



Office of Governor Christopher T. Sununu
Press Conference
Wednesday, February 9, 2022, at 3:00 p.m.

Governor Sununu:

Good afternoon. Good to see everybody. Thanks for joining us today. I apologize. I'm silencing my phone. So, we can start. Do we have a chart of some data? So this is our hospitalization rate. This is kind of the primary chart of data we've been looking at, the most important trend to ensure that our healthcare system is not getting overrun. And as you can see, the numbers of individuals within hospitals is now below 200, has been for a couple days, definitely on a really positive trend.

Our focus continues to be on hospitalizations. And as of today, we're very happy to announce that New Hampshire and Vermont have the lowest hospitalization rates in the country. We put a lot of resources, I think a lot of innovative ideas, knowing that the winter surge was going to be upon us in the fall. And while the Government can't just solve COVID, per se, we can provide, I think, a lot of opportunity for flexibility. And so, a lot of that stuff was put into place and really worked well.

None of it works. None of it would have worked without the Nurses, without the Doctors, without the healthcare system's willingness to be flexible, try some new stuff, be innovative with the flexibilities that we were providing them. But those Frontline Workers, again, we say it all the time. We can never say it enough. Without them, none of this would be possible. And the fact that we now have one of the lowest hospitalization rates in the entire country is really a testament to their tireless work that they've done and continue to do.

This is not a victory, by any means. But we are definitely trending in the right direction. And I think if we just stay right on it, if Omicron keeps showing itself to be not nearly as severe as some of the previous variants of COVID, there's no reason to think that we can't keep building on these results, providing more flexibility within the healthcare system and our communities, as a whole. With that, I'm going to turn it over to Dr. Chan for a Public Health update.

Dr. Chan:

Good afternoon. Before I give a numbers update, I just want to first acknowledge that we notified our Healthcare Providers and Community Partners, like school and childcare programs, last week, notified them that they could stop reporting at-home test results to Public Health. And so, going forward, we're really relying on Laboratory Reports and Provider-conducted COVID-19 tests to track disease incidents, or the number of new COVID-19 infections per day. And so, this means that the number of new COVID-19 infections reported out each day by Public Health will decrease. But the benefit of continuing to follow the numbers of new infections will be in the trend over time.

So, with that in mind, let me provide a numbers update very briefly. We are reporting 786 new people diagnosed with COVID-19 today. The number of people with active infection is 5,818. As the Governor demonstrated, the number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 is going down. And currently there are 181 people hospitalized statewide with COVID-19. And unfortunately, deaths still remain too

high. Any death is potentially preventable. And we are reporting 14 new COVID-19-related deaths today, bringing the total number of people that have died from COVID-19 during this pandemic to 2,284. Only one of these new people that have died from COVID-19 is in a long-term care facility. And if you look at the numbers over the last week, we have reported out 49 total new COVID-19 deaths in the last seven days. And so, we're averaging about seven new COVID-19 deaths identified each day and reported out by Public Health. With that, I will turn things back over to the Governor. Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Great; well, thank you, Dr. Chan. A couple things, and then we can open up for questions. First, we've gotten a lot of questions in the past day-or-two over some news that we've seen across the country, specifically around States, specifically what the media likes to call the blue States, if you will, dropping Mask Mandates in their States. I think today New York and Illinois announced their plans to drop their statewide Mask Mandates, with more States clearly looking to follow.

For nearly a year now, New Hampshire has not had a statewide Mask Mandate. Ever since the vaccine became widely available last year, our message truly has been that the vaccine and the booster are the best way out of the pandemic. A mask is one of the many tools that can be effective, of course, in reducing community spread. But it not an end-all/be-all. And specifically around schools, and, again, State has not had any sort of statewide Mask Mandate for schools in place. We always allow that local control to prevail, given that every School District and every community is a little bit different.

COVID is likely not going away. We know that. But, we are here with it for some time. But we do have to learn to learn with it and kind of move on with our lives in many ways. And New Hampshire, I think, has really led the country in a lot of ways in terms of providing that flexibility while still staying right on top of the mitigation measures to best reduce and minimize community spread, as well as allowing some opportunities in our healthcare system to remain flexible.

Also, last week, we did announce that every liquor store, we were going to be selling home COVID tests in our liquor stores. The first two rounds of our home-test program where you could click and get them for free were incredibly successful. The Federal Program has now started for that. Some folks are getting them. A lot of folks are still waiting to get their tests delivered.

Our third round of making home tests available in the form of retail opportunity is now well underway. We've already sold 5,000 kits in our liquor stores. And it's really to fill that gap, if you can't find one in a CVS or Target, or Walmart, whatever it might be, in a pinch. Know that you can; we do have our 70-plus retail outlets across the State in our liquor stores that are selling those tests. And so, those are available today.

We encourage folks to take advantage of that, if they don't have any of the free ones that we had put out in the first two rounds of our home-testing program. And so, we just want to really encourage folks to know that they are out there. If you're in a need, the liquor stores are up-and-selling them. We bought a million of them and we've already sold thousands. So, whatever they might need, not have available.

If they're waiting for the Federal Program to deliver their tests -- that's taking a lot longer, I think, than the Federal Government had originally anticipated -- but they needed tests in a pinch, it's best not to wait and either use one of the free ones that was previously provided, or you can pick one up at our liquor stores, if they're not available in other retail locations. I guess, with that, we can open it up for questions.

Q&A Session

Governor, with those tests at the liquor stores, given the plummeting numbers right now, presumably demand's going to go down. With all those tests, do they expire? And what happens if they do start to reach their shelf life?

Governor Sununu:

Good question; I think they're good for a while. Do you know what the expiration -- so they're good for at least six months. I think, even as COVID dissipates a little bit as we hit the spring, which we anticipated and fortunately it is doing, I think there'll still be a lot of testing demands out there is my guess. And so, folks will still have the ability to take advantage. But they are good for at least six months. So at least through hopefully between now and the end of summer, we will have that opportunity available for our citizens.

And follow up there, Governor, can you explain how the funding aspect of this works? Because it's the Federal dollars, but then the money is coming into the liquor stores, which were involved with the General Fund, how are you going to -- and I know you said you wanted to keep it sort of rolling through to keep that supply out there.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

Can you explain how the financial aspect of this will work?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, so we put about \$10 million -- ballpark -- about \$10 million to buy the tests, maybe \$12 million to buy 1 million tests. Those sit on the shelves. People buy them at cost. The money comes back into the liquor stores. And it gets reimbursed back to the ARP Fund -- the ARPA Funds. It's just a direct reimbursement back. And then, we can roll those ARPA Funds into either more tests or some other of the many programs that the ARPA dollars are going to.

Are there administrative funds that are associated with that through the Liquor Commission? Do they have some...

Governor Sununu:

It's basically the cost of transportation and handling within the store, itself. So, there's no profit or anything like that. We basically just reimburse ourselves. Folks buy it for our cost and we reimburse ourself that cost.

Do you have to segregate the money, though, because it is the ARPA? I mean, I'm just wondering if it enters the General Fund or not?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, excuse me. Yeah. So, technically goes from liquor, and before those transfers are made back to the General Fund, whatever proportion, if they sell \$40 of tests, that \$40 goes back into the ARPA Fund.

And we have heard from people who are like, wait a second. Why am I paying for this, as a taxpayer? Can you explain again why it needs to be...

Governor Sununu:

Well, because, again, there's 500 million tests supposedly made free by the Federal Government. But those can take time to get to folks. And we've already done two rounds for free. And what we're -- the gap we're trying to fill is the lack of availability in the private sector, if you will. You need a test today. You don't have one. You want to go out and buy one. So we make those available. Yeah, so we've already done two rounds for free. The Federal Government's doing their round for free. And we're trying to fill the gap on the retail side.

Governor, today, you signed an Executive Order establishing a Commission on Cryptocurrencies and Digital Assets. Do you or any of your family members own cryptocurrency?

Governor Sununu:

No. No, I don't own any bitcoin. I don't know anyone in my family that owns anything like that. Look, cryptocurrency, I think, as a lot of folks understand, it's complex. It's very interesting. Lot of people are buying and selling it on the market. But it is a currency that doesn't have a whole lot regulation around it. And we have some really smart folks here in New Hampshire. And the idea's to put some guardrails around it, some regulation around it, so that whether you're investing it or using it for retail purchases, or whatever it might be, there's a little more security and sense to it. And I think some of the folks that are kind of charging forward on some of this legislation, Wyoming did a lot. Those laws don't directly connect to what our system is here in New Hampshire.

So what I'm really doing is putting together a group of really -- as we say in New Hampshire -- wicked smart people, right? Okay. People that really understand this to make sure that whatever laws we pass, we're doing it in the right way that fits our system and provides that regulatory boundary. But, no, I've never bought any bitcoin, or Dogecoin, or something -- there's a couple different ones that are coming out there now. I don't. Yeah.

I got two on hospitalizations, Governor. The first, with numbers being what they are, are you going to be scaling back? Do you perceive Strike Teams or fixed vaccine sites, or any of those resources scaling back?

Governor Sununu:

So, the Strike Teams, the joint Military Teams that have come in, the Paramedic Teams that have come into our hospitals, they're all just kind of serve out on their schedule. We're not asking to extend their stay any longer than they're already scheduled. So we're not asking them to leave earlier. But they'll, I think, fill out their commitment and their duty over the next couple weeks, as numbers continue to fall. It'll work pretty seamlessly, I think. As far as you asked another piece in there?

The vaccination sites.

Governor Sununu:

Oh, things like fixed sites and vaccines, so not right now. So we're not saying we're pulling back on the vaccines. The vaccination sites, they're still putting out 150, 200 vaccines a day, some of them, something like that. Those are rough numbers. And so, they are still being utilized, to be sure.

So we will keep looking at that utilization. And I believe the vaccine sites, themselves, were contracted through the end of March. So those will likely stay up-and-running through the end of March, because we are contracted for them. And the testing sites, I think, my sense is there's still going to be a need and a demand for testing, even though Omicron doesn't appear as severe as the other variants. People still want to know if they have the sniffles or their child might have COVID. People still very much want to know. The home tests are taking a lot of the burden off that system. But they're very much still being used. So no plans to scale that back just yet.

And you mentioned some of the innovative ideas that are helping to bring the numbers down, hospitalizations. But isn't it a reflection of just the Omicron variant coming through New Hampshire, doing what it did, and now the numbers are just falling off like they have?

Governor Sununu:

Well, of course, that's a big part of it. But in terms of the healthcare systems, if you look in some States, in Kentucky, we talk about Kentucky a lot because we visited Kentucky and learned from them. I mean, their hospitalizations, I think, were going up. West Virginia, going up. Wyoming, I think their hospitalizations are still going up.

So there's still very much parts of this country where the numbers are still escalating and they're still getting a massive overrun into their healthcare system. We're just not seeing that. And part of that is not just the numbers going down naturally because of Omicron, but the fact that we moved so many people out, right?

So you come in. Folks that are waiting for long-term care are now moving to long-term care faster than ever before. The flexibilities that we gave a lot of the hospitals, in terms of being able to provide folks quality treatment, as opposed to just waiting in a hallway, again to get them what they needed and move them out.

We have more antivirals coming in, which is very good. I think most States do. And we're trying to get those out as fast as we can, the ones that appear to be effective against the Omicron variant. So there's all these different puzzle pieces really come into play.

But, again, the system stayed open. Unlike other States, the system never collapsed, even though we had incredibly high hospitalizations, and even though we're dealing with Delta and Omicron at the same time, which most States frankly didn't have to do. And the fact that we now are one of the lowest hospitalization rates, along with I think Vermont is the lowest. We're the second-lowest. And yeah, you're seeing it come down, which is all a really positive thing.

But those hospitals did an awesome job. But if anyone had -- I know it's rare. People really don't have access to walk the halls of the ICUs or walk the halls that -- during its real peak. It was tough stuff, man. It was really tough. And those Nurses and those Doctors were putting in immense, immense hours, over 100 hours a week consistently sometimes. It was wild. But they did it and they kept it flexible, and they kept the system moving forward. And obviously some of our Federal help, as well, not just the dollars but the actual manpower that came in with all these Strike Teams was pretty great.

Governor, as you know, a lot of Vaccine Mandate legislation out there. I'm wondering. What's your feeling about this concept of allowing a conscientious objection in order to decline a Vaccine Mandate, even if a business were to require one? Should people have that right, or...

Governor Sununu:

So you're talking about the Bill that basically says if there's a Vaccine Mandate, you can decide that the Mandate doesn't apply to you?

Yeah, if you've got a conscientious objection.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, no. Look, a private business has the right to manage themselves in terms of vaccines, how they want to do, just like they did before the pandemic. So why we're changing the -- why folks want to change the rules because we've gone through this pandemic, no.

A private business has rights. A private businessowner has rights. And it's their choice as to whether they want to implement that or not. But I mean, all they're doing is trying to create a loophole to basically say that no one can mandate anything. So, I don't think the Government should be mandating anything. But I think private businesses have the right to do what they want to do, and they always have.

Governor, can you give us an update on the data situation, especially with the boosters? I know the numbers are going down. Obviously, there's not going to be as much as intense kind of intention -- attention on that.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

But, will that be repaired? Or I guess what's the status on the data?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, so the booster data is all messed up. I mean, at a State level, at a Federal level, it just is. And we've kind of been talking about that for months and months, and how it was very hard to keep track of all of it, how it was being logged in by so many different Providers. Providers weren't always logging it in right. The data wasn't always being uploaded in the same way, not just at the State level but most importantly at the Federal Level, because we didn't have our Vaccine Registry up-and-running, as you know, until it's just really getting up-and-running now. And that data's being transferred.

So, as far as how many folks are vaccinated, I think, at some point, we will have a better accurate sense. But it's probably going to take some time. The key for us is availability for the vaccine, right? We didn't have people waiting months, or whatever it was, that wanted a booster. We got our vaccine sites open up-and-running. We got them very aggressively moving for the boosters. We did our Booster Blitz and all of those sorts of things. They were very, very successful.

So, anyone who wants a booster and has been able to get a booster for quite a long time now, and that's the most important part is the access. The actual numbers and the data, where it all sifts out, I can't tell you exactly when and what the numbers are finally going to be, and when it's going to be super accurate. Yeah, I don't have a better answer than that.

You're the data guy, as you called yourself.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah.

Aren't you going to want that ready by next fall, I guess, when we may or may not what's coming around the corner?

Governor Sununu:

Well, it's always useful, but a couple things. So, I guess it really depends on what we find the efficacy of the booster to be, right? Is it going to be, well, if you really want to be up-to-date on your vaccines, you're going to need a fourth shot? That could stand. Is three enough? I mean, depending on where that all sifts out and whether we see, and what the variant looks like coming back, that will all come into play as to how valuable the initial vaccine and booster data really is.

Data's only as good as what you can do with it moving forward. So, we want it. I am a data guy. I want that data. And I think once our Vaccine Registry is fully up-and-running, all the Providers are able to upload their data and connect, not just going forward, but going all the way back to last summer, right? That's really where the data kind of fell off a little bit -- a lot a bit. And we can kind of backfill all that data in an accurate way with our Teams.

I think we will get there. But I'm not sure exactly when that will be, probably in the next couple months, but not 100% sure. Commissioner's going, oh, boy, we only have a couple months to do this,

because we got to meet that. But, they are working really hard on it. We have Private Providers. We have our internal Teams working on it.

Dr. Chan, this one's for you. As Omicron subsides and Districts kind of maybe reevaluate their mask rules, what is your advice for schools (inaudible) approach these decisions and what metrics should they be looking at, especially in a sense we're not tracking cases in the same way? How should they be looking at that data there, too?

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, so let me first start by saying that we are still having routine communication with our School Partners, at least twice a month. I mean, we're having calls with our K-12 schools and even colleges, and universities. And the recommendations for right now haven't substantially changed.

But I think what's going to happen is that there's going to be a lot of change over the next coming several weeks even months, right? We're coming down from the Omicron surge. We believe that vaccination, particularly for the youngest children, 6 months through 4 years of age, there's a good chance that will be rolling out towards the end of February/beginning of March. And so, vaccination availability for very young children will be increasing. And so, as some of these changes take place, I think that the goal is to be able to pull back on some of the mitigation measures further, try and get our society, our schools back to more normal operations.

But that's going to be something that plays out over the coming weeks. And a lot of it is going to, I think, be driven by what happens with the Omicron surge. The good news is the hospitalizations are already decreasing. We're going to be trending the number of infections going forward, and then also what happens with rollout of the vaccine for the youngest children.

Dr. Chan, oh, sorry. Go ahead, Kevin.

I was just going to say, you've been reporting about deaths and deaths obviously remain a real concern here. What kind of data do we have on that? In other words, are these deaths, are they most unvaccinated people? Are they mostly people over 80? Are they mostly people who have comorbidities? Do we know?

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, so going back to summer of 2021, we're not conducting routine case investigations for every person diagnosed with COVID-19. And so, we don't have complete information on some of those questions that you're asking about, medical conditions.

But what I can say, though, from -- and let me just back up and say that the way we conduct surveillance for COVID-19-related deaths is based on Death Certificate review. So if somebody tests positive and then they die and have COVID-19 listed as a direct or contributing cause of death on a Death Certificate, they get classified as a COVID-19-related death. And so, there's some information we can pull off the Death Certificate, but not a lot of the medical information that you're asking about.

What I can say is that I think based on what data we do have and the data nationally is that the majority of deaths that are occurring are in people that are unvaccinated, right? And I think I can't remember the exact number. But people that are unvaccinated are maybe about 15 times at higher risk

for dying from COVID-19, related to -- compared to somebody who's been vaccinated. And this is data that the CDC publicly posts on their Dashboard. And so, I think the risk really is there for people who are not getting the vaccine or staying up-to-date on their vaccines. And so, it stresses the importance of people getting vaccinated. Vaccines are available. The vaccine centers are open, and continue to encourage people to get vaccinated to prevent those severe outcomes from COVID-19, like hospitalization and death.

Thank you.

Dr. Chan, based on the modeling, having seen other countries and regions go through the Omicron surge, what are you looking for? Or I guess is there an expectation of what the baseline sort of hospitalization rate in New Hampshire would be, moving forward, once we see that surge finally bottom-out?

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, so question: what's the baseline hospitalization for COVID-19 going forward? And I think part of the answer to that is we don't really know, right? We've been in a pandemic now for a couple of years. And there have been multiple peaks and surges, and then waning of infections. And so, COVID-19 numbers, including hospitalization numbers, have gone up and gone down. And I think what you're asking is what's the steady state going to look like? And I don't think we really know. And we certainly believe that COVID-19 will be around.

There will always be some risks from COVID-19. There may always be some hospitalizations from COVID-19. But the goal is to get that as low as possible. And then, we're going to have to see how this plays out over time, because it's certainly possible that this may take on some seasonality. We may see increases and decreases by season, in which case the numbers -- for example, hospitalization numbers will fluctuate. But that's one of the things that we're going to track going forward.

And just continuing on the tracking, you mentioned that you'll be looking more at trends over time, when it comes to cases. Can you just expand on that a little bit? And then, is the Department considering any other ways to track cases at a population level, like maybe testing wastewater?

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, so how do we conduct surveillance going forward for COVID-19, I think, is the general question.

Yeah.

Dr. Chan:

And I'll say that I was just on a call this afternoon with Partners from the CDC and other Public Health Agencies discussing this exact issue. And I think this is something that is going to be changing in the future.

How exactly it's going to change, I think, are still -- is still a topic under discussion. But I think we're starting to take some of those steps already, right, with the announcement last week to our Healthcare Providers and Community Partners around no longer needing to report at-home tests, relying more on some of the systems we already have in place, like electronic laboratory reporting to track the number of new COVID-19 cases.

The goal here is to find a sustainable way to track COVID-19 going forward. I think likely Death Certificate reviews, Vital Record review is going to be part of that, talking about COVID-19-related deaths. And I think a large piece of this is going to be how do we track severity of infection, whether that's hospitalizations due to COVID-19 or ER visits, for example, due to COVID-19? And it there are some systems already in place that we can rely on more going forward, what we call syndromic surveillance systems, like we use with tracking influenza every year, that could be utilized to track also not only influenza but COVID-19 also. So, I think that there are going to be multiple pieces of data coming in that we can look at to track COVID-19 and conduct surveillance going forward.

And quick follow there, Dr. Chan, the wastewater test is already happening in New Hampshire, isn't it?

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, so I'm sorry. I forgot to mention wastewater surveillance. The CDC just this past week released a Data Dashboard looking at wastewater surveillance across the country. And there are a couple of locations in New Hampshire. I don't remember the exact number, but a couple at least locations in New Hampshire that have been conducting wastewater surveillance. And so, this may be part of that surveillance equation going forward. But how exactly that wastewater testing is going to be used, I think, still remains to be seen. Thanks.

Governor Sununu:

Great, do we have any questions on the phone, or -- okay.

Mike Casey with The Associated Press:

Hey, how's it going? I don't have a question, thanks.

Governor Sununu:

Okay. Thanks for joining. Thanks for playing.

Karen Dandurant with Seacoastonline:

Hey, good morning -- good afternoon. I've lost track of time. My question is probably -- it's for either the Governor or for Dr. Chan. We just watched where Massachusetts lift school Mask Mandates as of February 28th for kids in K-12. And New York is lifting theirs. And as you know, I'm sure other States. I'm wondering when you think New Hampshire, who has been leaving it up to the School District, when you think you might feel that it's safe for schools to lift those Mask Mandates? And I know it's not your Mandate, but they're advisories.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, sure. So, again, other States are kind of catching up to where we are now. Other States are leaving it up to the local Districts. And I think as Dr. Chan talked about a little bit, I think, over the next 30 days, what you're going to see is a variety of things.

I think you're going to still see Omicron hopefully come down. The availability of vaccines for the 0- to 5-year-olds is going to become available. And so, I think as these kind of dominos start to fall all in a more positive direction, again, I would never speak for Public Health. But those are the types of things you'd want to see and trend in the right direction, in terms of making a -- evolving your recommendations.

Again, we don't mandate anything at the State level. But I think folks do listen to some of the recommendations and the mitigation strategies that we put out there. And it's not just on masks. There are other mitigation strategies that are currently used in our school toolbox, as we like to say, that could evolve, as well.

So it's not just about masks. It could be a variety of different things and different recommendations. I don't know if you want to expound on that. Dr. Chan said I did okay. So, we're going to stick with that answer.

Nora Doyle-Burr with Valley News:

Hi, thanks for taking my call. I also wanted to ask about masks and sort of what thresholds we should be looking at, in terms of both schools but also some municipalities also recommend or require masks in public places, and businesses, as well. And then, I guess my second question -- or my other question has to do with some context for these numbers, as we see a dip in hospitalizations and deaths. I mean, it seems like we're still about where we were maybe mid-November. Still seems like seven deaths a day is, I guess, worth noting.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, was there a question at the end there? I know I missed the question if there was a question.

Nora Doyle-Burr with Valley News:

Yeah, I guess I just want some context for the numbers. It still seems like we have some cases that we're seeing, but also some hospitalizations. I mean, 180 beds in hospitals is a fair number, as are seven people dying a day. So, I just wondered if you could...

Governor Sununu:

Sure; so I think I...

Nora Doyle-Burr with Valley News:

Yeah.

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, so I think I get what you're getting at. So, two things: number 1, as I mentioned in the previous answer, I don't think it's a single date or datapoint that we are threshold on a single point that we want to see before we make massive changes in our recommendations, but a confluence of different trends that we are likely going to see and different datapoints we're going to hit, and timeframes we're going to hit, over the next 30 days. And so, my sense is that we're going to -- over the next 30 days is the opportunity for things to hopefully evolve in a much more -- keep evolving in a positive way to provide more flexibility for the communities, as we all get back to normal-normal not new normal, right? We want new normal to become old normal, so normal just becomes normal.

As far as the fatality numbers, so I wouldn't say that we're still at the same fatality rate we're at in November, because we have gone up-and-down, and all of this. A lot has changed since November. But remember that unfortunately fatalities with COVID tend to lag the hospitalization numbers, right? Folks tend to be in hospitals for two, four, six sometimes longer weeks before potentially succumbing -- unfortunately succumbing to the symptoms that evolve and unfortunately deteriorate with an individual, as they're in a hospital.

So, I think that's why we're still likely going to see, on the fatality side, we could still see more elevated numbers than maybe we -- I mean, anything greater than zero is something we don't want to see. But I think the numbers could still potentially be elevated for a few more weeks, as they lag the peaks that you see typically with hospitalization and caseload.

Kerry Kavanaugh with Fox 25:

Hi, there. Good afternoon. Just couple of questions, as it relates to the Harmony Montgomery case. Governor, you said, I think, last week in an interview that you thought there would be some new information or any information available about New Hampshire's internal review available within the coming weeks. I'm wondering if you have a better sense of a timeline on that this week. And also, I'm curious if you were satisfied with the response that you received from the Massachusetts Trial Courts.

Governor Sununu:

Sure, so I'll take the second part first. The response -- I believe the only response I received from the Massachusetts Courts are they're going to look into it. And I mean, I was very satisfied in that they obviously want to be a constructive partner in trying to dig in and look at as much of the data and issues relating around this case, and obviously that resulted in Harmony being placed with that individual by the Court, which I think everyone can agree was a horrible, horrible mistake.

As far as the review, so, yes, we've kind of been working through a review process. I know New Hampshire's DCYF, Division of Children, Youth, and Families, is working with the Attorney General's Office to kind of figure out what part of that information we can make public. Obviously there could be some pieces of information that still need to remain confidential. But that's really between DCYF and the Attorney General's Office to make sure that those pieces might have to remain confidential. And we can kind of talk publicly about as much else as we possibly can, in the hopes that that information can

hopefully bring Harmony home safe. That's the ultimate goal here, as well as making sure that if there were system failures, which I think we can all clearly agree there were at some level, where they are, what we can do, and what mitigation strategies.

So, my sense is, in the next -- hopefully in the next week-or-so, I think we will have some more information made public and be able to identify any of the mitigation strategies that we want to put into place as part of that system. My gut tells me right now that the biggest break of the system wasn't just about Massachusetts or just about New Hampshire. It's really about the transfer of information across States, and not just between our two States, between any two States.

When you look at how that information is processed, how it's transferred, getting it, utilizing it in real-time to make sure that you can be on-the-spot with it, and there aren't delays in that, how those Interstate Compacts really work, the importance of them. Those are, for me, at least, on a preliminary review, that's clearly where the system had the most trouble. And that doesn't put blame on one side or the other. I think all 50 States really need to work better and develop better systems, in conjunction with one another, and in partnership, to ensure the welfare of the children that may be crossing borders.

My sense is that kids might not cross borders as much in Texas as in New Hampshire, for example, because Texas is a large place. I mean, to cross a border out of Texas is kind of a big deal. To cross a border out of New Hampshire can happen five times a day, sometimes, whether it's visiting family members, going to work, moving, or being transient, depending on where your job might take you. Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, New England's very unique in that aspect. And that's where I think, for us, the system has to be as robust as possible, because that dynamic is just going to be much more common in the Northeast than anywhere else. But we will have more information, I think, hopefully in the next couple weeks. We will circle back with DCYF and the Attorney General's Office, and make as much of this available as we possibly can. Okay, great. Question, sorry.

Oh, I've got a couple questions on emergency rental assistance. So this week, you released a letter saying that this State is running low on one kind of emergency rental assistance, ERA-1 Funding, and could eventually stop issuing grants. Can you elaborate on how much funding New Hampshire has left and how soon that could happen, and what steps you think...

Governor Sununu:

Sure, a very timely question, because literally an hour before we showed up, the Emergency Rental Assistance Part 2 that many States had already been authorized and gotten their funds for, we were not getting, to the point of your question. We were told that the first part of Part 2 is going to be released. So I think we're going to be in good shape. We've notified a lot of the Providers that we work for that have been providing that rental assistance opportunity to our citizens.

I was down at the White House. I spoke directly with the Assistant Secretary, Adeyemo, at Treasury, and talked about the fact that there are States like New Hampshire's that have just been with no real understanding or reason why, we weren't getting that second round of funding. It was granted as of, what, an hour ago. I think we received the letter, which is great news.

And then, there is the ERA-1 Program. And according to the latest data from the Treasury, you've only distributed around 28% of that funding as of November. And do you have a sense of why we're falling behind on getting that funding out the door?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, so a couple things. I think that's as of you said November, right?

Um-hmm.

Governor Sununu:

So that's a little old. I think over half the dollars have actually gone out the door. Two things: part of it is on the ability to move it out the door. If you remember, there was a really convoluted Federal Application process. That was a mess, and we tried to simplify that as best we could and move them as fast as we could.

Also, the demand in New Hampshire hasn't been nearly as high here as you might see in places like New York City or Washington, or Chicago. So the dollars aren't going out the door partially because the demand isn't nearly as high, which is a good thing.

Our economy's incredibly strong. We need more rental housing. I mean, we could have a whole discussion on the need of housing in the State and how that is really one of the number 1 things holding us back, even though we're the fastest-growing State in the Northeast. The housing component is still one of the number 1 challenges we have on some of the ideas.

We will be talking a little bit more about the housing opportunities next week, a little bit as a precursor to the State of the State, which I'm sure everyone will be watching. It's riveting stuff. I'll try to make it as entertaining as I can.

But the rental assistance piece isn't as high of a need here as in other parts of the country. So, I don't think it's as much of a why isn't the dollars going out fast enough? We just -- I think the demand just isn't here as much as in other parts. But, our CAP Agencies are the ones really driving that process in conjunction with New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority.

How about the housing -- not the housing crisis, but the unemployment -- or the lack of employment crisis, EB-5 Programs, any Federal Programs, have you had any chance to look into expanding the folks that come to New Hampshire, seasonal workers from other countries that we've had in the past?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, just to be clear, EB-5 is a separate program. That's not a seasonal worker program. EB-5 is -- I got to be honest, not a big fan of it. You're effectively allowing from outside the United States to buy a Green Card.

Okay.

Governor Sununu:

It's a little funky. It's a funky program. So I won't get into that. But the...

It's not an EB program?

Governor Sununu:

Well, it's the Worker Visa Program, right?

Okay.

Governor Sununu:

So, we have pushed very hard both with the previous Administration and with the Biden Administration to open up more Worker Visas, especially Seasonal Worker Visas. Both Administrations have been a bit reluctant to do that but for very different reasons.

I think I can -- I don't want to speak for the Federal Delegation. But I think I feel very confident that they're completely in conjunction with myself in our need to open that up, especially for a tourism-based economy, like we have.

Those Visas were drastically scaled back from certain parts of the country or certain parts of the world. And it's just created a problem. It really has. And it's really limited our ability. We need more Seasonal Visas. We're going to push for more Seasonal Visas. There's no reason why the Department of State shouldn't open up more of them. And it's a very important piece.

Was it scaled back because of COVID-19 or from other considerations?

Governor Sununu:

No, it was scaled back long before then. Yeah, and I spoke with the previous Secretary of Labor. I've not spoke with the current Secretary of Labor. They're new. I just haven't spoken to them. When we went down to Washington last week, I thought we were going to be able to meet with a lot of the Secretaries, like we usually do. We weren't allowed to do that.

So we will just keep making the case as much as we can, whether it's picking up the phone, writing letters. But I think everyone across New England wants to see that program vastly opened up in the right way.

And another concern I've been hearing about is the State's Contract with Vail to operate Sunapee. There was a lot of concerns this past weekend that have been exacerbated perhaps because of lack of labor or icing, or other issues that you're familiar with, with Waterville. Have you been hearing about that? And what leverage does the State have in that lease situation to improve it for the people who use that mountain?

Governor Sununu:

So, yes, I've heard very much a lot of very upset customers with not just Vail. I don't want to pin it just on them. But certain passes that have been massively sold, and there's an argument to be made that they were oversold, creating these huge long lines, creating a very poor customer experience. And it's something that we're paying attention to.

Now, I can't tell Vail you can't sell this number of passes, I don't think. But what we can do is try to work with them to create a better customer experience. It wasn't just about icing. I think anytime there's good whether over the past month-or-two, there's been long lines coming all the way out, especially around Sunapee and some of the other areas, as well, the traffic jams and all of that sort of thing. And it gets compounded when you have icing.

It gets compounded when you -- if you have a labor shortage. I'm not sure how they're dealing with the labor over there off the top of my head. But I will just say that we've heard a lot of the same concerns over the customer experience. We're going to keep working with them to hopefully provide a better experience. And they have a Contract with the State and went through the Executive Council, went through a very open process. There was a lot of feedback and push-and-pull over those negotiations a couple years ago. But they have to keep up. I don't know a better way to say it. You got to keep up with the expectations of the customer. And right now, those demands are not being met.

Governor, you mentioned, I think it was earlier today, the Administrative Services Commissioner put out a new Report about revenue.

Governor Sununu:

Oh, I'm sorry.

Now, it looks like we're swimming in surplus right now. And I know it's not a budget year. But have you given thought to directing the Legislature, here's how I'd like to spend what we should spend, and the rest of it, we shouldn't spend it?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, yes.

Or are you going to deal with everything on a Bill-by-Bill basis?

Governor Sununu:

No, it's a great question. So the Commissioner of Revenue did put out a Report showing that we're likely going to end up, even with all the tax cuts that we've done, all the opportunity we've created in cutting taxes, we're going to have five, six, seven times as much surplus revenue in our State coffers than we've ever had. And that's because businesses are coming into the State so aggressively. They're growing here so aggressively. We're the only State in the Northeast that has population growth right now.

So it all plays into the hand of a model that really does work. Cut taxes, get regulation out of business' way, and the opportunity gets created at the State level to fund the programs that you need and keep things moving forward, while not overburdening your citizens, whether it's the dollars we're sending back in property tax relief. We sent \$100 million back to the citizens of the State for property tax relief last year. I think we could do it again.

We're making a lot of one-time investments with the ARPA dollars, working with the Fiscal Committee and the Legislature. There's some things that can be done with ARPA dollars, some things that can't be. So, the State will have a lot of opportunity for one-time investments, because this is really one-time money. You can't necessarily count on it long-term.

But all the programs that we have are being funded the way they should be, which is great news. Nothing has to be cut back. This one-time money can go to one-time investments for the State. Those are very flexible General Fund dollars. And I am actually already in the process.

I meet with the folks on the Fiscal Committee every week -- every other week to talk about ARPA dollars, to talk about the budget and other things, infrastructure money. And now, we will kind of add this into the mix in terms of their ideas in terms of how they think it should be spent.

I think there's an opportunity to make some investments right now. Normally, we wait until the budget year to spend our surplus. But there's so much of it right now. And if there's a need, I say go after it. I mean, the dollars are clearly there.

I think we're going to end up somewhere in the ballpark of \$250 million to \$300 million surplus by the end of next year the way it looks. I tend -- that's pretty conservative, actually. I mean, it could even be more than that. But I think that's a good general ballpark of where we will be. And if we end up with more dollars than that, great. That would be wonderful. That's just more opportunity for the State.

But I think that's a conservative place to be. And we will be working with the Legislature to help make some of those investments. But those are one-time investments. Those aren't dollars to grow Government and bigger programs, per se. They'll have that opportunity in the next budget cycle, looking at the projections going forward to decide how we want to spend those dollars on more long-term, programmatic investments.

Governor, do you have a ballpark on where you think hospitalizations will end up in a couple months, where we should expect a baseline for COVID?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, what Dr. Chan said. Yeah. No, I don't know. I mean, look. What was our low point, maybe 25 per day, something like that? That was about our low point before. You don't know, because you don't know where the next variant might end up, if there's another variant.

I mean, hopefully it ends up at zero, frankly. I mean, that's where we want it to be. But, 25, 50 a day, something like that. But that's completely random -- a completely random guess. As Dr. Chan said, so many variables can go into what that is.

But those would be great numbers, because those are manageable numbers, right, without overtaxing the system too much. And someone asked me, are you getting ready for next year's winter surge? Yeah, absolutely. I hope we never see it. It never sees the light of day. But taking what we've done this year, what we already have in place, where we're able to find flexibilities, what worked, what

didn't, we're already writing the playbook for a year ahead, so we can be prepared, because, again, if it comes, it's going to come. We just need to be ready for it with the flexibilities.

One more question on that rental assistance?

Governor Sununu:

Sure.

The Treasury said that States who aren't using their emergency rental funding efficiently could risk losing it. Is that something that you're concerned about at all? And if so, do you think that...

Governor Sununu:

No, I don't think so. I mean, what I'll do is we will get you a more accurate number. I think we do have some accurate, more up-to-date numbers, so you can see exactly how much we've spent. But I don't get the sense that we've spent drastically a lower number than average, let's say.

So, no. Look, I want the flexibility to use those dollars to invest in housing, in actual bricks-and-mortar multifamily housing for workers. Rental assistance is not our top need. It's a need for certain individuals, and it's there. That's great. But it is not our top need, in terms of housing.

You want to deal with housing. You want to deal with the ability to keep people in their homes and all of that. There's other ways to do it. And I think that's the flexibility I was hoping to get out of the Federal Government with the ERA money and especially Round 2 of the dollars.

They're not going to allow that. We may have an ability to create some more opportunities like that with ARPA money, because we are getting a little more flexibility with ARPA dollars. So that could be there.

But, no, sorry, to go back to the core of your question, I don't think we're really -- I was concerned up until today that they may not send the dollars. But at least the first phase of the dollars have come through. And if not, we will keep working, whether it's with Senators Hassan and Shaheen, or our Congressional Delegation, to hopefully put pressure on the Treasury to keep the dollars available. They were allocated to the State. They should keep coming to the State.

And this may be out-of-date. My notes on this are kind of discombobulated. But in terms of getting money out, the food assistance, food pantries, was hearing anecdotally that there may be some difficulty getting that money out. Is that still an issue, or has that been a problem trying to...

Governor Sununu:

Not that I've heard; we kind of repurpose. We gave a lot of money to the New Hampshire Food Bank last year. Some of those dollars actually came back to us, because they did so well. We repurposed them out to all the 400-plus food pantries. That program was authorized I want to say six weeks ago, couple months ago. I haven't heard that there's any issues there. But we can look into it, see if it is.

I mean, we're just trying to get the dollars resent back out. I told them, don't send us the money. Get it back out, but we were the best vehicle to push it back out at a more localized level. So we did. Yeah. But I'll check to see where we are on that whole process.

Can you share your thoughts about what Corey Lewandowski said last week about President Trump, tasking him finding a Primary Challenger for you?

Governor Sununu:

I haven't paid attention to that. That's political theatrics. I'm busy running the State. I really haven't paid attention at all.

Can you tell us a little bit about your trip, then? Where'd you go last week and what'd you do? What'd you learn?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, so it was good. So, to be careful about it and really open about it, we had the National Governor's Association Conference down in Washington, D.C. We're down in D.C., met with other Governors. We actually were able to spend a little time with the President and the Vice President, not a ton, but at least a little time there. But it was mostly about working with other Governors. And then, I think you're speaking to the Cabo Verde trip.

So the Republic of Cabo Verde is a small island country off the coast of Africa, part of the Continent of Africa, very Democratic country. They have a new President. So we went over to meet the President. But the reason Cabo Verde is so important is that New Hampshire's National Guard was selected, out of many, many different States that kind of applied, if you will, for the partnership, to be a partner with the Military of Cabo Verde.

It is very much in the United States' interests to have a strong partnership there. These partnership programs that pretty much every State has with another country, there's maybe 80 or 90 of them that exist right now. We already have one with El Salvador. We have a partnership with El Salvador.

New Hampshire was chosen to kind of lead the charge, to be the Representative of the United States of America in terms of protecting American interests, working with their Military, and with that also comes the opportunity of better business relations, investment relations, all of that. So Taylor Caswell, our Commissioner of Business and Economic Affairs, came over with us, as well, along with General Mikolaities and Members of the National Guard, to formally sign the Agreement and create the personal relationships, to build on those relationships.

This isn't a short-term thing. This is something that will likely last potentially decades. And the fact that New Hampshire was selected out of all the different States that applied for this partnership, it's an honor. But it's also a responsibility. There is a strategic need for the United States to be there. And New Hampshire's the State chosen to lead the charge. So I think it's a great opportunity for us. I really do.

The Continent of Africa can have its challenges with lack of Democratic Governments and all of that. But the Republic of Cabo Verde, it's on the lower-income scale, to be sure. Doesn't have all the

economic opportunities that they are probably hoping for, but the Government, it's Democratic, very upstanding. I think it's going to be a great partnership for us, both from a business aspect, as well as the Military partnership that's required.

Governor, we're hearing that some towns may be having some difficulty in getting broadband expansion, because some Internet Service Providers are saying that broadband already exists. Are you hearing that? Is that anything that's on your radar?

Governor Sununu:

The broadband opportunities are very much on my radar. So, if I can take a half-a-step back, we were one of the only States in the country that did broadband expansion with our CARES Act Funds the first time around. The timeline was very short. But because New Hampshire's very nimble State, we were able to move very quickly and provide thousands of people with broadband expansion.

Then, we had to create that model, if you will, to how to make those investments happen very quickly, partnership with the towns and the Providers, themselves, to make it move forward. Because we kind of went through the really turmoil and the struggle to get that done, and it was done very, very well, we, unlike most States in the country, have a model we can lean right into with additional broadband dollars from ARPA and now the Infrastructure Fund, potentially north of \$200 million, if you add both those pots of money together.

We had a sense this was coming. So we had all the Providers prepare for it even faster than, again, than most other States. We're way ahead of the game. There's no doubt New Hampshire leads 49 other States when it comes to the ability to invest our ARPA dollars for broadband expansion.

Part of that is an application process with the town, right? The town has to basically want it, because we have to work with the towns to actually install it. We have all the Providers onboard, to be sure. And now, there's a mapping process that really starts the program that says, okay, these towns have this amount of broadband. This town has that speed, and this town has nothing, or whatever it might be. These guys are -- I don't know if people are still on dial-up, but they're basically on DSL. There's a lot of folks still out there. And because of the rural nature of a lot of parts of our State, there's a lot of challenges there, to be sure.

I've -- I feel very confident in saying that we're moving very aggressively to deal with all those issues. I haven't heard of the exact issue that you just brought up that people are saying, I need broadband. Well, you already have broadband. I haven't heard that, per se.

But I know, as part of the first phase the Federal Government requires, which is the mapping process, we will be able to, I think, pinpoint a lot of those issues in those areas. Where do you put the nodes? Where do you expand those nodes?

There's a lot of dollars that have to go into what we call the last mile. Sometimes it's like the quarter-mile, half-mile driveway, sometimes that folks might have to actually make that connection. But you can't ignore the mid-mile, which is a very different type of system, where you have a lot of the branches.

So, working very, very closely with all the Providers and all the towns. Department of Business and Economic Affairs is really leading the charge. They've taken over the application process. And they're being very aggressive about it. We have folks that that's their only job is to work with towns, get them to apply, sign up, and move forward, and actually get in the queue, if you will, so that, when the

dollars become available, we're closing the deal on this stuff. And preliminarily, we look like we feel very confident we're going to get pretty much everybody covered with broadband in this State faster than anybody, pretty exciting, actually. But if there's specifics, I'm happy to look into if there's any complaints or anything like that. I haven't heard it at my level but doesn't mean they're not out there.

Just one more question, Dr. Chan, for you on the tracking. We know community transmission rates have been a key metric in what the CDC's (inaudible) for schools. With both changes to case tracking and just like more transmissible variants, like Omicron, how are you thinking about the future of a metric like that for things like masking in schools?

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, so good question about community transmission metrics. And it's being discussed how those community transmission metrics might need to change. I think they will need to change. They will change.

Test-positivity's probably going to go away. And I think, as we've talked about before at this press conference, there's going to be more focus on severity of disease potentially. So, what that exactly is going to look like I think remains a little bit uncertain.

But what I can say is, even based on the current metrics, we still have a substantial level of COVID-19 in our communities, just based on the incidence of new disease, or the number of new infections identified per day. So COVID-19 is still out there. It's still circulating. And there's still risk in our communities. And would go back again that, regardless of what the level of community transmission is now, or might be in the coming weeks, we expect COVID-19 to continue to circulate. And it's important for people to take the step of getting vaccinated, getting a booster dose to minimize their risk of hospitalization or dying from COVID-19.

Just one more, sorry, school masking question. I think we've heard this concern maybe from parents, Guidance Counselors, even some Doctors about the impacts of masking on learning and especially for the young kids may not be able to read facial cues.

Dr. Chan:

Yeah.

Where is kind of the science behind that that you might look like? And how should schools be thinking about some of those concerns, as we've had kids mask for a long time?

Dr. Chan:

Yeah, so as with everything we've done throughout this pandemic, it's a balance, right? We try and balance COVID-19 prevention or COVID-19 mitigation with the other important societal functions and considerations, whether that's somebody's physical health, mental health, ability to seek healthcare, or ability to earn an income. And so, with -- as with most things, there's a balance that we try and strike. And I think in New Hampshire, we've always attempted to have that balance.

I think we've done a relatively good job at trying to find that balance most of the time. But it's challenging because the pandemic is constantly changing, right? The risk and the benefit of some of these mitigation measures are constantly changing, based on the risks from COVID-19 in the community. And so, what I can say is that COVID-19 is still here.

As I just mentioned, there's still a substantial level of COVID-19 in our communities. It's still important for people to take steps to protect themselves and to protect others from COVID-19. But as the risk from COVID-19 decreases, either because the levels of COVID-19 decrease or more and more people get vaccinated and population immunity builds, that will allow us to sort of reset and re-find that balance of what it looks like to live with or manage COVID-19 in our communities.

Governor Sununu:

Okay. Great, we hit an hour. We're all going to turn into pumpkins. You're doing the 1980 slow clap?

Yeah.

Governor Sununu:

Well, thank you, guys, very much. I will be back at some point, whether it's next week or the week after. I'm not 100% sure, to keep people up-to-date as things change. But obviously we're on a great path. We just need to keep it up and keep things moving forward, keep managing those flexibilities so we can get to where we all want to be, which is putting COVID in the rearview mirror hopefully a little sooner than later. Thank you, guys.