



Office of Governor Christopher T. Sununu
Press Conference
Wednesday, January 19, 2022, at 3:00 p.m.

Governor Sununu:

Good afternoon, everybody. Well, thank you, all, for joining us. Lot to talk about, but we will try to be fairly quick today. Dr. Chan will be leaving us at 3:30, because he has a phone call with the school. So we will try to get to his Public Health update in just a moment.

Quickly, I just want to go over a little bit of data, because folks ask every once in a while. So this is kind of a little map. Folks are getting used to this map. This is kind of where the country is today. As a lot of folks saw, about a month ago, that map was very much in the yellow and orange. And now obviously especially with the Omicron variant moving very rapidly all across the country, some States, especially the Carolinas, Illinois, and others really just absolutely inundated with very, very high levels of COVID, specifically the Omicron variant, which now accounts for approximately well-over 95% actually of the cases we see across the country.

Our hospitalization data, folks have seen this graph before. And again, this is one of the charts we look at very, very closely to keep an eye on where our healthcare system is. How overburdened is it? And again, this really shows it is at capacity, to be sure. But it has not shut down. It has not stopped. I think we've found some very innov (ph) ways to be able to manage very high levels of the bed occupancy, while still providing access to healthcare and a revolving door of keeping Staff very flexible, trying to provide as much relief as we can to Nurses through either licensing more Nurses faster, which we've been very successful with, or bringing in some of our Strike Teams or out-of-state Teams to make sure that, again, we can give folks a break. And we're very appreciative of all the out-of-state Teams who are on the ground here in New Hampshire to help us. With that, I think we will turn it over to Dr. Chan for the Public Health update.

Dr. Chan:

Good afternoon. Just a brief numbers update for today; so we are reporting 595 new people diagnosed with COVID-19. Please be aware that this number is incomplete and additional test results are still being processed and will be updated on our Dashboard. We are, in fact, averaging about 3,100 new infections per day in New Hampshire over the last week. And there are currently 18,986 people with active infection in the State.

Test-positivity is at 22%. Currently there are 410 people hospitalized with COVID-19 statewide, as the Governor just displayed on the graph. And then, unfortunately, 24 new deaths from COVID-19 to report today, bringing the total number of deaths during this pandemic to 2,109 people that have died from COVID-19.

Based on the latest data on our Dashboard, we were currently averaging about three new deaths from COVID-19 each day. And as additional COVID-19 deaths are reported, this number will also be updated on the Data Dashboard. That's all I have. I will hand things over to the Commissioner. Thanks.

Commissioner Shibinette:

Good afternoon, just a brief outbreak update. We have one outbreak that closed since our last press conference last week. We opened six new outbreaks in the past week, mostly nursing homes, one correctional center. So currently we have 42 outbreaks in New Hampshire at congregate living centers or long-term care centers. Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Great, thank you, Commissioner. A few things just to cover and then we can open up for questions for whatever folks need. Obviously we continue to see very high numbers of individual cases of COVID. We've seen that cross the country as the graph that we just showed.

Omicron is definitely out there and it is circulating far more widely than testing numbers even suggest. We know there is a lot more home testing going on. And folks are finding out earlier and often. That's a good thing. But, again, all the data isn't always reported up to the State and the national level.

On the positive side, even with all these cases of Omicron spreading is that right now Omicron appears to have much less severe symptoms and it's likely that there are many people out there who are asymptomatic or don't even know that they have COVID as a function of the less severe symptoms that you see specifically with Omicron, which again is by far the dominant strain here in New Hampshire.

But what we do want to urge people is to really watch for symptoms. Be sure you're taking them very seriously. Anyone who is sick really does need to remain home. And anyone who suspects that their child might be sick -- excuse me -- needs to keep them home and away from school. And it really is the best way we can keep to ensure that their friends and their Teachers, and their classmates are not infected and spreading COVID, as well.

Vaccine, as we always say, does remain the single greatest tool that we have. This week, we're bringing up two more fixed vaccination sites. You can see this map that we have online. In addition to the five existing vaccination sites that we have, two more are coming online. You can see those in green.

There's a new Stratham location that opened today. So folks that in the seacoast area, the new Stratham vaccine location is now open. And on Friday we're opening an additional fixed vaccination site here in Concord. And both Concord and Stratham will be opened seven days a week from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

The booster is so critical. It really is. It really makes all the difference in the world in terms of the severity of symptoms if and when you should be infected, specifically even with Omicron. It can really make the difference of getting back to work and back to school quickly or being laid up for weeks and weeks on end.

By the end of this week, though, there will be seven locations across the State administering vaccine on a walk-in basis. So you can literally just find a location, hop in your car in the morning, and show up. And you're very much bound to get your vaccine.

Next week, we anticipate bringing three more fixed vaccination sites online: Salem, Manchester, Nashua. In addition, we expect a teens fixed vaccination site to be online before the end of the month. So for full rundown, again, you can go to [COVID19.nh.gov](https://www.covid19.nh.gov) and click the button that says Fixed Vaccination Sites to learn more information about hours and where exactly the locations are. But again we're trying to make sure we have good geographic access, good easy access to getting not just your booster but your initial vaccine, if you so choose.

We also want to talk very briefly about two more things. One is just our Strike Teams. We talk about Strike Teams a lot. They've been very instrumental in providing flexibility with our healthcare system. And two weeks ago, we announced the deployment of two State-facilitated Strike Teams to our long-term care facilities.

In addition to these two Teams in Nashua and Bedford, a third State-facilitated Strike Team will start taking patients at the beginning of February over at the Edgewood facility in Portsmouth, so, again, trying to get good geographic coverage. And again, making sure that folks that -- in addition to patients transferred to County Nursing Homes, as a result of the actions we've taken, we just want to make sure that those transfers can happen. It allows a lot of flexibility within our healthcare system, and has opened up countless beds across the State, so that we can be flexible and available for those needing healthcare services. And the last thing here is a little bit on our at-home testing push.

As folks know, there's a lot of talk this week surrounding home testing. Specifically the Federal Government are now offering home tests across the country. That is a great service and a great resource. As folks know, in New Hampshire, we've already accomplished two rounds of at-home testing which obviously we're going to keep trying to do, keep making sure that at-home testing is available either through the local or more Federal means.

To that end, this week we just want folks to know that we anticipate bringing forward a request to the Legislative Fiscal Committee to spend about another \$10 million for the State to purchase at-home tests. Now, we've heard how hard it is across the country for folks to find at-home tests. We've been very successful with it in New Hampshire. And so, we definitely want to keep that going.

We did have a call with the White House earlier this week, where we heard from a couple different Governors who's wanted to kind of replicate the at-home testing program we had here. But unfortunately their tests had been pulled back by the Federal Government, because they're trying to put as many as they can into their 500 million pot of tests.

So we're not sure where that will go. But we're going to move forward with at least requesting the dollars, make the purchase, and hopefully get a third version of our at-home test program up-and-running. So we're going to try to be as aggressive as we can about that, not exactly knowing how easy it'll be to obtain the tests. So we're going to keep working with a variety of different vendors to make sure that that can happen. And hopefully it can.

There is the Federal Government site, though, where folks can go and click online to receive a test. Do we have that website? Covidtests.gov, sorry, covidtests.gov. I apologize. We don't have it on the screen here. But that's the Federal site where you can go click and get an at-home test. I think it takes a couple weeks maybe for it to be delivered but it's well-worth it. They're good to have. You never know when you're going to need them. And access to the test is just a huge opportunity to help limit the spread of the virus.

The earlier you know, the faster you know, the better you are, and the easier it is to take preventative measures from getting it to be transmitted. And as we know, Omicron is very, very transmissible throughout our communities. So, with that, we can open up for questions if folks have questions.

Q&A Session

Okay. You're talking about opening more vaccination sites. And we were talking to a hospital just yesterday in North Conway that said it's cutting back because the demand has dropped off recently, dramatically, so that we redeploy those folks back in.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

Are we at that point where, just as we saw it sort of plateau in the first rounds, that we're seeing a plateau in perhaps the booster?

Governor Sununu:

Oh, without a doubt, yeah. I think we've seen a plateau in the demand for the booster ever since just after the New Year, frankly. But that doesn't mean we're going to sell ourselves short in terms of kind of trying to promote it and make it available.

A lot of healthcare facilities are pulling back a little bit on themselves doing the vaccination. So, again, we will try to take that burden off them a little bit and allow them to focus a little more on their patients.

So, it's just about kind of redistributing who's doing what to keep the system as efficient as possible but keep access to the booster as easy as you can to get. And we will look at the numbers, as they come in. And we can make adjustments, as needed, in the future.

In terms of testing, is there anything we can do to speed up some of the results in some places? I know Vault was having issues. The State sites were seeing some delays.

Governor Sununu:

Again, the Federal Contractors have been absolutely inundated across the country with demand. And so, again, we try to hold our Contractors to a 24-hour turnaround as best as we can. But they've all been inundated with an unprecedented level of demand on testing, which, again, is why the at-home tests are so important as at least a first brush to determine whether you're positive for not, especially for kids and folks just trying to keep their lives as normal as possible. You can do it in the ease of your own home. So, no, we're pushing on those Contractors as best we can. There's -- I don't know of any testing facility that isn't just all out 24/7 trying to keep up with the demand right now.

ICU bed capacity right now in the State, are we monitoring that and trying to redistribute and relocate people? I'm just wondering if whether you or Dr. Chan could me sort of an idea on where we're at?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, we monitor the ICU bed capacity for all the different facilities. And again, similar to what we talked about a few weeks ago, the hospitals actually work very, very well together in terms of being able to share resources, whether it's moving patients from one location to another, if need be. I think more often than not you're finding what we're doing is just expanding the ability for hospitals to expand their ICU capacity. We basically expand their licensed bed capacity, whether under active beds or ICU beds. And again, if there's a need, hospitals are working together to make sure. So it does happen from time-to-time. But for the most part, we just try to make sure our hospitals have the resources they need for the care that they can.

But are we bumping against on a consistent way that we're at capacity, we're at capacity, or are we seeing dips in the past month or so, and...

Governor Sununu:

Well, as you can see from that chart, it kind of ebbs and flows, without a doubt. A lot of the folks that are in our ICUs, without a doubt, are still there because of our Delta surge. Our surge in December was really about Delta. It was much more severe. You saw a lot more of the severity of those cases. And we still have a lot of those individuals, given that, when you're in an ICU, chances are you're in there four, five, six weeks, maybe more. I mean, who knows? So a lot of those folks are still there and hopefully on the upside and getting better. But a lot of them have been there since mid-December with Delta.

So there's going to be a push on the system, I think, for quite some time. Hopefully with Omicron, with the less severity, we see it go down. Luckily, it's not skyrocketing up, like it was before, which is great. And hopefully we see a downward trend here very shortly.

Governor, is there anything we could do to help kids? Right now with COVID running through schools, so many kids are home. A lot are home because they're having to quarantine, because it's running through households and they're falling behind. Can anything be done so that the school systems -- because obviously it's important that they stay home, so the spread isn't there. Is there anything that can be done to help kids from school systems to help kids not fall behind?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, I think that we've made a huge step again with the five-day quarantine and isolation guidance that changed just about a week, week and a half ago. That was a huge step forward to, again, making sure that kids that weren't symptomatic anymore, that had lessening -- had broken their fever and all of that and were clearly less transmissible, using the CDC Guidelines as kind of the backdrop of allowing schools to -- we wanted to make sure that schools knew that the new guidance said after five days with those lessening symptoms a child can come back into school.

So I mean, we've literally cut the time in half-or-more for the time that kids have to be quarantined or isolated. And I think that's a really positive aspect about allowing kids to get back into school as fast as they can. That's really where they need to be. Okay, sure.

Alli Fam with NHPR:

Great, good afternoon, Governor. I have a two-part question. The first part is for Dr. Chan which is, first, what would you recommend for patients who are concerning taking Ivermectin to treat COVID-19? And the second part of that question is for you, Governor Sununu, given concerns Healthcare Experts have around Ivermectin, should patients have the right to get it over-the-counter at a pharmacy?

Governor Sununu:

So I'll answer and then I'll ask Dr. Chan to come up. When it comes to treating COVID, the best treatment is between a Doctor and their patient. I mean, that's really where the State does not really get involved with what Doctors can and cannot prescribe, per se.

If it's available, then a Doctor can prescribe it. But they need to make that decision based on the symptoms they're seeing, based on whatever that individual case might be. And so, that's, again, something that really needs to be determined between the Doctor and the patient.

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, thanks for the question about Ivermectin. And I'll just first acknowledge that I think everybody is looking for access to effective available therapeutics to treat COVID-19. And there are effective available therapeutics out there, like some of the oral antiviral medications, like PAXLOVID and Molnupiravir, and some of the intravenous infused medicines like Sotrovimab or Remdesivir.

Ivermectin, however, is not a medication that has been proven or shown definitively to effectively treat people with COVID-19. This is still an active area of research. But the medical and professional organizations that put out treatment guidelines, like the NIH, the National Institutes of Health, and the Infectious Disease Society of America to not recommend, or, in fact, recommend against use of Ivermectin because of the quality and the findings of various scientific studies out there that have not shown that Ivermectin is a proven treatment for COVID-19, meaning the benefits of treatment don't outweigh the risks of therapy. And for that reason, Ivermectin continues to not be medically recommended by these professional medical societies as a treatment for COVID-19. Obviously there's still research ongoing around this. It certainly could change in the future. But for right now, Ivermectin is not a recommended therapy to treat COVID-19. Thanks.

Governor Sununu:

All set there? Sure, of course, yeah.

Governor, Patricia with Boston 25 News.

Governor Sununu:

Sure.

The issue of Harmony Montgomery, if I may?

Governor Sununu:

Oh, sure.

Yesterday's letter, you alluded to the lack of ICPC. That's something that our station has been reporting for two weeks and we've been trying to get answers from Massachusetts, which we haven't been able to, due to privacy laws. Your letter actually offers some insights. You mentioned that Massachusetts asked New Hampshire to start or initiate an ICPC, but then New Hampshire had some more questions for Massachusetts. At that point, I'm wondering what follow-up was there from New Hampshire? That was in December of 2018. The little girl was transferred in 2019.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

At some point in those months, there must have been some sort of follow-up, I presume, from DCYF in New Hampshire. Was there or was there not any follow-up? And what did that consist of?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, it's my understanding that Mass. DCF had asked State of New Hampshire to do a Home Study in 2019. New Hampshire, in turn, asked for a little more information. And within weeks, I think in early sometime in February of 20 -- I'm sorry. Let me back up. December of 2018 that request was made.

In just a few weeks, I think in early February of 2019, before we even received the information back from DCF, a Court jumped in and made the Decision to give full custody of Harmony to this monstrous individual with a horrible, violent background, multiple arrests and convictions, and so our question is: why would the Judge make that Decision without the Home Study being done, without the Interstate Compact being put in, or request that an Interstate Compact be completed and put into place as part of that Decision? And so, it was incredibly erupt [sic]. And at that point, the child was in full custody of the parent.

So did New Hampshire ask Massachusetts, when they did not hear from them on their added information that they needed, did New Hampshire follow up with Massachusetts and Massachusetts simply not respond?

Governor Sununu:

No, I think my understanding is both organizations were working. It doesn't happen overnight. Both organizations were working in the weeks that follow, I think in early-2019 now, just a few weeks later after the holiday. They were working to get questions answered and all of that. It doesn't happen overnight.

But for the Judge to make that Decision almost immediately, while that process was in the middle of going back-and-forth between the two Agencies, that's what's most concerning, why that Decision was made, how it could possibly be made, why an Interstate Compact wasn't put into place. It's all incredibly abnormal and it was clearly one of the initial failings of the system that put Harmony in harm's way. And it's terrible.

So, was New Hampshire DCYF simply not aware that Harmony was in Massachusetts in February 2019?

Governor Sununu:

I can't answer that exactly in terms of what DCYF knew in terms of her location. They were asked to do a Home Study on this side of the border. And they were going through that process and said, well, we need some more information about what is this? What's the background on the case, dah-dah-dah-dah-dah-dah. And then, a Judge placed her with her father fulltime. And once that happens, that process really -- and there's not a request for the Home Study and the Interstate Compact. That process moved forward.

Okay. I know that in the summer of 2019, Police and DCF had been to that house -- DCYF, rather, had been to that house. And then, your letter yesterday mentioned an interaction in December of 2019. I presume that was the DCYF. What did DCYF New Hampshire do during that six-months period, from June 2019, when we first saw in Police Reports that they'd actually visited the home, to December 2019, when your letter referenced their interaction?

Governor Sununu:

So, again, that's part of our internal review. That's exactly what we're digging into. We're looking at it internally. We're looking at both DCYF's approach and action, where things could have been better, where the system worked, where it didn't work.

Right now, in the early process of that, that's where we say okay, this isn't about blaming one system or the other. This isn't about casting blame. It's about bringing Harmony home. People are angry. I'm angry. Everybody's angry. And at the end of the day, you have to be transparent about it. You have to get to the bottom of it.

But it all started with that Judge. I don't know who this Judge was putting that child, that little girl in the custody of that monster. And that gets us all pretty furious. So, I appreciate we don't have all the answers today. That's exactly why I said we're doing an internal review.

But part of that process is making some demands on the Judicial System of Massachusetts that made absolutely unbelievable Decision. I talked to Governor Baker about this. He shares my anger and how upset. And again, we're going to do our internal review. He wants the same accountability on his side, because we're New England. We have all these States. Families are transient. We all have to get on the same page.

So, it isn't about blaming one system or the other. It's about answering these questions. Hopefully we can still have time to bring Harmony home safe, and make sure that whatever failures of our systems, if there are any -- and I think there clearly are -- that we address them. We're transparent about them. And we actually provide remedies there, so that families know that we're going to do everything we can to make sure this doesn't happen again.

Massachusetts hasn't been very responsive with us, like very cooperative for privacy laws.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

I'm wondering if you're satisfied with the response you're getting, or do you feel that more needs to be done and quicker?

Governor Sununu:

Well, we all want to move as fast as we can. I also appreciate privacy laws. I mean, this is an active case. We can't just open everything up to the public as fast as we would all like to, of course. It is an active case and so you have to be very careful. You're talking about a young girl. You're talking about a family. You're talking about individuals. So, you have to be careful with that process. So, I respect that.

But the Judicial process, though, I think does have to be opened up. That was a Decision that was made long ago. It was what I would call a single-point Decision made in February of 2019. And it isn't just a Decision where you go, I wonder why. There's no logic to it. There's no logic on the face of it as to why that would happen. And it was clearly the impetus of this young girl being put into harm's way.

And here's my last question. This was all -- I think it all boiled down to parental rights coming first. Do you feel that there needs to be -- does this signal it's time for a change, that we really need to sort of look very closely at those biological parents, as well, especially when it involves foster care children?

Governor Sununu:

Well, I wouldn't say that yet. Again, we're going to go through a whole review of the system, at least on our end. And I think Massachusetts will likely do the same and say, look -- we always do it with any of these critical incidents that involve a child. This is very common internal practice. We're always trying to update our practice, see where there are gaps in the system.

This was a very serious issue, in terms of Harmony being missing. But even on minor cases, sometimes, we want to do an internal review. I don't think we're at the point where we're ready to make

any final conclusions about parental rights and all of this. We're just focused on bringing Harmony home safe right now. That is the top priority.

Okay. On another subject, could I ask about the Legislature's Abortion Bills that are coming forward. Yesterday, apparently House Bill 1609 was heard and as Pro-Choice Activist would say was gutted, in terms of provisions that you were seeking. Right now, there's a hearing on House Bill -- or Senate Bill 399, which would essentially repeal last year's and there are other provisions. I wondered if there's any particular piece of legislation that you particularly would like to follow and back, or what you'd like to see come out of the discussions.

Governor Sununu:

So, I think House Bill 1609 was originally intended -- was a good bill. And like a Pro-Choice Governor in a pro-choice community, I think it took the absolute right steps in terms of saying this ultrasound is too aggressive. I would have liked to have seen the exceptions put in there for rape and incest. I would have liked them to take up the option of not criminalizing Doctors. I think that all should be put in there.

They went and made a change to it, made an amendment to it that really watered it down. It was a step. I think it really tries to address the ultrasound provisions. So that's a positive step forward, but it's not nearly enough for my liking, of course.

So, any way we can get back to those original provisions that House Bill 1609 was looking to go after, that's exactly what I'm going to continue to try to pursue. And there's a couple different ways to do that. But obviously there's a lot of headwinds against it, as well.

Do you feel that there's possible consensus that can be made to get to a better spot than we are right now?

Governor Sununu:

I'm always optimistic that you can find a better solution.

And I just wanted...

Governor Sununu:

I think we've taken an initial step. But it can be better and we will -- going to fight for it as best we can, see what we can do.

And would the one key issue for you, the ultrasound, be the most important part of that that needs to be repealed?

Governor Sununu:

Well, I think that's in there. It looks like the amendment that they did agree to does take the ultrasound requirement out. That's a good first step. But I think there's more to do. I don't want to say that one provision's more important. That's a big one, of course. But I think there should be exceptions for rape and incest. I think the idea of criminalizing Doctors is not appropriate at this time. So I think there's definitely more steps that we can take. And we will work with the Legislature to see if we can get it done.

Governor, I guess Governor Baker is expanding testing in the State to early childcare, meaning having them test to make sure they can keep them in school, targeted testing to make sure they stay open. It's something Vermont's already doing. Massachusetts is starting it now. Is it anything New Hampshire would consider?

Governor Sununu:

So, I believe -- I don't want to speak too out-of-turn. I know Dr. Chan isn't here. But I believe childcare should be following the CD -- if you're talking about isolation and quarantine requirements, is that what you're talking about?

The testing requirements, testing -- targeted testing to make sure they stay open, to make sure childcares can stay open.

Governor Sununu:

So, yes, obviously, if a childcare center, if they're in New Hampshire, they're mostly private organizations. There is a difference. I don't want to compare ourselves to Massachusetts too much, because ours are on the whole are private organizations. And as a private organization, if there's a five-day isolation and quarantine requirement, if they want to put in a requirement to have a negative test to get that child back, they can. They do not have to, is my understanding. So they can. But that's where the guidance stands. But that's for childcare, which is separate for public schools.

For public schools, there's a five-day requirement. And again, as long as they meet the guidelines of the symptoms being reduced and no fever, and all of that, then that child is back in school after five days.

Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Okay, great.

Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

All right, thank you. How are you, David? Great? Good. I know it's a long trip from Vermont. So I appreciate you coming in. But no speeding, right? All right. Well, thank you, guys, very much. You bet. Appreciate it and we will be back likely next week with an update. Thank you.