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

Brian Lehrer: It's the Brian Lehrer Show on WNYC. Good morning, everyone. And we begin as we usually do on Friday's with our weekly Ask the Mayor segment. My questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio, our phones are open at 2-1-2-4-3-3-W-N-YC, 4-3-3-9-6-9-2 or you can tweet a question using the hashtag #AskTheMayor. And we will begin with the Mayor today with some breaking news. More suspicious packages found with local implications. One found in New York City, the other targeting New Jersey Senator Corey Booker. So, good morning, Mr. Mayor, and can you start by giving us an update?

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Yeah, Brian. It's been a tough week in this city. And I think even though people have had every reason to be concerned. I have to say at the beginning, New Yorkers have been absolutely outstanding in how they have dealt with this and have shown a lot of resolve and a lot of strength and I just want to commend my fellow New Yorkers for that. The latest is there was another package sent to a postal facility in Manhattan. It was intercepted by the postal personnel. I really want to commend them. I mean while we we've been talking about this really painful issue and challenging issue. There's been a lot of brave men and women at the front line looking for these packages to intercept them. They've done a really good job of doing that. And so facility on 57th Street is where they found this package. It has been removed by the NYPD successfully. The package did not detonate; no one was harmed in any way. And the package is being taken to Rodman's Neck facility for evaluation. But on initial inspection is consistent with what has been seen in the other packages in this pattern.

Lehrer: And am I right, that that was addressed to former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, who's been a critic of President Trump and mailed to him at CNN like the one to John Brennan?

Mayor: That's my understanding as it was addressed to Clapper, that's correct.

Lehrer: There is so much we don't know that I wonder if the media has gotten too far ahead of this story in certain respects in the last two days which I am trying not to do. For example, were

these really bombs that could explode or incomplete devices intended to terrorize people but not intended to kill. Do you know?

Mayor: Well, I have to say I really appreciate your question. And I had a press conference yesterday with Commissioner O’Neill, and FBI leadership, and others. And I thought the line of questioning was unhelpful, honest but unhelpful because people kept in the media, kept seeming to want to say is this a hoax bomb, and not a real bomb, and the answer kept being the same. And I don’t think it was heard really well. So I want to make it real clear. This is a suspected explosive device period. All of them follow the same pattern. From what we know at this moment these were built to be explosive devices to harm people. Now, again there is a full investigation underway. All of them are going to be as I understand it evaluated at the FBI lab at Quantico. We’ll get the full picture then. But I really think it’s a mistake to somehow to either wish that they are only hoax bombs or assess them before the professionals have done it. Until otherwise notified these are real explosive devices that were intended to do harm.

Lehrer: So you are answering the question. You’re not saying you don’t know. You’re saying these are real explosive devices that could have explode, could explode.

Mayor: It’s actually really clear. Respectfully I want you to hear what I said. Because I said this was the exact answer that Commissioner O’Neill gave – suspected explosive devices. Meaning everything that they could see initially suggested that these were meant to do harm and they were explosive devices. Then, the next part which everyone has to honor, until a full evaluation has been done be by experts we can’t say for sure when that is done we’ll put it out there. But I think there was some attempt yesterday and some to say oh it must be a hoax or they must be superficial. Don’t assume that, assume the other way around. Assume they are the real thing until you hear something others.

Lehrer: And the motive, an actual right wing terrorist as the conspiracy theorist on the right have it maybe a fake right wing terrorist trying to make the right look bad. And it could bother things entirely. Chuck Todd on Meet the Press yesterday suggested how much we don’t know by saying maybe it’s the Russians, trying to sow more division in America in an election season. Can you tell us anything about motive?

Mayor: No, there is very intensive national investigation underway and it’s really important. I’ve learned this because we’ve been through terror attacks before. It’s really important not to pre judge it. We don’t know if it’s foreign, we don’t know if its domestic, we don’t know which part of the political spectrum. We do know it’s the definition of terrorism, that violent means are being directed at people for political purposes, whatever the underlying motivation, no matter how direct or indirect this fits every the definition of terrorism. It’s an effort to intimate, it’s an effort to disrupt using violence. But we shouldn’t speculate. We have to let the investigation play out and get to a final set of facts.

Lehrer: And what can you tell us about finding the person with respect to implications of that for people’s safety going forward?

Mayor: Well, I would say in terms of safety first of all I really want to commend everyone who has been protecting us. Starting again with the postal inspections, folks working in mail rooms who have been very heads up, obviously NYPD and all the other first responders, and the federal, state law enforcement. Everyone has been doing an outstanding job and thank God no one has been hurt so far. And I think this really the epitome of if you see something say something situation. The fact is a lot of information was shared long before this with folks who work in mailrooms letting them know that long before this there's been a concern about these types of attacks. And helping people know what to do to be prepared and how vigilant to be and how to alert the NYPD instantly if they see anything out of the ordinary. I want to emphasize that to all your listeners. Anybody who gets a package where they see wires exposed, where they see – where they get a chemical smell. Anything that makes them concerned, don't open the package. Alert the authorities, let the experts deal with it. And obviously anyone who has any information that they think maybe, may shed light on who is behind this. We need that right away and that information – anybody who has information can call 9-1-1 with it and it can be routed to the right place. But I think the fact is this puts a real light on the idea that in an age where some are trying to use tools of terror to disrupt the democratic society the answer is in many ways an answer rooted in the people. It's not just law enforcement who protects us, it's we protect each other. We have to be part of answering this kind of moment. Everyone has an opportunity to protect someone. I use the example of what happened a couple of years ago in Chelsea. Where an everyday New Yorker walked by a package on the street and saw it and walked by and didn't think much of it and stopped in her tracks and said wait a minute that looks strange. It turned out to be a pressure cooker in a bag left on the street and there was an explosive device in it. And because she called the NYPD instantly that device was contained and taken away. That is a bomb that was going to go off. But an everyday New Yorker saved a lot of her fellow New Yorkers because she was vigilant heads up. That's the attitude people have to take in this kind of situation.

Lehrer: And so how specific along those lines can you be with advice to New Yorkers with respect to what to look for, what they might see that would lead them to say something about this. We know that in the case of the package addressed to Robert De Niro, a worker saw something that resembled what he had seen on television, a paper packaged with apparently bubble wrap inside and the Debbie Wasserman Schultz return address. But it was that packaging that alerted him. How specific can you be to help New Yorkers see something, say something most effective?

Mayor: So I appreciate the question. I want to answer it in two parts. On this immediate one, I mean we've seen the images of the manila type envelope, bulky envelope. Obviously inappropriately using Debbie Wasserman Schultz as the return the address. I mean anybody who sees something like that's an instant call to the NYPD and do not open that package. Isolate it immediately, get people away from it, call the NYPD. The bigger situation again, we can't ever get too caught up in one pattern. Because we have to remember we're dealing with a larger environment around us. I think the thing I really need people to think about. If you see an unattended package to still the area of great concern – you're on the subway, you're on the street. You see an unattended bag, luggage, shopping bag, etc. that needs to be – the police need to be alerted immediately in any of those situation, because we should have all of our attention one very narrow vein. And then miss the fact that there are other threats that continue to be out there.

So the unattended package – always alert the police to that or any other public personnel around. And I would say you know, the same point about anyone who hears anybody talking about a potential act of violence – that needs to be called in, any evidence like that. And in terms of things coming to your home or your work place, that even beyond this immediate pattern we are dealing with. Those key indicators, if you get a package with a chemical smell, if you get a package obviously that you are not expecting that looks suspicious in any way, anything where you can see wires exposed. I just think it is a smart approach that if you are not sure about something, don't open it. Call it in. Put in a place where others are not in danger and let the experts work it out.

Lehrer: It's our weekly Ask the Mayor segment with Mayor Bill de Blasio here on WNYC. Before we get to phone calls Mr. Mayor, I want to ask you a few questions about one other story. The New York Times today reports that your approach to the worst performing public schools in the city to improve the bottom 94 schools with intensive services and teacher training rather than close and reorganize them as Mayor Bloomberg had intended to do. That your program called Renewal Schools has largely failed, your new Chancellor calls the idea behind them fuzzy and you are about to abandon it. So can you confirm that the Renewal Schools program is about to end and give us a candid assessment of what has worked and what hasn't?

Mayor: Well I will give you a candid assessment but I have to start by saying I think the article in many ways was inaccurate and unfair. And I'm surprised to be honest. I think that for some reason only a piece of the equation was looked at and not the whole thing. We are talking about 94 schools that were deeply troubled – previous efforts to address the needs of these schools either hadn't worked or bluntly there hadn't been a serious effort more likely, there hadn't been a serious effort to invest in the school and do something to turn it around. The article I think leaves out the whole history leading up to this which is that in the previous administration, the Bloomberg administration, they had a tendency to close schools in a way that was often very destructive to the school community, harmful to kids and their education, replacing them with schools that did not necessarily work either. In fact, one thing that is accurate in the article is the note that a number of the schools ended up in the Renewal Program were the new schools organized in the Bloomberg administration that then failed. So I disagree with the premises article that this was in some way an idea that wasn't appropriate to the problem. I think it was the right idea to say we had to invest in these schools, let's start with point one – struggling schools in underprivileged communities, we had to invest in them. Closing them and replacing them with something that couldn't necessarily address the problem any better was not the solution. The idea was to try and figure out an investment pattern that would actually lift up these schools and these kids.

We did things that I think were very logical like additional classroom periods, additional after school tutoring, more teacher training, making them community schools, so they got mental health services and a variety of other supports for the kids. I mean we are talking about some of the kids who are dealing with some of the toughest situations in all of New York City and some of the schools that had been you know left without support for years or decades. So the notion that we were going to invest in them was the right idea. But we said from the beginning we did not expect it was going to be easy for all of them to turn around. And that we would give it a three year time frame. We added one year so the program is at the natural conclusion of that

whole process at the end of this school year. And what we've seen is a number of schools did graduate, quote on quote graduate out of the program and succeed. That's really good. Some we came to the conclusion were not working – we either closed them or we merged them. A lot of them had gotten really small and they couldn't work at that level. And there is still another 40 to 50 schools that are finishing out this initiative and we'll decide on their future in the course of this academic year. I just think what we have here is the toughest situations, no one thought it was going to be easy. We tried something different I think for the schools that graduated, clearly it worked. For others, it was an honest attempt to see if this would work and if it doesn't we are going to find another alternative. I just feel like the article did not portray that fullness of what we tried to do here.

Lehrer: Yes, you are stating the same stats that were in the article – out of about 100 schools a quarter of them graduated from the program, a quarter of them were deemed failures within the program and closed and reorganized. Half of them are still in the program. Is that good enough to call it a successful policy if after four years only a quarter graduated from the program?

Mayor: We'll know at the end of this year, the final count and then we can judge. But I guess, Brian, I'm trying to go to the root reality here which is we are talking about 94 schools that were failing. We're not talking about started a level playing field. We are talking about a group of schools that already weren't working. And I think there's a little bit too much instant gratification in the idea of oh just close them, snap your fingers and create some you know, wonderful new alternative that's not going to be affected by all of the same challenges that these students face every single day if they come from under privileged communities, if we have schools with a lot of English language learners and other challenges. It doesn't work that way. You don't get to flick a switch and say here's a failing school and oh we will just bring in this prefabricated, perfectly successful model and drop it into the community and everything is going to be fine. This is painstaking difficult work. I mean one thing the article does note is that this kind of challenge has bedeviled people across the ideological spectrum and in a lot of different places. That is a point of fairness. But the fact is we tried to constructively engage the school community, the parents, the educators, rather than saying you're failures because of a whole host of challenges that the community faces and the school faces and a history of disinvestment in the school. Rather than blaming the victims, we said let's actually do the thing that should have been done a long time ago and invest and see if we can turn things around. I'm very happy it worked for a number of those schools. Of course I'm unhappy where it didn't work but we tried to be honest and this is again, I think something absolutely missed in the article – we've been closing and merging schools all along that we didn't think were working. I think the article and I really take exception to this, suggested that we were allowing failure to continue. I disagree entirely. When we saw a school not making sufficient progress, we either closed it or merged it. When we thought we could turn it around, we kept investing, we did not expect it to be a one year instant solution. We expected a turnaround of this nature to take years. And now at the end of this school year, we are going to decide how to handle the remainder of the schools and then move forward.

Lehrer: And one thing about the model before we take some phone calls. The model you used of providing holistic social services to the families with kids in the schools and doing a lot of teacher training to improve the classroom experience – the article says research shows those are

crucial elements but won't transform troubled schools on a large scale without three other fundamental academic changes that do include replacing teachers and principals, sounds like Bloomberg, more integration by race and income, which you've only slowly come to as a central goal, or dare we say it, item three in the article, converting them into charters. Those things are all politically controversial so they are hard, but do you accept that research and will you adopt more of those strategies now?

Mayor: Now I don't accept that research. And again I dislike, this is a very good reporter but I absolutely think this was an example of accepting an orthodoxy without objectively presenting the fact that a lot of people wouldn't agree with that. I don't know who this group of researchers is. They do not represent a consensus from everything I understand of education. The notion of converting to charters is – forget the politics, saying let's convert to charter is to me, a statement that absolutely misses the fact that there's a whole host of different options in the charter world. Some of which are very effective, some of which are not. Charters, treating charters as a monolith is a huge mistake so I take issue with the article right there. We do not want to see school, a troubled school turned into the kind of charter that just focuses on test prep and excludes special ed kids and excludes English language learners and has kids removed who don't take tests well. That is not success for anyone and that kind of charter model exists in large number in this city and it's one we do not buy into and then there is other charters that are extraordinarily positive and inclusive and productive and some of those can be a solution.

On the question of turning over personnel – it's not as simple as that. Sometimes you do need a new principal, sometimes you do need new personnel, sometimes you have a strong principal and good personnel dealing with a really tough circumstance of a school that has not been invested in in a community that is really underprivileged. And the answer there might be to keep investing over time and building them up and bringing in model teachers, master teachers, more personnel to help beef up the folks who are already there and are good at what they doing. It's just not the one-size-fits-all that is portrayed. I think in the end anyone who thinks that you're going to turn around a troubled school without substantial investment is missing the picture.

Lehrer: We do have a Renewal school parent calling in and so we'll go first to Crystal in Jamaica. Crystal, thank you so much for calling. You're on WNYC with the Mayor.

Question: Hello?

Lehrer: Hi, Crystal. Can you hear me?

Question: Yes, I can hear you.

Lehrer: Hi, you're on the air. The Mayor is here.

Question: Hi, Mayor Bloomberg –

Lehrer: Or de Blasio.

Question: [Inaudible]

Mayor: Wrong mayor, but hi, Crystal, how are you?

Question: Oh, I'm sorry. Hi. My concern is – I heard everything that you said and I wanted to know what I am supposed to do now as a parent for my child's school that's on the Renewal list?

Mayor: Well, Crystal – so, first of all, the schools that are still in the Renewal initiative [inaudible] between 40 and 50 at this point, will be in the course of this year, we're going to evaluate those schools. Our hope is that a lot of those schools are going to be in a position to move forward positively, constructively. And we'll keep investing in them to help them do it.

If there's any schools we think don't make sense in their current form, we're going to work with the parents and with the educators in the school to figure out what we got to do differently to make them better going forward. So, there's going to be a whole discussion in your school community of where things stand and how we're going to handle them over the course of this year.

So, there's certainly going to be meetings that parents are going to be invited to, to hear what's going on and offer their ideas. That's going to play out now between now and the spring.

So, give your information, please, to WNYC, and I want to make sure that someone from the Department of Education talks to you directly to let you know how those community meetings are going to happen in your school and what we're planning going forward.

Lehrer: Is it P.S. 119, by any chance, Crystal?

Question: No, it's Martin Van Buren. She's in high school. She's in her 11th year. And now she's in 11th grade and it's been on the Renewal list since 2014. So, now that she's in 11th grade, it's like she's not prepared or ready for college so now I'm stuck as like what am I supposed to do now? Like, how can I move forward to get her ready and prepared for college when she's supposed to get this service in school since 9th grade –

Lehrer: What's your own –

Question: [Inaudible] pre-med and that's why we chose Martin Van Buren. She's not even getting any pre-med classes there.

Lehrer: What's your own impression, Crystal, of why your daughter isn't learning more in school than she is? Is it just the unavailability of pre-med classes or is it beyond that, just something in the more basic parts of the education, in your opinion?

Question: Well, it's beyond that. It's more than her not receiving the pre-med classes because she also some issues [inaudible] metal detectors. No one is preparing her for college. She's not getting the information that she needs. No one communicates with the parents. She doesn't ever see the principal. The last time I met with the principal was when she was in 9th grade. And also she stated that there isn't any metal detectors there. She feels unsafe. So, it's a [inaudible] going

on at Martin Van Buren and now she's in 11th grade – I just feel like that's unfair because now where do we go from here?

Lehrer: Mr. Mayor, anything else you want to say to Crystal.

Mayor: Yeah, Crystal – look, first of all, Crystal, I appreciate – you're obviously an active and involved parent and I really appreciate that. I think the fact that your daughter already knows in 11th grade that she wants to be a doctor is – that really says good things about you and her.

And we want to make sure that she gets the support she needs. So, if she's at the beginning of 11th grade, there's still a lot that can be done to help her.

Again, I want you to give your information to WNYC so that we can make sure that both someone from the school – the principal and people from the Department of Education talk to you to make sure we're giving your daughter the support she needs on her path.

You know in terms of the overall situation, Brian, again we're trying to provide the supports that every school needs. That's the whole concept and I'm the first to say in everything we try and do on education, we're constantly trying to improve. We're constantly trying to figure out what works and what doesn't.

These are big thorny, complex issues but what we do know is if you're going to move a school you have to invest in a school and that's what we're trying to do. And we're also trying to strike a balance on the safety issue all the time.

We need our kids to be safe. We listen very carefully to the school community and of course to the NYPD about when and where we need metal detectors. There are many fewer metal detectors than there used to be in the past and in many ways that's because both the NYPD and the school community did not want them in a lot of places and found that other forms of keeping kids safe worked.

But any place where either the school community or the NYPD believes that a metal detector needs to be put in place, that's something that the NYPD will do. I just want to emphasize, you know, a lot of times when I'm talking to students and parents they actually are very hesitant about wanting metal detectors because they don't think it creates the right environment for kids.

Lehrer: By the way, the Times reporter on the Renewal schools article Eliza Shapiro just tweeted this morning, "On Brian Lehrer, Mayor de Blasio called my article unfair and inaccurate. He declined an interview last week." That was noted in the article that you declined an interview –

Mayor: I did not decline an interview. My press staff, I'm sure they were trying to do their job, may have declined on my behalf but I would have been very happy to do that interview. So, I will look forward to talking to her going forward.

Lehrer: Pat on Staten Island, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Pat.

Question: Hey, good morning. Mr. Mayor and Brian, how you guys doing?

Lehrer: Doing alright.

Question: So, I've been complaining for multiple years to DOT, Polly Trottenberg, Mr. Mayor himself, traffic incidents have been rising for the last three years – collisions and total injuries for the last three years. I know [inaudible] last year because the West Side terror attack.

So, I had to complain to TLC. Cell phones are still being mounted on windshields in New York City in 2018. How can drivers see other drivers changing lanes and using [inaudible] and making eye contact [inaudible]. Cell phones are still mounted on windshields in New York City.

It's ridiculous. It's embarrassing. It's a total shame and disgusting. Every morning there's traffic all over New York City. Why? Because there's 100,000 Uber morons with cell phones on their windshields driving around –

Lehrer: Pat, let's get your response from the Mayor.

Mayor: Pat has strong views and he's raised this issue before and I have to be honest with you, I need to get the details back because we did pursue this point with the Department of Transportation and with TLC. I think it's a common-sense fair point. I think there are some legal issues we have to work through on it but I think he's got a point.

The bigger point of people in any way, shape, or form texting while driving, using cell phones while driving – this is a huge problem. Now, that said, I disagree on one point. Obviously because of the Vision Zero approach, we've seen fatalities go down consistently and we've seen that the whole set of strategies we're using to reduce traffic crashes is working.

We got to do a lot more of it. But I do agree with Pat that anything that distracts drivers is a problem. I need to get a clearer answer for this, once and for all, if there's an additional step that we can legally take to limit the kind of thing that he's concerned about.

Lehrer: Pat's calling from Staten Island –

Mayor: And he should give his information to WNYC so we can do that follow-up.

Lehrer: And let's conclude on another Staten Island story. It looks like the Staten Island Wheel is dead. The big ferris wheel that was supposed to be a [inaudible] of economic development on the North Shore. What's left is the wheel's parking garage which I gather some people love because it's nearly 1,000 stops for commuters getting on the ferry but others want it out of there as an eyesore that the wheel project stuck them with, as they see it. And I guess the land that the garage is on now reverts back to the City so this falls in your lap. Are you pro-garage or anti-garage?

Mayor: I don't have a position yet for a very good reason. We only had confirmation in the last few days that the wheel project was not going to go forward. I know for a lot of people who were really hoping for something special for Staten Island, it's a very disappointing moment. That said, it was increasingly clear to us in the City that it was not coming together. And you know the last thing we want to do is give people false hope.

We now have a really wonderful opportunity to create something great for the future of Staten Island and to recognize that there's a lot of things that can be done in this central, central location that could really spur on the economy of Staten Island and create jobs, create opportunity.

It also, of course, is right next to the outlet malls which are about to open and are going to be a big boost to Staten Island as well. So, that's a discussion that we're going to have with the leaders of Staten Island – with the borough president, the Council members, and community stakeholders – to determine what should be done with that site going forward. What can have the biggest impact? And what the role of the garage should be in that. That's something we have to do right from the beginning. If you look back on the history of the wheel, Brian, it was a pretty speculative concept from the beginning, obviously, something that was done in the previous administration.

This time we have an opportunity to do something that will really help Staten Island and something that will stick and something that's a really reliable option for the future of the borough and that's what we want to get right.

Lehrer: Mr. Mayor, thank you as always. We'll be looking for further updates on the suspicious packages as they become available. Thank you for briefing us this morning and for talking about these other issues.

Mayor: Thank you, Brian. And please, all New Yorkers, take to heart that phrase. If you see something, say something. This is a time where people really need to live that out.

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