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

Brian Lehrer: It's Brian Lehrer on WNYC. And if it's Friday, it's Ask the Mayor day, my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio at 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0. Or you can tweet a question, just use the hashtag, #AskTheMayor. And good morning, Mr. Mayor. Welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, Brian. How are you doing?

Lehrer: I'm doing all right. How are you doing? I know you've got your Johnson & Johnson COVID vaccine yesterday. How are you doing with side effects?

Mayor: Thank you for asking. A little bit of soreness, but nothing, nothing that bad. And I really wanted to get the Johnson & Johnson vaccine to send a message that it's safe and it's effective. And also, it's only one dose. And I got to tell you, Brian, this is something I think more and more people are connecting to. I was up in Co-Op City in the Bronx talking to senior citizens who said they actually were waiting for the Johnson & Johnson vaccine because they wanted only one shot. And it was a brand they were familiar with. And my experience with it was great. I'm feeling good.

Lehrer: From the COVID trackers that I look at, seems like the city has hit a plateau on the way down from the last surge over the last two weeks. Still more than 60 people a day on average dying from COVID in the city. And we see the numbers really spiking again in Michigan and some other places that are being called canaries in the coal mine for here and the whole country. How would you describe the race between the vaccines and the variants in New York City as of today?

Mayor: Well, this is a conversation I have daily with our health care leadership and we think we're winning this race right now, really. You know, a typical day, let's say 50,000 vaccinations. That's a very, very steady pace. That's something that actually will pick up a lot when we finally get the supply we need. And you can see it on the overall trend line. Cases are going down. Thank God, deaths have gone down. Hospitalizations have gone down. We're not out of the woods because of the variants. But everything we're seeing, the vaccines are effective against the very intense – just the sheer number. I mean, we're now well past three million vaccinations in New York City from the beginning of our effort. So, I think we're winning. But we're going to be very vigilant and watch the data every day and make adjustments as we go along.

Lehrer: Let's take a phone call. Kari, Is it Kari or Kerri in Manhattan? You're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi.

Question: Hi. Is it for me?

Lehrer: Yes, it is. Hi.

Question: Hi. No, it's Terri with a T. Hi, I'm a big fan. I listen all the time. I tried last week, couldn't get through. Hi, Mr. Mayor, how are you?

Mayor: Hey, Terri, how are you doing?

Question: Good. So, I'm a NYCHA resident. I live in one of the Wise Towers buildings on the Upper West Side, 92nd. And I wanted to see what you can do, if anything – we, you know, for the past year, even before we went into the pandemic lockdown, we had our resident elections postponed. And which is like a couple of months even before the lockdown. And, you know, since then we've had really no communication, you know, with management. I mean, it's not like that that's a big deal. I mean, we don't have management communication anyway. But you know, Greg Russ is moving forward to the extent that he can with the Blueprint for Change proposal, which I'm sure you're aware of. And I think, you know, obviously everybody knows that we have to raise money for the repairs. And but at a time when there is very little resident engagement to be going forward with this plan, which seems like he's doing, because they're holding these Zoom meetings and, you know, town halls and virtual town halls. And you know, not a lot of people I know in my building, I've done an informal survey – you know, a lot of people aren't communicating through Zoom. It's not the way they feel comfortable.

Lehrer: And Terri, what's your question?

Question: – They're waiting for elections. And they keep sending these emails saying, Oh, we're moving forward. And we're getting resident engagement and we're having – we're engaging residents. I reached out twice after –

Lehrer: Terri, forgive me. I'm going to try to get you to a specific question for the Mayor. Do you have one?

Question: I do. What can we do to start elections sooner? I mean, movies are opening, schools are opening, when can we start elections so we can really get resident engagement and not just pay lip service to it?

Lehrer: Thank you, Mayor. To the NYCHA community?

Mayor: Yes, absolutely. Terri, first of all, please give your information to WNYC. And I want Greg Russ, the chairman of NYCHA to call you directly and talk to – I know, because I've talked this through with them. He has had hundreds of meetings with resident councils all over the five boroughs to talk about this vision of how we get substantial resources into NYCHA, to fix buildings, while protecting residents' rights? And that's absolutely essential. We must constantly

protect residents' rights to keep their apartment, succession rights, representation, rights, keep the public sector in charge, et cetera. That's what his plan does. He's working with the Biden administration on it right now. But he's had an immense amount of engagement with resident councils. But I agree with you, not everyone uses Zoom and as things are opening up, you are going to start to see, you know, slowly but surely in-person meetings. But I think the point about the elections is really good. We want to get everything back on track. So, I will have Greg follow up with you directly and go over the timeline with you. And I appreciate it. We want people to be a part of this process because it's – we need \$40 billion, \$40 billion to fully repair the buildings of our public housing authority. And make them quality buildings for the people who live in them. That's what Greg's plan seeks to achieve.

Lehrer: Terri, hang on, we'll take your contact off the air. From the Mayor, it looks like you're going to get a call from the head of NYCHA. Let me ask you about some breaking news. I'm sure you've heard this before you came on, the CDC just revised the recommendations for distancing in schools from six feet of separation between kids, to three feet, assuming everybody's wearing masks. That means more students should, at least in theory, be able to attend in-person classes. So, are you going to implement that CDC guideline as New York City public school policy? And if so, will that mean that there will be another opt-in period for choosing in-person learning? Or more days for kids in hybrid? Have you gotten your mind around this yet?

Mayor: Well, I'll tell you something, I'm very happy to hear this news. We're evaluating it right now. It's literally breaking. We did not expect to hear this so quickly from the CDC and we need to see the actual documents, the actual standards. As I mentioned yesterday in my press conference, we are already in a planning process for the possibility that we have a health situation that allows us to do those kinds of changes. And we are preparing for the possibility, but we're not there yet, for the possibility of an opt-in. But we're looking forward to seeing this guidance today, getting some answers from CDC directly. And then we'll have more to say on it because if it does work for us, we'll obviously want to move quickly.

Lehrer: Let's take a call from a teacher as a segue from that. Tyson in the Tremont section of the Bronx. You're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi Tyson.

Question: Hi Brian. Hi Mayor. I'm a teacher and for the second year in a row, I'm very upset that you and the Board of Education are taking away our spring break. We worked very hard, you know we deserve this break, and we need to have it back.

Lehrer: Is that true? Is spring break canceled, Mr. Mayor?

Mayor: Oh, there's been a number of variations to – I don't – from everything I understand, I want to always be careful if there's something I don't understand. There's been a bunch of variations to the calendar because of COVID. But there's also been a consistent effort to make sure there was downtime. So, I'm not sure I accept – I respect Tyson. I respect his work and I appreciate his work, but I don't think it's fair to say it the way he said it. But let's get – Tyson, please leave your information for WNYC and we'll have a senior person at DOE call you and clarify things.

Lehrer: Tyson, thank you. Well, next week is spring break in some places. In New York, the school news is high school buildings will reopen for in-person classes starting Monday. And you know, Mr. Mayor, and this is kind of a follow-up on my question about the CDC guidelines. But I get tweets throughout the day now, from parents who want a new chance to opt-in. They say, it's not really a reopening if the only kids who can go back in-person are those who had chosen opt-in status way back last November. Are you ready to announce anything?

Mayor: As I said Brian, no, not yet, because we have to see exactly what the CDC is saying. This is a surprise. I think it's a good surprise. But I have to tell you, if you had asked me 48 hours ago, 24 hours ago, would the CDC take this action now? It was not on anyone's radar as something definitive coming down so quickly. So, we need to understand exactly what it means, what it means for us specifically. There's a lot to work through. If we were, if we were able to do a opt-in, there's a lot we have to work out logistically. There's a lot we have to work out in terms of staffing. We do obviously have to work with the unions. We need the time to create an opt-in period. There's a lot to do. So, I'm excited by this news and I'm hopeful, but I can't announce anything formally until we see the specific guidance. And as soon as we really have the details, then I'll speak to the people in the city about it.

Lehrer: And my producer, who is a New York City public school mom, says there is spring break. And it's the week of March 29th, just in case we confused a lot of people out there.

Mayor: Yeah, I was confused by the question. And I'm glad – thank your producer because I thought that was not an accurate question. But I tried to make sure there was something that I wasn't missing here. So, thank you to the producer.

Lehrer: Ed in Manhattan, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Ed.

Question: Yes. Mayor Thank you so much. And Brian, thank you for your time today. I'm going to bring it back to the New York variants and all that that incurs. Including the Caltech study, the Columbia study, that it's around this area especially. And Dr. Fauci and Dr. Gottlieb's concerns. And here's where I'm feeling about this and whether this can be done on a federal level, state level, city level. Yes, your honor. Mayor, I know you're trying to open up more vaccine centers. My feeling is, and I don't know if you can do this legally or politically, can we just lower the age within the Washington Heights, Inwood area? I mean, you have the remarkable you know, the New York Presbyterian, with the Armory and the set up like that. And I know you're doing pop-up centers and I know you're doing a Johnson & Johnson. But we need to lower the age because there's so many people that wish to get it. And I don't know if that can be done legally then also, I know you're waiting for the amount of vaccination that you can get from the feds. But I feel like we're not really attacking this in a year of dealing with this across the world and attacking variants and being more precise is what I'm saying. So, my question is, can we find some ways to lower the age and let a greater group of people get vaccinated within the Washington Heights, Inwood area? Thank you.

Lehrer: And other hotspots. I was just going to say in other hotspots.

Mayor: The question that I think is a fair one, because it's about a place that was hit very hard by COVID and, you know, being really – going the extra mile to protect people. But here's my answer. One, the supply. We have two fundamental problems, a lack of supply, which is something we need help from both the federal government and manufacturers on. And then a lack of freedom to use the supply, which is something we need help from the federal government and the State government on because we do not have the flexibility we need, nor are we getting our fair share of the vaccine within the State of New York. So, there are things that could happen right now with the existing supply to give us more so we could reach more people. But until that happens, we are really hamstrung. We're between 150,000 to 200,000 doses less than our capacity to give the vaccine shots at this point each week.

So, it's a really staggering gap and we have to get that answer by the federal and State government. But to the question of changing the age, I would say not yet, because what we're finding is the hesitancy levels are going down markedly. And so, every appointment we put up gets filled up and I really do want to make sure we reach seniors and folks with pre-existing conditions. They are the most vulnerable. They are the folks who are in the greatest danger. So, so long as those appointments are snapped up in Washington Heights or anywhere else, I think we should stick with the current criteria. I agree with President Biden, May 1st is a good time to make the shift to all ages, but right now it's about who's in the greatest need and danger and how we help them first.

Lehrer: You've accused Governor Cuomo of going on a tear of reopening announcements to – tell me if this is a fair characterization of your accusation – to make people feel good about him, just as his scandals are swirling, more indoor dining, larger indoor gatherings, fitness classes, even though they're usually more tightly crowded than gyms, all these things in recent days. My question for you is, Cuomo may be many things, but do you really think he would play that fast and loose with people's health and people's lives?

Mayor: Well, he clearly did with the nursing homes. I mean, you did characterize my remarks effectively, and I appreciate that, Brian. But with the nursing homes, clearly – look decisions were made that were dangerous to people's health and wellbeing. Thousands of people were lost, and the Governor and the State had the audacity to cover up the information. I think there's a huge question here of what was really motivating that. And I think there's many factors that need to be looked at. And I understand the federal investigators are looking at campaign contributions from the nursing home industry, from the hospital industry, things that may have been very much on the Governor's mind as he was making decisions. So, is he capable of making decisions that are that crass and that political and about his personal needs? 110 percent.

Lehrer: Are you saying that not just the coverup, but the original policy of moving, recovering nursing home patients out of hospitals back to their nursing homes was done knowing that it could be fatal for some people because he was getting donations from maybe the hospitals lobby?

Mayor: I – you know, the famous phrase from Watergate, Brian, follow the money. I am heartened to see the federal investigators, the FBI, is doing that exact work right now. They are following the trail of millions of dollars over the years of campaign contributions from the

nursing home industry, from the big hospital systems to see what impact that had. I will remind you the Governor's top political aide went to federal prison for corruption and bribery. There's a history of corruption in Albany and the Governor has been a central part of it. So, I think we need to understand that, but do I think he makes these decisions for political reasons constantly? Yes. I mean, our health care leadership said do not open up these fitness classes. These are doctors who have spent their whole life in public health, trying to save people's lives. They said, this is small spaces, indoors, people either with no mask or masks on that had gotten wet from perspiration, a heavy – you know, heavy breath. This exactly what you don't want, if you want to stop COVID, especially with the variants around. Our health care leadership is abundantly clear, don't do that. The Governor took back the power for us to decide and did it. And I think for very political reasons, just to – anything he could do to get anyone to like him. And I think it's dangerous and this is why we need local control because I'm listening to health care leaders. We all know he doesn't listen to his health care leaders. I'm listening to the health care leaders and they say that was a real dangerous decision.

Lehrer: Jim in West Windsor, New Jersey, but born in New York City, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Jim,

Question: Good morning. Mr. Mayor, I've been trying to get my birth certificate from New York City since last July of 2020. I'm disabled, bedridden. Without my birth certificate I can't get my social security, I can't get my disability. What can you do for me?

Mayor: Jim, I am certain we can help you and thank you for calling in and appreciate everything you've done for all of us. So, let's get your information to WNYC right now. I'll have someone from our Health Department, that handles the birth certificates, call you today. I suspect this is something we can resolve as early today. And we want to make sure you get everything that is due to you.

Lehrer: Jim, hang on, we'll take your contact information. Hopefully, you'll get one of those birth certificates with the seal that's usable for all those things. Mr. Mayor, I want to ask you about the NYPD budget. At this week's City Council oversight hearing, Commissioner Shea said that the NYPD needed more "financial help" and your preliminary budget for the fiscal year that begins in July would provide that, as I understand it, by increasing police spending by roughly \$200 million. What do you say to New Yorkers who say that falls out of line with your stated priorities of reinvesting in communities and not the police?

Mayor: Well, our priority, clearly in everything we're doing, is to invest in communities, invest in young people. We made a major commitment in the June budget for youth programs, recreation centers, the things I think really help give young people positive options. We're going to be able to do a lot more of that now because of the stimulus, a lot more focus on the mental health services for young people. That's where our focus is going to be. But look, we made a decision with the City Council to reduce the size of the NYPD. It's now about 35,000 officers, about the size of when I came into office. And I think that's the right place for it to be, but there's going to be really substantial investments separately in the kinds of help that I think are foundational like the youth programs, but also like Cure Violence. I announced we're doubling the staffing for Cure Violence and the Crisis Management System. These are community-based

people who solve problems and fight shootings and gun violence at the community level. I think this is a big part of the solution going forward. We're doubling that investment.

Lehrer: When you were approved to plan to hire 1,300 new officers in 2015, you said it was in part to institute key reforms on the fiscal front and reign in the NYPD spending. But as I understand it, the NYPD has continued to exceed their overtime budget, including in the current fiscal year when you had cut the overtime budget on paper, but they blew through it. Why is this happening? And is this a failure on your part to implement the fiscal reforms you promised?

Mayor: No, actually, the overtime budget has been steadily going down. That's a really good thing. The NYPD is very serious about it. I'm very serious about it. And we've got a lot of the year left. There was a period of time where there were real additional responsibilities, and we all know that. There was a lot of activity out in the streets where NYPD had to be present and that did affect the overtime budget. But going forward, I think we have the ability to keep reducing that budget. Whenever you have less full-time staffing – and we did reduce the size of the NYPD substantially – when you have less full-time staffing, it does create some additional pressure for overtime, but we believe we can, with a smaller NYPD, still keep reducing overtime.

Lehrer: Lisa in Crown Heights, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Lisa.

Question: Hi. Good morning. Thank you, Brian, for taking my call. Mr. Mayor, I live in the Crown Heights North Historic District. A real estate developer is [inaudible] purchase and build on the southern campus of the only intact historic institution that's in central Brooklyn, which is formally the Methodist Home of the Aged. The community vehemently opposed – is opposed to this. We have a petition with almost 7,500 signatures, about a thousand letters, including letters from the Historic District Council, as well as our elected officials opposing the desecration of this landmark site, which were all sent to the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Chair Sarah Carroll and the LPC commissioners are in agreement that this landmark property can't sustain this enormous development. LPC is ignoring the community, elected officials, and their own principles of reserving architectural and cultural history. This was the neighborhood of Shirley Chisholm tourism, who was unbought and unbossed. Mr. Mayor, my question is, do you believe Black historic districts matter and deserve to be protected and preserved? If so, I urge you to publicly oppose the issuance of a certificate of appropriateness for this project. And lastly, I agree with you as – what you said is follow the money because I'm very interested in the donations that are made by real estate developers to New York City campaigns. Thank you.

Mayor: Well, thank you, Lisa, and I'm really glad you raised that. Yes, we have to do a lot more to preserve Black history in New York City. And one of the really good things that happened in the last week or so is we announced the purchase on Duffield Street in Brooklyn, of a site that was a very important site in the abolitionist's movement, and that was going to be lost and we're saving it now. And it's going to be something we can do a lot with to protect that history. And there's many other important examples. I don't know the specifics that you're raising. I want to know more. So, I'm going to have one of the members of my team call you today. Please give your information to WNYC, and we can get your answer back quickly about what we're seeing in terms of what the Landmarks Preservation is seeing here and what we can do to address the

concerns you're raising. I'm glad you're raising it because yeah, this is something we have to, across the city, think about very differently than we did in the past.

Lehrer: Mr. Mayor, can you update us on the City's response, following the Atlanta killings of eight people, including six Asian-American women? What's New York City's response at the moment?

Mayor: Thank you for asking, Brian. Let me just say one thing upfront to everyone listening. This is a horrifying moment for Asian-Americans. There's just tremendous fear out there and for good reason, and we got to stand in solidarity. So, I really want to ask everyone, if you are ready to stand in solidarity with Asian-Americans, please go to our website, nyc.gov/StopAsianHate. There's a lot of information there about how to support the Asian community, but also about how to report anything that appears to be a hate crime or bias, act of bias. We need these reports, a lot of folks – and I was in Flushing yesterday with a number of Asian-American leaders, and everyone was saying out loud, look, people are not reporting out of fear, or they're not reporting because maybe they think maybe it wasn't a hate crime. We need everyone to report everything they see so that we can evaluate it and act on it and stop the perpetrator. So, I really want to emphasize that, but it's a combination, Brian, of outreach to the community, support to the community, education both in the citywide sense and in our schools to foster respect. And then a part of it is about NYPD follow-up. We have an Asian Hate Crimes Task Force. It is made up of Asian-American officers from many different backgrounds and nations who speak the wide range of languages in our Asian communities and are connected to the community. We're going to have to just keep doing this work until we stop this horrible trend.

Lehrer: Let me ask you a follow up question to what we discussed before about high school buildings reopening on Monday. We're getting a few different versions of this on Twitter. Here's one that pertains to a particular high school. “Can you address why my son's return to high school. Edward R. Murrow High School will not involve live instruction. All students will sit in their classroom on their laptops while teachers work remotely. High school reopening is a farce.” Your reaction.

Mayor: Yeah, I'm glad to hear the question because I think it's not the whole story by any stretch. And I'd love to get that individual connected to folks at the Department of Education, who can go over how things are going to be handled. Here's the bigger reality. We want every student to be in-person with an educator being taught, you know, the traditional way, as much as humanly possible. At the high school level, there's a particular complexity because a lot of students, particularly as we're moving towards graduation, need very specific courses to meet the graduation requirements. And sometimes, especially with so many teachers out on medical accommodation, it can't be done in person that has to be done remotely. But what we're trying to maximize –

Lehrer: Thirty seconds, just [inaudible] –

Mayor: Maximize in-person education, some remote sometimes, but still surrounded by professional educators and folks who are going to support those students. It's a much better reality than a child just learning remotely from home.

Lehrer: Thanks, as always, Mr. Mayor. I hope you continue to have a relatively easy ride after your shot yesterday. And I'll talk to you next week.

Mayor: Thanks very much, Brian.

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