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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 again everyone and before we bring on Mayor de Blasio for our weekly Ask the Mayor segment, I want to acknowledge the turn of the calendar out of April to the month of May. We knew going into April that it would be one of the most horrific months in the history of New York City, with the number of coronavirus cases spiking, which meant the number of deaths would inevitably spike thereafter. And it happened. From April 3rd through April 19th more than 500 people a day died from the virus in the city according to the official count. On six straight days in the middle of that, more than 700 people died. That has continued to decline but is nowhere close to zero. I thought we would take stock of the stats a little bit as we move into May. On the last two days of the month, the death toll was down to around 300 but we should not breathe a sigh of relief when 300 people every day are dying from a disease that didn't exist until recently. 300 people is the total number murdered in New York City in a full year and more than the number who die from car crashes in a full year. And we know that we put so much public attention onto reducing those stats. We also know that black and brown and poor and working class people have died at such higher rates than white or better off people, twice the rate according to preliminary data that's been reported. So thank goodness April is over, but what will happen in May and June and thereafter in the city, that remains highly uncertain.

And with that we began our weekly Ask The Mayor segment, my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio. Our phones are open at 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0, 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: Thank you Brian. I want to thank you for the way you just laid that out to all New Yorkers. I think you said it exactly right. I want to say thank God it is May. You know, I see hope in the month of May and March and April were just extraordinarily tough. So I really think you put it all together right there and now we all got a lot of work to do to make May a much better month.

Lehrer: Thank you. And I talked about the death toll, which is what the data people call a lagging indicator because it takes a few weeks, usually before people who die from the virus do so. We know that. But I want to get your take on a number that reflects the present. And that is the number of new confirmed cases, which is still in the thousands per day, almost 5,000 statewide on Wednesday, if I saw that stat, right. Most of those in the city and the shape of that curve is sloping downward but not as steeply as it went up. So in theory with all the social

distancing that we're doing, new cases should be petering out by now on paper. Why are there still thousands a day?

Mayor: Well, look, it's such a central question and what I'd say first of all is, for people to understand that we only have a partial picture of what's really happening to all 8.6 million of us because we have been starved of testing from day one. And this is really just the essence of this history. So when you see those numbers you indicate, that's based on still very little testing compared to what we would like to see. And so it gives us some of the truth, but not all of the truth. The fact is that we haven't been able to do until now and we're starting now finally to get to the place where we can do the aggressive, kind of fight back, which is widespread testing. And then quarantining people and providing them support a course to really start to address this disease at the root, if you will. To date, you know, it's been unfortunately in so many ways it's had to be a more reactive reality of the disease spreading with no way to properly trace its progress. And having to defend our hospitals at all costs to save lives. That's what March was all about and so much of April. As we've come out of that because social distancing and shelter-in-place have been working on questionably, even though I understand your question is sort of like why hasn't that worked even more? I do want to emphasize glass is more than half full Brian. How far we have traveled in just a matter of weeks is unquestionably because of effective social dismissing or shelter-in-place. And New Yorkers have been outstanding at that and we need them to stick with it. But the new phase of heavy testing and tracing and quarantine is where you sort of go on the offensive rather than being back on our heels. We get to sort of turn the tables on the disease if you will, and go on the offensive. We have some of the testing capacity we need. Nowhere near the amount we need. That still requires federal intervention to get us there. But we do have a lot of hotel rooms. We do have more and more personnel, medical personnel who can be a part of the testing freeing up, more and more PPEs coming in. So it is a moment where we are going to get to change the situation. I would say folks have to realize they have to stick with it, with the social distancing and the current rules to allow that strong testing and tracing program to really come to bear. And that's actually going to be the gateway to finally at one point seeing much, much reduced numbers and then some loosening up in the rules.

Lehrer: And I'd say as we reinforce the message that it's not time to ease the social distancing. I would throw in that we should probably warn the listeners and maybe the media should incorporate this in every weather forecast, that there's a dangerous weekend ahead because it's supposed to be sunny and 70 degrees tomorrow. And then 70 again on Sunday. Would a dangerous weekend ahead be too strong language for you?

Mayor: No, it's exactly the right language. And Brian, I thank you for that as well. It's so counterintuitive and painful in a way that, you know, we all wait for this time of year and we cherish it. And yet, yeah, ironically the nice weather is very much a threat to us. Not if we all handle it right. You know, there's nothing wrong with going out and getting some exercise and getting back home. Having the windows open at home to enjoy the fresh air. That's all great. That the temptation is the problem that folks are going to start to feel that they want to spend more and more time outside. They want to play sports. They want to gather with other people. We can't let that happen. So yeah, there is a danger here. And look, it's hard to think about. But I do think one thing that's been amazing is New Yorkers have been so participatory in fighting back this disease. Everyone in your own life, you know, you need to send a message to your own

family, your friends, your neighbors that you know, go out for a little bit, but don't go out for too much. Don't gather, don't try and do the things we would normally do on a beautiful spring day.

And people have to be kind of assertive with each other. They see people [inaudible] have to remind each other to wear the face coverings. And we are going to have a lot of enforcement out. We are going to have a very strong NYPD presence all over the city and a bunch of other agencies that can do enforcement. And Brian look, the goal here is not to give anyone a summons and not to arrest anyone. But I've made very clear this week, gatherings in particular, anything where people are gathered together, particularly in larger numbers, there's going to be one chance. If the police are walking up and that gathering doesn't immediately scatter before the police get there and never come back. If they in any way attempt to maintain a gathering, everyone involved will be summonsed. And I don't like saying that Brian. I really don't, but this is where we are right now. [Inaudible] resist, you know [inaudible] there will be arrests and we really don't want to see that happen.

Lehrer: Beth in Lower Manhattan, I think on this point. You're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi Beth.

Question: Yes, thank you Brian. Thank you Mayor. I live in Battery Park City and I'm afraid to go outside down here. I have sent in photos and notes to 3-1-1, thanks to the Mayor's recommendation. Yesterday when the hospital ship sailed out, there was a crowd down here. There were at least four police. And right near them people not distancing, not wearing masks. And I asked the police, what are you empowered to do about it? And they said nothing. They said, please ask the Mayor to empower us to do something. So there seems to be a disconnect between what you just said Mayor de Blasio and the police understand. I have also called the police precinct patrol down here. The Battery Park City Commander. I've written to the Governor, I've written to you and I called the Road Runners Club. I have not seen enough people wearing masks and distancing down here and it's only going to get worse as the weather improves.

Lehrer: Mr. Mayor?

Mayor: Thank you Beth. I really appreciate the point you're making and I really appreciate that you went up to the police and asked the question. And I don't know who those officers are, but they need to get the memo that -- you know, the Commissioner spoke very passionately this week about the fact that first of all, let's start with the worst of all things, which is gatherings. No tolerance for gatherings. We're going straight to summons. And again, if someone resists the summons, we're going to arrest. And I don't like saying it, but that's what we're doing. And every police officer in New York City should feel very clearly empowered and all the other enforcement agencies that we're sending out. Period -- on the gatherings. On the social distancing of individuals, face coverings of individuals. Look, our goal here is to just get people to do it. So in that instance, if you see someone who's, you know, getting too close to other people and you say to them, hey, back off. Or someone has a face covering and they're not wearing it, put it on. I'm not interested in giving a summons if it's not needed. If people just do what they are asked to do. If they're not doing it, of course they can be summoned. So I want it to be very, very clear that we're escalating now because we have to. This is about saving lives and about beating back

this disease. I will call Commissioner Shea today to make sure he sends out yet another formal instruction to the men and women of the NYPD that they can use their discretion. This is, you know, we train our officers more than ever now and we treat them as professionals and they are lifesaving professionals. That's what they do. And they use their judgment. But in this instance they have to feel empowered that if their instructions are not being followed, summonses has to be the go-to now. And so we will use that aggressively.

Lehrer: As a follow up on the intentional public gatherings. I think most of our listeners know of the story in the news this week about the large public funeral for a Hasidic rabbi in Brooklyn on Tuesday in Williamsburg. There was another one yesterday, 150 people reportedly close together and Borough Park for another rabbi who passed away. But Gothamist reports that while the NYPD broke it up on Tuesday, according to Hasidic community leaders, the NYPD actually approved and helped coordinate the Tuesday procession. So is the police department enabling these events with special treatment and then having to break them up because they were too accommodating in the first place?

Mayor: So let's separate the two examples because I don't know in the way you asked the question, I'm not sure your listeners will hear the differences between the two. Clearly all around what happened on Tuesday was wrong. And by the way, to be fair to the leaders of the synagogue involved, they put out a letter the next morning apologizing and saying that they took full responsibility for what happened in Williamsburg. And that it should never have happened. We understand mourning is a very, very difficult reality. And they lost a revered rabbi. And I do feel for anyone in mourning, not being able to express it in this time is very difficult. But it was a clear violation of everything we said and it endangered the lives of members of that community. And I want to say I appreciate when community leaders come forward and take responsibility and say they were at fault and they will not let it happen again.

But I think what's clear here is the NYPD, while trying to be respectful of the community, certainly trying to be respectful of people's faith and the process of mourning. I get that that's a lot to try and balance. NYPD has to be abundantly clear, there's no accommodation, there's no acceptance, there's no tolerance of any gathering of any kind. So that needed to be done better on Tuesday all around. What we saw yesterday, I don't have all the details, but my understanding from Borough Park is as soon as the NYPD precinct heard there was something happening, they made very clear they would not tolerate it, and if anyone showed up, they'd be turned back and that, that gathering was disrupted immediately and that's going to be the model going forward.

Lehrer: Did the police department make that original Tuesday plan with or without your knowledge?

Mayor: Oh, I don't – first of all, the notion of 'plan' I think is a little generous here. I think there is – this was not well handled by anyone, you know, in the community and the precinct by anyone because there was obviously miscommunication and assumptions all around, when what should have been clear from the very beginning was no gatherings of any kind, even the slightest attempt to gather will be met immediately and turned back. But no, I heard about it somewhere between 6:30 and 7:00 pm, that something was brewing and it sounded entirely wrong. And I called the Commissioner immediately and then when I heard the details, I went there right away because I thought it was absolutely unacceptable.

Lehrer: Right. And you did go there yourself. We'll continue in a minute with Mayor de Blasio, more of your calls on our weekly Ask the Mayor segment, stay with us.

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Lehrer: Brian Lehrer on WNYC, with our weekly Ask the Mayor segment my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio at 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0 or tweet a question. Just use the hashtag, #AsktheMayor – and Vicky in Manhattan, you're on WNYC – hello, Vicky.

Question: Hello. Thank you so much, Brian. Hello, Mr. Mayor. Good morning. I'm calling on behalf of a neighbor of mine in Tudor City. Her name is Danno. The Housing Preservation and Development courts have been suspended because of the virus. And her trial was just on the edge of being heard. She had a flood in her apartment in September and between the managing agent and the landlady, she hasn't been able to have the problem addressed. Sorry, I'm a little nervous. And she's been staying at the Y and in hotel rooms and now hotels are closed and she's kind of falling between the cracks, and as of today will be homeless. I'm calling to ask if the Mayor can take her number and if someone in his office can help address her problem.

Mayor: Yeah. Vicky, first of all, thank you for looking out for her. I really appreciate that. There's been a lot of really great examples of New Yorkers showing compassion and looking out for each other in this crisis. And you're giving a really good example to the people right now of that, so thank you. Please give your information to WNYC. Our team will follow up with you immediately or with Danno directly, whatever you think makes more sense. We can certainly make sure she has a place to stay immediately. And if the landlord has not fulfilled their responsibilities, that's something that goes beyond just the question of the crisis and whether courts are open. If the landlord has not addressed a condition and someone can't live in their apartment, our Housing Department, HPD, is able to step in, in many cases at least. So, let's see how we can immediately get her someplace safe and then see if we can solve the underlying problem. And share your information to my folks. We'll follow up right away.

Lehrer: Vicky, we'll take your contact off the air. Just stay there and we'll put you on hold. Ivy in Brooklyn, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Ivy.

Question: Hello. Thanks for taking my call to you both. I'm calling because I am a small business owner. I own a bar called Leyenda in Brooklyn, in Carroll Gardens. We have been closed now for six weeks. We have only income coming in from some contactless cocktail delivery that we were able to do. But I want to know, Mayor, what you plan on doing to help businesses like mine. Just according to a report that you did in 2018, the food services industry employs more than 141,000 people, delivering \$4.2 billion in wages and \$12 billion in direct economic output. I want to know what is going to be happening with the rent abatement, if there'll be any sort of tax relief because we are uniquely vulnerable. We've been talking about gathering on this call so far this morning. My business makes money off of gathering, gathering people together, and I'm not alone. We are the – small businesses like mine that employ less than 40 people are the social fabric of our city and we were already in danger of having every corner turned into a Duane Reade or Starbucks. And I'm worried that we will continue to go that way. So, I'd like to hear your thoughts.

I'd also like to talk – to invite you to talk to the coalition I am part of, I'm part of New York Hospitality Coalition. I'd like to invite you to speak to us in our group – and thank you. I can take my call off the air.

Lehrer: Ivy, thank you very much. Mr. Mayor?

Mayor: Thank you, Ivy. Ivy, please share your information with WNYC. I'd certainly be happy to speak to your coalition. So, if you'll give your information our team will follow up with you today and we'll figure out a time to remotely gather together, as with all conversations nowadays. But certainly, happy to – I want to hear from you and everyone else what's going on. Look, I think your basic thesis is exactly right and Carroll Gardens is obviously the community I've represented in the City Council and feel very close to and, you know, the kind of business that you own is the backbone of the city unquestionably every way emotionally, culturally, in terms of the identity of the city, in terms of what makes neighborhoods great, in terms of employment, you name it. So, we have to find a way to bring you back. You know that you're dealing with – I think you indicated it – one of the most sensitive elements of life in the city and our economy in this kind of crisis, which is when do we bring back people in sort of really close quarters like a bar. How do we do that? There's a lot of ideas out there. We haven't solidified anything yet. But as we start to normalize, you know, can bars operate with limited capacity, can they have different ways with restaurants, for example? Can restaurants do more outdoor seating? There's a lot of ideas out there that we're working on right now and we want to work with people in the industry to sort through. So, would love to hear your thoughts and the coalition.

On the relief we can provide – so the City provided about \$50 million immediately when this started in loans and grants to small businesses then, excuse me, our just massive budget crisis started and that is unfortunately only getting worse right now. We've been pushing the federal government to keep adding money to the Paycheck Protection Program. They did add \$310 billion and we're trying to help New York City's small businesses get full access to that. And as you know, loans but in many cases, forgivable loans, so, they turn into grants. A reminder to all small businesses, you need to apply immediately to get in line for those at SBA, Small Business Administration, [sba.gov](https://www.sba.gov), and anyone who needs help with the application can call 3-1-1. That's where the real money is right now to keep people afloat and we need New York City's businesses to maximally apply for that.

On your bigger issues, you're asking about what we should do going forward. I'll have more to say on that soon on other ways we can help small businesses to get through to the point where we can really start reopening, which obviously is a few months away at minimum. So, I know the job-one right now is to get people to maximize those federal dollars. I'll say more going forward on anything that the City can do and the State can do to help people

Lehrer: And Ivy may be interested or other people in your coalition that we're going to be doing a restaurant specific segment on Monday's show probably around 10:30 on Monday morning – what restaurants can do right now, what it will or could look like when reopening time comes at different levels in different places starting whenever it's appropriate to start or various places in our area. So that'll be Monday in case you're interested. Here's a question via Twitter, Mr.

Mayor. A listener asks, “What does the Mayor think of the presidential primary being canceled in New York State while local elections are not canceled in that June primary?”

Mayor: Yeah, look, I will start with the most important identifier, which is, you know, I was a very strong, proud supporter of Bernie Sanders and, you know, really passionately believed in what he would have been able to do as president. But, you know, I think he made a choice, understandably based on the facts, to step out of the race and support Joe Biden. And I think at that moment it was clear that the notion of a primary was in many ways moot. In the context of this city where we're going through hell right now, we do not want to see people gathering and we have to conserve all energy we can for fighting this battle. I think the decision made sense. I would separate that fully from the question of the work that still needs to be done to make the Democratic Party more progressive and make the rules of the party more progressive, and a lot of other things that have to happen going forward. But in this context of crisis, I think it was an understandable decision.

Lehrer: We're going to run out of time pretty soon. And there are so many more serious things going on than we can reasonably get to in our available time. Obviously, this is not your only media outlet. I think it's really good that you're doing news conferences basically every day. But let me touch on a couple here in brief that really deserve longer treatment. But this is the situation we're in – one is, the hospital system may have not gone into official overload, but it looks like the funeral home system has, with reports of bodies piling up in trucks outside some funeral homes at least. Is it merely a function of overload or are some people doing something wrong?

Mayor: I think some people are doing something wrong. I mean – look, most funeral homes kept working through this. They did extraordinary work. They comforted families. We worked very closely. Funeral homes are regulated by the State of New York, but the City works in this kind of crisis, of course, with them and our Office of the Medical Examiner, Health Department, and we've tried to support the funeral homes in a variety of ways. Vast majority of them have done their job and done it very well. A few of them, I think, have been really negligent and one particularly horrible case we heard about in Brooklyn – it's just unconscionable. And if they needed help, they should have asked for it. So, I do not see a situation where most of the funeral homes aren't doing their job. I think they are doing their job, but I think it's imperative – and we're going to – it was a good idea from Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams – to form a sort of council or committee to make sure the funeral homes were talking regularly with the City government and others on anything they need. We're going to do that. But what I've seen, Brian, that particularly horrible case was abhorrent.

Lehrer: And today is the day by which you promise to have iPads to every New York City public school student who did not have the equipment for online learning, it is kind of amazing that we're six weeks into this now and there are still some kids without the equipment to do the online schooling. As we talked this morning, can you declare mission accomplished?

Mayor: Yes, with an asterisk that's actually not a bad asterisk, but something that, you know, you and your listeners can help us with, which is there's still some kids who have not asked for one who we think need one, and we've got to identify them. So, here's the bottom line. The day that I announced the schools would close I was clear, the Chancellor was clear that we knew that

the digital divide is a horrible, painful reality in this city and this nation. And we knew one of the really bad effects of shutting down schools would be a lot of kids would not be able to immediately take advantage of the distance learning. And, of course, we had to set up the online learning from scratch to begin with, which was a herculean task. And our educators did an amazing job, but we knew, we just knew there would be hundreds of thousands of kids who did not have either devices or the internet service or both.

And we didn't have them in stock. We did not have them sitting around. So, what's happened in these weeks was getting the actual devices in and then getting them to the kids. And it's actually been a very, very systematic effort. So, I know we are now over a quarter million kids, over 250,000, have received their iPads. I know there are extras left over waiting to find kids who have not yet asked for them. Any family that needs one can just call t3-1-1. Just a simple, you know, quick questionnaire they fill out and if they qualify it's, again, very simple to qualify, the iPad is delivered to them. So, mission accomplished, in the sense that every name that the DOE had, they did deliver to on time, and it was over a quarter-million kids. But if there's anyone else who still doesn't have one, if you know of anyone in your life, anyone listening, a kid who does not have access to the internet does not have access to a device, we can – one of our public school kids – we can get it to them right away.

Lehrer: And last question, summer camps and beaches, partial openings this summer or none at all, can you say on May 1st?

Mayor: Well, I can certainly say there's no plan for any summer camps in terms of anything that the city funds, it's like the very sad reality we're experiencing with our other youth programs, our youth centers, and youth employment. You know, we just are not in a position to – first of all, we cannot predict at all when anyone can gather. And second, we just don't have the money. We have been hemorrhaging money in this crisis and the whole ballgame of what the City is going to look like going forward is going to be decided in a matter of days in Washington. And I'm going to be sounding the alarm here. You know, the House of Representatives right now is drawing up the stimulus bill. If that bill focuses on where the impact of COVID-19 was greatest, and if it's a bill that's based on the justice of serving communities that were hurt the most, then New York City can be made whole and we can move forward.

If that bill creates a formula that does not focus on the needs of cities and localities as well as states in terms of what COVID-19 did to them. Then we're going to be talking about huge budget cuts. So, the pressure needs to be on everyone in Washington. They're responsible now. They're either going to help New York City back on our feet or they're not. And we need to see results. But we, that's the youth programs. The beaches are a little bit more of an open question, Brian. Not starting on Memorial Day as we normally would. Maybe – maybe later in the summer we'll be in a position to do something with the beaches, but it's premature to say at this point.

Lehrer: Thanks as always, Mr. Mayor, talk to you next week.

Mayor: Thank you, Brian.

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