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OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
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MEDIA CONTACT: pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov, (212) 788-2958

TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall, as we told you before the break, the City is preparing to reopen middle schools for in-person learning on February 25th, at the same time, restaurants are gearing up to resume indoor dining this Friday, that's after Governor Cuomo moved up the start date. Mayor de Blasio joins me now from the Blue Room inside City Hall to talk about all of that and more. Good evening, Mr. Mayor. Good to see you.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: How are you doing, Errol?

Louis: Just fine, thanks. I wanted to talk about some of these reopenings, let's start with the middle schools. You've announced plans to reopen on February 25th. Are you confident that the teachers will be fully vaccinated by then?

Mayor: Errol, look, we have done something extraordinary in New York City and our educators, our staff, our health officials deserve a lot of credit. Literally New York City schools are about the safest places to be in New York City right now, and we have created a gold standard of health and safety, literally one of the best examples in the whole world of how to keep people safe. So, the point is our middle school teachers and staff, and students will be coming back into a safe environment. We're going to have a special vaccination effort during that vacation week before folks come back to make sure that we reach a lot of our middle school teachers and staff, but we know right now many, many people are working really positively in our schools, staying safe even before they've had a chance to be vaccinated, and we know we can keep everyone involved safe. We've proven it.

Louis: What is the latest on the testing program inside schools, is your goal to get all the middle schools back to five-days-a-week in person?

Mayor: Yes. So, testing will be weekly in all middle schools, just like they've been in the schools open so far. Our goal is to get as many middle schools to a five-day-a-week standard as possible. The perfect world, Errol, is every single student is going five-days-a-week, but many cases that will be, you know, a majority of students going five-days-a-week, if not all. But I'm really very hopeful about this because what we've found is there are some families who really want in-person education, there are others who really prefer remote, we just want to get people into one category and another, so that the folks who prefer in-person, the kids really get the maximum, and, you know, we've made clear once again to parents that the week we come back, you know that Thursday, Friday, and then that following week, if you intend for your child to use that seat, they have to show up in school and they have to bring a testing consent form. And if your child isn't showing up or doesn't bring a form, then we're going to assume that child goes to

all remote and we can use that seat to maximize the time for other children who really do want to attend in person.

Louis: Okay. So, just so I understand, is this a sort of a new opt-in window for parents to try and figure out if they want to do this? Because last time the question was open, we didn't have vaccines, there were a lot of things that were different back at the time.

Mayor: It's a very important question. Thank you. We did an opt-in back in November and for middle grade kids, they actually didn't get a chance to benefit from the opt-in. So now all those kids, all those families that did opt-in in November that will be applied now, and of course the ones who had previously been participating. We're not doing a new opt-in, we're drawing off the one we did a few months ago, and we're going to continue like this for a while as we continue to vaccinate more people and hopefully drive down the virus in this city. We're going to be looking at middle school, obviously – excuse me, high school next, I should say. At some point we'll consider an opt-in if the health situation really meaningfully, substantially changes in terms of number of people vaccinated and the positivity rate. That's the point when we would certainly consider another opt-in altogether.

Louis: Okay, well, let me switch to the other big question on the table, which is indoor dining. It's going to be available now on February 12th, and that was the State's permission that was granted, that doesn't necessarily mean New York has to take him up on it. What is going to happen?

Mayor: No, look, Errol, we very much want to see – I care for these restaurants, for the people work in them, for the folks who've been struggling through this crisis. I want to see them survive, you know, survive this crisis in every sense. These restaurants, we love, they're part of our culture, they're part of our neighborhoods. I want to see them survive. We have to make sure they're safe. So, you know, we're going to follow the State's decision, but we're going to have the Department of Health work very closely with restaurants to make sure they're following all the rules. You know, it's one thing to say you're open, your 25 percent, but now we have to make sure people do that the right way, and if they do, you know, I'm confident we can make it work safely.

Louis: I mean the rates are much higher than they were when indoor dining was closed, right? Are you concerned that this is maybe being rushed a little bit?

Mayor: Look, I've expressed concerns throughout that we have to be really careful about what the data's telling us and there are particular challenges that come with indoor dining. But again, the State's made a decision, I respect that decision. I very much want to see these businesses survive and the jobs survive. I know people are struggling right now to keep their livelihoods. We got to balance all the pieces and we'll do that with a lot of support, a lot of enforcement, we'll make sure that restaurants know what they have to do, and look, I am hopeful that with every passing day as more and more New Yorkers get vaccinated, you will see the overall situation start to change for the better.

Louis: You've got a new vaccination site opening up it's at Citi Field, priority goes to Queens residents, food delivery workers, TLC licensed commercial drivers. How stringent is the city going to be at verifying eligibility?

Mayor: Oh, we have to be, Errol. Look, you and I both know there's a disparity crisis within the disparity crisis. I've mean COVID – talk about tale of two cities – COVID pointed out profound disparities particularly in terms of who gets health care, who doesn't in this city. Things we have to work on fundamentally. But we also have seen now that we've been doing vaccination for a while, disparities in who's getting the vaccine. By having this location be for Queens residents, and, you know, city field is very near to some of the neighborhoods hardest hit. Obviously, we all talk about Elmhurst Hospital. A lot of other neighborhoods, very hard hit by COVID, are very nearby to city field. And then when you talk about people who are vulnerable and also represent all the communities that the city, particularly immigrant communities, while you're talking about food service workers, and you're talking about taxi drivers, for hire vehicle drivers. So, this is an effort to really pinpoint in the name of equity, but it has to be verified. So, we're going to have very clear measures to make sure folks who show up and say they're a Queens resident, or they're a TLC driver, or a food service worker, that they really are.

Louis: You know, speaking of taxi drivers, are you going to help residents get to the site, because I've only been to Citi Field once, I went out there for a Mets game last summer, it was kind of a stretch. It was a bit of a drive to get there.

Mayor: Well, you know, Citi Field does have some good mass transit serving it, and obviously it has a huge parking lot. So, you're going to see a combination of folks who get there at mass transit and folks who take advantage of that paid parking lot, including the TLC licensed drivers. I think it's – we're going to see, you know, plenty of ways for people to get there. We're also doing a lot of work to get seniors to sites with everything from TLC licensed drivers helping them to get to sites, to, you know, vans and buses that are owned by senior centers and senior organizations, a lot of different approaches pinpointed to seniors. So, I think it will be a very accessible site.

Louis: I want to ask you a very particular question. A viewer wrote to me with a concern about CUNY standards. His granddaughter is not being allowed to graduate from your college because her average fell below 3.0, which is of course unfortunate. But the contention here is that other campuses are using a different standard. Should there be one standard for the, for the whole university, that's what this family is asking.

Mayor: Well, it's obviously a really important question and CUNY is so crucial to the City of New York, but whether we like it or not, CUNY is run by the State of New York. So, I can't answer from the position of someone who has the ability to make those decisions and it's something you'd really have to ask the State. I am very concerned. The State needs to focus on CUNY because it's going to be one of the things that helps bring New York City back and creates opportunity for all. That's always been CUNY's strength in the city's history, and it has to be again.

Louis: In our last minute before the break, you have a new program, Curtains Up New York City, Curtains Up NYC, to provide assistance to live performance venues and organizations and

others who are trying to get federal relief. Is there a specific title of federal relief that applies just for the arts and for these venues, or is the idea to try and get them included under existing small business titles?

Mayor: No, thankfully there is specific funding. I mean, today we talked about the Open Culture program where we're going to be opening up spaces all over the city for outdoor performances and make it much easier for cultural organizations, nonprofits, to get those spaces for free and be able to give culture to the people out in communities, help bring New York City back. This is part of what a recovery for all of us looks like. We're also helping with Curtains Up to get the federal funding that was designated for cultural entities to them, you know, Senator Schumer to his credit fought hard for cultural funding specifically in that latest COVID relief package. We want to make sure that money gets to New York City institutions.

Louis: Okay, stand by Mr. Mayor. We're going to take a short break here. I'll have more with Mayor de Blasio in just a minute.

Welcome back to Inside City Hall. I'm once again joined by Mayor de Blasio, and Mr. Mayor, I wanted to have a little talk with you about this front-page story in the New York Times yesterday, about 10 women who said that they had endured assault, or unwanted sexual attention from the CEO of a non-profit group, the Bronx Parent Housing Network. The group has received more than a quarter billion dollars from the city to run homeless shelters and provide services, and that's just in the last few years. Did you get wind of that, and I wanted to get your sense of how this fits into the strategy of dealing with the homeless?

Mayor: It's an important question, Errol. Thank you. Let me first give you some important breaking news on this. The individual in question who these allegations are connected to, Victor Rivera, he has been fired by that organization, which I think is a very important message to people throughout the city and particularly in our non-profit sector that these kinds of activities will not be tolerated. It's very disturbing. It's very disturbing. I – only in, I have to be honest, the, the City itself needed to do better on this one because these allegations came up in 2017. Should have been handled through an independent investigator – they were not, they were passed back to the organization to address, without the kind of follow through that should have happened. I did not know about that at the time. I only heard about it now as part of the recent reporting, but what I've said very clearly is we are not going to tolerate that going forward. Any allegation of sexual harassment or misconduct must be independently investigated whether it's by the City Department of Investigation or by an outside investigatory entity that we bring in, an auditing firm, or any other independent entity because we are not going to allow city dollars to be spent on an organization that is not holding the highest ethical standards.

Now, the work of the organization, Errol, I've asked our social service leadership about the actual work, not of this individual, but of the organization in terms of serving the homeless. They say this is an organization that has done good work, in a field, whereas, you know, there's not that many organizations that actually nowadays want to do the very difficult work of providing services for the homeless. But, you know, allegations like this have to be identified and they need full investigation of full action. At least in this case, you know, I think a strong message has been sent with his firing.

Louis: Back when you were in the City Council, when you chaired General Welfare, I assume that from time to time, these kinds of stories came up, right? I mean, there are a lot of non-profit providers, you know, I could go back a generation or two, about groups that were accused credibly of having violated a lot of basic rules. Because there's the sexual abuse, which was appalling enough, alleged in this story, but there were also instances of self-dealing, you know, for-profit groups that were getting money from the non-profit and those for-profit groups either employed family members of Mr. Rivera, or were owned by Mr. Rivera.

Mayor: You and I could probably give, you know, a long list going back decades of non-profits that did the wrong thing, unfortunately – where there was nepotism, where there was fraud, and, and the reason I can tell you that I still hold out hope in this world is that we can tell those stories because they were uncovered, and so many people who needed to be fired were fired, or contracts were taken away or whatever was appropriate. Thankfully, in recent years, we've seen a lot less of that. I think the field has professionalized intensely. There's a lot more oversight. There's a lot more care in the city contracting process. Something like this is a wake-up call though, that any kind of allegation of this nature, it's – I'm sure the board is made up of well-meaning people, but we can't just pass a problem like this back to the same organization. We need to have independent eyes on it. We need to make sure that investigation is thorough and that any results that need to happen, any actions that need to be taken, actually taken are taken, and that's what I've mandated now for all of the homeless service providers, where there's been any question that we go back and apply this standard evenly.

Louis: Your successor as the chair of General Welfare, Councilman Levin, suggested that the Department of Investigation would be the right place to keep an eye on these kinds of questions. I'm not so sure about that. It seems to me that the State Attorney General, which has oversight over non-profits might have more capacity and frankly, subpoena power, and the ability to prosecute in a way that might maybe get people's attention a little bit more quickly.

Mayor: Look, I would say the first thing we always want to do with a problem in New York City is address it in New York City. So, our Department of Investigation is very effective. They have plenty of tools. That to me would be the first go-to, and again, in some cases it might be bringing in an outside auditing firm, for example. It's always good to know there's other layers of government that can back up if there's a problem. But what I find is the best solutions are the most local solutions, and we certainly want this addressed aggressively going forward, and the instruction I've now sent to our city agencies is anything like this from now on gets an immediate independent investigation.

Louis: Well, you know, in general this raises a question – I've actually written about this. I've spent a lot of time on – I've been on boards of non-profit organizations. At one point I've served on at least a dozen different boards of non-profits.

Mayor: You created one once if my memory serves.

Louis: I've created a couple of them. I've served on foundation boards where we've given funds to non-profits. It's complicated, it's detailed work, and I'm concerned because, you know the candidates who want to be the next mayor, and frankly, a lot of activists who have supported defunding the NYPD – they kind of suggest almost like a throwaway line that non-profits can

pick up the slack. That's not necessarily the case, or just because you give non-profits money. They can't necessarily handle the workload.

Mayor: Yeah, Errol, you're really raising an important point here. Look, we can never mistake what most non-profits are able to do compared to what government's able to do. We have to be clear about the fact that simply saying, "oh, we're going to hand something off to a non-profit" is not a magic formula. There are some non-profits that do an extraordinary job. There are some that, you know, come with the best of intentions, but have capacity issues. It's a real challenge because these are profound human problems and challenges that are being addressed. Homelessness, and so many other social service needs are really complex matters, and you're always, you know, struggling to overcome these challenges without enough resources, whether you're a government or non-profit. But the fact is these are not easy solutions, and I agree with you sometimes folks like to say, "oh, someone else will take care of it, no big deal." No, in fact, it is a big deal. We owe it to folks who are homeless – I always say, if someone's homeless, you know, they're, but for the grace of God go we. I've met plenty of homeless folks whose lives were very stable until something happened in their life, and things came crashing down. It takes a lot of work to help people back. When that's the whole concept, we have our journey home vision of getting people off the streets, getting them back on their feet, getting them to affordable housing, it's immensely complex work. It's not something everyone can do. It takes, it takes a special expertise and we've got to be mindful of that.

Louis: Well, there's an important experiment that you talked about before. You and the First Lady Chirlane McCray announced that beginning in fact, this month teams of EMS and mental health crisis workers were going to respond to 9-1-1 calls involving mental health emergencies, that was going to happen in two precincts. Has that pilot program begun?

Mayor: I'll get you the latest on that, but I want to say Errol, and it's very, very important because this is something Chirlane's really worked for, for a long time. It's a crucial part of the Thrive philosophy to provide mental health at the community level, and in this case, if there's a call, a crisis call where there's no specific indication of violence, sending out social workers, sending out medical personnel, mental health personnel to address it, instead of police, I'm really excited about this. I think it's going to be something that will go to a much bigger level, ultimately citywide pretty soon, this is something I want to see citywide, but we'll get you the update on the exact details of the implementation.

Louis: Okay, and as we have established, you know, capacity, integrity, transparency of any community organizations that are involved is going to be paramount.

Mayor: Oh, absolutely, and you know, we're talking about here, very sensitive situations. When someone calls or a family member, a loved one calls, someone's in distress, someone's having a challenge, a mental health challenge that led to that call. These are really complex situations, and we forget that, that, you know, mental health challenges, you know, develop over years and years, and so often go unnoticed or untreated. The whole concept behind Thrive is to identify them early, even early on, in a time a child's in school, get people access to mental health services early and consistently. So, it doesn't come down to a crisis call when someone's really at an advanced state of distress.

Louis: Okay, we'll leave it there for now. I will see you next week. Good luck with Valentine's Day, big important holiday coming up.

Mayor: Very important, Errol. We have to get – prepare yourself thoroughly.

Louis: Okay, absolutely. I'll see you soon.

Mayor: Take care.

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