently at around 7.2% of all tests that are positive for COVID-19. Hospitalizations have also increased. 244 people currently hospitalized statewide with COVID-19 and unfortunately the number of people dying from COVID-19 remains high. There are four new deaths from COVID-19 to report today. Two of these individuals are associated with long-term care facilities, bringing the total number of people that have died during this pandemic to 1,617.

In the last week, there have been 31 new deaths related to COVID-19 that we have reported out. That's of just in the last seven days. And we are also seeing an increasing number of deaths reported from long-term care facilities, although the majority of deaths continue to be in our community setting.

So, COVID-19 vaccines are now available for everybody 5 years of age-and-older. We encourage and strongly recommend that everybody get vaccinated and become fully vaccinated. This includes a

recommendation for parents and guardians to have their children and teenagers vaccinated against COVID-19 to protect themselves, to protect the child, to protect the teenager and the family.

These vaccines have been shown to be safe and highly effective at preventing COVID-19, and certainly very effective at preventing severe disease and complications of severe disease like hospitalization and death. And so, we continue to work with our community partners, and particularly with our Regional Public Health Network Partners to get vaccines out into the community. And so, I think people will be seeing an increasing number of clinics being set up.

We continue to work with our Public Health Networks to set up a combination of both school-based clinics but also community-based pediatric vaccination clinics to support the vaccination efforts that are ongoing in our communities from our Healthcare Providers and our commercial pharmacies. And so, access to vaccines will be increasingly available in the coming weeks, and we strongly recommend and encourage everybody 5 years of age-and-older to be vaccinated. Thank you.

Commissioner Shibinette:

I think this message might be for me, too. Just a couple of short updates: an outbreak update. We have one outbreak closure to announce, which is Riverwoods in Manchester. There are seven new outbreaks in institutional settings over the last week-or-so to announce. They include Epsom Health Center; Inn at Deerfield; Maple Leaf Healthcare Center; Maplewood Nursing Home; Pine Rock Manor; Pleasant View Center; and Webster at Rye. That brings our total for institutional outbreaks to 23.

As Dr. Chan said, with increasing demand for vaccines and boosters for the last couple weeks, and we expect it to increase over the coming weeks, we do have a Contract with Onsite Medical, which has a variety of different avenues to increase our vaccine output in our State. So, in the new three to four weeks, we will be increasing our mobile teams from four to six teams that will be going out and setting up kind of popup mobile vaccine clinics.

We will also start opening some fixed sites around the State through Onsite Medical. So our first two will be in Plymouth and in Berlin. That'll take about three to four weeks to set up those fixed-site clinics. But those are the first two of approximately four or five that we're going to set up for fixed sites. I think that's all I have. Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Great, thank you very much, Commissioner. As a lot of folks have seen with the data, in both the COVID numbers, the hospitalization numbers, and unfortunately the deaths that are attributed to COVID here in New Hampshire, they continue to be on the rise, as we feared. All of Northern New England, you're seeing a pretty drastic increase in cases in Vermont and Maine. And that really goes a lot with the seasonality, unfortunately, of what we were anticipating. And we anticipate you'll see a gradual increase in some of these numbers across the greater northeast region, as we get further into fall, ultimately into the winter months.

As a reminder, New Hampshire does continue to have the four State-run testing sites. We've gotten a lot of questions about testing. We have four State-run testing sites to help with the increased demand of testing, whether it be for you or your children, whatever might be. And you can go onto our website to find out where those sites are and book an appointment, to make sure that we can kind of get

back in the game. We know that a lot of folks need to get tests when they are experiencing flulike symptoms.

We continue to have vaccine appointments available for the 5- to 11-year-olds. And those appointments are starting this week -- or have started. And a lot of the clinics will be continuing on in school districts and start in the coming weeks, as well. So if you have any questions obviously for any potential school clinics, you can contact your school districts to see what they might be proposing, and then determine whether that's the right path for you and your child, or going to one of the more traditional, either your Pediatrician or your pharmacies to get the vaccines and/or your boosters.

Obviously there's a large demand. But you can always go to the website at vaccines.gov to enter your zip code, to find your next available appointment. So there's a lot of website opportunity in terms of being able to find and make those appointments.

DHMC, Dartmouth-Hitchcock, is hosting vaccine clinics for their patients who are 5 to 11 years old this weekend, actually, at several of their locations. And they're also hosting a public vaccination clinic up at Lebanon High School this Saturday. So, again, I think that's really good news that everyone's really getting into the game about making all of this much more accessible, especially as we have kind of a push onto the system with both boosters and kids getting vaccinated at the same time. So, lots of opportunity out there, but we still have a lot to manage, not just today but in the coming months. With that, we can open up for questions.

Q&A Session

Governor, can you give us a sense of how the Executive Council came around to yes on this money that you described as crucial?

Governor Sununu:

Well, a couple of the Councilors had approached us with an idea of doing some type of Nonbinding Resolution. I think there was an appreciation that they wanted to make sure that, while a Nonbinding Resolution doesn't have any force of law behind it, they wanted to make sure that their voice of not just themselves but individuals that they represented were heard. And that's a fine avenue of doing it, if it makes them more comfortable to get to a yes on those dollars.

I think there was a little bit of -- my understanding is there was a little bit of back-and-forth about what it should say. And I think they all had a little bit of input there. But when we came in this morning, it seemed that they had come to some type of resolution. They thought they had gone back-and-forth. I can't speak to exactly the discussions they had amongst themselves. They were all happy to some extent with the Resolution. I don't think Councilor Warmington loved the Resolution, but she knew the value of getting this money across the line.

So, at the end of the day, it wasn't just three votes. You had four votes from Councilor Wheeler, who tends to be much more conservative on this issue, Councilor Warmington, a Democrat. The other Republicans got onboard and it was a 4-0 vote. So it was great. It really was. And it shows that there's always a way to find a solution.

Just because something gets struck down, I give the Council a lot of credit. They didn't back off of it. They knew that there was probably some work to be done to try to get to a yes, and the value of doing that, and they did it. And so, I'm very appreciative of them working hard to get that done. They deserve a

lot of credit for that. And at the end of the day, now we have -- that Federal money isn't just being left on the table and not being used. We're moving forward with it, which is terrific.

To what extent are you going to get involved, or try to convince Lawmakers on the Fiscal Committee to also approve that money, because it has to clear that hurdle, as well?

Governor Sununu:

Well, obviously we will answer any questions that folks like. But, yeah, I think the fact that it passed today not just with a couple Councilors but four Councilors in a spectrum on both political sides, I think, gives a lot of backing and credence to hopefully allow those Fiscal Committee Members the confidence to be able to feel comfortable moving forward on it and doing it the right way.

But obviously we will answer any questions and help anyone that needs some more information. We've provided all the information that we can. And my sense is that that Fiscal Committee will hopefully take it up and pass it in the next week-or-so, I think, when they meet.

Do you know how many 5- to 11-year-olds have been vaccinated at this point?

Governor Sununu:

We don't. We don't know exactly. Look, one of the most important things the funding does is start setting up the Vaccine Registry. It is so vital. 49 other States have, in some ways, more accurate data that we do right now. And we usually lead the charge with accurate data and now we're kind of behind the times a little bit, because we are the only State in the country without a Vaccine Registry.

The dollars that were approved today will allow us to move that forward. So it may take a few weeks or even a couple months to make sure that we get it up-and-running, the connection with the pharmacies, the opt-out system that has to be put into place there.

So we're going to be -- it's not flying in the dark. But we're doing a little bit of estimating with some of the different datapoints. How many people have had boosters? Exactly how many 5- to 11-year-olds are there? We will have some sense of it, but probably not as accurate data as we like.

So we just keeping pushing the message as strong as we can, responding. We have so many feelers out there, if you will, 500 different locations that are giving out vaccine. That allows them to come back to the State and say, hey, we need more here. We're not using enough there. Here's where some of the gaps regionally in the system might be. And so, we use a lot of that kind of on-the-ground information to make a lot of our decisions. So we're not in the dark by any means. But it's just not as accurate as we're used to.

Has there been any thoughts of maybe opening some National Guard sites for the 5- to 11-year-olds using VINI again for that age group?

Governor Sununu:

The 5- to 11-year-olds, I think there's a lot of interest in the Public Health Networks and the clinics that are going to be supported, whether they're through Public Health Networks or school districts assigning their -- bringing in their own teams to do these school-based clinics. So there's a lot of interest there.

I don't think we've had anyone reach out and say, hey, we can't do a school-based clinic. We need the National Guard. I don't think there's been any request there, because there's been so much, I think, positive push by the Public Health Networks to be the driver for those districts.

On the cases, hospitalizations, deaths -- and feel free, Dr. Chan, too -- but by today's numbers, I mean, we haven't seen numbers like this since January in some cases. Why are so many people dying at this point? And again, just the caseload.

Governor Sununu:

The vast majority of deaths are still in the unvaccinated realm, right, with folks that are just making that choice to not get vaccinated. That's incredibly unfortunate. There's still vastly the vast majority which are still older and more medically frail or vulnerable populations. So the reasons haven't changed. It's just that the shift isn't to as large of a population base, because so many of us are vaccinated.

But the Delta variant is very aggressive. If you compare it to the winter last year, you didn't have the Delta variant. It was kind of that initial -- I think we called it Alpha, maybe, the Alpha variant. This one is much more aggressive. The breakthrough cases are really starting to show now and it has a much more severe effect on individuals. We see it much more severe with the younger population.

So, all those things kind of combine to create the perfect storm of, even though 60%, 70% of our population's vaccinated, that 30% is extremely vulnerable, which is why we keep pushing the messaging. We're just not going to slow down on that aspect of it. And look, even if it's just a few more people every day, we want thousands more a day to start their vaccination process. But even just a few more a day is a win. And so, we're going to keep pushing as hard as we can.

But the boosters are really critical. I can't tell you how many people I meet that think, well, I got my initial vaccination. It's good. No, the breakthrough cases are real. And so, you just have to keep an eye on it.

Do you know where cases might be going? Any estimates on how high we could see numbers go?

Governor Sununu:

Dr. Chan always laughs when I predict this stuff. Look, if you looked at our numbers today versus December 10th -- or November 10th of last year, I want to say we're about 3 times as high, something like that. I mean, you can look at it.

So, is it realistic to say that if our vaccination rate continues to about where it is, could we see numbers, in terms of cases, about three times as high as they were last year? Yeah, I mean, that's very possible. And unfortunately that's what I'm planning on. I don't want to see it, obviously. But we're planning to have a system that feels that type of crunch.

We're in the northeast. If you look at Vermont's numbers, Vermont's one of the most vaccinated States in the country and their numbers have far-exceeded anything that they've ever seen in terms of caseload. Maine is getting up there. We are getting up there. And so, my sense is you're going to see that trend continue, as you get further into the fall and winter months. We need to be prepared. This is real. It's not going away anytime soon. And folks have to take it extremely seriously.

Can we hear from Dr. Chan a little bit on the mortality?

Governor Sununu:

Sure.

And is the vaccine changing anything, or are we still seeing that constant 1%, this totally unforgiving math of the pandemic? Is it just we're still going to see the mortality tracking on that same rate, even if the cases increase?

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, so I think it's important to differentiate cases from hospitalizations and deaths, right? So we know that the vaccines aren't going to be 100% protective. We've been saying that all along. And in fact, as the Delta variant emerged and as time has gone on, we've seen the vaccine efficacy or the effectiveness of the vaccine at preventing infection go down.

Now, there's still efficacy. There's still prevention there. But as a result of the Delta variant, and over time, we've seen the number of infections increase in everybody, vaccinated and unvaccinated alike. But it's important to differentiate that from hospitalizations and deaths, right?

The vaccines still remain very, very effective, highly effective at preventing hospitalizations and deaths. And so, even though as the numbers go up, we expect to see increases in the numbers of hospitalizations. We expect to see increases in the number of deaths.

We're still well-below where we were, in terms of the winter surge, in terms of seeing hospitalizations and deaths. And that's exactly the purpose of vaccination. Getting a booster will help boost that vaccine efficacy back to sort of the high levels we saw initially. It will help prevent infection. And so, we're recommending that people that are able to get a booster dose, particularly those that are at higher risk for severe disease, because it will help prevent infection.

But really we want to, I think, as the pandemic goes on, start to transition and pay more and more attention to the impact of vaccines on preventing hospitalizations and deaths, knowing that the virus will continue to circulate. So hospitalizations have gone up. Deaths have gone up, not as much as we would have seen if there wasn't a large number of people in our communities vaccinated already.

But I think the fact that we continue to see hospitalizations, we continue to see deaths at the levels we're seeing now speaks to the fact that we still need to get more people vaccinated. Vaccination is the best way to protect people against infection, but also, in particular, hospitalizations and deaths.

And flu season's starting to kick in, of course. Compare and contrast last year to this year. Obviously with fewer cases last year, it was a little bit easier to distinguish. Is it harder this time around with the volume?

Dr. Chan:

You mean about distinguishing between flu and COVID?

Well, I know the testing works and all that stuff. But in terms of just the people coming in and things like that, people with symptoms.

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, so certainly there are many different viral infections that can cause symptoms similar to what COVID-19 causes. Influenza's just one of the viruses. We saw very little influenza last year, both in New Hampshire and nationally. And I think, for a variety of reasons, we expect the influenza numbers to be higher this year.

Thankfully, we're still seeing relatively low numbers of influenza in the State. But I think as the season progresses, we're going to see more and more influenza. And that speaks also to the importance of people getting vaccinated against the influenza virus, right?

People can get both the COVID-19 vaccine and the influenza vaccine at the same time. They don't require separate visits, necessarily. And in fact, both vaccines are recommended to prevent influenza, to prevent COVID, and prevent the burden on our healthcare system from people either having symptoms and seeking testing for influenza or COVID, and reduce the burden that these two viruses can have on the number of people being hospitalized and the number of people dying, right?

I mean, both influenza and COVID can cause severe disease. We have seen higher levels of hospitalizations and deaths with COVID than we did with influenza. So I don't want to give the impression that these are like the same virus, they're very similar. Very different viruses, very different impact, but they're both vaccine-preventable.

And one last question for you. Oh, sorry, go ahead, Mike. Go.

It's probably the same one. Well, this is kind of different. But we're hearing from some people that their COVID test results may not have been accurate because of their blood type. Is that something that you're hearing of?

Dr. Chan:

Actually, no, I haven't. I've heard talk, or rumors, about -- I think we've heard rumors of inaccurate tests all along. We're not aware of people having inaccurate test results because there's something faulty with the test, right?

The accuracy of a test is going to depend on a number of factors, including which test somebody gets. We know that PCR tests are more accurate than antigen tests, particularly when you're testing somebody who might be asymptomatic. We know that PCR tests are much more accurate for picking up

asymptomatic infection than antigen tests. But we're not aware of any issues with the tests, themselves, in terms of not being able to pick up the virus. Thanks.

Governor Sununu:

Do we have any on the phone? Sorry.

Paula Tracy with InDepthNH:

Yes, good afternoon. I was interested in the timing and ability for the average New Hampshire child to be able to be vaccinated by December 24th. So if I have a kid who gets the first shot today, it would likely need the second shot to be administered by, like, the first week of December. Then, it would take another two weeks to be fully immunized, if I'm correct. That's about December 17th, seven days before Christmas Eve. What am I hearing is that people are getting booked out at least a week in advance, and I'm not sure whether it's a supply issue. But what do you think about the possibility that the majority of kids in the State whose parents -- I guess you have to know how many they're going to have -- but would be able to access it by the holiday? And also, Governor, could you tell me? You said last week that you plan to be booster shot. Have you been boosted (ph)?

Governor Sununu:

Sure; excuse me. So, yeah. Look, we want kids to be able to get vaccinated as fast as possible. Bookings are about a week out. You need about three weeks between the two shots. So, yeah, we want as many people to be vaccinated before December 24th as we can. But I don't think it's about December 24th. We just want as many kids to be vaccinated as fast as possible. So all that is beneficial.

We went through Christmas last year without having any vaccine for kids. We're going to go through Christmas this year with having an abundance of vaccine for kids. So, one way or another, we're going to be in much better shape this year than we were last year, in terms of vaccination and protecting kids. In terms of the booster, I think I'm scheduled for the booster on this Friday, I believe.

Alli Fam from NHPR:

Hello, good afternoon. My question is about VINI. I believe that some of Dartmouth-Hitchcock's clinics you can book through VINI. Is that going to be the case, as well, for the new fixed sites you mentioned? And then, also do you have a date expectation for those fixed sites getting stood up by Onsite?

Governor Sununu:

Sure, the quick answer there is yes, I believe so. But I'm going to turn to Commissioner ShibiNette for some of the details.

Commissioner ShibiNette:

Hi, thank you. I do know that Onsite plans to use VINI for some of their scheduling, both the mobile clinics that they're standing up and the fixed-site clinics. The timeframe for standing those up is three to four weeks. So right now, they're hiring Staff. They're ordering equipment. They're getting the

logistics set up. They're doing the mobile clinics now. They're like a popup clinic that are moving around the State. But the fixed sites, three to four weeks. And yes, VINI is going to be their scheduling software.

Commissioner, while you're up there, if you don't mind? Sorry. Can you just give us an update on the booster in long-term care and other institutional facilities? What kind of progress there, and where is it compared to where you want to see it?

Commissioner Shibinette:

I talked to the Healthcare Association probably last week. And of the facilities, these are nursing homes that either had a clinic or had one scheduled in the next week. It was right around 80%. So the vast majority of facilities have already have at least one booster clinic, if not boosted (sic) their whole building.

There were outliers that we're having trouble scheduling. So, we connected them with our team and the Regional Public Health Network to get them scheduled. Haven't heard back that there's been any issue since then, so it's exactly where I thought it would be. A vast majority, if not everybody, has accessed their booster clinics or have them scheduled.

And is the booster uptake rate similar to the original vaccination rate, or higher, or lower?

Commissioner Shibinette:

From what I'm hearing, it's about the same. Yeah.

And really quick, if you don't mind, on the Council vote today, this is something you had fought hard for. So, what was your reaction to seeing that money come in?

Commissioner Shibinette:

A great win for New Hampshire citizens, that's really it, right? We want to be able to give our citizens access to the vaccine all over the State. We want to be able to give the citizens and all of you accurate data around the vaccine. It's great for decision-making and it's great for not just State decision-making but individual decision-making for our citizens. So I think all around being able to execute this vaccine money both for the Registry and vaccine operations is a win for everybody in New Hampshire.

And in terms of the delays, you had described before, when do you see yourself at sort of back on par with the other 49 States that have already accepted and expended some of this money?

Commissioner Shibinette:

So, we're about six to eight weeks behind from when we initially proposed it. So the goal is to be completely caught up by then. Like I said, we're still out contracting. A good amount of the Contracts came through today for the things that we consider critical to us: school-based clinics; community-based

clinics, things like that. Some of the other things like the IIS system and the technology may take a little longer.

But access to vaccine, we've really moved things around in the State in the last couple weeks to make sure that everybody could at least get an appointment in the next couple weeks. And I think we were very successful in that. And I only expect, as demand goes up, we will be able to keep up with it better now that we have this money.

Governor Sununu:

Okay. Oh, couple more?

Well, one more.

Governor Sununu:

Sure.

With the \$5 million you had to spend that wasn't from the CDC, Governor, you have to -- no, no, for you, for you.

Governor Sununu:

Oh, for me. Oh, sorry.

Are you going to be able to backfill that in any way? I mean, because that was intended to go someplace else, right? I mean...

Governor Sununu:

It was. No, I'm going to have Commissioner Shibinette, because we were just talking about this beforehand.

Sorry.

Governor Sununu:

So, yeah, she can explain some of the details.

Are you going to get your \$5 million back, I guess, is the question?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

Commissioner Shibinette:

So are we going to get the ARPA funds back? No, but what we are going to do -- not directly. So what we're going to do is we don't want to leave that \$4.8 million on the table, because that would be typically sent back.

So DHHS and Public Health will go back this week and this money goes out until 2023. So this is not short-term money, right? We are going to have additional needs in the future that we will be able to use this \$4.8 million for.

So we are going to modify our Workplan and send it into the CDC for approval. And hopefully at the next Council meeting, we will be bringing back that \$4.8 million for accept-and-expend of Federal dollars. And we will be using it for different purposes.

Governor Sununu:

So, doesn't go back in but gets repurposed to where the needs are. Okay. Well, good, great. All right. Well, thank you, guys very much. Again, just get your booster. Get your kids vaccinated. Get yourself protected, because the rise is really here, if you look at not just our numbers but the States around us. Everyone's increasing and unfortunately will likely keep increasing with some of these COVID numbers at least into the coming weeks. But we want people to be safe, as we enter the holiday season. So there's still plenty of time to get vaccinated and get your booster. So, thank you, guys, so much.