



Office of Governor Christopher T. Sununu
Press Conference
Tuesday, May 26, 2020 at 3:00 p.m.

Governor Sununu:

Well, good afternoon. Thanks, everyone, for joining us after what was hopefully a good Memorial Day for a lot of folks. It looked a little different, to be sure. First, before I kick it over to Commissioner Shibinette to talk a little bit about a public health update and testing, I just want to thank everybody for what we saw across the State.

It was a nice weekend. And for the most part, you saw some folks out. But in terms of individuals limiting their social gathering, limiting any large crowds and things of that nature, I think the State did a really phenomenal job. And as we always say, the more disciplined we are early on, the more steps we can take to flex open down the line. So, a great job by the entire State, and I think it gives us a lot of opportunity, as we move forward.

With that, I am going to kick it over to Commissioner Shibinette for public health update.

Commissioner Shibinette:

Thank you. Today, we're announcing 34 new cases of COVID-19 in the State of New Hampshire, bringing our total to 4,231; one new hospitalization, which keeps our total around 10%; and four new deaths, all at long-term care facilities. We have 2,551 of our cases recovered. That's 60%. So our current caseload is 1,467.

Testing, pretty low numbers over Memorial Day weekend, especially Sunday into Monday, a variety of reasons for that, including it's a holiday weekend. So I think other people wanted to do other things over the holiday weekend.

And I think we're at the point where supply and demand is pretty equal right now. The people that want testing in the categories that we set forth have been able to get testing, and oftentimes same-day testing.

So, as I had said on Friday, we will be announcing a new category for testing at our fixed test sites. So, we're opening up testing for employees who cannot avoid prolonged close contact with either peers or members of the general public. So, employers that are opening meeting the universal guidelines that we put forth by DHHS and our Public Health department are encouraged to contact the Department so their employees can be tested, either this week, when they've gone back to work, or before they reopen and they want to go back to work.

In addition to expanding this testing for employers, the following groups still remain eligible for testing: people with any symptoms at all of COVID-19; anybody that has chronic lung disease or moderate-to-severe asthma, serious heart conditions, compromised immune systems, obesity, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, liver disease; healthcare workers; childcare workers; people over the age of 60; anybody that lives with anybody in any of the above categories.

So, testing is widely available right now. We are doing same-day testing. If you call today, you could probably get a test this afternoon, definitely would be able to get you a test tomorrow or any day this week. So people are very much encouraged to contact the Department to get their test in, if they want to.

We have our new test sites up. Keene and Londonderry both opened on Sunday. So, total, we have nine locations stood up: Claremont, Keene, Concord, Lancaster, Londonderry, Milford, Plymouth, Rochester, Tamworth. In addition to those set sites, we also have what we call Go Teams at each of those sites, which are mobile teams. So if you are an employer and you have a group of, let's say, 50 team members or staff, you can either set up a time for them to come to our fixed site, or our mobile team may be able to come out and visit you in your parking lot to be able to get it done. There are so many options at this point for testing. No one should want testing and not have it.

In addition to those test sites, we also have our eight ClearChoiceMD locations, our 11 ConvenientMD locations, hospital throughout the State, and a variety of Primary Care Physicians. A full list of testing options is available on our website under Testing Guidance.

In addition, just as a long-term care update, we are announcing three additional outbreaks today: The All American Assisted Living in Londonderry with six residents and 11 staff members; Courville in Manchester, six residents and six staff members; and the Kimi Nichols Center in Plaistow, which serves adults with disabilities, has three residents and two staff members. And that's all I have for an update. Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Great, well, thank you, Commissioner, very much. A couple things, just a few brief items, and then we can open up for questions. I want to let folks know that earlier today I signed Executive Order Number 48. And that's an Order to ensure the continued special education services for students that now will require school districts to hold individualized IEP team meetings to consider the extended schoolyear services for every child in the State with an IEP. At these meetings, IEP teams must now consider whether compensatory education services may be required to be provided, due to the circumstances arising from remote instruction and support.

This Order was crafted with the support of the Disability Rights Organizations, including Able New Hampshire, the Disability Rights Center of New Hampshire, the Parent Information Center. And it's all designed to help ensure that students with those Individualized Education Plans continue to receive the support they need. And it goes to the understanding that we just know that too many students are still at-risk of slipping through the cracks. And this Order will help make sure that school districts and Teachers prioritize the needs of each student on an individualized basis. It's one of the opportunities we can truly provide here in New Hampshire to make sure that we're doing everything we can for these kids one-on-one.

Also, as many folks know, more than a week ago we announced the formation of the Main Street Relief Fund to help small businesses through the economic challenges presented by COVID-19. And again, as a reminder, any business interested in receiving funds from the State must fill out the Pre-Grant Application online at revenue.nh.gov, revenue.nh.gov. And the application period is available through this Friday, May 29th. And again, any small business has until this Friday to fill that application out.

To-date, we have over 7,700 Applications have been received, and another three or four days for folks to get those in. We've always tried to make sure it was a streamlined process. It's not first-come, first-serve or anything like that. But there is a two-week period when all those Pre-Grant Applications have to get in. And then, we will try to get the checks out as fast as we can.

And finally, before we open up for questions, a reminder to talk about one more area, something we often talk about at this time of year, given that it's spring. We know that, as part of the Stay-at-Home 2.0, as we call it, we want to incentivize folks to go out for fresh air, go for their home hike challenge. We've gotten a lot of success with those programs.

But as the weather gets warmer, it's all important to remember to take time to educate ourselves on Lyme disease. It is another real important issue that we don't want to forget about. Everyone's talking about COVID. But let's not forget about the thousands and tens of thousands of people and citizens we have right here in New Hampshire that have Lyme disease.

It all starts with a tick bite. And so, educating ourselves on the importance of any prevention methods that we can take for ourselves and our families, and our pets, whatever it might be, it really is all important. We all know somebody who's been affected by Lyme disease, or frankly anyone of the other blood-borne pathogens that come. I think there's something like 14 that have been now identified in the State of New Hampshire that come from tick bites.

So we did proclaim May Lyme Disease Awareness Month. And we just want to encourage everyone to go to tickfreenh.org. It's a great organization, tickfreenh.org, to just remind folks of those preventative measures that they can take, so that, while they're out and about, while the weather gets warmer, we're all quite aware of one of the other real devastating issues that we've had in this State for quite a while.

So we're all talking COVID. And of course, that's kind of a priority for us right now. But it doesn't mean these other very important issues go by the wayside. So whatever we can do to bring awareness to ourselves, our families, and our communities, I think, is a beneficial step.

With that, I think we can open up for questions.

Q&A Session

Governor, you started off by congratulating the State for, I think, a good weekend, essentially, from a social distancing standpoint. There were some examples of violations, particularly up north in Groveton in the Speedway. What's the status of what the State's going to do there? And what's your own reaction to seeing someone essentially saying, no, we're going to do this, and we're going to keep doing it?

Governor Sununu:

Sure, so the Track Owner in Groveton that you're referring to was warned repeatedly to not hold an event where there would be a large gathering, where social distancing could be challenging. It was definitely against the orders and the Stay-at-Home Order that we had put into place. And so, the Attorney General's Office will be taking further actions later this week.

Is there going to be a standard template for response here, in terms of escalation, how things work, because we're hearing in Hampton, as well, there might be a hotel or two that's letting rooms to people from out-of-state? So, is it a case-by-case basis? Or is there pretty straightforward...

Governor Sununu:

I think they're so few and far between, and we're a small State in that we can take them on a case-by-case basis. We always want to work with individuals as opposed to saying, well, there's a blanket template here, and you got to come down with the hammer on every single individual.

So, we have an Attorney General's Office led by Gordon MacDonald that I think is quite exceptional when it comes to customer service in very difficult situations. And so, letting them do their job and work with those individuals as best they can to try to find some type of better situation than having to bring in Court Orders and all that kind of stuff, we always want to be able to do that. And doing it on a one-on-one basis is usually the best way.

Are you worried, as the pandemic continues, that this could become more widespread, essentially?

Governor Sununu:

No, not really, I got to tell you. I mean, I drove on Hampton Beach on Sunday morning. I drove up just to see how things were being stationed out and to kind of get a feel. I mean, I've over there every once in a while, so getting a feel of things. And I got to tell you, it was a nice morning. And people were out walking on the boardwalk, but there weren't folks on the beach. People really were, I think, understanding the responsibility that they have in making sure that every drop in the bucket matters, so to say. You don't want a few apples to spoil the bunch.

So, there will be cases. We've always known there will be cases. But, as we flex things open, as we can provide more opportunities for folks, obviously the need of dealing with these types of issues will hopefully go down.

They're not going to go away. There are still aspects of our economy that are going to be challenging to fully open without the potential for repercussions, what I keep calling those super cluster events where one individual can infect a whole bunch of people in a very short time period, and really set not just the State but your community, your town, especially up on a place like Groveton. It's a small community. A lot of folks, I'm gathering, that went to that racetrack were probably from that area. So one super cluster event can affect an area that has a good healthcare system, but doesn't have all the capacity in the world, in terms of bed, like you might find in other parts of the State or whatnot.

So, you're putting a lot of folks at risk, when you do that. And so, we just need everyone to be disciplined. We're going to get through it. We're going to keep flexing things open. But there's going to be continued challenges along the way. And anything we can do to work with those individuals one-on-one, we're happy to do so.

Do you anticipate issuing revised guidelines regarding vacation rentals, as some people try to make plans for the summer?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, I think later this week, probably in the Friday timeframe, we're getting close to finding, I think, some common ground and some way to talk about lodging, as a whole, so whether they're vacation

rentals, hotels, motels, Airbnb. We will have an announcement on Friday to, I think, give folks a little better sense of where we go with all of that.

I've got a testing question, Commissioner. Thanks. Basically, I'm just looking for clarity on changing categories in the COVID testing briefings. And about a couple weeks ago, new testing categories were issued: total PCR tests and total antibody tests. At that same time, the State stopped reporting out "persons tested negative in selected laboratories". Can you explain the significance of that?

Commissioner Shibinette:

So, what we're reporting out is total persons tested at selected laboratories, which is the same as the negative number, which is 64,232. And then, when you add that into our positive counts, which is 4200, you're right at about 6900 for the statewide.

So, the reason why we keep expanding categories is because if we open up testing completely in one shot, there's no way we can handle a quarter million people trying to drive to nine testing sites in three days. So we're taking the highest risk populations first. And then, we're moving out from the highest risk population to the next risk.

And then, who's at risk of spreading it in the community? And that's really, when we look at people that are going back to work that, for one reason or the other -- think Hairdressers, right? They're not able to socially distance for 6 feet, while they're doing their work -- to have them tested if they want to be tested. That's why we're expanding the categories. We're reporting out the same data, if not more data, on testing than we ever have been, currently.

Have we ever blended numbers on people who tested negative for antibody tests? That's been an issue in some States, in terms of sort of losing numbers?

Commissioner Shibinette:

So, the first two days that we were doing it, we asterisked our numbers and said, this is a combination. And we will report out them separately tomorrow. We just didn't have the right report in our system to be able to divide them out. That was a day or two.

But, since we really started working with ClearChoiceMD is when we started reporting out antibody numbers, because prior to that the number was so negligible it wouldn't have changed it either way. So you'll see each day, this report that comes out, that clearly separates PCR and antibody.

To be clear, when it comes to capacity for testing, is that still a function of how many tests there are available to the State?

Commissioner Shibinette:

No.

What are the limiting factors at this point? Is it how many sites there are and what...

Commissioner Shibiinette:

No, the limiting factor at this point are the number people in any distinct group that wants to get a test, right? If we just open up and said, anybody in New Hampshire, 1.3 million people, can get a test, regardless of their risk factors or symptomology, if even half of those people decided to get testing, our testing capacity would be limited just by the sheer number of people. But right now, we get...

That is my question. So it's a function of how many tests there are, or of how many sites there are?

Commissioner Shibiinette:

No, it's just a function of being able to test that many people in a couple-day window, which is why we've spread it out over a couple of weeks.

I guess another way to put it, is there a way of spreading? Since you spread it out like we're talking about it, are there enough tests for everybody eventually to get a test in this State?

Commissioner Shibiinette:

So, swabs, which has always been the big limiting factor, we received an order of 2 million swabs in this weekend, so obviously not a factor. Test kits come in regularly on a weekly basis. PPE, we have plenty of PPE, which the exception of N95s. We're still struggling with those. We have a small cache of those.

But, for the most part, it's not about having enough individual test supplies to do the testing on our residents. It's about not being able to test a million residents in one week. So, spreading it out and prioritizing high-risk people makes the most sense for the State.

I might have missed it. Did you give an update on antibody testing, percentage?

Commissioner Shibiinette:

The percentage positive, I don't have that update with me right now. I can tell you that it's been running between 2% and 3.5%, as has our PCR tests, right around. It varies between 2% and 4%.

And I know we've been asked this a lot, but is that an indication that the virus has not really spread around the State, because there's been some narratives suggesting that a lot of people got it and didn't know it. And there's been other narratives that the virus has...

Commissioner Shibiinette:

I think that we've said right from the very beginning that we have widespread community transmission in New Hampshire. And we continue to say that that is our messaging for the State of New

Hampshire and for the citizens is that there is widespread community transmission, which means that there are both symptomatic and asymptomatic people.

And we have seen ongoing evidence of non-symptomatic people in our communities, in Healthcare Provider, at healthcare facilities, specifically in our nursing home testing. We've seen evidence of that over and over again. So, I think it's fair to say that there is widespread community transmission, although our percent positive is fairly low, which is good.

I guess just to tie this up, the kind of question I'm going for is when will we have the data we need to know when the virus is starting to run its course, because if the antibody tests are still a very low percentage, that would suggest that people who are choosing to take antibody tests, not many are showing as having the virus? So, when is the State going to be able to know when the virus is actually...

Commissioner Shibinette:

I think what we're watching right now, I don't know the answer to the ultimate endpoint that you're asking about. I don't think anybody knows the answer to that question. What we're watching right now is that, as we take these small steps in reopening is what is the impact on those numbers. So, are we going to start seeing our percent positive go up? Are we going to start seeing our hospitalizations, or our case numbers, overall, go up?

That's what we're really watching right now. We're about two weeks from our first small step we took. Typically, we would wait two to three weeks to see if that had an outcome on our positivity rate. So, right now, we're in that window where we're watching very closely.

But the positive test percentage does seem to be still inching down. We're right around 6.5% of all tests, it looks like, of all cases. When would it be safe to say we're out of the woods? I mean, in other words, if this percent positive rate keeps going down for the next month, that's a really good sign, isn't it?

Commissioner Shibinette:

I think it's a combination of factors that we're looking at. There's so many data points that we look at to determine when is the right time to start opening up, right? So, we all know at this point that COVID-19 has hit our nursing homes harder than any other area of our State. And as long as we continue to have outbreaks and significant negative outcomes at nursing homes, I'm not ready to say any of that.

Our nursing home residents doesn't have the liberty of socially distancing away from their caregivers. They rely on their caregivers for their activities of daily living and to have their care done every day.

Those caregivers are part of our communities. So, as long as there's still COVID circulating in our communities, there is always a risk of bringing it into a nursing home. And there is always a risk of negative outcomes.

Governor, last week, President Trump ordered all States to reopen churches and also threatened to override States that refused to do so. How do you plan to respond? Do you plan to override that guidance? And what is the State's guidance to houses of worship right now?

Governor Sununu:

Sure, so following that statement by the President, they said the CDC would be releasing guidelines around places of worship, which they did. We got it late Friday afternoon. So we've taken a look at that over the weekend, and we will probably have a -- we're kind of finalizing what we think we can do, what other States have done, what has worked, what hasn't worked. And we will probably have an announcement on that later this week.

Governor, why do you think mask wearing has become so political?

Governor Sununu:

I don't know.

And as Governor, do you feel you need to lead and step in, and take a more firm position to kind of settle that debate for people here in New Hampshire?

Governor Sununu:

The question being why has mask wearing become so political? I mean, you want my philosophical? Because we all need something to argue about lately, it's one of the sad natures. And mask wearing a simple thing to argue about. We can argue about that stranger. Why isn't he wearing a mask? Why aren't you wearing a mask?

I don't know why it's so political. I think it's silly. It's not about who's doing it and why. It's about, does it make folks healthier? We encourage folks to wear them, absolutely. Is it absolutely required by CDC guidelines, or anything like that? No, it's not and it's not absolutely required here. But I think a lot of people, given that we don't require it, given that it's very different than anything we were doing two or three months ago, and given that most people are wearing them I think is a very positive sign here. So, why is it political? Everyone wants to argue about something lately. I don't know, too much social media.

So you don't think it would help if you said, okay, mask order? I guess for you to step in, what would it take?

Governor Sununu:

Well, I don't know if it's about me stepping in or not and I'm in. I mean, this is it. I stepped in, in March. And we've been very clear and very consistent with our message. We recommend it. We think it should be done.

But in some circumstances, like if you're out grocery shopping or just in the public, it's not required. And in circumstances where people are, again, in retail, if you're working in a retail front, customer-facing situation, you're working in a restaurant, of course, yeah, we're going to mandate it in

those certain area where we know there can be a lot of very direct, close contact interaction over a period of time. And we want to be sure we're protecting those customers.

But just walking around down the street, or walking down the sidewalk or something, or going for a hike, we're not at the point where we have to mandate the mask wearing. I know Massachusetts did it. But we don't have to here. We don't have that rate of transmission right now.

You mentioned on the business side, if a business has reopened under guidance that requires them to mask their employees and they're not doing that, what's the appropriate reaction of a consumer? Should they be calling someone? Should they just turn around and walk away? What should they do?

Governor Sununu:

Look, we're not asking consumers to pick up the phone. And we don't have snitch lines and all that. I don't believe in all that. If there are businesses that are kind of thwarting the guidance, we usually hear about it one way or the other. I'll say that. And we respond to it, appropriately.

And again, usually we can just work with a business. If they're not available, maybe there's a certain circumstance why they can't. Maybe there's an underlying health issue for some of those workers. And if those workers can be put in a different aspect of their job that don't put them in a position where they have to wear the mask, we're always willing to work with individuals.

Governor, you wrote to the President last week, asked about the National Guard, asking the President to extend the special deployment period under Title 32 that allows the National Guard within New Hampshire to be reimbursed. Have you heard anything back from the White House on that and...

Governor Sununu:

No, not yet, I do believe some folks from the National Guard will be joining us here in the State later this week. So we will have the opportunity to kind of push the case a little bit. But it really is an order from the President, and we hope to get it.

I know I was on a phone call with the Vice President and a bunch of the other Governors earlier today. And some of the other Governors were talking about it. I think Governor Murphy had brought it up directly with the Vice President, the need to extend that order hopefully.

So we do have it through mid-June, I think about June 24th, if I'm not mistaken. And again, the 500-or-so men or women of the National Guard just continue to knock it out of the park here for New Hampshire.

We're not asking to extend that order for nothing. We're asking to extend the order because those are the men and women that are helping at the food bank, that are manning our call centers, that are doing so many different thing, our testing centers. I mean, they're the ones on the frontlines of a lot of these issues. They do whatever they're asked. It's just unbelievable what they're willing to step up and do. And so, having a resource like that's very valuable, which is why we hope they'll extend it well-beyond June.

What would be the implication, if it weren't extended for the services you just described?

Governor Sununu:

If the Title 32 Request was not extended beyond June, we'd just have to make some different accommodations. We'd probably have to scale back how we were using our National Guard, doesn't mean we'd get rid of it altogether. But now there's just more cost implications to the state level. And we have some funds that could support that, to be sure. But we'd probably have to scale back in terms of what we do, the timing of what we do.

The Title 32 Order gives us a lot of flexibility in terms of what we can use these individuals for. And that's just been an awesome resource. And I think I speak for all 50 Governors when I say that. So, it doesn't mean it would go away entirely. But we'd probably have to scale back and prioritize.

I was told today actually by the National Guard it's about 700 Guards that are deployed right now around the State doing a number of things. I just wonder, compared to the other aspects of the State's response, what proportion is made up right now of National Guardsmen? How might that be affected, if this is not extended past June 24th?

Governor Sununu:

Sure, so what proportion of the National Guardsmen are making up the State's response? So I'm going to answer that in two ways. First, we have about 3,000 men and women in our National Guard. So you're looking at nearly 25% of them being deployed, if the number's already up to 700. The General probably deployed a few more over the past few days, which is great being able to do that. So you're looking at 20%, 25% of our National Guard are deployed at any given time, which is just an awesome resource.

In terms of all the resources necessary at the state level, that's literally thousands of individuals, because we're using them not just for State services. We're using them at the food bank. We're using them in private testing facilities. We're using them wherever folks need a helping hand on the frontlines. They're there, and we're happy to provide that. So that's one of the awesome parts of their flexibility is that it's not just they're being used in State Offices for only State services. It's all over the State. And that's thousands and thousands of individuals.

Now, it's not the end-all, be-all, if we can't use them beyond June. But it would definitely limit our capacity to respond in the way that we want to, with the flexibility we think we need to respond and stay right on top of some of these issues.

Can you confirm whether or not the liquor store employee on the Hanover Street store in Manchester is the only Liquor Commission employee who tested positive for COVID-19?

Governor Sununu:

I don't know, to be honest. I apologize. If it isn't, it's one of only a couple. But I don't know of any others off the top of my head. So, we can find out for you, though, to be sure.

Our employees with New Hampshire Hospital, are they getting the \$300 per week?

Governor Sununu:

Right now, no. There's been some discussion about it, to be sure. And it's something that we can definitely look at.

Why do you think most States haven't done this? Because they've waited, I mean Congress, as the President talked about it in mid-March, there have been two Stimulus Bills since.

Governor Sununu:

Why have other States not done the stipend like we did? I don't know. I don't want to speak for other Governors. Every State is so different. Let me give you a quick example. And I apologize. I don't know the numbers exactly.

But I was talking to Governor Baker. Massachusetts has about five times our population. They have, depending on how you look at it, 10 times or more the level of COVID that we have in our State at any given time. So they're dealing with a unprecedented issue down there.

But in terms of the flexible CARES Act funds, I want to say they received about twice as much as we did, something like that, because of the formula. They didn't receive five times as much. So certain States, just on a per-capita basis, are a little more limited, in terms.

Other States, I think, probably have more opportunity than we do. Every State got at least \$1.25 billion. So if you looked at a State like Wyoming, or even Vermont with about half our population, per capita they got about twice as much as we did, right?

So, my point is every State is a little bit different in terms of how much they might have received on a per-capita basis. Every State is very different in terms of the level of COVID that they have to deal with.

In Massachusetts, I don't want to speak for Governor Baker, but my sense is a lot of his funds are being deployed to and should be deployed to healthcare, right, on the frontlines of healthcare facilities, long-term care facilities. That's just where their need is right now. I'm sure they would love to do some of the economic relief or some of the stipend relief that we're doing.

But not every State is going to have that opportunity, unfortunately. And I think it just, again, goes to how different every State is. Everyone's dealing with it. I think every Governor's doing a great job, and more importantly why the Governors are the ones that really need to have the flexibility to design the systems for the best results for their COVID issue, their constituency, their economic downturn. And everyone's going to face some economic downturn.

And the economic downturn looks very different, too. I was talking to Governor Burgum of North Dakota and the Governor of Alaska, as well, Governor of Wyoming. Those States really rely on oil, right, and energy. Well, oil is really down. So, it isn't a matter of businesses being closed, but just the indirect issues that the market is driving in some of those other States that are driving other economic issues for not just their citizens, but for their State revenues as well. So, it's, again, just an example of how every State is very different and why Governors really do need the flexibility to move and move quickly.

Governor, the bipartisan negotiations at the State House appear to be breaking down this week. The House of Republicans voted in a caucus today. They say they have serious concerns with the process ahead of the session that's being planned in Durham next month, and that they may not agree to rule changes, that there are dozens of hundreds of Bills that may not be able to be passed and may be dead in the water if rule changes don't happen. How tied to this are you? And have you been talking to parties?

Governor Sununu:

Sure, when it comes to the bipartisan negotiations between how the House and the Senate are going to conduct their legislative business, given that they have to be in different locations, that's really their business and their rules. I can say wherever the House meets or wherever the Senate meets, they make their own rules. And the members do have to abide by them. But, obviously leadership has to come to some consensus. And I'm really not involved in those discussions at all.

Do you have any key priorities, though, as Governor, in the Bills that exist now, or in any amendments that you'd like to add, that relate to this crisis and that you'd want to see passed?

Governor Sununu:

What I'd really like to see passed when they get back together, just off the top of my head, and this is one of the issues that I've been fighting for a few years that I've been thwarted by the Democrats on is student debt relief, right? We had a \$16 million student debt relief plan that would have cost taxpayers nothing. They shot it out. They took it out of the budget. Okay. That was part of the negotiations, what we had to give, fine.

But there was a promise that they would come back and really fight hard to get student debt relief. We hear there may be a bill. They're looking at rule changes that would do more scholarships, not student debt relief. And scholarships are great, too. Don't get me wrong.

But, given that it's a little different but it's on the same tract of rental or housing relief, or utility relief, right? These are bills that are going to come every month for these students. Anything that we can do to help incentivize them to stay and work here and help pay down some of that debt, while hopefully incentivizing them to be at work and be part of our growing economic structure, without having them carry the burdens through tough economic times, I mean we're doing that for a lot of other areas.

I still think we need to go full throttle on student debt relief. And I hope the Democrats have a change of heart and join us in doing that. But we will see. We have a few calls?

Holly Ramer with the Associated Press:

Hi, can you clarify? This is a testing question. In which scenarios can a household member get tested? Is it only if they live with someone who's older, or has a health condition? Or is it any household member of any of those other categories, like a household member of someone with mild symptoms, or household member of a childcare worker?

Commissioner Shibinette:

It's a household member of any of the conditions, including household member of people with any symptoms of COVID, or any of the conditions that I listed: chronic lung disease; serious heart conditions; immune system issues; obesity; diabetes; chronic kidney disease; liver disease; or anybody over the age of 60, obviously.

The target population for this category is really the caregivers and the household members of people that are at high risk, people that care for the elderly, people that have elderly parents that live in their home, people that have household members that have disabilities and/or children with disabilities. So that is really the group that we're targeting here. Thank you.

Paul Hayes with The Caledonian-Record:

Hi, Governor, just wanted to follow up on Riverside. I was hoping you could talk about how that fits into the big picture up here in the North Country, where people are very concerned about the future of small businesses. I know Riverside, the owners have said the track's at-risk if it doesn't open. But people up here are also very concerned about gatherings and the impact of tourists from hard-hit areas in the public health system. So, if you could discuss sort of how it fits into the picture of those issues?

Governor Sununu:

Yeah, I'm sorry. Could you just repeat the question? I want to make sure I'm getting at the heart. Are you saying just to talk generally about the issues of small business in the North Country? Am I getting that right?

Paul Hayes with The Caledonian-Record:

Well, Riverside is a business where the owner has said that it's at risk of closing if they don't open this season. They had just purchased it last fall. And I know up here there's a lot of concern about small business in the bigger picture. People are worried that businesses up here will close, and the fragile North Country economy could really be hard hit. At the same time, people are worried about the impact of the healthcare system with the course and other gatherings. So there's a push-and-pull here. And Riverside seems to be right in the middle of it.

Governor Sununu:

Sure, so the question's really about the impact of small business, and really, if I may, the balancing that we're asking a lot of folks to undertake, given the tough economic times. I'll say this. The issue does not simply revolve around one racetrack in the North Country. That's frankly just a limited way of looking at that.

Every small business in this State is likely at-risk economically of closing their doors. Everyone is making sacrifices, everybody, whether you're a small hotel owner, whether you're a small racetrack, whether you're a small restaurant. All those businesses are at very severe risk, which is exactly why I designed the Main Street Relief Fund to focus on small businesses, get them cash relief, easy, quickly, and without the bureaucracy. And we're trying to do it as fast as possible.

We understand that April and May have been very, very tough months for these businesses, extremely tough months. I was talking to a business owner earlier today that was down 80% in both months. They're barely scraping by. They're surviving, but literally barely scraping by. And obviously a few more months of that isn't going to last too long.

So, it really is a balance. We're asking everyone to make sacrifice. All the more reason why one business can't say, if I don't pay my bills, I'm going bankrupt. So I'm just going to ignore the guidance. You can't do that. You really cannot, because you're putting individuals' personal health at risk. You're putting a lot of things at risk.

There are sacrifices happening. Not just a couple dozen, or a couple hundred, but thousands of businesses across the State are at risk of shutting their doors, if they haven't already. We are very, very aware of that and cognizant of it, which is why we're trying to move as quickly as possible.

But let's also remember that we still have a lot of COVID cases in this State. We have nearly just shy of 2,000 active COVID cases in the State, maybe in the 1500 range. That's a lot. And it's at all levels in the State.

So, it's a very tough ask of individuals, I know. Again, my former business was hotels, restaurants, and tourism in the North Country. I get it. I absolutely get it. Every one of those businesses is at risk, not just mine but all across the State. And so, believe me, it hits hard. And it's what's kept me up in many sleepless nights over the past couple months.

We are flexing things open. We're finally at the point of moving forward. If you told me a month ago I was going to be thinking about flexing open the beaches on June 1st, I would have said, no way. It's not possible.

But you know what? We've found a way. The numbers got better. We're on a good track. We're seeing what other States are doing. We're looking at other models. We're working hard. It's an all hands on deck effort, and we're actually able to do things that I didn't even think was possible a few months ago.

We're getting testing levels to levels where I didn't think were going to be possible. Those are all incredibly powerful tools. All the more reason we just need folks to have some more patience, to hold on. We know it's asking a lot, but we are all in this together. And there's a collective need, I think, to appreciate those sacrifices, but understand that they have to be made. And in very short order, hopefully sooner than we think, we could be back on the right track, economically. Excuse the pun.

Donna Jordan with the Colebrook Chronicle:

Hi, there. Good afternoon, and thank you for your time today. I have a couple of really quick questions. I think, Commissioner Shabinette, they may be for you. The first one is that Johns Hopkins University has really awesome COVID-19 maps showing cases all over the world. You can get right down to county level per State. They show Coos as having 13 cases, whereas the State of New Hampshire shows four cases, though I suspect we might be seeing those numbers increase in the coming days. Can you explain to me why there's a difference in those two numbers? It must be the way they do their mapping. The second real quick question is, I'm wondering if, with all of these outbreaks at long-term care facilities, is there going to be a new standard, do you think, of what employees might need to do upon entering a facility before taking care of long-term care patients? I know they're very careful now, as it is. Is there more that can be done for this, or any other virus? Thank you.

Commissioner Shabinette:

Yes, no problem. So I'm not sure what the discrepancy in the Coos County numbers are. I can assure you that our numbers are accurate that are coming out of Public Health. I think that there are times where there are certain border communities. And there has been times that we've had to adjust our numbers, because they get tested in one location, and then we find out that they live right over the border in a different county.

So, ours are accurate. I'm not sure what the discrepancy is. There is always issues around people, especially on the Vermont border, that live in New Hampshire and work in Vermont or vice-versa, and some of the larger report outs may have some inaccuracies there. Through our public health investigation, we really drill down into that information to make sure we report out accurate numbers.

So your question about long-term care facilities, we're doing active screening right now. And what you're going to see coming and what we're doing is testing all the employees. And even the Federal Government has recommended serial testing for the employees. And we're in the middle of negotiating a contract to be able to do that on a every seven-to-10 day basis. I think that's going to be the new standard. Having a COVID test prior to showing up for a new job is going to be the standard for the foreseeable future in the coming months.

So, Commissioner, while you're there, how many outbreaks or clusters are there currently considered active by your Department at long-term care facilities?

Commissioner Shabinette:

At long-term care facilities, so usually I have a list, if you'd just bear with me for a minute? We have 17 long-term care facilities. We have some others that are not long-term care facilities but are considered outbreaks, like one of the ones I announced today.

But I just want to put in a note in there. We have probably four or five that are ready to drop off that list tomorrow. So as long as they don't get new cases today, then, tomorrow, their outbreak is going to be clear.

But are those the same facilities? You've referenced facilities in the past that were...

Commissioner Shabinette:

We've had several drop off through the time. And oftentimes what happens, even with facilities that have a case or two cases, or three case, there's such a period of time between cases. They'll have a positive, and then they'll have another positive two weeks from now. And then they'll have another positive two weeks from then. And it's hard to say that's really an outbreak, because it doesn't fit with the standards.

Yeah, I think what you'll see is that the facilities that came on early on have dropped off. There's several more facilities getting ready to drop off. And what we're hoping is that, as new facilities come on with our new testing guidelines, we are able to catch it quicker and contain it sooner.

Paula Tracy with InDepth:

Good afternoon, Governor and everyone there. I'm sorry about the sound of motorcycles going by my house. It's kind of noisy out here. But, I have two questions: one about the upcoming elections; and the other is to clarify the workers will be able to get testing who have face-to-face contact. Is that going to be available next week? And I'm not sure I heard that correctly.

Governor Sununu:

It's available now.

Paula Tracy with InDepth:

It's available now. So, that's good. Okay. And then, I had a question. Tomorrow, Secretary Gardner and Brad Cook will be participating in one of 50 cybersecurity election virtual discussions that are being held across the nation. And I was interested in knowing. I guess we have some money that has come in for the upcoming election and would allow us to perhaps expand some of the opportunities to vote from home because of COVID-19. But I also wondered whether cybersecurity was also inline to get some funding for that.

Governor Sununu:

So the question really revolved around the funding and how it relates to cybersecurity which is there will be a national panel discussion that both Secretary Gardner and some other folk will be participating in tomorrow. I'll start with this. One of the issues we take great pride in, in New Hampshire, is we always have cybersecurity issues in everything you do nowadays, of course, but not to the level that other States do.

All of our optical scanners here in New Hampshire, they're wireless and their internet connectivity is disabled before they go in. So we already have created these natural barriers. And hats off to Secretary Gardner for having the forethought on a lot of this ahead of time.

But, they'll participate in the panel. And of course, there's always other means where we can look to make sure that our system is secure and viable in all of the different aspects around voting, or what might happen in our local communities around voting.

There are funds available. There's at least an initial funding stream of about \$3.2 million that came in. And as we've said, we're not changing our voting process really at all, other than to say if folks want to vote absentee, which they can do right now, because of the issue of COVID, they can do so. And they can check that box and do so. It's really that simple. We already have a very robust absentee ballot voting process. And so, we're just allowing that little bit of flexibility for this election.

Michael Graham of New Hampshire Journal:

Thank you. So, Governor, there's a lot of talk about the fiscal impact on the State's budget from the shutdown, as the Legislature gets ready to gather together. And I'm curious what your working number is for the size of the hole that the budget will be facing that can't be filled by federal money. Also, as you know, some Democrats are talking about this being the moment when a new look at the Tax Code should be taken, a broad-based tax to fill that hole. Do you agree that this is the time for something like a statewide Sales or Income Tax as some of your Democratic friends have suggested?

Governor Sununu:

So, in terms of the amount of the hole, if you will, the revenue hole that the State will be looking at, it's somewhere in the neighborhood of \$500 million to \$700 million. That's what we're currently estimating. But please understand. That's a bit unknown. It could be more. It could be less. We're really not 100% sure.

But we have folks that are constantly updating those numbers and looking at it. So, there'll be about \$150 million through June 30th of this year, and then potentially another \$350 million, \$450 million in revenue losses next year, could be more. We're not quite sure.

We don't know how those revenue holes will be filled out of the Federal Government, because the next Stimulus Package will likely have that the Congress will pass -- and I think something will get passed -- will likely have some funds in there to allow States to backfill some of those revenues. We don't know what kind of flexibility we will have, or how much money might come in, or what the pushes and pulls there will be. So it would be, I think, premature to make any firm decisions on anything knowing that there's a giant out there. Then we just don't know exactly what it's going to look like.

In terms of the Tax Code, absolutely not, we should not be passing broad-based taxes. I know the Democrats tried to pass their Income Tax last time. There was broad-based support by the Democrats in the House and the Senate. And as much as they want to keep pushing those ideas, we're going to veto them and hold those vetoes, because that is not what New Hampshire does.

And to think that anyone actually even entertaining broad-based taxes right now, when the chips are down, when times are tough, when families don't have as much money as they might have had, when jobs are hard to come by, the last thing you should be doing is taxing the people of the State more. That's absolutely the wrong path to go by. You can always manage through.

It might mean leadership has to make some very tough decisions. It might mean that programs get delayed or capital projects might get delayed. But, again, we don't even know if that's going to happen, given that we will likely get some stimulus out of the Federal Government.

But even if no stimulus came -- and that's probably not going to be the case. But even if none of it came, you can always manage. You can always prioritize. I've always said there were some sacred cows, if you will. There are certain programs that I simply will not cut anything out of.

If anything, there's certain programs that I think we need to enhance, whether you're talking about programs around children, abused kids, special education services, domestic violence, SUD, issues around addiction. These are issues that tend to really explode during tough economic times, and now is not the right time to pull back on those things. You got to really make sure you're moving forward with them.

Now, that might mean we might have to make tougher decisions in other areas. We can do it. We can manage. And I'm happy to make those tough decisions. I'm not happy about it, I guess. But I know that that comes with the job. That's the responsibility of the job.

When times get tough and you have to make tough decisions on how to spend money, you don't defer and just go take more out of the pockets of your citizens. Anybody can do that. That's not management. That's not innovation.

So, the idea that we've been talking about these broad-based Sales Tax and Income Taxes out of the Democrats right now, it gets me a little concerned. It should get everyone a little bit concerned. But I feel confident that we can show a path forward. We can show a way to manage through it. We can show

a budget that makes sense without bringing those taxes to bear. And hopefully show it to the people of the State, as well, and work through and get it done.

Tony Schinella of the Patch:

Thank you very much. Two follow-up questions, please, for Commissioner Shibinette; first, we've been working with the assumption that all or nearly all of the deaths associated with COVID here in New Hampshire have been people with underlying and chronic health conditions. Is this still accurate, or has that changed? And then, second, previously, I believe it was way in the early part of April, I asked about a number of residents who have reported to me that they had severe flu in December, January, and February. That severe flu passed, and now they're wondering if they had Coronavirus all of that time and just didn't know it. We hadn't been doing a lot of testing. You started with the travelers back in late-January. With the introduction of the antibody testing and, granted, understanding that everybody is so focused on current contact tracing and investigations, is the Department going to circle back with those people, or expand categories for the antibody testing for those people who may have had that severe flu at the time? Thank you.

Governor Sununu:

Well, I'm happy to take it. Are you sure? Okay. Like I said, I'll answer it. And then, the Commissioner can come up and correct me, I suppose. The vast majority of cases have had underlying health conditions. That was true a few weeks ago, and that remains true today.

In terms of the antibody tests, anyone can contact ClearChoice and get an antibody test. So if folks did have symptoms back in February, if they suspected they had COVID when we had very limited testing capability, we definitely encourage them to reach out to ClearChoice and get that antibody test.

Again, there's no financial barrier. If they don't have insurance or they have other financial barriers to themselves, it doesn't matter. We will take care of it on our end. But, anybody interested in getting an antibody test can absolutely go out and get an antibody test. And again, all those results get fed up to the State.

Okay. Are we good? Okay, great. Well, look, thanks, everyone, for joining us. We will have more updates. It is going to be very warm this week. We understand that. So we want people to stay cool. And again, I'm just very happy to see that, as we kind of progress through this, as summer really starts to hit us, the beaches will eventually get opened next week.

And we will be watching for some folks who were asking me a little bit earlier. We will be watching to see what happens in some of the other States, whether it's in Massachusetts or Maine, or some of the other States where some of their seashore beaches have opened. We will see how they manage traffic, how they manage crowd control, and obviously help us make some of the decisions to refine our model and refine our guidance, if necessary, and make sure that it's a success for everybody.

It's something that we can open. We can flex open. And we can do it in a way that is sustainable for the entire State. So, stay cool. We will see you guys later.