Thank you. As the Governor said, we have worked hard to get to this moment. We are now prepared in ways that we could not have been two years ago. Most importantly, we have high levels of immunity among individuals – in major part due to the 75 percent of adults that have gotten at least one shot. We are also prepared with treatments, testing, and a robust supply of other tools.

While COVID is now a threat we can manage, it has not disappeared. We will remain vigilant, and we will work to equip you with the information and tools you need to make choices that are best for you and your family.

Moving forward, our approach will follow four core principles. Empowering individuals. Maintaining health system capacity. Collaborating with local partners. And prioritizing equity. These principles ensure a fast and fair response that improves the health, safety, and well-being of *all* North Carolinians.

People want to return to their normal routines, which they can do because of the free and effective vaccines, boosters, and other tools that help people manage their risk. We will continue to ensure access to information and resources, especially for historically marginalized populations, people with disabilities and older North Carolinians.

Data will continue to drive our response as it has through the entire pandemic. But some metrics no longer measure the moment. Some that you are used to seeing – like the percentage of positive tests – will no longer be our focus. We have selected seven metrics, based on science, for the current moment.

Let's go to the slides

First, wastewater has pieces of the COVID-19 virus 4-6 days before the first cases are reported in the community. North Carolina was one of the first 8 states to partner with CDC on sampling community wastewater to give us an early warning.

[next slide]

Another early indicator that we'll continue to use is the percent of people going to emergency departments with COVID-like illness. When this metric is trending upward, we're expecting more severe illness in communities.

[next slide]

Hospital admissions for COVID-19 tells us how strained our hospitals are becoming. When it is high it indicates hospitals will be challenged to provide care for COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients.

[next slide]

Cases remain important, even though every case is not reported. Case trends give us insight into particular communities and populations being affected by the virus.

[next slide]

Being up-to-date with your vaccine is the most powerful way to reduce your risk of COVID-19. That's why booster rates help us measure protection in our communities.

[next slide]

Understanding which variants are circulating in North Carolina informs our response and recommendations on how best to layer-up protection. Variants that cause more severe illness or are more transmissible is important information.

[next slide]

Finally the CDC's community level metric combines a number of the metrics above to give a low, medium, or high level of risk specific to your county.

[next slide]

Beginning on March 23, the summary page of the COVID-19 Dashboard will feature these seven metrics. Recognizing the importance of trends over time, we will move to a *weekly* update. These metrics, along with your personal situation, can help inform your choices to protect yourself and your family. And they'll help us stay prepared as a state.

Looking ahead we will see periods of increased spread. You can stay prepared by keeping up to date with your vaccine, and we'll maintain a strong supply of treatments, testing, and PPE.

North Carolinians have demonstrated incredible strength over the last two years, and we will recover stronger together. We've learned important lessons through the pandemic that we'll use as we invest in our behavioral health and resilience, focus on child and family well-being, and build a strong and inclusive workforce to align with Secretary Sanders' efforts. I look forward to working with each of you to make a stronger recovery a reality.

Finally, it's not too late to vaccinate. Visit myspot.nc.gov for information.

Governor Cooper...