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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON
THE BRIAN LEHRER SHOW**

Brian Lehrer: It's Brian Lehrer on WNYC. Time now for our Friday Ask The Mayor call-in. My questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio. Call-in with your questions at 646-435-7280, 646-435-7280, or a tweet a question. Just use the hashtag #AskTheMayor. And good morning, Mr. Mayor. Welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, Brian. I have some good news, breaking news for you this morning. Two quick things. First of all, New York City COVID positivity level, according to our Department of Health today, 0.93 percent. We are under one percent now. 0.93 percent, lowest since Labor Day last year. Absolutely amazing. So, it's been nine months since it's been this low. And related, something, I know you are an athlete yourself, Brian, you will appreciate this. Our high school basketball players, our PSAL teams are looking forward to a major, major tournament this weekend, five borough tournament. The Douglas Memorial Basketball Tournament was going to be rained out, because the situation COVID is so much better, we're going to allow that tournament to be played indoors, just the players, coaches, and refs, no crowds, with masks and other precautions. But we're going to save the tournament, bring it indoors because the people of this city went out and got vaccinated and have fought back COVID so successfully.

Lehrer: Certainly, characterizing me as an athlete is way overstating anything, I would call myself. I will say I have vast experience on the WNYC softball team. Not sure that counts me as an athlete though. But is this the return of high school sports at another level in general, this event that you just cited?

Mayor: Absolutely. First of all, as COVID was being fought back through vaccination, we brought back high school sports across the board. But originally out of abundance of caution, it was all going to be outdoors. Now because we made so much progress. We can bring basketball, volleyball, wrestling, indoors, which is going to make it a lot easier for everyone. There is still going to be a lot of precautions in place for sure. But it is another market progress. And look for our kids, especially for kids who this was an important part of our life. It was something taken away from them on top of everything else they lost to COVID. This is going to bring a lot of hope and energy back. This is part of showing them that we're all going to overcome this. And it means so much to the whole school community. So, this is a big deal.

Lehrer: Well, you're talking about students returning to sports. And funny enough, I think we have a caller about another demographic that wants to return to sports. Charles in Manhattan, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Charles.

Question: Hello, Mayor.

Mayor: Good morning, Charles. How are you?

Question: I'm very well, thank you. I represent a group of about 30 fully vaccinated seniors who want to play basketball at the Chelsea Recreation Center. We have been told that it wouldn't reopen until July and since you are reopening the city in so many ways, maybe they can open up the rec center?

Mayor: That sounds pretty damn reasonable. And so, Charles, I'm going to have my team follow up with you today and see if we can get that done. Obviously, we got to check whatever the governing State rules are, if there's any other factor to know. But I think you know, I've said in general we've made even faster progress than we expected. I want to see New York City fully reopened by July 1st. We're well on our way. But in this case, if everyone's vaccinated, I want to see people getting their healthy exercise in and have a good time. And yes, Brian, you are an athlete if you play softball. So, Charles, let's see if we can resolve this today.

Lehrer: Charles, let's see. Leave your contact information, the Mayor's Office will get back to you. But this is a policy question that we've talked about before in recent weeks, opening the senior centers. Obviously, it's not just his basketball group in Chelsea, it's reopening the senior centers, right?

Mayor: And we're getting closer – look, I want to separate the notion of when you have a verified, fully vaccinated group of people, which the CDC has made very clear, opens up a world of possibilities. Versus if you have a group of folks, some vaccinated, some not, we still have to be careful, particularly with seniors. But that said our Health Department, Dr. Dave Chokshi, our Department For The Aging Commissioner Lorraine Cortés-Vázquez are working constantly. I think an announcement is soon. We've got a few things still to work through. We'd like to get our seniors back to senior centers. We know it means a lot to them. It's a big part of their life. It's a big part of their day to be with their friends, a lot of good services they get. Obviously good food, but we also know seniors still are the single most vulnerable group. So, we have to be smart. By the way related, Brian, we just announced yesterday – anyone 75 years old and up, and also anyone who has disabilities, now can request in-home vaccination. We are at a point now, we've been really successful reaching homebound seniors, folks who did not have any other option, needed a shot home. We've reached everyone who made that request and was homebound. We're now taking this idea further and saying, if you're 75 years old or older, or you are disabled and it would be better for you to have the medical folks come right to your door, right to your home, and give you the vaccination in-person, we will now do that. And anyone who is interested in that can reach out through 8-7-7-VAX-4NYC and can go ahead and schedule that opportunity.

Lehrer: That sounds like a great program. And certainly the positivity rate that you started with is great news. But let me follow up and ask you about the holes in the system still? And how you're fighting access disparities by internet status or English language status, or other things within these programs? It sounds like what you just said, though, it's great that they'll bring a vaccine to anybody who's got a particular disability or who's over 75. But it seemed like you say they have to reach out? We did a segment on this last hour about some of the structural barriers that still exist unintentionally, but they still exist, for people who you know, could be reached who are not refusing vaccines, but have certain barriers? And the news organization, The City this morning has a story, Southern Brooklyn's ongoing COVID suffering shows toll of disinformation and disconnection. And they have a much higher positivity rate than a lot of the rest of the city. And there are pockets around the five boroughs. So, how are you going to get through those barriers?

Mayor: It's a very, very important question. The community outreach is absolutely, crucial. We're saying now I want to emphasize this, 75 years old and not over 75, just as a clarification. 75 years old and up can get that in-home service. But this is one of many, many approaches. It's really about deep, deep, deep community outreach. So, we have an initiative through Department of Health, where doctors, personal doctors are calling their patients. Pediatricians are calling moms and dads and you know, going over why vaccination is important, answering questions. We have canvassing operations going door to door in neighborhoods that don't have as high of vaccine level, vaccination level, particularly in public housing. We have very, very targeted efforts exactly as you're describing. Our Office of People with Disabilities here in the Mayor's Office has been reaching out through organizations that represent and advocate for the disabled to help make sure people get vaccination and it's supported and facilitated. I think the future is more. You know, we have the vaccine buses, the vaccine vans, they are going to be out all over the city this weekend. They are going to be at the beaches, wherever people are. They've been in the neighborhoods hardest hit. I was with Congress Member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the Bronx in her district a few weeks ago with the vaccine bus. Incredible response, as you may have seen, my son is out there, Dante, you know, encouraging people to get vaccinated, particularly young people. Bringing them over to the vaccine bus. But it's more and more and more of the same. This is what works.

Lehrer: Raul in East Elmhurst, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Raul.

Question: Yes. Mr. Mayor, Brian. Good morning, Mr. Mayor. Thank you so much. *Muchas gracias* [inaudible]. My mom got vaccinated. The nurses were wonderful. They can right into the house. We got the Johnson & Johnson. Thank you for all that you have been doing with us with COVID. Mr. Mayor, I have quality of life here in East Elmhurst. There's a house that for many years, they steal motorcycles, mopeds, everything, and they bring it into to the house just frequently. Police come and they take them and they go back and do the same thing. It has been an issue for many, many years. I wonder if you can help us here in East Elmhurst? The other quick issue is about motorcycles. Motorcycles are all over the place. I've had – just again, run through a light, there was a patrol car right behind me, they didn't move an inch. So, I also want to get from you, what are they supposed to do? Are they have some sort of some sort of thing, Mr. Mayor?

Mayor: Yeah. Very important question, Raul. On the first point, I'm going to get the NYPD borough commander for your part of Queens to call you today. If we have a location where illegal motorcycles, you know any kind of – any kind of illegal vehicle, because they're very clear laws about what kind of vehicles can be on the streets of New York City and what can't. NYPD has increasingly been confiscating those vehicles, making very clear to people the consequences of having them. So, if this has been an ongoing problem and I'm going to have the borough commander talk to you about how they can do more consistent enforcement. On the issue of motorcycles on the streets – there is a sensitivity. This is the area where I think NYPD has been very smart and careful about saying there are certain situations where you do a chase, there's other situations where you don't. We all know a chase comes with its own challenges and dangers. So, if there's a safe way to deal with that problem immediately they will, obviously. There are other situations where it isn't going to be something that can be done safely. And the idea is to put safety first. So, that's always a balance. That's up to individual officer discretion to judge in that situation. But clearly if anyone violates the law, there's going to be enforcement in the best available manner at all times.

Lehrer: Is that the same as the issue –

Mayor: And Raul, we need your information – I'm sorry, Raul, we need your information please, so that we can do the follow-up related to what's going on in your neighborhood.

Lehrer: Yeah. Raul, we'll take it off the air for that. Is this related to the drag racing in the city? Gothamist reports data from 3-1-1 shows drag racing complaints are up 194 percent this year with 893 complaints so far this year compared to 303 the same time last year. It says Queens has seen the most complaints and also with large clusters of reported drag races this year in Washington Heights, in the Northwest Bronx, according to the data, according to Gothamist. Isn't this something that can be stopped?

Mayor: Brian, let's talk very clearly about this. A really important question. So, one, the best way to stop it and many, many neighborhood residents do this – the best way to stop this is call the NYPD and let them know who's doing it. Where – if you know who's involved or if you know where the vehicles are, directing NYPD to it when there isn't the race going on. And so, they can be confiscated, so people can be addressed. That's by far the best approach. That happens a lot. A lot of people call in and give that specific information and that's dealing with the root cause. We want to see a lot more of that. The NYPD can clearly disrupt – if there's a drag race in process, of course they can go and disrupt. What there's going to be caution about is creating a situation of car chases, which again create their own dangerous. So, what we want to do is get this at the root cause. And that's what we've had a lot of success with. You may have seen the very vivid video of crushing a number of off-road vehicles and motor bikes and things that were not legal. This is because neighborhood residents who really hate this kind of disruption in their lives, are calling the NYPD and saying, here's who's doing it. Here's where it is. Here's how you find it. And that's what's helping us.

Lehrer: And there was a death of a man killed crossing the street in Bedford-Stuyvesant last week. And Channel 7 reported it appeared to be near the scene of a drag race. I'm not sure they

conclusively linked it, but that started a rash of reporting on this. Kevin in Brooklyn Heights, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Kevin.

Question: Hi. Thanks very much. Mr. Mayor, I really want to commend you on your leadership of our city these last several years. I mean, New Yorkers can be pretty tough on their mayors. And Brian, I know you're a big Mets fan, I think there's probably been a lot of Met players that the Mets fans did not always treat hospitably. But I – we're going to miss you Mr. Mayor when you're not in the batting order next year at City Hall. So –

Mayor: I like your baseball analogy, Kevin. You're carrying the baseball analogy all the way through. And that's very kind of you. Thank you.

Question: Okay, so, you know, I'm an Irish American, I really want to commend you early in your tenure when you refused to participate in the St Patrick's Day Parade because of their exclusion, so I want to know would you commit - maybe you want to break the news here today that you will not participate in these, any of these in-person pride events this year unless they allow gay and lesbian Correction officers and police officers to fully participate? Because I think you could set a real precedent because, you know, they said that this is going to last through 2025. So, if you don't participate, if you draw the line, then the next mayor I think will feel compelled to do the same. So, thank you.

Mayor: Thank you, Kevin. Thank you for the question. It's an important topic. Look, as I think you're seeing in some of the reporting even today, a lot of people were disappointed in that decision. I know so many people have been a part of the LGBT rights movement going back literally to Stonewall and in '69 and who are appalled that there were years and years where the call was for it NYPD start representing the whole community, and these trailblazer officers went into NYPD and started to change minds, change hearts, educate, and it's a whole different reality today in large measure because of them, and now they would be excluded. Makes no sense. And I generally think the answer to any social challenge is inclusion, not exclusion. So, there's a lot of dialogue going on right now. I'm going to answer your question this way, Kevin, and I'm not for any reason trying to say anything but a clear answer. There's a lot of dialogue going on to try to resolve this, and before I say anything more definitive, I think the right thing to say to help resolution along is that a lot of us would like to see a positive resolution and inclusive resolution, more and more voices are raising up on this, and I am hopeful that we can find a solution in the next few weeks.

Lehrer: Do you have a solution to recommend that would satisfy both sides?

Mayor: Look, I'm not going to be the person to say this is the perfect model. I think what's been happening right now has been the right approach, previously. You know, I really do, because it was inclusive of people who are serving our community and represent the LGBT community proudly. But I understand some of the concerns raised, I think there is a way to balance both, but the best solutions will come through a real dialogue, both within the community, and others of us joining in. So, I believe, Brian, it is thoroughly resolvable in the name of inclusion. There's a way to resolve this. Here are the concerns but move forward. I think it would be very sad and

very wrong to leave out these officers who want to express their pride and who serve us all every day.

Lehrer: I want to ask you about the bill that City Council passed this week, almost unanimously, to sharply increase the value of housing vouchers provided by the city, which have for years been so low as to be almost worthless, as I understand it, with only about 350 people per month able to find an apartment using the voucher before the pandemic, according to city council the value of the new vouchers would be in line with fair market rent, from the reporting I've seen. So, for a family of three, seeking a two-bedroom apartment, the maximum voucher allowance could jump by 40 percent and that would go from only about 500 apartments that are currently listed on Street Easy being affordable for people with the vouchers to about 70,000 apartments being affordable. Will you sign this bill?

Mayor: Couple of things. I understand that people are citing that one website to make their argument. It's a much more complex situation than that. Let me give you the most important fact and I'm kind of stunned people don't talk about this more. Over 150,000 folks that were homeless and went into shelter ended up getting affordable housing through the efforts of this administration in the last seven plus years. 150,000 people, vouchers or one of those strategies, clearly, they work. So, Brian, respectfully – really, you know, I respect you – but sometimes I feel like you take a piece of information and don't give it context. No, of course vouchers have been usable by many, many people. I think there's a legitimate argument where people say, should we keep raising the level? And the caution was if we raise a level independently, we would then be taking the State funding that we had depended on for years and years and basically making it obsolete and putting all the financial responsibility on the City of New York, because no one would use the State vouchers anymore. The solution is to raise the State vouchers and the city vouchers simultaneously maximizing the number of vouchers available to folks so they can find housing, rather than putting an unfunded mandate on ourselves. So, the bill is directionally correct, and we're working with a Council, but we're also working on the Legislature to pass companion legislation that would bring all of this together, and it can be done by June 11th when the legislature goes out.

Lehrer: And WNYC reported this week, that there was a very significant change to the bill, apparently that your administration worked to get in that I'm told word cap the income levels eligible for the vouchers are 250 percent of the federal poverty line, which I'm told means a single adult whose income goes from \$32,000, that that cap level to \$33,000, they would see their rent burden increase potentially from 30 percent of their income to 70 percent of their income. Is that accurate? And why did you put that – if that's right – that two and a half times the poverty level cap in there?

Mayor: Yeah. I want to make sure I'm careful in answering this. I'm going to defer and have our team get back to you today with the exact details on that. Look, the bottom line here is again gotten, 150,000 plus people to affordable housing. I want every tool I can get, but I want to make sure they're tools that reach the folks in greatest need, and I want to make sure that we do not inadvertently say the State of New York, you no longer have any responsibility here, because the big story here is the State of New York has never stepped up and done what it should do on homelessness, and the last thing I want to do is give them less responsibility rather than more.

Lehrer: Mike in Brooklyn, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi Mike.

Question: Oh, hi. Good morning, Mr. Mayor. There's a video on YouTube titled “Mayor Bill de Blasio administration lied that Patterson was terminated; Patterson had resigned”, and in that video, Patterson shows irrefutable evidence that both Corporation Council and Administration for Children's Services in bad faith unlawfully lied that he was terminated, despite the fact he has an accepted timestamp resignation. My question to you is, are you going to investigate and meet with Mr. Patterson to see his evidence and report the outcome to WNYC Radio, since you made it known the buck stops with you?

Lehrer: I will say, because I call out listeners when they do this, that he got on false premises, he said he was going to ask you if there should be more plain clothes officers in the subway. Having said that you can answer this question.

Mayor: I want to be clear from what I'm hearing, I don't have context on which person, which case we're talking about here. So, I'm happy to update – have our team update WNYC later today, but I'm just not familiar with what he's referring to, honestly.

Lehrer: All right. I heard that you were not planning to watch the Republican mayoral debate Wednesday night between Curtis Sliwa and Fernando Mateo, did you in fact –

Mayor: Imagine that, Brian. I did not watch a single minute of it.

Lehrer: Well, I did you a favor and recorded it, and I'm going to play one sound bite from it now to get your reaction. I asked the candidates where the restaurants that have been granted outdoor dining space during the pandemic, into what used to be parking spots, should be able to stay there permanently, and here's what they said. Mr. Mateo speaks first.

[Clip from mayoral Republican debate]

So, Curtis Sliwa, proceeded by Fernando Mateo, and Mateo later agreed about the speed cameras. So, they were together on both of those issues. So, Mr. Mayor, can you comment on the two issues there that were aimed at you. Restaurants versus neighborhood car owners and speed cameras as allegedly revenue raisers rather than safety measures? Will you comment on both?

Mayor: Sure. We are here to save the lives of our seniors and of our kids. I was yesterday, in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, with families for Safe Streets, with neighborhood residents, mourning a teacher killed, P.S. 110, because of a hit and run driver. The cost of these horrible, needless crashes, it takes a human, horrible toll on our city. And speed cameras are one of the ways we stopped them. So, if our Republican colleagues think it's okay to have these crashes, it's okay that there's no accountability, there's nothing to stop them, well, that has to be on their consciences. I think Vision Zero has shown us it works to put speed cameras in place, it works to protect lives aggressively, if no one's speeding, they have nothing to fear from a speed camera, period. And then on the restaurants, Open Restaurants have been a huge success. We saved 100,000 jobs. It is our future to use our streets differently. What we have here is a new

New York City where we're enjoying our open space, we're saving restaurants and bars, we're bringing people outside it – you know, this is such – in the midst of pain, we found something good and better. And of course, that's more important than parking spaces for cars to save 100,000 jobs. It's not even close.

Lehrer: But permanently, even when the restaurants go back to full capacity indoors?

Mayor: I, we – these restaurants and bars have been through hell and back. We lost too many of them, including some really historic ones. I want to make sure for the years ahead that they are strong again. I want to see this part of our city economy thrive. I want us to enjoy our streets. All of that is more important than parking spaces, honestly.

Lehrer: And in our last minute or so, minute and a half or so, you made a decision I think since the last time you were on, no remote learning option for students next fall, even though some families say they want that. I know the schools are statistically very safe from COVID for most kids but tell those parents why you don't think they should have that choice as individuals.

Mayor: Yeah. Let me, let me give you one additional factual update from this morning on the schools. So, here is the latest data based on 14,000 tests in our schools conducted in the prior 24 hours, there were nine cases, which is a 0.09 percent positivity level. You heard the City of New York is now at 0.93 percent today, which is stunning. The schools literally 10 times better. So, you know, the fact is our schools are the safest places to be in New York City. They will continue to be. We can do this properly and safely, but our kids will not be served if they're not in person. It's as simple as that. They cannot get the education they deserve. We have a lot of catching up to do. We have to close the COVID achievement gap. We have to give them mental health support. We cannot do that as well, remotely. To serve our children, they all need to be back in school and all our teachers are coming back, all our staff is coming back.

Lehrer: Even if the parents' judgment is that for their individual kids, they'll be better served remote for a little while longer? 10 seconds.

Mayor: This is what's right for our kids in our city. Parents always can have a dialogue with us and get answers, but this is the right thing for protecting the needs of our children.

Lehrer: Thanks as always, Mr. Mayor, talk to you next week.

Mayor: Thank you, Brian.

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