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

Brian Lehrer: It's our weekly Ask the Mayor segment, 11:05 am on Fridays. My questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio. Our phone number is 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, since I took the last three summer Fridays, it's been around a month, so, thanks as always and welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Thank you so much, Brian. I hope you got a good chance to rest and relax after all this madness and hope you're feeling good.

Lehrer: Thank you very much. And it certainly is madness. And I want to ask you first, just kind of a how-you're-doing question because such intense times in the city, some of the issues we'll get into with the virus looming and affecting finances, the teacher's union now threatening to strike, and the police union allegedly already engaged in a work slowdown, principals saying don't open my indoor spaces. Restaurant owners saying do open my indoor spaces. The most intense time in so many years. What's it like being mayor right now?

Mayor: Well, I appreciate the question. I think your summary kind of catches a lot of the dynamic now. I'm happy to talk about the police situation because I actually don't agree with that characterization. I think it's worth talking about, I don't think it's a work slowdown, I think of something different. But look, it's really, really tough, but, you know, when I talk – when I think about what I'm experiencing, I really do think about what every-day New Yorkers are experiencing. And I've talked to so many people about their lives, obviously starting with the people who lost members of our family. I mean, I – so many people have been through pain and confusion and frustration and fear. There's just tons of fear out there. So, I try to take that in and not be defeated by it, not be depressed by it. I try – because I think what a leader needs to do is sort of feel what people's lives are, but not be overwhelmed by the real pain, but somehow find us a way forward. I think leaders need to find a path. It's like a classic way of thinking about what we do. Imagine being, like, lost in a forest, you got to find a path out. We're going through something incredibly painful and difficult. And so, what I try to center on is just what's the next positive step, what's the next thing we can do.

And I got to tell you, as bad as it's been, the fact that the health care situation has turned around so profoundly and the fact that people listened and did something, I mean, that actually gives me a lot of energy. It gives me a lot of hope. And I just look at what New Yorkers have done with a real kind of awe. So, it's very painful for all of us. It's very difficult to take it all in as Mayor, but there's also a lot that gives me hope and I owe it to the people of the city to show that path and show there's hope. I think that's one of the most essential parts of what I do.

Lehrer: And it is amazing that the positivity rate for coronavirus tests hit a low of something like one-quarter of one percent –

Mayor: 0.24 percent, that was a few days ago.

Lehrer: Earlier this week. But I want to ask you about the police and what some people are seeing as a work slowdown. And you said you wanted to respond to that. Let me frame a question because for the year, as of this week, the numbers I've seen anyway, citywide, shootings are up 82 percent compared to this point last year, but gun arrests are down eight percent. Union President Pat Lynch recently released a statement saying, “The criminal mob is dictating their terms to the NYPD brass and district attorneys who are tripping over themselves to comply. Police officers want to know, what are we still doing out here, why are our leaders sending out to enforce laws they don't believe in, and what are we supposed to tell the New Yorkers who are watching us retreat while violence overwhelms their streets?” So, among other things he acknowledges in that last line retreating. Are they staging an illegal or immoral NYPD work slowdown?

Lehrer: Oh, Pat Lynch may want that. But the men and women in the NYPD aren't doing it. I mean, look, there is a cancerous reality in this city and we have to acknowledge it. It goes on for decades. You can go back to the 1960s and 70s, you'll find it, in the PBA, particularly. An endless effort to tear down New York City, an endless effort to divide us, an endless effort to create racial division. And it's a thoroughly right-wing reality. We should call it for what it is. The PBA, the leadership, not the members. Members are 35,000 extraordinarily diverse people, majority people of color. I've talked to a lot of police officers of all backgrounds. Many of them don't agree with the union leadership. Many of them don't listen to the union leadership. They make their own decisions and they believe in the work they do. And they go out and do it.

We had cops that went into a burning building in Queens a few days ago to save people. That's not what they do, but they went in without any gear, without any protection to save people. We have cops putting themselves online all the time. Gun arrests are, at this point, almost back to the level they were exactly last year, no matter all the problems that existed with COVID. But the union leadership, Brian, is trying to divide us. And what they have done historically is – and it's not surprising Pat Lynch endorsed Donald Trump this week, this is a right-wing apparatus that's trying to impose its ideology on New York City and on members who don't even agree with it. And it always has been. When I was serving with Mayor Dinkins in the early 90s, exact same reality. But do not mistake the union leadership for the rank-and-file of the NYPD because they're out there doing their job. I know and I've seen when there is something more systematic.

We did see something in the beginning of 2015, and I've talked to our police leadership about this difference. Beginning of 2015, there was something more systematic going on. And the people in the city were very troubled by it. And it quickly changed. This is a different reality because our officers have been through so much, so many were sick with COVID. Then we had the horrible reality, the pain and frustration in communities. We've had the protest calling for social justice, but we've also had violence within those protests, the looting as well. We've had the lack of a functioning court system. There are so many perfect storm dynamics here. This is not what we saw, for example, in the beginning of 2015, but the union would have you believe it's all over for New York City. And that's just a blatant lie.

Lehrer: At the same time, about police discipline, there was a big release yesterday, as you know, of 35 years, I think it is, of police disciplinary records. It showed more than 300,000 civilian complaints. 20,000 of them were substantiated by the Civilian Complaint Review Board. The number of officers fired over the years out of those 20,000 was 12. I'm theorizing that the fact that records were secret until now has something to do with the low number of firings after substantiated complaints. How much would you agree?

Mayor: I do agree, but I want to make sure people understand, first of all, I'm thrilled that we're finally getting transparency, not because of, you know, an individual organization releasing data. That's not what I want to see. What I want is the data being released by the government, which the changes in Albany have finally allowed us to do. And that's something I fought for. And it was a major, major change that came out of this social justice movement. Police disciplinary records should be public. By the way, my last three police commissioners all believed that police disciplinary records should be public. It's good for there to be transparency. Now, a case – a complaint doesn't necessarily mean something's wrong, a complaint, just like any other, due process needs to be heard and investigated and come to a fair conclusion. A substantiated complaint certainly doesn't necessarily mean someone should be fired. It might be something where someone made a mistake. They need more training or some kind of penalty, but not firing. But unquestionably that number of people who have been fired is very, very low. It does not reflect reality –

Lehrer: Well, before we –

Mayor: I've had this conversation. Go ahead.

Lehrer: No, you go ahead.

Mayor: I've had this conversation with the Commissioner and the leadership and the team here at City Hall. We need a system that does a better job before, even, the complaints, identifying officers who should not be on the police force. It's a small number, but there are always at any point, some officers who just shouldn't be on the force. We got to do a better job of proactively finding those officers and removing them. And that's something I want us to do on a policy level quickly. However, vast, vast majority of officers –

Lehrer: What should –

Mayor: One last comment – the vast majority of officers are in it for the right reasons and do the job the right way and everything that we've seen come out doesn't change that reality. The vast majority, I'm absolutely convinced, do their job honorably.

Lehrer: What should the firing policy be in your opinion? Because I see that in the data 20,000 cops currently on the force, if I'm reading this right, had five or more complaints. I'm not sure if that means five substantiated complaints, but in your opinion, should cops who've racked up five or more substantiated CCRB complaints still be on the force?

Mayor: No, no. A hundred percent no and I'll tell you why. First of all, the complaints themselves –

Lehrer: No, what?

Mayor: No, I do not think that should be the standard. I think there has to be a much clearer and more refined standard in that. Complaints come from every-day people who feel something was wrong and sometimes they were right that something was wrong and sometimes it doesn't prove to be true. Complaints come, honestly, from folks who have violated the law and are trying to create trouble for the officer who arrested them. It's a whole range of things that generate complaints [inaudible] –

Lehrer: But that's why I'm asking about substantiated complaints and a policy on a three-strikes, five-strikes only on substantiated –

Mayor: No, because they're substantiated – a substantiated complaint could be on bad language, for example, you know, or someone being rude. That's not enough reason, in my view, to remove someone from the police force. What I'm looking for is folks who, if someone really isn't meant to be a police officer, if in their mentality, particularly in terms of use of force, they're not meant to be a police officer, we need to, like every other profession, have a process for proactively removing them. Or if there are certain substantiated complaints of a high level. And I think, yes, I do believe you can come up with some kind of standard, but not something as bluntly unrefined as if they get fired, no matter what they are, you know, they're out. No, it has to be much more specific than that.

Lehrer: Last question on this, then we're going to go to the phones. Your own Police Commissioner has accrued five misconduct complaints against him over his career. I think the news organization, The City, saw this looking through these records that got released. Only one of them was substantiated. It was for an unlawful stop in the Bronx in 2013. The records, though, show that he wasn't given any other than what they call instruction. What does it say about a police department where an officer can commit misconduct with impunity and then even rise to the rank of commissioner?

Mayor: Well, I think that's an extraordinarily editorial question with all due respect. This is someone – and I know Dermot Shea personally, very, very well. And I wish that people in this city knew him better as a human being, because he is a profound reformer. He's made – been such a crucial part of the reforms and improvements that have been made. Everything we've done, whether it's ending stop-and-frisk, reducing arrests, changing the marijuana policy, you name it, Dermot Shea has been front and center in that. And he's actually moved police discipline cases faster as police commissioner. In the end, if someone who joined the police force in 1991 has one substantiated complaint in their entire career, it may very well be appropriate. That's based on a mistake because we all made mistakes, he needed to be reminded to do things a better way. But no, it's a very tough job.

I mean, I'm telling you what I disagree with profoundly with the leadership of the union. I'll tell you [inaudible] the empathy I feel for the men and women of the NYPD because I've seen their work. It's incredibly tough work and it's very tense work a lot of the time. And it's work that requires you to keep your emotions in check no matter what's being thrown at you. And that's hard. So, I think if someone made one mistake in the course of a career that shows a lot of strength and discipline. But as a commissioner, as a human being, he is committed to improving

this police force. And I've never seen anyone get angrier at the bad apples than Dermot. I mean, I – all my commissioners, Jimmy O'Neill, Bill Bratton had a personal, raw anger whenever a police officer did something that caused them to be removed. Jimmy O'Neill [inaudible] to the classes that were being recruited in at the beginning of their training, he would say, if there are people in your life who are bad influences, you need to lose those friends right now. He was very raw about it. But Dermot is the straightest arrow you're going to find. And when he thinks a cop has done something wrong, he does not hesitate to ask.

Lehrer: And just one correction from what I said before, I think I said that substantiated case, that one, was in 2013. The City article says it was in 2003. Rory in Queens, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Rory.

Question: Hi, I was calling, I wanted to talk about schools reopening and budget cuts. And seeing as that there's budget cuts and I saw on the news the other day that, you know, there are 9,000 jobs at risk in the Board of Education, that coupled with the fact that the teacher's union and the principal's union, both wanting remote learning, wouldn't it be smarter for us to just go full remote in September, keep everybody safe, save the money that we wouldn't be putting into [inaudible] and electricity and just opening schools and keeping them clean in general, take that money and put it into advancing our remote learning for our teachers which is what they've been looking for. And it's a constant thing I've been hearing because I feel like we're pushing too fast to reopen schools. And what we should be focused on is bettering our remote learning education because like it or not, we still do have a partial remote learning environment now. It's hybrid. It's not fully going back. And I don't think we're focusing enough on that. I feel like a lot of problems could be solved by just going full remote and focusing on, like, remote learning and keeping jobs, these teachers' jobs.

Lehrer: Got you, Rory, let me get a response for you from the Mayor. Mr. Mayor?

Mayor: I appreciate the point. And there's a real logic to what you say, but I want to tell you why. Of course, we've thought about all that, but [inaudible] disagree. First of all, let's just talk about the human dynamics of our school system. Why did three quarters of our parents when we surveyed hundreds of thousands of them want schools to come back in-person? Why have now we, you know, as we have given parents a chance to opt out, we have 700,000 students coming back? Because for so many working class parents, for so many immigrant parents, parents in communities of color, single moms leading households, they need their kids to be in school in person because of their lives and the fact that they have to find work. They're trying to get back to work because they want their kids to get an education and you can't do the same remote. No one claims – the unions don't claim remote learning comes anywhere near in-person learning. Even part of the week in-person provides so much more than remote learning ever could, including the emotional support, the counseling, the mental health support for kids who have been traumatized. The unions actually say, and I've challenged them on this, they say officially, they don't want to go all remote. I think some of their actions are contradictory, but they say they don't want to go all remote. But I want to say, I work for the parents. I work for the kids of this city. I am very, very clear – in a city that's overwhelmingly people of color and working class people and low income people, that the absence of in-person learning is hurting those kids. They have been held back already the last four months, and I'm not going to damn them to another year of less education than they deserve. It's up to all of us to give them the very best we can, even with the challenges.

So, to the budget cuts, our job is to avert those cuts. And there's multiple ways to do that. Obviously, if we could get a stimulus in Washington, that is the best that is not working right now. It may work later in the year. I certainly believe if Joe Biden's elected there will be a stimulus quickly. We are working to get long term borrowing in Albany so we can avert those cuts. We're working with the unions to come up with alternative savings from labor so we can avert those cuts. So, there's many, many irons in the fire to avert the cuts. But in terms of how we spend our money, there's nothing more sacred than serving our children and building their future. And we cannot do that well enough with remote learning. We just can't.

Lehrer: On the remote learning that will take place even in the hybrid model that you're planning. I've heard from parents and teachers who are frustrated that there wasn't more effort put into training on remote instruction this summer. The New York Times said here in New York and elsewhere, it was a lost summer, as some people characterize it, a lost opportunity as plans have focused on weather and how to reopen buildings. But all public school students will spend a substantial amount of time doing remote learning in the current plan. So, has there been a citywide effort to train teachers on remote learning? How many teachers have participated if so?

Mayor: I don't know the exact number, but I'll happily get it to you. Yeah, there's the remote learning process began know literally in crisis, no notice effectively and had to be put together on the fly and still some very good work did happen in the spring. The efforts to continue to train teachers and improve remote learning, continue. They have continued throughout the summer, but I also want to be honest about there's only so far you can go with remote learning. The problem we are seeing is remote learning skews according to dynamics of disparity. Children who are already advantaged, children of wealthier families, children who have parents who are working remotely and professional jobs and can be home to support their kids as opposed to parents in working class jobs who have to be on a job site. The rich get richer when it comes to remote learning. I believe this profoundly, I've talked this through with our educators so you can continue to make it better, but you can't make it as fair as it needs to be. It's structurally impossible. The fact is for many, many kids they don't have adults in the home who can help them. They don't have a situation where they're going to be able to manage the whole process on their own. Some do, but many don't. And if we're really going to get at what we're here to do, which is to fight disparity and to prepare our kids. That's why we have to keep true to i- person, but we are trying to improve remote constantly. We will keep trying to improve remote. Teachers are doing their damndest with remote. It's just structurally flawed in the very, very being of it.

Lehrer: Yes, but are you kind of acknowledging –

Mayor: You can't have kind of direct contact, even in the best situation you need to with kids.

Lehrer: But are you kind of acknowledging that there wasn't that much training on maximizing the quality of remote this summer? Because even under the plan, it will be half remote? Were you able to hear that?

Mayor: Of course, as I said there's been ongoing work to improve remote. What's that? I'm sorry.

Lehrer: For some reason there's a little – yeah, there's a little delay on the line today that we don't usually have. But so, you know what, let me, let me go onto another caller and we're going to try Q in the Bronx. Q you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Let's hope this works technically. Hi there.

Question: Hi. Thanks for taking my call. And [inaudible] the time to ask this question and have this comment because it's very important. With all the focus with reopening schools, I feel like there's been a neglect of addressing the ancillary effects of opening the schools, which is public transportation. So, this is the question for the Mayor and also in your listening audience, like the MTA, Sarah Feinberg, or the Chancellor Richard Carranza. Now I'm a person of color who attended elementary and high school in New York City. So, I know that many students of color travel to their schools by buses and trains. And I've ridden the buses and trains during the height of the pandemic. And now when the pandemic's a little less in New York City. And my line is as most lines are very crowded and kids being kids, no fault of their own, often you know, they like to corral and they're, you know, yelling and shouting at each other. Because they're just being kids. And masks are expensive. So, I often find when I'm riding public transit, most of the people who are not wearing masks or teens. And so, I want to know, I don't want to be criminalized for not wearing masks, but I want to know whether it's the schools, the DOE, or the administration or the MTA, what can be done to provide these kids with masks? Not just in school, but in public transit. So perhaps the schools can give masks to students two or three masks a day, so they can wear a mask going to school and coming back? Because like I said, being a native New Yorker, I know you can't just throw a bunch of extra trains on the rail system because that causes congestion.

Lehrer: Let me jump in just for time and get a response to you. Mr. Mayor, are you able to hear Q?

Mayor: Yeah. And I think it's a great question. And I appreciate it very much. First of all, we're going to be giving out free masks everywhere. And we have been, but even more. This is true beyond the question of school opening. It is something we've done in the MTA. We need to redouble at. We'll be doing it in schools, absolutely free masks for all kids who need them, as many as they need. I would remind you that, you know, a single mask can last for days. It's not like you have to change your mask, you know in the morning and put on a new one at night. So long as it hasn't been in any way altered

Lehrer: But wait, isn't would you disagree with – I'm sorry I know we have a delay on the line. I wanted to follow up on what you just said on masks. Isn't it true that once you're out in public with a mask, you have to consider it contaminated and then wash it or use another one?

Mayor: No, that's not been the standard. The fact is you can, you know, if a mask gets wet, if a mask gets torn. If a mask gets old, I mean there are reasons to get rid of a mask. Not that it's inherently -- no, not at all. We, and I've been talking to doctors about this from the beginning. I've never heard anyone say a single use, disqualifies a mask. We're going to keep however, providing them for free constantly. Every school is going to have plenty, in different sizes for different ages of kids. So, I think it's a very fair point that we have to do extensive, extensive efforts to constantly – not to enforce, just to educate and provide them for free.

Lehrer: Q, thank you for your call. And when I saw that the caller's name was Q, I said, maybe this is Q from Q Anon. So, I'm really glad that it wasn't Q from Q Anon, since that person doesn't really exist. Sharon, in Manhattan, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello Sharon.

Question: Hi. I have two questions. The first is, and Brian, I'm hoping you'll help me pin the Mayor down on a sort of yes, no, on this. Does he foresee any reasonable possibility of a return to indoor dining this year in the city? And my second question is now that gym re-openings have been put up to the local authorities, do we – when can I expect that? And I would like to just share that I'm a member of the JCC in Manhattan, and a lot of older people rely on this for very important rehab. And right now, I am paying \$125 a week that I cannot afford on my credit card for physical therapy to rehab two injuries that I could be doing with the proper machines myself at the JCC. So those are my two questions.

Mayor: So, the State and the City, both given what we're seeing on the health front, we're very careful, cautious about reopening gyms. But the State created the order. We're following the order. Gyms will start to reopen September 2nd. There'll be limits on the number of people and limits on the kind of activities. But the reopening September 2nd. Indoor dining, there's not a plan right now. There's not a context for indoor dining. We're never saying it's impossible. But we do not, based on what we've seen around the world, we do not have a plan for reopening indoor dining in the near term. And in fact, the example that Dr. Jay Varma, my senior health advisor gave to the media this week, Hong Kong started to have a resurgence directly related to indoor dining and bars. And have to close them down. We know what an unfortunate nexus they've been for resurgences. We've seen it in Europe lately as well. We're just not doing it now. We'll keep looking, but we're not doing it now. We're going to focus on outdoor and obviously, you know, take out delivery. Those options will keep going, but not now for indoor.

Lehrer: Did you get the yes or no question answered the way you wanted to Sharon?

Question: Yeah, it sounds like it's not going to happen until something really changes with the virus. I'm very sad for the hundred thousand people who rely on it for their income.

Lehrer: Sharon, thank you very much. The restaurant owners, Mr. Mayor say, if you can open – well, I heard, I don't want to put words in people's mouth. So, I heard somebody say on their behalf if you can open schools and we have a one quarter of one percent positivity rate in the city now, then you should be able to let the restaurateurs open with the, you know, limited percentage indoor dining. And that they could do that safely. You want to give them one more response?

Mayor: Yeah, absolutely. And again, I asked the health experts this constantly. Please, anyone who feels this and cares about the health and safety of New Yorkers. And obviously we do care about the huge number of people that work in the restaurant industry. I want them back to work. That's why – look, we moved outdoor dining, had never been done before. We've gotten almost a hundred thousand people back to work. We're going to do it again next year. That's what we could do. And that's been safe, but indoor dining, look right now at what's happening in Hong Kong. Look right now, what's happening in Europe. Unfortunately, it's proof positive that a lot of the problem comes from going back to the normal reality we knew with indoor dining. I wish it wasn't true. It just is true. And they, in the end, there's a night and day reality between say a school and indoor dining schools. Schools we are obligated to provide our kids an education. And we can't do that effectively without having them have some in-person instruction. And we

do have the context to do it. And we can make sure everyone's wearing a mask. And we have tons of safety precautions that we run as the public sector and we control. We don't control what happens inside a restaurant or a bar at every hour. We know people don't wear masks in restaurants and bars, by definition, you're eating and drinking. You don't wear a mask. The chance of transmission goes up greatly. I wish it wasn't true, Brian. I'm not happy about it, but it's just the truth. And New Yorkers actually prefer the blunt truth.

Lehrer: As we run out of time for this week we have so many questions coming in and so many of them are in on education. So, let me combine two questions that I have and get one last response for you on this. One parent writes why not, and I'm going to paraphrase a longer question. Why not go remote for the first semester and save up money to be able to test every student and every staff member before they go back into the schools for the next semester like Los Angeles is doing? And the other question is what about the neighborhoods with positivity rates that are above five percent like Sunset Park?

Mayor: First of all, Sunset Park is not above five percent right now. The latest testing as we do more and more, we're getting a better picture. It's 3.5 percent now and declining. That looks like that was a very limited problem and limited to certain households. So, I'm pleased to say we're seeing real progress there. Los Angeles, from what we're seeing, that was a very big announcement without a lot of specifics behind it. There does not appear to be an actual, tangible plan in Los Angeles to actually test the kids and the staff in real time. And they're working with an all remote system. That sounds like a very vague, if not noble vision there. We are talking to the unions right now about the amount of testing that we can provide and when. And I want it to be as much as we possibly can do. And we have a huge amount of testing available. We have over 200 test sites. We're providing everyone a test for free. Parents, students, teachers right now. So, we actually do have, it's not a matter of cost in the first instance. We have the capacity to test a lot of people and do it on an ongoing basis. And we're working with the union right now to figure out the best way to do that. So, no, we do not need to go remote in order to do testing. We can be doing testing in a lot of ways, right this minute and in an ongoing way.

Lehrer: Thanks as always, Mr. Mayor. There's never been a tougher time in my memory to be Mayor of New York. Talk to you next week.

Mayor: Thank you.

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