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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO, FIRST LADY MCCRAY HOST INTERFAITH LUNCHEON**

**First Lady Chirlane McCray:** Good afternoon, everyone. I want to thank you, Commissioner Perez, for kicking us off, Rabbi Potasnik, [inaudible] for those invocations, Dante, Lauren, and Julian, for all your powerful words. Many thank you's. I thank all of you for being here today, for joining us, for participating in this gathering. It is truly a joy to be here in person. Thank you to all our faith leaders for their work and commitment this year, you've been here. You've been steady and dependable through the good, the bad, the ugly and the unknown. You've made sure that New Yorkers kept the faith during one of the toughest times in our city's history ever. And today we're here to talk about a group we are all invested in that has been deeply challenged this year: our young people. The growth and development of our young people is significantly linked to their ability to socialize with their peers and get exposure to the other adults, as you just heard. And this period of isolation has been so frustrating for them, and exacerbated in many cases by family financial instability, by violence, by personal grief, and loss, and despair. Clearly the path to recovery begins with getting them vaccinated, as Dr. Torian Easterling will speak to shortly.

But as we've seen this past year, health is so much more than our physical health. Supporting our young people means caring for their mental health, caring for their emotional needs too. That is something that our administration has been focused on for many years, and now we must do even more because the need is much greater. We already have in place efforts like NYC Well, our 24/7 helpline. How many of you remember the number? 1-8-8-8-NYC-WELL. This is a test – can you say it with me?

**Audience:** 1-8-8-8-NYC-WELL.

**First Lady McCray:** One more time.

**Audience:** 1-8-8-8-NYC-WELL.

**First Lady McCray:** Please remember that number, pass it on to people. You never know who might need it, who's in crisis, who might need resources. It's 24/7 and it's free. We also have NYC Care, which guarantees health care access to every New Yorker, regardless of their ability to pay. And it doesn't matter what their immigration status is and helps them to see a primary care doctor and get all that specialty care for free.

In addition to these powerful tools, we want our young people to have a structured path, to help them develop themselves. That's why we know have a mental health curriculum – social-emotional learning, which is in every public school classroom in our city. That curriculum teaches them skills for managing their emotions in a healthy and constructive way, especially those difficult emotions like stress, anger, and frustration. It helps them manage conflict. It helps them understand how to process and channel their feelings. Now, this work has already begun. We launched it in 2019, and this work will continue throughout the summer, through Summer Rising and other programs. But this fall, we're going even further. Every student will receive a social-emotional screening in addition to an academic screening, so they can receive the personal attention and the support that they need.

Now just last week, I saw a great example of what this kind of support can do for our children. I was at P.S. 78 in Staten island, where I participated in a class exercise called scenarios. They actually have a wheel that they spin and the wheel stops – one of the students stops the wheel at a scenario, a situation that they have to react to. And I listened to as third graders, mostly students of color, talked about how they would handle their feelings in this scenario. And this one was, they were faced with a difficult math question that they really couldn't figure it out. And they were to imagine what their feelings, what their emotions would be as they tried to tackle this problem. I went around the room. Everybody had a partner and one child, my partner, said that she would take some long, slow, deep breaths until she felt calm enough to think about the problem deeply. Another student said that he would take a walk

and tackle the problem later when he felt better. Another boy said he would play music as he did the problem. So, in that classroom, they were learning to identify their emotions like what the emotion was that they were feeling, and then choose a method, a healthy method, to address and process it. All these students were learning that they have the ability and the power to handle tough emotions. And just imagine if we all had learned those skills when we were like six or seven or even younger, just the thought of that, and hearing their squeaky, earnest voices brought tears to my eyes. It really did. I think everyone, all the adults in the room were very moved by the exercise. So, this is really a new era. It's a chance to reach our young people in a totally different way from where they live, deep inside, but it's going to take all of us. This is not just the responsibility of the teachers, trained educators, school staff. This is about parents learning these skills too and reinforcing them at home. It's about faith and community leaders, serving as role models, encouraging students to remember what they're learning in school and model these behaviors as well. We're all in this together. So, I want to thank you again for being here today and now it's my great pleasure to introduce someone who has made it a priority from day one to give our children the support they need to succeed at home, in school, and in our community, my partner, our Mayor, Bill de Blasio.

[Applause]

**Mayor Bill de Blasio:** Good afternoon, everybody. It is so nice to be back together in person. Remember the old song, You Are So Beautiful to Me, remember? That's what I'm feeling right now. It is – I am seeing New York City. I am seeing the best of New York City. I'm seeing us together, again, and this makes me hopeful. This makes me hopeful. This is a step, one of many, many steps we will take together to someplace better. I want to tell you how important it is we are together, not just because we gain energy from each other and hope and inspiration, but because this is a call to arms moment. This is a moment we need each other. This is a moment we're going to have to do more together to win this battle against COVID, to fight the dangers that we face to bring this city back fully. You can feel the comeback starting to happen. You can feel the energy in the streets of this city.

[Applause]

I'm going to quote the great spiritual leader – I'm going to paraphrase here – the great spiritual leader, beloved by all, Mr. T. I want to say I pity the fool who bet against New York City. Because when you bet against New York City you lose. We're coming back, but we've got work to do. Now I want to give some credit where credit is due, first to the young people, to Lauren and Julian, I loved what you said and I love the fact that you talked about the lives of those we love, our youth, as they really are. We're going to reach our young people and keep them safe. If we're going to reach them, get them vaccinated. If we're going to reach them, keep them away from the dangers in our streets, it begins by actually listening to what's going on in their lives. Hearing them, respecting them, working with them. We don't get to just talk at them, preach to them. It begins with listening to them. We wanted you to hear from these two wonderful young leaders who are going out there and convincing other young people to get vaccinated. Let's thank them.

[Applause]

There's this other guy they put on the program. I don't know him, but he was quite articulate, I thought. I really have to tell you, Dante, one day he just called and said, I want to help. You know, we all cherish those moments when someone says, what can I do? I want to help.

[Applause]

I said, okay, you're going to stand on sweaty street corner and convinced surly New Yorkers to do something they don't want to do, good luck with that. But as he said, it really isn't that people don't want to, it's that people need a conversation. People need a real conversation. And I say about New Yorkers, I love our people, everyone here in this room loves our people, you do the work of love every day, listening hearts and kindness. But one thing I think we can all agree on is 8.5 million people here, and I like to say, when I go around the country, I say I represent 8.5 million highly opinionated people. Right? Have you ever met a single New York who didn't have a strong opinion on pretty much everything? I have not. I have not. So, when Dante is out there with his colleagues, they're doing the most powerful thing, let people – let them have their opinions, let them have their fears and their conspiracy theories, and then answer it, nurture, communicate, work together, and you would be amazed how much things start to change. I'll tell you my own story that we were at 125th and Lexington, this is a few months ago, when hesitancy

levels were higher and there was a table, our Test and Trace Corps, and our vaccinators, our public engagement unit, they were all out there on the corner. Let's give them a round of applause.

[Applause]

And you just talking about, here you are on a street corner in the middle of the day, busy street corner in New York City, what you see is what you get. You don't know who's coming up to you, what their opinions going to be, what they need, what they think, but let's just have the conversation, and what happened time after time was, I would engage people, and it was not that they thought the vaccine was bad or wrong. It's that they had not had the conversation yet. And so, I talked to them, and I'd bring one of the health care folks over, and if they had questions, we answered the questions and then it came down to something we can all relate to. New Yorkers are really, really busy. So, eventually a lot of folks who say, okay, I'll do it, but like, how do I do it? And we say right here, sign up right here, right now. This person's going to talk to you right now and sign you up, because one thing we know as New Yorkers, you better start talking fast the minute someone says yes, right? But it worked. And once someone's signed up, we're in business, we're going to be able to keep them safe. So, I want to emphasize that because I experienced what Dante experienced, have the conversation, show your love and your passion for your fellow New Yorker, for your fellow human, and now we're starting to get somewhere, but we have to do it over and over and over again. So, I want to give credit where credit is due for this gathering, someone I have turned to many times and I listened to every time, Pastor Mike Walrond.

[Applause]

Another person who called up and said, I want to do more. And it's not like he doesn't do a whole lot already. He said, I want to do more. We got to break through. We got to reach more young people in vaccination. We got address the other challenges we're seeing, the violence in our streets. I want to do more. I need everyone to do more. All the people who serve us in the faith community. And we talked about it, we said it's time to gather people in common cause. And pastor, thank you, so many times you've led the way, and I want to thank you. You had one of the first faith-based vaccination efforts as First Corinthian and the energy in your beautiful building, that very special place you've created, the energy of people coming to a place where they knew they'd be trusted, nurtured, respected, and they trusted you, and all your colleagues and people were ready because it was the right place with the right people who they could believe in. And folks said to me, this is the time I'm ready to get vaccinated, because we're here at First Corinthian. Let's thank Pastor Mike for that incredible effort.

[Applause]

One more story. I love this story. Two sisters and they were into their sixties, and they went together to get vaccinated, and I went, you know, all around asking people what motivated you to get vaccinated, why are you ready? And they said, our mother told us we had to. I said, how old is your mom? And they said 86. And I said, well, okay, to the moms of the world, it never stops working. Okay. Let's thank all the moms because they often lead the way.

[Applause]

So, it is that human element, but we all need to do more now, because look, it's amazing. Well over nine million vaccinations, more than half the total population of the city now vaccinated, but we've got more on. That's amazing. Congratulations to everyone who's been a part of it.

So, we're over nine million vaccinations. I want to get us to 10 million vaccinations and further and further. We need to go further. We need to go faster. I want to thank everyone who's been a part of this. Every one of you who's here, everyone out there has helped us in the faith community, I want to thank all the members of my administration here who have been working nonstop since March of 2020. I wanted you to hear that again, nonstop in many cases with variably no time off since March of 2020, let's thank them.

[Applause]

And also, this is a pretty cool place for our gathering. Let's thank everyone to Harbor NYC for having us in this beautiful space.

[Applause]

But here's the deal. So, we've reached so many people, but now the challenge is deeper for two reasons. One, the folks who were most ready, they've already been vaccinated. Now we're talking about a lot of folks who either it's just about, we need that last conversation, maybe there's some hesitancy we can answer, some facts we can make clear, but it's going to take extra effort. But it's person by person. I am – forgive the phrase – preaching to the converted here. Your shepherds, every one of you, you know how to work one by one by one and spread faith. We need to find the next person who's going to get vaccinated today, and then the next person after that, and the next person after that, and do that thousands and thousands and thousands of times. That's what protects us, and if you need some extra motivation, just read a little bit about this Delta variant. Dr. Easterling will, to coin a phrase, put the fear of God in all of us when he speaks. The Delta variant is not to be underestimated and it is causing real problems in other parts of the world. The reason we're doing as well as we are doing is because we keep vaccinating constantly, but we got to keep that momentum up. So, this is a call to arms. Everyone I need to ask of you to go to maximum in your vaccination efforts, tell us what you need, our whole team will be following up, whatever you need. If it's time to do a special effort at a house of worship, to do a pop-up site, to do a van, to do a bus, we'll get it there. If it's time to do a gathering, to encourage people, we'll do it. Whatever it takes, especially in communities that are still vaccinated at too low rate. But this is everybody's business now, and throughout our eight years, when there's a challenge, when there's a crisis, we believe, I believe, Chirlane believes, we believe we cannot solve the problems of New York City without calling the faith community into the solution. We need you.

[Applause]

But the other challenge, and Pastor Mike and I spoke about this as well, what an evil trickster COVID is, a new disease that confused us at every turn, challenged us, took so many of us, our loved ones taken away, but then unhinged our society in so many ways. Work was lost. A million people almost lost their jobs. Schools closed. Houses of worship closed. People say to me, what happened? Why did we see more crime? Why did we see more violence? I said, because everything disconnected like we've never experienced in our lives, and we're all in the process of gluing it back together, and we are getting there more every day, but we're not there yet. And too much of that negative energy got unleashed, and there's still a lot of pain and trauma on top of all of the pain and trauma from the years before, and there's too many guns and we all need to intervene. We need to do a city-wide intervention. So, we are providing more and more resources to the Cure Violence Movement and the Crisis Management System because community-based solutions to violence are necessary. You cannot just police your way out of the problem, we need community-based solutions.

[Applause]

And the NYPD announced last week something very powerful, and bluntly something that showed real evolution. The Kid's First Plan of the NYPD was a recognition by those in uniform that the best work they can do is to work with the community, to work with families, to help young people before there even is a problem, or the young person is struggling and maybe trending in the wrong direction, that's when to intervene, do not arrest or imprison when you can intervene well before that point and get that child on a better path.

[Applause]

Now, again, I appreciate the many good things about the NYPD. I appreciate many changes we've made, and I am the first to say, we've got a lot more to do, but this is a signature moment when people in uniform say, wait a minute, we to rethink this. If we're not about prevention and proactivity, then we're not doing our job. So, it's an important moment, but it will not take full effect without all of you. The only way we reach young people again, fully the way we need to, is with the faith community.

[Applause]

And I want to emphasize, again, the power of one. One young person in your congregation, in your neighborhood, one parent or aunt or uncle or grandparents who comes to you and says, I'm worried about a child in my life, I'm worried about the direction they're taking, we need to intervene right that moment, with everything we got. We've

got schools more than ever working to address the trauma, and all of that is due to our First Lady, let's thank Chirlane for all she has done to make social-emotional education the core of what we do. Every child, I want you to hear this, every child who goes to school in September in our public schools will get a mental health screening for the first time in history to address what they need from the very beginning of the school year. Thank you to our First Lady, but we need to be interventionists. Everyone here, everyone out there watching, everyone you influence, we're going to win the battle against violence one young person at a time, while we do the big structural changes too. We're going to win the battle against COVID one young person at the time, while we waged the bigger efforts at public health. We need to do this work with passion and urgency, because we're actually turning the corner, and wouldn't it be wrong just as we can taste victory to lighten up and let go and see the violence and the disease come back into our lives. We cannot let that happen. So, it's a call to arms, every single one of you, we need you, are you ready? Are you ready to be part of this effort to save this city? To bring back this city, to take us where we need to go?

[Applause]

Well, we need you. Last thing I'm going to say, a clergy member last year, in one of those tough moments we went through, said to me with pain in his voice, and it was very honest. He was feeling very down about everything we've been through, and he said with a certain fear in his voice as well, Mr. Mayor, do you ever think New York City will regain its past glory? I thought about it, and I wanted to answer with respect and kindness, but I thought there was something that had to be said. So, I said, Reverend, with all respect, I think that's the wrong question. I think the question is when will New York City reach its greater glory? What is the next step forward to get even farther than where we were before? Not to believe we had some beautiful wonderland because we didn't. We had a lot of great things and a lot of problems too, but to believe the next step is to go farther, to go someplace better, which bluntly is the essence of the New York history and the persona, who we are is to always believe we could do something more. That's just the DNA. That's what makes us great.

So, we need to win this battle and then go to a place of justice and community that we've never been to before, and I believe with all of you, we can do it. And now I have a great pleasure to introduce someone who has been an outstanding leader because we understood early on that to fight COVID it took a constant conversation with communities, and it took a voice that people could believe in and trust. He is a great doctor. He is a great communicator. He is a great strategist. He does not need this box to stand on. No, sir, he does not. He is our First Deputy Health Commissioner, Dr. Torian Easterling.

[Applause]

**First Deputy Commissioner Torian Easterling, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene:** Thank you so much to our Mayor, Bill de Blasio, our First Lady, Chirlane McCray, It is such a pleasure to be joining you all this afternoon. I do not need this box. I can see you all clearly. Can you hear me? All right. That's awesome. I'm reminded, just before this event actually, that just a year ago, a year ago at this same time, I was asked by then-Commissioner [inaudible] and then Executive Director of the Center for Family – for Faith and Community Partnerships, Reverend Atchison, to have a talk with faith leaders. Many of the faces are in here today, and we talked about COVID-19. And now I'm reminded of what the imam just talked about – hope – because I had hoped that we would be here, and we're here and we're having a conversation.

[Applause]

And so, although I do have some bad news, I wanted to at least start off from this position of hope, because we have turned the corner. We do have an opportunity to do more, and we are asking you to do more and you have done so much. Some of the people in this room, I've had one-on-one conversations with. I've talked to your congregation. I've spoken to the pastors and ministers, and I've heard the concern in your voices. I've heard the despair in the conversations that you had with your parishioners about having to deliver bad news, and so I think this is important to just be able to reflect on the moment that we're in, and I'm thankful that I get to see all of you in person, shake hands with you. Look you eye and eye, and nothing is separating us. And so, with that, I do want to talk about the collective work that we have to do going forward, the collective work that we have to continue going forward. And so, June 30th of last year we held a town hall, and one of the main questions that I remember receiving, on top of tell me more about COVID-19 – who is most at risk, what can I do to protect my house of worship? And so, we made a



decision to look at the data and to really focus on a neighborhood and bring our resources, and so we brought testing, we brought physicians, we brought social workers to their neighborhood. We worked with the Masjid Adams right there in Tremont. We worked with St. Simon Stock Church as well, to make sure that we could bring those resources, and we carry that same spirit into our vaccination efforts, and we're asking now that we carry that same effort as we continue to promote and protect the health of our young folks. Because as you've already heard that we really have to make sure that our young folks are protected.

And so, you've already heard sort of the broad number, over nine million doses have already been administered in this city. That is a huge achievement. We have more than 50 percent of New Yorkers, not just adults, but more than 50 percent of New Yorkers who are fully vaccinated. That is also a milestone, and we have ways to go, but COVID did something else for us. It didn't just put the fear of God in us, but it also exposed the inequities that we've known have been in this country for far too long, and so if we are to do the work that we need to do, and I want to thank our Mayor and our First Lady for always grounding us and keeping equity front and center, because we need to do it going forward. Because as we look at the data and we saw the inequities around COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations and deaths, we see those same inequities bearing out in our vaccination rates.

We see it in Brownsville. We see it in the South Bronx and Upper Manhattan as well, parts of Staten Island. In every borough, there are neighborhoods that need our focused attention, and many of you represent those neighborhoods. So, when I look at data from parts of Central Brooklyn or Southern Brooklyn, when I look at our data, when I talk about Northern Bronx or South Bronx, those vaccination rates do not match what we see in the city, and so as I talk about the over 9 million doses, as we talk about the over 50 percent, and in some neighborhoods, 60 percent of those neighborhoods have reached full vaccination rates, but we cannot say the same for all of our neighborhoods. We want to make sure that we're promoting and protecting the health of all New Yorkers. In order to do that. We have to bear all of our resources together, collectively.

And so, the work that we did in the South Bronx in Tremont, there were Pastor Michael for St. Simon Stock Church and the imam there at Masjid Adams, to really marshal all of our resources, made sure that we tested our way out of higher rates of cases and hospitalizations to protect that neighborhood. That's the work that we are doing now around our vaccination efforts. And so, in January I joined the Mayor and the First Lady, and we had an interfaith dialogue about the vaccine, and of course the question was, what more can I do? And so that question keeps coming up, and so we're here to talk about what more can we do? How can we really ensure that we can protect our young folks first and foremost? The important part of what we know right now is that COVID-19 is still a risk. As you've already heard from the Mayor, we're now dealing with other variants. Last week, we were dealing with the Delta variant that represented only five percent of the total cases in New York City. As of now, we're at 25 percent. Let me just say that again. All the cases that are in New York City, that represents the total cases of COVID-19, and if you will remember, when someone is a case, they're at risk of severe hospitalization, and they're at risk of death. We want to prevent that. We want to prevent that, and so right now, 25 percent of all the cases in New York City are the Delta variant. Now, the dominant variant is still the Alpha variant. That variant that was first found in the UK. So, we're looking at all of the variants, but as we continue to see the increase in the concern with the Delta variant, more now than ever, we have to get this message out.

And also, as we look at the Delta variant in the cases that are represented in New York City, who are the people that are most at risk for the Delta variant now? Young people. We are now seeing young adults representing most of the cases that are reflecting the Delta variant, and so that's why we're here today. We want to make sure that you have all of the facts, you have all of the information so, you can now take this call to action, as you heard from the Mayor, and now we stepped in and making sure that we are armed so that we can get this information out.

So, you have the information. What do we have to do? Well, I'm speaking to the choir here, we're vaccinated – folks who have their masks off, and so now you know that you can rejoice and now having some normality. You can now have your mask off if you're vaccinated – fully vaccinated, just to be clear. So that means two weeks after your second dose for both of the MRNA vaccines, two weeks after the one dose for Johnson & Johnson, just to be clear, all right? And now you can – you do not have to practice social distancing, and those are just – that's just an opportunity to really encourage people to come back. As you heard from our young folks today, getting back to some type of normality. So, one, we need to make sure that folks are vaccinated. We need to ensure that they have the right information. We have three safe and effective vaccines that are available, but when we're talking about the

young folks, right now, our Pfizer vaccine has been approved for individuals 12 and older, and so we need to just make sure that we armed with that information, and we can carry that information into our conversations.

Now, as a family doctor, I have seen children far and wide, in New York City, and I've seen them in other countries as a practicing physician. And I know how important it is that we carry that message not only to the children, but to the parents. And so, what I'm asking you as faith leaders is having smaller groups with parents to really make sure that they have the information as well, because we do not want our parents to block the opportunity for our young folks to get vaccinated, and so this is, there's a lot of information that we've been sharing. We have now created our COVID-19 youth vaccine presentation, and we've been doing this for thousands of houses of worship already, and we're ready to do more, and I want to thank you for all of the town halls that we've already done. All of the presentations that we've done, the pop-up clinics that we've hosted at many of your houses of worship, but when we want to make sure that we're getting to our young folks and part of that is really making sure that we're engaging both our practicing providers and our parents as well, because they're going to be the key to really carrying that message forward and ensuring that we're connecting to our young folks, and so to all of the youth ministers, to all of the groups the summer camps and you know, I'm a product of vacation Bible school, and so a vacation Bible school is scheduled for next month. We need to be having conversations – please invite me. I know I'm too old for vacation Bible school, but I'm willing to come back, just let me know, just let me know, and I'll be there.

[Applause]

There you go, alright.

So it's really important that we're getting the messages out about the vaccines. The next thing that we need to make sure that we're doing, as I talked about at the beginning of this, is that we got to think about our collective action, because we have, we still have work to do, and the Mayor's already talked about it. We have to think about what our just recovery looks like. We still have work to do in our communities.

We talked about how COVID-19 has exposed these inequities, and these inequities have been longstanding, and so we have to continue the conversation of how we're ensuring, as you heard from the First Lady, that we are providing and accessing mental health resources all across our communities. We have seen how COVID-19 has amplified anxiety and stress and PTSD in our communities. We have seen how gun violence has continued to go up in New York City. We have seen, we've been able to address food insecurity, but we know that housing instability is still an issue, and so what the vaccine also allows us to do is to re-shift our focus back to this just recovery, and so I'm going to take my seat and I'm going to ask Pastor Monrose to come up next, to talk about the great work that he's doing to address anti-gun violence in our communities. Because I do think that that is part of our call as well as we continue to push and make sure that our children are vaccinated. We also want to make sure that they are covered in other ways as well. So, I thank you for the time to share my information and thank you so much for being here.

[Applause]

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