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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO HOLDS MEDIA AVAILABILITY ON MIGRANT CHILDREN HOUSED IN NYC

Mayor Bill de Blasio: I'm joined here today – hold on for the train – I'm joined here today by our Health Commissioner, Dr. Mary Bassett, our Commissioner for Administration for Children's Services, David Hansell, and our Commissioner for Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, Bitta Mostofi.

All of us are shocked by the images we're seeing from the southern border of children being separated from their parents, children being kept in cages, parents having no idea where their children are, or what will happen to them. We're all shocked at what we think is something happening far away, well I have to tell you I am further shocked to find out today how much this policy has now come home right here to New York City, and right here to this location.

What we're seeing is something that is now affecting all of us and it means that children, not numbers, not nameless faces, people, actual children with names, with families, are having their lives disrupted right now. One of the children, I talked about him either, a young man named Eddie, nine years old from Honduras, he was sent here 2,000 miles on a bus to this location and does not know when he's going to see his mother again. This is one example, but here's what I am shocked to have learned here today, there are now 239 children right here as a result of the Trump administration's family separation policy.

We now know and we're all understanding this as it's sort of coming in, wave after wave, that in the last two months this family separation policy has affected thousands of children. 239 of them are right here, right now, and this is just one of the centers in New York City. The folks here told us since the program began, over 350 children have been here, all because of the family separation policy of the Trump administration.

These children are across a whole range of ages, the youngest to come here they told us was nine months old. So we're talking about children in some cases who literally can't even communicate, have no idea what's happening to them, no ability to be in touch with their families. These children are coming here and the professionals we met with made clear, that this has been a traumatic process for a lot of these kids. The mental health issues alone, they made clear to us, are very real, very painful.

Imagine for any of us if we were ripped away from our parents and sent thousands of miles away, with no one we knew. These kids are suffering from that and they need mental health support. It's one of the things we talked to the providers here today about how the City, the Health Department, and others can provide that extra mental health support for these kids.

The officials here also told us that these kids come with physical challenges, because they were held in detention, they come with the evidence of that. They've said that a number of kids have come with lice, have come with bedbugs, have come with chickenpox, physical diseases, and contagious situations that just make it worse for everyone else.

Here's what I think people are feeling all over New York City right now, our message to the federal government is simple, stop this right now, stop this broken inhumane policy right now, and come clean with the truth.

Who are these children? How many are they? Where are they? What is happening here? How is it possible that none of us knew that there 239 kids right here in our city? How is the federal government holding back that information from the people of this city and holding back the help that these kids could need?

I want to say, in appreciation to the folks who work here in this organization, the Cayuga Center, that they were very forthcoming. They immediately granted the request for this delegation from the City to meet with them, they were forthcoming, they were transparent, they answered all our questions. We offered to help on physical health, mental health, additional legal aid, anything that they needed and these children needed, they were very receptive to those offers, and they want to work with us and we'll be doing the same with the other centers in this city.

But I also want to say I've hear something very troubling on top of everything else that we're talking about here, that there have been threats directed against the people who work here. That's absolutely wrong and inappropriate. I want to make that very clear.

I want to make clear that the NYPD will be involved immediately to protect these social service workers who are trying to help these kids. They didn't create the policy. They are trying as professionals to help these kids in distress. So it's misguided. If someone disagrees with the Trump administration, direct your energy there, do not direct it against people who are trying to help the children and we're going to make sure they are protected.

Our job now, all of us, is to change this situation, to pound down every door, to protest, to do everything in our legal power, everything we can to break this policy, stop it, end it, and I think it is a moment of conscious that has very few parallels.

This is literally one of those situations where our children, our grandchildren, are going to ask us what we did when the Trump administration took children, took babies from their parents, put children in cages. This is one of those moments where we're going to have to decide who we are as Americans and it's absolutely unacceptable and it must end. Because it's now come home to New York City, it's our responsibility to help these children, while we're working to fight to change the policy, it is our responsibility to help these children in every way we can and we intend to do that. Just very quickly in Spanish.

[Mayor de Blasio speaks in Spanish]

With that I will take your questions. Dave?

Question: [Inaudible] the first thing that just brings out here, this figure of 2,300 [inaudible] that have come across the border, that has got to be extremely off and way low, if you got 239 just at this one facility. My second question is will these kids ever be reunited with their parents?

Mayor: Well we have to make sure they're reunited. I mean, this policy is so fundamentally broken to begin with, that kids are being sent thousands of miles away from their parents – we have to change the policy, we have to fight to change the policy. We also have to make sure that all of these kids are reunited with their families. And to your previous point, I'm asking myself the same question. If 239 children are right here, right now, is it in fact that there's many more children that have been taken from their families than we even know? Henry – Henry, Henry?

Question: [Inaudible]

Mayor: So, without getting into intricacies of the federal government, the State government, the City government, everyone has different responsibilities. We were welcomed to be involved. So certainly, the Health Commissioner, the ACS Commissioner, are going to be staying constantly in touch and their teams with this organization and others, to make sure the children are safe and make sure that they have what they need. Yeah, go ahead?

Question: [Inaudible] and second, what do you make of the President's executive order to end the separating of families [inaudible]?

Mayor: I – look, this President has changed his mind on so many things, so many times, I will believe it when we see the results, when all these families are reunited. That's the simple measure, when every single family is reunited, then I will believe in the executive order. In terms of the children, I was invited to go to one of the classrooms. I'd say it was about 40 kids, overwhelmingly kids from Guatemala, and there was a group of three teachers working with them, and I want to give the teachers credit, I thought they were very compassionate and very warm, trying to work with the kids as best they could under very adverse circumstances.

It looked like the kids were being treated very well but again these are social service providers. The images we've seen from the border are border patrol, ICE folks unfortunately involved in detention. These are social service providers. They, in fact, work with the City of New York on behalf of kids here too as well and I think they are doing their job but I have to tell you, I literally – after meeting with all the officials of the organization we went around a corner and were suddenly looking at the face of this crisis. Dozens of children sitting in a classroom.

And what shocked me was the idea that this has all been happening without the people of New York City being told it by our federal government. Yeah?

Question: [Inaudible]

Mayor: We're trying to ascertain that because, like all of you, we're learning for the first time the extent of this in the city. This is an organization we know and we have worked with. The City of New York works with them all the time.

And we have a good working relationship and we've seen them do good work but we want to monitor the situation closely here and at the other centers. That's what we can do as New York City. The bigger thing we have to do is end this policy and get these kids reunited with their families.

Question: [Inaudible] make sure they're being reunited –

Mayor: All of us have to create the pressure on this administration to not just sign a piece of paper but actually reunite the families.

Question: Mr. Mayor, can you tell us if the children that are in there right now, where are they spending the night? What's happening [inaudible] class [inaudible] –

Mayor: So, this is a day facility where they come for classes and services. The children are in foster homes, individual homes not in a dormitory. This is exactly the question I wanted to understand too. It's the exact reverse of what we're seeing at the border. And again Commissioner Hansell was telling me before we went in, ACS works with this agency on foster care for New York City as well.

Question: Do you have an update on the children [inaudible] –

Mayor: We're obviously not asking about individual cases but what we believe is that this is a group – this is part of the 239 children that are brought in constantly.

Question: [Inaudible] Can the City do anything to prevent the federal government from sending more [inaudible]?

Mayor: The challenge here – and this is what seeing this really brings up – we've gotta change the policy and not inadvertently victimize the children in the meantime. And this is something we're all trying to make sense of, seeing it now for the first time.

There's no question these kids are getting support here. The bottom line is they should never have been taken from their parents. If they're still taken from their parents but not given the education and the support and the social services and the health care, that's even worse.

So, we have to make sense of it. That's a very good question but I don't think we have a clear enough answer yet.

Question: [Inaudible]

Mayor: They're better off in a place where they're going to get physical health care, mental health care, and support. But where they need to be is with their parents. So, it's a fair question but I think it gets back to the core of things.

The worst of all situations is to take them from their parents.

Question: [Inaudible]

Mayor: Hang on a second, hang on.

Question: [Inaudible]

Mayor: Hang on, hang on, hang on. Okay.

Question: [Inaudible] –

Mayor: The federal government has not given us any information. We have asked for it. We have not been given the information by the federal government. This organization was open and transparent and told us about the 239 kids who are here now and that there's been about 350 total from the beginning.

This is probably the largest one but we're now – our officials are going to visit the other organizations too. But what the federal government needs to do is come clean to the whole situation.

They should tell the American people how many kids are involved, where they all are, how they're being cared for, and they should reverse the policy immediately. Last question.

Question: How is it that the City of New York wouldn't know that hundreds of kids are coming in [inaudible] –

Mayor: Because –

Question: Does it not get checked [inaudible] –

Mayor: No, it does not. This is regulated partly by the State and this is a federal contract. The bottom line is if the federal government wanted to work with this City and this State and the people of this city, they would have been transparent about this from the beginning. Clearly, this information was not provided on purpose and we had to go search for it.

Again, I want to thank the folks who work here for being open and transparent. But now all of you should demand that the federal government should give the full facts not just for New York City but for the whole country.

How many kids are there? Where are they? How are they being taken care of? And when are they going to be back with their parents?

Thank you, everyone.

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