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January 7, 2022

The Honorable Phil Murphy
Governor, State of New Jersey
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 001
Trenton, NJ 08625

Dear Governor Murphy:

In the weeks since November 30, when public health officials first identified the Omicron variant as a “Variant of Concern,” Americans have experienced the new variant’s rapid spread and ability to evade vaccination. I commend you for the State of New Jersey’s prompt response to this new phase of the pandemic, including your work to ensure New Jersey residents remain vigilant with vaccinations and mask-wearing.

Still, additional action is needed to best equip our communities to handle this variant. Several steps could be immediately beneficial: (1) extending licensure and scope of practice flexibilities for frontline workers to increase the supply of skilled providers; (2) further utilization of the New Jersey National Guard to expand COVID-19 testing; and, (3) continuing your efforts to keep schools open — not only for educational continuity but also because of the implications of school closures on childcare, which would further exacerbate the challenges our essential workers face.

You have been quick to prepare New Jersey for the Omicron variant. Since early December, when officials detected the first Omicron case in the state, you called on Jersey residents to get vaccinated, boosted, and to wear masks to reduce the spread of COVID-19. In recent days, you have worked alongside the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to increase community access to testing in underserved regions of our state. These measures — coupled with the groundbreaking work of the New Jersey life sciences industry to bring to market cutting-edge therapeutics — have resulted in the stronger footing we now have to tackle the current wave of this pandemic.

Despite all this progress, following my discussions with Fifth District constituents and public health leaders across North Jersey, I believe there are several additional steps your Administration can take to ease the impact of the Omicron variant. First, hospital systems in my District face immediate staffing shortages from high infection rates among frontline workers. I was pleased to see your Administration’s request this week for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) “strike teams” to be deployed across New Jersey to counter the depletion of staff in crucial hospital systems. In addition, I encourage your Administration to extend the recently expired licensure and scope of practice flexibilities of your Executive Order (EO) 112,

issued at the beginning of the pandemic. As you know, this EO took various steps to expand the availability of frontline healthcare professionals. Unfortunately, with the rise of the Omicron wave, those steps are again necessary.

Second, as you know, hospital systems in my District have been hit hard in recent days by the testing surge as schools, workplaces, travel destinations, and other places of public accommodation require proof of a negative COVID-19 test. Because of the difficulty many of my constituents have had accessing rapid at-home testing, hospital emergency departments have experienced an onslaught of otherwise healthy individuals presenting in the emergency department searching for a COVID-19 test. This occurrence speaks to the demand for greater testing accessibility. It also has repercussions across the healthcare system, complicating the ability of those in dire need of treatment to reach the care they need. As we await the shipment of additional rapid at-home tests, I encourage you to further utilize the New Jersey National Guard to expand COVID-19 testing capacity in our hardest-hit communities.

Finally, I was pleased by your Administration's rollout on January 1 of a "test to stay" program for K-12 schools in New Jersey. As a result, more students will stay in school and receive in-person instruction by combining contact tracing and frequent testing. As you have recognized, in-person education, where possible, and the related benefits for our children are much preferred to remote learning. Without in-person instruction, many parents are faced with the difficult choice of continuing to work or staying home to care for their children. Indeed, hospital administrators across North Jersey have expressed to me the importance of in-person instruction to prevent the further depletion of their workforce, comprised mainly of parents with school-aged children. Doing all we can to keep kids in schools must remain a priority.

Thank you for your ongoing leadership during this challenging time and for the immediate steps you have already taken to move New Jersey beyond this pandemic. By taking the additional steps outlined here, we can lessen the impact of the Omicron variant and minimize the disruptions it will cause in the coming weeks. I appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J. Gottheimer". The signature is stylized and fluid, with a large initial "J" and "G".

Josh Gottheimer
MEMBER OF CONGRESS