

The Star-Ledger

N.J. coronavirus death toll just surpassed number of residents killed in 9/11 attacks

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published April 4, 2020

New Jersey passed a sobering milestone Saturday as the number of residents who have died due to complications of the coronavirus surpassed the number of New Jerseyans killed in the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

State officials said the virus has taken 846 residents. A total of 704 New Jerseyans died in the 9/11 attacks.

“Please let that sink in for a moment. This pandemic is one of the greatest tragedies in the state’s history,” Gov. Phil Murphy said at his daily coronavirus press briefing in Trenton.

The day before, Murphy ordered flags flown half-staff to honor the dead, echoing past tributes to 9/11 victims.

“Just as we have committed to never forgetting those lost on 9/11, we must commit to never forgetting those we are losing to this,” Murphy said.

Murphy on Saturday reported 4,331 new cases and 200 new deaths of the virus in New Jersey. That brought the total to 34,124 known cases and 846 deaths.

For perspective, the state lost 1,487 people in the Vietnam War and 12,565 during World War II, according to the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

During the 1918 Spanish Influenza, more than 8,500 New Jerseyans died just in October. By the end of that pandemic, Newark alone lost more than 2,000. (The state’s total death toll is difficult to know because of uneven reporting, but it’s likely more than 10,000.)

Since the first reported death less than four weeks ago, the virus has taken a teacher, a “Succession” actor and a baseball coach. A food pantry founder died Monday, a firefighter on Tuesday and an acclaimed songwriter Wednesday.

Because tests can take several days, officials have said it’s too early to know how the governor’s lockdown will affect the virus’ spread.

The coronavirus has already changed how residents grieve. Mourners wave from cars. Ambulances form processions.

“It’s an overwhelming time, but that doesn’t mean we have to be overwhelmed,” said Judith McCoyd, an associate professor at Rutgers University’s School of Social Work.

McCoyd supervises hospice workers who are helping families mourn from afar, and she said gratitude was crucial: Families that can find something to be thankful for were better able to process a loss.

It's also normal to mourn people you've never met, she said, in much the same way the world grieved Robin Williams. It helps to focus on what we can control, she said, like calling those we love.

Maureen Brogan, director of the Traumatic Loss Coalitions for Youth at Rutgers, said those calls can help you create new grieving rituals while churches, temples and other community centers are closed.

"Grief is a process that we kind of go in and out of," she said. "We have to be gentle with ourselves, and we really have to be patient and kind with those around us."

NJ Advance Media staff writers Vinessa Erminio and James Kratch contributed to this report.