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**RUSH TRANSCRIPT: GOVERNOR CUOMO, A.G. SCHNEIDERMAN, MAYOR BILL DE BLASIO
JOIN FORCES TO COMBAT LANDLORD HARASSMENT OF TENANTS**

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Well, I want to thank the attorney general. This is – this is a game-changer – to have the top law enforcement official in New York State weighing in on behalf of our tenants and fighting to protect affordable housing.

I want to really emphasize what the attorney general said – he is willing to bring criminal charges to stop the harassment of tenants, to stop tenants from being illegally displaced. That’s a game-changer, and I want to thank you, attorney general, for your leadership.

[Applause]

I want to thank Ed Josephson and Meghan Faux and everyone at South Brooklyn Legal Services – everyone who does such extraordinary work. I’ve been thanking people as I went around the building today, because these are folks who have kept people in their homes, who have made sure that people were not illegally displaced, who have been the legal thin blue line between people having an apartment they deserve and a family being without a place to live. So their work is crucial – and it’s work that my administration is supporting and going to be supporting on an even bigger basis all over the city.

But I want to just reflect for one quick second on what Ed said about his work starting out in Park Slope, what Eric said about his family’s origins at Eastern Parkway and Utica. So, just a personal reflection – I went to NYU for my undergraduate degree, 1982. As part of the urban studies program I was in, I did an internship – I did it with a non-profit that’s still around and doing great work called the Fifth Avenue Committee in Brooklyn – and I did work in Park Slope. And Park Slope in 1982 was a place that was entirely different than today. It was a place with a lot of boarded-up buildings and vacant storefronts and vacant lots. And if you were to tell me then about million-dollar and two-million-dollar homes and people being forced out by landlords so they could get sky-high rent, I would’ve told you you are absolutely out of your mind.

This phenomenon of gentrification occurred so quickly that, I think, for all of us, we’re still catching up with the impact. I remember vividly Chirlane saying to me the first day she heard about a million-dollar home being sold in Park Slope – and we were absolutely in disbelief – and it literally seemed like that happened in the course of very few years, from it being a neighborhood that was affordable to a neighborhood that very few people could afford to reach. The reason I say that is, we, as a city, have not had the right conversation about gentrification. We haven’t sorted out what it means, both positive and negative – the challenges it creates, the things that have to be addressed with public policy.

What you’re seeing today is an example of, finally, government focusing and getting it right – and the different levels of government coming together in common cause to address the negatives of gentrification, because, as I said in my State of the City speech, if we don’t address the downside of gentrification, it will not be the same city any longer. It will become an exclusive city. It will not be the open city and the inclusive city that we have always been, and that has worked for generations, and has been a place that people aspired to live in for

generations, or to stay in. So that's why today is so important, because it marks another step towards all levels of government coming to grips with this problem, and now taking the reins and addressing it energetically.

Now, the numbers tell you a lot. We know that in the last decade-plus, over 200,000 people – or I should have said, over 200,000 units – left affordable status. They were Mitchell-Lamas, they were in rent-regulation, and whatever – whatever status they had, they used to be affordable and they're not affordable anymore. We know some of that happened legally. We know some of that happened illegally. We know a lot of that that happened illegally could have been and should have been stopped. And this work that we're talking about today is an example of the kind of tools that could actually stop it, that could actually cause the law to be enforced that so often was not enforced in the past. And this could really be part of how we stem the tide – we stop the illegal harassment and the pushing out of law-abiding tenants. It is a fundamental part of how we change the affordable housing picture in this city. Complaints of tenants – of harassment of tenants that are coming into our housing court are skyrocketing. We had 752 in Fiscal 13. We already have 426 so far this year. So the numbers, even from year to year, are going up rapidly. More and more unscrupulous landlords, unfortunately, are trying to take advantage of the market. I say every time – I know my colleagues feel the same way – most landlords abide by the law and serve their tenants well. There are a number of unscrupulous landlords that now are in the crosshairs of all of us. Because what they're doing is they're forcing people illegally out, and leaving those people in a very tough situation. It's especially true in Brooklyn and Manhattan, but it's all five boroughs. And it will take a group effort and a sustained effort to address it.

I want to thank the members of my administration who have been a part of this – our HPD Commissioner Vicki Been; our Buildings Commissioner Rick Chandler; our Assistant Commissioner for Health Nancy Clark. Of course, we want to thank Commissioner Darryl Towns of the state housing department, who is an old friend and a colleague. We worked for many years together. I want to thank him for joining this effort energetically. The elected officials here today – every one of them, I've known them all a long time – they've all focused on fighting harassment and protecting affordable housing – Borough President Adams, Senator Squadron, Assemblywoman Simon, and of course, the chair of our Housing Committee in the City Council, Jumaane Williams.

And more and more, what you see are tenants organizing to stop harassment – and these kind of efforts help tenants organize.

[Applause]

You're going to hear from Donna Mossman of the tenant – the tenant leader of the Crown Heights Tenant Union. These efforts help put wind in the sail of tenant organizing – give them more ability to follow through on organizing. We found that with our Worst Landlords Watchlist when I was public advocate. We shined a light on the bad landlords – it helped tenants to organize and get the attention they deserve and force the changes. Ultimately, that effort led to thousands of units getting repairs that wouldn't have otherwise. We see a lot of changes, and we're proud of the changes we're making here in this city – a new tenant harassment law that increases the penalties for each instance of harassment, now to \$10,000 dollars per penalty. We obviously announced in the State of the City, \$36 million dollars in legal assistance in some key neighborhoods where we have to make sure that people are protected, but that number has to expand in lots of different ways and we need all of our partners to be a part of that effort.

Look, I just want to put a picture on this before my colleagues come up. This – what does it mean when someone is harassed? It's illegal – we know that – but what does it mean humanly? It means a family doesn't get heat, a family doesn't get hot water, no repairs, life becomes impossible. This illustration here is of a building that an unscrupulous landlord started doing quote-unquote “repairs” on. What he was really trying to do was force the family that still lived there out by having this be the conditions around them every day. And the notion was, if he made their lives unacceptable, they would leave, and then he could flip the building and get a lot more money for the units in it. This is what this task force is going to go at. It's going to have the full power of the attorney general, the state housing department, a bunch of city agencies – HPD, buildings, finance, the sheriff's department, the law department. All of these pieces make a huge impact.

So, everyone knows that we are focused in this city on building more affordable housing, on preserving the affordable housing we have with subsidies and other programs, but the legal piece and the enforcement piece is absolutely necessary, or else a lot of those other efforts just won't have the impact they should have. We cannot keep hemorrhaging units that legally still should belong in the hands of the tenants that have them. And this task force is going to make a big difference. Quick couple of sentences in Spanish –

[Mayor de Blasio speaks in Spanish]

I read that from the written page. Eric Schneiderman could do that –

Unknown: [inaudible]

Mayor: – *de nada* – Eric Schneiderman could do that without the written page – he's that good. But thank you, again, attorney general, commissioner, everyone, all my colleagues, because this is going to be a game-changer.

[Applause]

[...]

New York State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman: I love it when he does that. And now, ladies and gentlemen, we can take some on-topic questions, if you just identify yourself and your place of employment, if any.

Question: Andrew Siff, from WNBC – for yourself, or for the mayor – the mayor himself mentioned that as public advocate, he made a list of bad landlords – there have been initiatives to crack down on delinquent landlords for years, if not decades. Why does this task force change this reality?

Attorney General Schneiderman: Well, I mean, I'll let the mayor respond, but I can start off by saying there has been – since I took office five years ago, I found that there are problems throughout state and city governments with a lack of communication and coordination by agencies that should be working together. We have reached a crisis here, in terms of the boom of the housing market, that becomes just too tempting for some particularly abusive landlords, and we have worked together on sort of an ad-hoc and anecdotal basis. This task force represents a systemic reform that will ensure the sharing of information, that will encourage others to come forward, and tenants to come forward – and also, ladies and gentlemen, let me emphasize – good landlords sometimes come forward, and good contractors sometimes come forward to report this misconduct. So we're going to open up broader forms of communication. We're going to have seamless cooperation between state and city actors, and it's important also to understand that, as in any issue like this, the action on the ground – the activist groups – have to be involved also. And this will enable us to do this, and speak with one voice, and to bring more cases than we've brought, and to create the deterrent effect that some of my colleagues are talking about. Your honor?

Mayor: Thank you. This – look, for too long, unscrupulous landlords have found a way to navigate. If they couldn't get away with something one way, they'd get away with it another way. This is part of what motivated the Worst Landlords Watchlist, because we found landlords would rack up all sorts of penalties and housing violations – they would get a good lawyer, they would go into housing court, they would get the dollar figure of their penalties knocked down, they'd treat it as a cost of doing business, and they'd go on not providing heat and hot water and repairs. So, it was a tragic, cynical economic equation. We said a long time ago that the – the way to defeat that cynicism is to surround the bad landlords; to get the penalties increased, which is what we did, for example, with the tenant harassment law, and we thank the City Council for their leadership on that. It is the combination of the enforcement actions – Attorney General, state housing department, the different mayoral agencies. It is the support for legal aid, so that a landlord who's doing the wrong thing is now up against a tenant and a lawyer who supports that tenant, not a defenseless tenant. It is supporting the organizing efforts. So, bluntly, we are – in a good way – tightening the noose. We are making it tougher and tougher on the bad actors.

And this effort will ultimately reach thousands and thousands of tenants, combined with all the other new pieces being put into play – it's going to change the game. And then, as I suspect Commissioner Been might say, there is a deterrent effect. If you watch your fellow bad action get caught and penalized and put out in public for all to see, you might think twice about breaking the law. Did you want to add?

Commissioner Vicki Been, Department of Housing Preservation and Development: Let me just add to that by saying that, you know, one of the problems that we've faced in the past is, if we got a call from a tenant who was enduring these kinds of conditions, we at HPD or DOB could go in, issue violations – but as the mayor said, it become just a cost of doing business for some of these landlords. Having our ability to go in, see the violations, issue violations, you know, see what's going on in terms of patterns – to combine that with the enforcement power that the Attorney General and the state have, is an incredibly powerful combination – to make it so expensive, so difficult for landlords to do this, and to show tenants that there is relief, and there is protection, so that they call early, so that we can do something early. So it really is a game-changer, in terms of bringing the power of all these different agencies and all of this different information to bear, to protect tenants.

Attorney General Schneiderman: Yes, on-topic, once again.

Question: This question is for you – this is Monica Miller from WCBS-880 – when you talk about penalties and criminal action, what type of penalties are we talking?

Attorney General Schneiderman: Well, there's a wide range of penalties, because there's a wide range of misconduct that we're talking about. But certainly, there are – there are not just misdemeanors, there are felonies that can be prosecuted. We have had success in actually removing some bad actors who were physically harassing tenants, and getting them out of the picture completely. It is possible that people will get jail time. But the – the devious creativity shown by some of these bad actors in this space – landlords and people they hire, developers and people they hire – has led us to understand that there's a very broad range of both civil and criminal liability. And whether it's harassment or assault or endangering someone's life through some other process, New York state has a very, very full set of laws to protect tenants from this kind of conduct. Grace.

Question: Grace Rauh, from NY1 – question for you as well, Attorney General – you said that when appropriate, your office [inaudible] bad actors. Have you been doing that already? Can you give us a sense, sort of, are these cases particularly difficult to bring, or have success with? And how have you approached them in the past? And sort of, do you expect to see an increase in caseload going forward?

Attorney General Schneiderman: Yes, so, we have done that, and we've gotten results, and some of it has been made public. I can't comment on ongoing investigations that haven't yet come to fruition, but this – this task force is going to help. These are challenging cases. I mean, we often have to send in undercover investigators. A lot of times people – tenants – are afraid to speak up. Another great benefit of this collective effort is, I think, we're going to have an easier time getting cooperation from people. But we're – you know, we are not deterred by the challenges, to bring difficult cases. We will do so, we have done so, and this task force will ensure – in a very concrete way – I'm confident that the flow of information to Commissioner Towns office, my office, to the city agencies – it's just going to get better and better, and the ability to get people to cooperate with investigations is going to get better and better.

New York State Homes and Community Renewal Commissioner Darryl Towns: Can I just add?

Attorney General Schneiderman: Yes, sir.

Commissioner Towns: You know, and also the – the fear of criminal prosecution is one thing, but we've also – currently, under TPU – have also brought landlords into settlement. And I think that that also is part of this effort – landlords who have – were harassing tenants, came around with the TPUs after the TPU's investigation, and agreed to settlements in order to reverse those opportunities, pay the hefty fine, and also open up a path for those harassed tenants to return to their apartments. So, I think that this gives us an opportunity – all of us had

our laser focus in areas, but by coming together, it allows us to cover more territory, and again, the importance of sharing information, sharing efforts, enforcement techniques, makes for us all together sharing in success down the road. Thank you.

Attorney General Schneiderman: Thank you.

Question: Yoav Gonen with the New York Post – I'm still struggling to identify what's new here, besides the collaboration – it seems like a bunch of agencies that already have the power to do these things are just going to do them with renewed focus now, collaboration – how is this going to make things – how is this going to –

Attorney General Schneiderman: Well, let me give you an analogy. President Adams – President Adams –

Mayor: [Laughs] Which one?

[Laughter]

Attorney General Schneiderman: I know, I enjoy saying that too.

Mayor: Eric, or John, or John Quincy? [Laughs]

Attorney General Schneiderman: Our – our – the current President Adams mentioned through an analogy, to our efforts to fight crime during the crack epidemic, and President Adams and I both worked in law enforcement, and the best way to deal with problems when you had a building that was the center of crime – there was crack dealing, there was violence, there were things coming out of that building – was what we called the all levers approach. Because you didn't just send – if you just sent the cops in to arrest a few people, it wouldn't work. You had to fix the streetlights. You had to go in and take down the barriers. The Department of Buildings was critical. Transportation was critical. Social services could get in there and get the people who were victimized by the drug dealers in the building – was critical. This is the equivalent for harassed tenants of that effort. This is the all levers approach to preventing predatory landlords from throwing people out of their homes.

Mayor: Let me – I'll just add one quick point, that the – the – the speed dynamics are crucial here. If you've got a bad actor and they can delay the penalties – as I said, in the case of some of the landlords we dealt with with the Worst Landlords Watchlist – they would just play the clock. They would, you know, delay the court process; they'd knock down the fines with lots of negotiations. This makes it a lot harder for a bad actor to squirm out of the situation, because they are surrounded by all these agencies and it speeds up each agency's work. Each agency now is going to move more quickly, because they're sharing information and because they're pushing each other, bluntly, to move more quickly. And there's the deterrent effect – and I really don't want to have that missed here. If someone thinks they will get caught, they are more likely not to violate the law. Right now, a lot of people – a lot of bad landlords – think they will not get caught. Our message today is you will get caught. All of these agencies are going to work together. You will get caught. There will be severe penalties. You're going to wish you had not violated the law.

[Applause]

Attorney General Schneiderman: Okay, thank you. Maybe time for two more.

Question: [inaudible] Channel Two. For market-rate tenants who don't have the protections of rent regulations and who may also be facing harassment, who can't afford steep rent increases, can this task force help them as well?

Attorney General Schneiderman: Sure, I – any illegal conduct towards a tenant, whether rent regulated or not, is something that we would be concerned with. And there are situations – because the market is going up so rapidly – that there are people who – it's worth it to some landlords to try and get people who just have leases

out so they can just immediately re-lease at a much higher rate. So this going to cover any tenant who feels that they are being unfairly harassed or abuse to get in contact with us. We have multiple lines of communication now. We have our website – ag.ny.gov – and the other agencies here also have – it’s very easy – or call 3-1-1. One more?

Question: The mayor just referred to, a little bit earlier, to the legal aid services that are available to [inaudible] tenants. The City Council has proposed – some members have proposed a right to counsel in housing court for New Yorkers. I’m wondering whether you and the mayor think this is something that would be helpful in this endeavor that you’re moving forward with, and whether it’s something that’s feasible.

Attorney General Schneiderman: Well, look, the funding – the failure to fund civil legal services in cities and states all over America, I can say, as the state’s top lawyer, is, to me, nothing short of a disgrace. It is anti-American, and I think that the State of the Judiciary speech a few days ago – the chief judge of New York State, Judge Lippman – referred to the concept of civil Gideon, referring to the Gideon v. Wainwright decision that required counsel in all criminal cases. I think it’s very important that we work there. I know that in some of the settlements that I have obtained with some of the big banks that caused the crash of the housing market – they have put up – I think we now are at \$100,000 for legal services around the state of New York to deal with the victims of the crash. So the key issue here really is the funding – and that’s something that we are grappling with and we’re dealing with. The mayor has committed to a substantial increase in funding. I think this wonderful agency is actually going to go through some expansion, so maybe you could comment on that.

Mayor: Yeah, I think – look, I think the fact is that a lot of tenants, had they had legal representation, would’ve kept their apartments. It’s as simple as that. That’s not to say that every tenant is perfect. It’s not to say that sometimes, even with legal representation, the landlord might not have been found to be right. But we know, in thousands and thousands of cases, the tenant would’ve gotten to keep their apartment legally and appropriately. That’s why we’re going to focus a lot more of our attention on the legal services part of this equation. I think we need all other levels of government to do the same. And I think it’s something we need to do in concert – it’s one of the most powerful tools we have.

Mr. Attorney General, I know you said that you were going to end questioning, but I just want to – I say Brigid Bergin had her hand up, and since she has just gotten engaged, I think – first of all, we applaud you and congratulate you –

[Applause]

– and I think she should get a free question for having taken such a bold step.

Attorney General Schneiderman: Bonus.

Mayor: Yes, the bonus.

Attorney General Schneiderman: Now, we’re reaching the bonus question.

Mayor: Bonus round.

Attorney General Schneiderman: Oh – and one of my assistants has advised me that I misspoke – that the numbers are hard to keep track of. We have thus far in my office, over the last two years, forced the banks to provide \$100 million dollars for legal services around the state, and we are funding 90 agencies, including here in Brooklyn.

[Laughter]

Attorney General Schneiderman: Yes. Yes. You know, what they say – you know what’s cool? Billions.

[Laughter]

Question: Thank you very much, Mr. Mayor. The question is really to you – and to the attorney general – but I'm still trying to understand what this task force really means for tenants today in terms of how they access the system. Clearly, you're talking a lot about communication, coordination on the government side, but as a tenant who may not be as lucky [inaudible] advocate, you know, what do they do to access what they need – whether it's to reach [inaudible] or the city, and how is this task force a part of that?

Mayor: Yeah, so I just want to start on the basic – I'm glad you asked [inaudible]. Anyone who thinks they're being harassed and wants to get the city government involved or the state government involved can call 3-1-1 and get directed from there. Again, obviously we want to make sure people get legal representation wherever possible, but we have direct enforcement actions that this task force will be undertaking that, if reported, we can act on. So, again, if you – if you see this as a way of speeding up enforcement – getting enforcement to happen from as many different places as it can – look at the city level alone – we're talking about HPD, buildings, finance, sheriff – you know, there's a lot of different pieces that can help surround the situation and force the hand of the bad landlord, but people should call 3-1-1 to report any instance they believe to be harassment.

You want to add?

Commissioner Towns: Additionally, the state has the Office of Rent Administration, which also is available for those who have complaints – whether through our walk-in centers or the like. But I think this collaborative is also intended in being proactive. Sometimes tenants are being wronged and they're not even aware of it. So, by coming together, we can actually produce opportunities of coming to the tenant as opposed to just waiting to receive the complaint.

Mayor: Yes – yes – [inaudible]

Commissioner Been: Let me just add on one [inaudible] –

Unknown: Let me help you out here –

Commissioner Been: Thank you. Thank you. Just – let me just add one thing on that, Commissioner Towns, because that's so important. I mean, this – this building here was actually identified through data analysis of us all sharing data, looking at it to find suspicious patterns, to see buildings that had recently turned hands, to see where we – where DOB was getting, you know, building permit applications, but we had some reason to believe, because we were getting 3-1-1 complaints, that there were still tenants in that building. This is one where we hadn't yet gotten a call. It was our data analysis that showed us there's something going on here that caused us to send inspectors in – joint inspection forces – and then to take action. So, it's so important not – to realize that it's not only complaints, but it's this proactive enforcement that – where we're working together to analyze patterns and to identify and be proactive about the enforcement.

Attorney General Schneiderman: Let me just mention one thing that has already started to happen that gives you an idea of the potential here. Instead of having a bunch of different agencies sending in investigators to do inspections, we now are starting to conduct joint inspections. And that means, as the mayor said, the speed with which matters will be dealt with is – you know, is something that is very important to this process. We have, in our office, gone after – [inaudible] case [inaudible] huge property owners who have systematically tried to rid their buildings of tenants. We have gone after folks who were actually hired thugs – hired by landlords who were trying to get rid of tenants by personal harassment. Discrimination against immigrants, against people who pay for part of their rent with a government check, against senior citizens – I mean, we're talking about situations in which there are a whole host of laws that are implicated – and we have been bringing those actions. We now will be able to do it more efficiently, more effectively, and we will be able to deal with this. But, ladies and gentlemen, it is very important to understand the level of the conduct that's going on. The market is moving so fast that the unscrupulous cannot help but be tempted into things they might not even think of in a slower market. When you have people hiring armed thugs to harass tenants, you know we're in a pretty serious

situation. So these are the things that we can get done much more effectively together – and I'm confident that we will see each other again at some point when we are announcing some of these cases. But I cannot emphasize enough that the assumption that government agencies are always coordinating effectively together is often false, and it's very – you know, it's – there was no system, believe it or not, for New York and surrounding states, for law enforcement to share information systematically about heroin rings that dealt in both states. I set up a joint heroin task force with several surrounding states in the last year – the first time that happened. Everyone assumes we're doing it. This is a tremendous effort, and it's a tremendous potential, so I want to, again, thank all my colleagues – and, your honor, you want to close?

Mayor: You going to follow on this before we go to off-topic? Go ahead –

Question: Will 3-1-1 complaints be filed and directed differently? What happens [inaudible]?

Mayor: [inaudible]

Commissioner Been: Yeah, so, when – when – when someone calls in a 3-1-1 complaint, that will go to the city agency that most touches that, and then the city agency will alert everyone else who's involved as appropriate, right? Sometimes we will be calling in for joint inspections. Sometimes we will be referring for criminal prosecution. Sometimes we will just be sharing information and saying, you know, what else do you know? But the city agencies will take any of that information from 3-1-1, work together to direct it out, and to bring in the right people on that.

Mayor: So now, we will transition to other topics. For all my colleagues, if you want to stick around, you're welcome. If you want to escape, it's a good moment to do so.

Question: Attorney general –

Mayor: Attorney general, you're getting one call for a quick question.

Question: One of my colleagues is reporting today on your agreement with, I believe, 20 school districts to change their policy with regard to how they screen children of immigrants. Can you explain how that works and how that will help?

Attorney General Schneiderman: Sure. There is a – many of you know about the phenomenon of an influx of immigrant children into the United States and into New York. And children who have or do not have parents or other caretakers have been turned away in many cases by some school districts around the state of New York. It's illegal. It's discrimination. And what we have done is contacted the school districts, explained that it's illegal, and we – the agreement that was announced was 20 particular school districts around the state of New York. We have also been involved in a case in Hempstead, where we got involved in ensuring that this didn't happen anymore. Quite simply, you can't discriminate against children based on their immigration status, and the first wrung of the ladder to becoming a law-abiding, tax-paying citizen or resident alien is education – and we're just not going to tolerate discrimination against immigrants wherever it comes up. This is – this is a very important commitment for our state, and I think you will see states distinguishing themselves by either being welcoming and encouraging and supportive to the immigrants among us or by driving them underground and creating even more problems. Our – we have a strong commitment in my office to ensure every access to every opportunity for people regardless of immigration status.

Mayor: Thank you very much. All right – we are going to off-topic. Before we do, just a moment on weather – we keep getting a lot of weather.

Okay. We're expecting extremely cold temperatures. So, again, I'm going to ask my friends in the media to help get this message out to all New Yorkers. These very cold temperatures we've had in the last week or so will continue, accompanied by heavy winds. So that means we have a wind chill situation that people should take very, very seriously. Wind chill advisory is in effect starting at midnight. Heavy winds today – temperatures

with the wind chill factor today as low as zero to five degrees. Tonight, temperatures as low as four degrees, but with the wind chill, it will go down to minus 15 tonight in New York City. Tomorrow, wind chill values of minus five to minus fifteen during the day. I don't think it's hard for people to put two and two together here. This is extremely cold weather. People should stay indoors to the maximum extent possible. Don't go out any more than you need to. Again, be careful. If you have to go out, recognize you're going to get very cold very quickly. If you're sick, you've got to be mindful that this is a very tough condition to be out in, so please limit your exposure. Anyone who does not have heat and hot water, call 3-1-1. We keep emphasizing – if you have a problem, call right away, which gives us the time to get to you. If we hear about it hours and hours and hours later, we can't do as much as if we hear about it right away. And also, in terms of checking on your neighbors – again, these temperatures are particularly tough on senior citizens; they're particularly tough on people who are ill. Check in on your neighbors, make sure they have what they need. If – God forbid – they don't have heat or hot water, call 3-1-1 for them so we can get to work making sure they're safe. With that, we will take all topics – go ahead.

Question: When I asked you last March about Gridlock Sam's congestion pricing plan, you said you looked forward to speaking with him, but you have not been a fan – or you haven't supported tolling the East River bridges. One – have you spoken to him about it? Two – do you maintain your position on the East River tolling? And three – what do you think of the latest iteration of –

Mayor: I spoke to him during the campaign in 2013. I think the world of him – I think he's a – was a great public servant, and, you know, is an important commentator on these issues. And I thought that original proposal was one that we have to take seriously. I have not seen the details of the new proposal, but again, I think it has to be taken seriously. What I think we have to do is, the city and state together, figure out a long-term vision for the MTA. And, you know, we should look at a range of options, but right now, my focus is going to be on preserving the funding streams we have for the MTA and – I won't go into a lot of detail, because I'm going up to Albany this coming Wednesday to talk about a range of issues – but clearly one of the things that has to be addressed is the level of state support for the MTA from the surplus dollars that are now available. So those are the immediate things that have to be addressed, but I think the various proposals that have come out over the last couple of years need to be assessed and compared with other options, and we've got to figure out a long-term solution for the MTA finances.

Question: Do you still maintain your position on the –

Mayor: My position is that the proposals that had existed – that came up originally when I was in the City Council – were not acceptable. I think the newer proposals are a step in the right direction, but again, I'm not going to weigh in until we've fully assessed all of the options we have to stabilize the long-term future of the MTA.

Question: [inaudible] marching in the St. Patrick's Day Parade?

Mayor: That is an ongoing discussion. Right now, we are waiting to hear more from the parade organizers about their plans. There's obviously some real concern about ensuring real openness in the parade – and those discussions are continuing. So, we'll have more to say after we've had some more dialogue with the organizers and other interested parties.

Yes –

Question: [inaudible] what you think about these recent comments from one of your predecessors – Rudy Giuliani – about President Obama and [inaudible] ISIS?

Mayor: I was very troubled. I was very troubled – there was a couple things happening all combined. The president is doing something important and necessary. He is saying that the vast majority of people who are Muslim are law-abiding peaceful people all over the world – you know, 1-and-a-half billion-plus people, including, of course, many Americans who are peaceful, law-abiding people – the vast, vast, vast majority of

Muslim people. And the president as acknowledging that and then saying there's a very small number of people who, in a crass and political manner, claim that their religion is inspiring them to do violent and extremist acts – and it has to be seen for what it is – it is crass, it is political, it is opportunistic. It does not have anything to do with the message of a religion that the other 1.5 or 1.6 billion people practice peacefully – and in multicultural societies, in many cases. So, the president's making a powerful point, and he's saying that you have to look at all religions through that same prism, which is accurate. Rudy Giuliani decided to attack the president's love of his own country, his patriotism, his devotion to the United States of America. It's absolutely – I think it's pitiful. I think it's unfair for anyone to question our president's patriotism. The president has served with great distinction. The president loves the people of this country so much that he helped make sure that more and more people had healthcare coverage, and that more and more people had jobs. He did what we want a president to do. And I find it a cheap political trick for Rudy Giuliani to question the president's love of the country. That is just – that is stooping very, very low, even for him. But, another interesting fact is that Mr. Giuliani said this in the company of Scott Walker, and I hear a deafening silence from Scott Walker. I think Governor Walker should disassociate himself immediately from Rudy Giuliani's comments. They are an insult to our commander-in-chief, and they're absolutely unfounded. So, Governor Walker has the chance to decide who he is and what he stands for – so far, he's been absolutely silent, which must mean he wants to stoop as low as Rudy Giuliani did.

Yes.

Question: Mr. Mayor, [inaudible] state Republican party issued an attack that pictured you and Al Sharpton as characters from 50 Shades of Gray – the National Action says – condemned it, they said it's inappropriate, they've called [inaudible]. So, two questions – one would be, do you echo their sentiment? And as [inaudible], do you or any member of your family – have you seen the movie or read the books?

Mayor: I have not seen the movie or read the books. I don't know about the other members of my family – I can only tell you the truth – I just literally don't know now. I respect any other organization's view of this attempt at humor, but I have handled it in a particular way – you know, I had the honor of being at the Saturday Night Live 40th Anniversary show. Dakota Johnson was there, so in light of all this, I asked her to play me in the upcoming biography of my life. So, I think that settles it.

That's not a factual statement. [Laughs]

Question: At the Saturday Night Live special, did you speak to Governor Sarah Palin at all?

Mayor: I did not. Although, I must say, I'm not a fan of her politics, but I thought she did a great job as a comedian. I thought her line was great there. But I did not have the opportunity to speak to her.

Question: [inaudible] comments, another one of your predecessors, Mike Bloomberg, has said that the way to get guns out of the hands of minority males is to throw them up against the wall and frisk them. What do you think of those remarks, and what does that say about his stop and frisk policy?

Mayor: First, I have not seen – these are new remarks, I take it – I have not seen them. I think I made very clear, in the years 2012 and 2013, that I disagreed with Mayor Bloomberg's stop and frisk policy. And I thought it was counterproductive. We remember that over 90 percent of the people stopped were innocent in every way, shape, or form. And so, good people were treated like criminals. That did not encourage a good working relationship between police and community that we need. So, I would say the same thing today that I said years ago – that's wrong. That's not only a misunderstanding of what will solve the problem, it's unfair to the vast majority of innocent people who are treated that way.

Phil: Couple more, guys.

Question: Mayor, how do you justify – city funds going to support institutions that demand prayer [inaudible] to the extent that it extends the school day, and then they have to make it up by using national holidays, Sunday – what's the rationale for doing this, other than estranging a political group?

Mayor: No, I think it's – you misunderstand the situation on many levels, my friend, so I'll start from the beginning. I think it's quite – quite clear that I established full-day pre-k as my number one priority. I think that will have a transcendent impact on this city, and particularly on the next generation of people who will live here. We said from the beginning, we wanted to work with all elements of the spectrum – traditional public schools, charter schools, religious schools, everyone – and that is part of why the program has been so successful, because it's so inclusive, because we have so many sites, et cetera. There are some particular challenges that had to be addressed, and what we said was, here is the amount of instruction that we need to happen under this vision. If a school happens to have a different calendar, and those schools have a six-day calendar to begin with, you can use your six-day calendar to achieve the same outcomes. So, to me, it's absolutely consistent with the original vision. The break for prayer is a separate issue entirely, meaning that is being handled separate from anything involving the secular instruction, and we believe that's absolutely appropriate.

Phil: Last call, guys.

Question: How do you ensure that? That the prayers, that are –

Mayor: We ensure it the way we ensure everything else. Remember, I did not innovate the notion of religious schools being in pre-k – they had already been in the previous pre-k program of the previous administration. And even then, this same question – in a different form, of course, because they didn't do full-day pre-k in many cases – the same question of how do you keep to a set of ground rules, and respect the separation between church and state – it's existed for a long time, not just in terms of this question of pre-k, but in lots of other interactions. How many of our social service organizations are faith-based, for example? So, there is a clear ground rule with city government that's true all over the country with local governments – faith-based organizations have to play by a set of rules if they want public funding, and if they want to work together with us. There are regular inspections. If there's a violation, and if that violation is not resolved, they will no longer get funding. The – in this case – yeshivos know that we'll be inspecting regularly – if we find that something's not being handled right, they won't get funding anymore. But what we found already, from the experience so far this year, and certainly from the previous administration's experience, is that the religious schools that participate understand those ground rules, and abide by them. Those that do not want to live by the ground rules don't ask for the funding. That's what we've found.

Anything else? They're silent. Okay, thank you, everyone.

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