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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO HOLDS MEDIA AVAILABILITY

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, everyone. Well, it is truly a beautiful day in New York City. It's beautiful and sunny outside, but I am so happy today because I was just up in the Bronx, seeing kids coming back to school. Middle school kids coming back, what an exciting moment, such good energy. Everyone, so happy to be back in school, middle school now back all over the city. So, today I was at Leaders of Tomorrow Middle School in the Bronx. I got to tell you, whether you are talking about parents, kids, teachers, educators, staff, everyone wanted to be back in the building. Everyone wanted to be together. Everyone wanted to be there for the kids. So, it was wonderful to see the energy and the hope and the understanding that this is part of how we move forward. This is part of how we come back.

And I talked to some of the kids and I love – I know this as a parent, a lot of times you'll get those one-word answers. So, I said to them, you know, how do you feel? [Inaudible] good? Are you ready? Yes. But a couple of kids, I said, Hey, tell me why are you happy about coming back to school? And they said, they really didn't like, you know, just doing remote learning. I asked a young man named Joshua, what do you think of remote learning? He looks at me. He says, boring. And – no, I'm sorry. That's a different young woman [inaudible] said that, boring. I looked at Joshua. I said, why do you not like remote so much? And he said, because it's weird. And I just love these kids saying it just wasn't what gave them what they needed. What they needed was to be with their friends. What they needed was to be with their teachers, to get the warmth, to get the energy, we were in a classroom with Ms. Cottineau, And Ms. Cottineau was just full of energy. And she asked the kids what was bringing them joy today? And so, we all said to her, what brings you joy? And she said, what brings me joy is being back in the classroom with the kids. I want to be here. It feels right. And she just said, it is literally a feeling of joy to be able to educate our kids.

So, that's what we saw today. And again, I know lots and lots of parents are also feeling relief today. It's been a lot for them to have to cover all the bases at once. Finally, our middle school parents getting a little bit of relief. Big, important day from New York City. And our Chancellor feels this to his core. He and I have been at all the opening days together. And every one of them just feels so special. So I want you to hear, because the Chancellor has been working so hard with his team to get middle school back. And we're going to go farther in the months ahead. I want you to hear from our Chancellor Richard Carranza.

Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. It was truly a pleasure to be at Leaders of Tomorrow Middle School this morning to see that energy that you talk about. And before I say anything else, I also want to thank Principal Joe Biernat who had just a well-oiled machine this morning. Students getting tested or the temperatures taken, consent forms, everything in place. So, thank you, Principal Biernat. It was exciting to welcome our middle school students back to their classrooms today. When we were at Leaders of Tomorrow Middle

School in the Bronx this morning, even behind the masks, there was such joy and excitement on the faces of our students. It's an important reminder of why it's so critical that we open our schools for in-person learning as soon as it's safe to do. And none of this would have been possible without our dedicated school staff who have done a tremendous job supporting students remotely. From the educators that are teaching lessons in-person and remotely, to the staff who make sure buildings are ready, to families for their continued perseverance and flexibility. I'll tell you that you could have eaten off of the floors at that middle school. They looked beautiful.

And of course, to our middle schoolers themselves, who have done such an amazing job of learning from home for the first half of this school year. You are incredible. And we are very proud of you. We've come a long way together since the fall. And we reopened District 75 schools, our elementary schools, moving the majority of our students to in-person learning five days a week. And now we're beating back the virus. Over 30,000 of our educators have received a vaccine. And that number is increasing every day. The CDC recently adopted the same health and safety standards that we in New York City have had in place since September. Together, we wrote the playbook for delivering a safe and supportive education for our children. And we're not stopping now. Yesterday we reached half a million COVID tests administered in New York City schools. And the latest weekly positivity rate in our schools is 0.58 percent. So, as the Mayor has said on many occasions, we can truly say the safest indoor locations in the City of New York are in the classrooms of the New York City Department of Education. We've ramped up capacity by hiring additional staff to support our situation room and adding teams to conduct weekly testing in our middle and elementary schools. We will continue to provide the safest learning environment possible for students, educators, and staff.

[Chancellor Carranza speaks in Spanish]

With that, sir, I'll turn it back to you.

Mayor: In every language, it is joyous, Chancellor. And thank you so much. Just an update, everyone, and this is just a wonderful, wonderful report. Breaking news, as of this morning in New York City, 1,203 schools are open today. Open and serving our kids and moving this city forward. 1,203 schools open right this moment.

Okay, let's go to what we focus on every single day, which is bringing this city back, a recovery for all of us. And that means getting everyone vaccinated, getting to that five million New Yorker vaccination point. I know we can do it. We can get five million New Yorkers fully vaccinated by June. And one of the big reasons is the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is coming. This is very exciting. One dose, easier to use. We should be seeing a substantial amount of it in March. That's going to make a big difference. Where are we right now? From day one, the number of vaccinations administered, here we go, 1,614,585 doses. That is more than the entire population of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which is the sixth largest city in America. So, you can see every day, this number just keeps climbing, climbing. We get the supply we need, we can take off. Now, we had a tough week last week because the storm, delayed shipments of the supply of vaccine. But a lot has now come in. So, we're going to blitz this week. This is going to be a very intense weekend. We're actually adding capacity at a lot of our sites because we have extra vaccine now for this week. So, we're adding overnight shifts at the Brooklyn Army Terminal, at the Bathgate site in the Bronx, at Citi Field in Queens. We're doubling the number of appointments at some of the key sites in communities where we're focusing on fighting

disparity, at Teacher's Prep and at Martin Van Buren High Schools. We're opening new pop-up sites in communities that need more outreach.

And particularly for our seniors, so we have a seniors-only site, El Caribe in Mill Basin, Brooklyn. And we're focusing on faith communities, getting faith communities to help us get their congregants and communities involved again, particularly seniors. So, we have a site that'll be opening this weekend at First Corinthians Baptist Church in East Harlem. So, a lot going on. Test and Trace will be operating the First Corinthian site. That'll be Saturday and Sunday from 10:00 AM to 6:00 PM. So, for residents of Harlem, want to make sure you know that site is going to be up and running. And we want people to go right away. If you need the vaccine, go to nyc.gov/vax4NYC, nyc.gov/V-A-X-4-NYC. Let's get people signed up because we know, we know we have the capacity to reach so many people, every single person. I'll tell you yesterday, I was in Jackson Heights in Queens, people kept coming up to me, seniors saying they had gotten the first shot, they had gotten the second shot. It changed their lives. The joy, the comfort, the relief, it's happening for more and more New Yorkers. Let's get out there and get the word out. The vaccinations can happen right now, here in this city for so many people.

Now, we're doing a lot of partnerships to reach people at the community level, particularly in communities that have been hit hardest by the coronavirus. Communities that also we're seeing a lot of hesitancy. We need to overcome the hesitancy, give people answers, give them faith, get them vaccinated to protect them, particularly seniors. So, today we are announcing a partnership with the National Action Network and Choose Health Life. And what we'll be doing – Reverend Sharpton is really helping to lead the way in getting a number of faith communities and faith organizations to help us create these popup sites on the ground. This will be happening where we have planned to initially – you know, you have 10 sites, we're going to keep building from there. But now, we're talking about how we build trust – community leaders, faith leaders that people know, and trust, and like, and believe, that's how you do it. Reverend Sharpton himself is putting his arm where his mouth is. He is out there himself, making sure that people know that he's getting vaccinated, that everyone can have faith in this vaccine. And, look, again, we understand the hesitancy. We understand the history. We understand why folks are not necessarily ready in the first instance, but what we see more and more is that word-of-mouth impact, when people have someone in their family who gets vaccinated, it gives them more faith. Someone in their community, a neighbor, someone they work with – there are so many instances, I've been hearing more and more where people say they got vaccinated because someone they knew and trusted already got vaccinated ahead of them and it worked okay for them. But also, voices people know and trust make a huge difference. From the beginning, we've said we need clergy to be a really big part of this. Clergy voices – and I know we've worked so closely with clergy in this administration on a host of issues, on mental health, on reaching communities to get parents involved with pre-K and 3-K, you name it. Clergy has been crucial to all we do. But one of the things we found is that people listen to their faith leaders, they have a special belief and respect for their faith leaders. So, we're going to bring faith communities more and more into this process as we go forward. And I want everyone to know that we don't for a moment [inaudible] that if someone's distrustful, if someone has questions, if someone has concerns, that's not something to disrespect. That's something to hear and answer, reassure, give evidence. And, again, particularly powerful when folks are able to come forward and say, look, I'm going to be doing it myself, I have faith in it, I respect this process, that makes a world of difference.

Okay. Let's go on to a couple of things. I want to do our indicators and then I want to do a special reminder, because we have an important day tomorrow, so I want to make sure people know about this, because Purim is coming up, but first let me do the indicators –

[Inaudible]

Wait, hold on one second. We're having a little technical issue here. Are we ready for the –

[Inaudible]

Not yet. Okay. We'll come back whenever you guys are ready. Okay. So, the indicators for today. Number one, daily number of people admitted to New York City hospitals for suspected COVID-19 – today's report, 259 patients. Confirmed positivity, 67.9 percent. And our hospitalization rate, 4.15 per 100,000. Number two, new reported cases on a seven-day average – today's report, 3,158 cases. Number three, percentage of people are testing citywide positive for COVID-19 – today's report, seven-day rolling average, 7.12 percent.

Again, special a day tomorrow – tonight and tomorrow, the celebration of Purim. I want to make sure that folks know as we celebrate, this is a wonderful, joyous holiday in the Jewish community. It is all about a celebration of life. It is a joyous time. It is a time to focus on the deliverance from evil. It is a time when people really get to celebrate and enjoy, but we also have to be smart and careful. People historically have gathered for Purim, done a big party, but this is a different year. And I want to thank all the community leaders and particularly the community leaders that focus on health care, like Hatzolah Ambulance Corps., who are getting the word out that of course people can and should celebrate Purim, but they can do it safely. Be smart about how big the size of group is, be smart about staying close to family members and not having the big gatherings that are typical. Having a happy and safe Purim, that's what we're urging everyone. So, a happy Purim to everyone. Let's keep everyone safe. And when it comes to keeping people safe, our very important priority we've had in our vaccination effort is to focus on some of the New Yorkers who need vaccination the most, because they have gone through so much in their lives. Holocaust survivors – we have a special focused effort to vaccinate Holocaust survivors. We're getting more and more people each day. We're working with a number of organizations in the community. I want to thank all the organizations who have been a part of this effort. We're reaching people who have been through so much. We want to make sure they are safe. So, we'll continue to deepen that effort and we're going to reach each and every one of the folks who need the help.

Okay. At some point we're going to have an additional guest beam in – hold on, getting a note. Okay. Just a moment. Let me do first the Spanish for today. And this goes back to the topic I started with on middle schools.

[Mayor de Blasio speaks in Spanish]

I want to emphasize that in English. My thanks to the teachers, the educators, the school staff, to the parents, to everyone who has helped us bring middle school back and it's going to help us go farther. A great thanks to our Chancellor and the whole team at the Department of Education who have believed all along, no matter how big the challenge is we would overcome them. And

yes, Chancellor, New York City public schools are the safest places to be in New York City right now.

Okay. So, now – we do not have our special guest yet.

[Inaudible]

Now we have our special guest. Okay. So, I talked earlier about National Action Network, Reverend Sharpton, and the fact that he is not only helping us to create these new vaccine sites and to bring more and more clergy into the vaccine effort, but that he is going the next step and showing people how important it is to get vaccinated by getting vaccinated himself and talking about the experience and why it's safe and why it's smart for people to protect themselves and their families. So, Reverend Sharpton, I believe you're up at Harlem Hospital today. Is that right?

Reverend Al Sharpton: Yes, I am in Harlem Hospital. I have just been vaccinated. I have around 10 pastors with me. I'm putting my shirt back on from being vaccinated, and the pastors are from all the different parts of the city, including my pastor in Brooklyn, Dr. Adolphus Lacey, and Pastor Canaan, all of them here with me. And Mr. Mayor, I talked yesterday with the vice president, Kamala Harris, who is going in Washington D.C. today to a pharmacy where they are trying to start bringing vaccines right to the pharmacy. So, I told her, at the same day she's going to the pharmacies, we're doing this in the city with you and the efforts to reach out, because we want to set an example to our community. We've demanded and have rallied, saying that we want to have the same access to COVID-19 testing and vaccines as other communities. Now, that we are beginning to get that we have to set the examples to go with the vaccine. We do not need to be the Donald Trumps of this community, questioning the science. We need to follow the science. We need to do what it says. I know all of the conspiracy theories, I've looked through them. Tuskegee was letting people suffer and not get shots – it's keeping the penicillin away. This is the opposite of that. I trust [inaudible] and the Black doctors that were involved. So, I'm here saying, I cannot afford not to take the shot.

Mayor: That's so helpful to hear, Reverend Sharpton. And thank you. And I want to just ask you, because I think this is one of the things that people always need to hear. Why did you personally choose to have the shot? And how does it feel right this minute?

Reverend Sharpton: I personally took the shot because I feel two things. One, that you've got to be sure that your loved ones and the people you're around are not risking themselves being around you, because you're playing some jaded game of Russian roulette, saying I may be still negative, I may not be. And that's not fair to your loved ones, even if you want to do that to yourself. And secondly, is that I wanted to set an example. I think those of us that are in public ought to set a public example, and I didn't want to tell people go do something that I was not going to do myself. And, right now, I'm feeling I'm feeling very well. I don't feel any kind of after effects at all, as of yet.

Mayor: Excellent. And I really want to thank you, Rev. Your message is so important for people to hear. I want to thank everyone at Harlem Hospital, one of the great medical institutions of this entire city with such an extraordinary history. I know they took good care of you today and they're ready to take care of everybody else who is going to come in and get that vaccine. Rev,

thank you so much for joining us. And we've got to spread this message everywhere. We've got to tell people how important it is. And thank you for helping us to create these sites in the community with clergy, that's going to make a huge difference.

Reverend Sharpton: Thank you.

Mayor: All right. God bless. Okay, everyone, let's go to our colleagues in the media. And please let me know the name and outlet of each journalist.

Moderator: We'll now begin our Q-and-A. As a reminder, we're joined today by Chancellor Carranza, by Dr. Chokshi, Dr. Katz, and Senior Advisor Dr. Jay Varma. First question today, it goes to Gloria from NY1.

Question: Good morning, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Hey, Gloria. How are you doing today?

Question: I'm doing well. Thank you. How are you?

Mayor: Good. Thank you. I wanted to follow up on a story that my colleague, Alyssa Paolicelli, did this week. We went to some of the sites that have opened up recently, particularly the ones in Brownsville and East New York that were set up to give priority to home health aides and people who live in the area. And we actually found after visiting twice that some of the people that were receiving shots were from outside of the communities, many of them were not home health aides. And so, I wondered if there's any kind of a follow-up that the City is doing or anything that the City can do to ensure that the sites that you're setting up that are supposed to be targeting specific people, whether it's seniors or home health aides, or people of color who live in these neighborhoods that have been affected, are actually getting those shots and that it's not other people coming from other neighborhoods to have their vaccinations there.

Mayor: Thank you. It's a really important question. I appreciate it, because it's something we work on every day, Gloria. We give priority to make sure we're reaching people in greatest need. And we work on every day, making sure those priorities are adhered to. We obviously don't turn away people who need the shot and are from other communities, but we want to really get those priorities to be the focus. So, I'm going to turn to Dr. Katz and Dr. Chokshi so they can tell you about the way we do that constant work to make sure the priorities are adhered to. Dr. Katz?

President and CEO Mitchell Katz, Health + Hospitals: Yeah. Sir, thank you so much. And you've said it very well. The goal of setting up these centers is to make sure that we are able to vaccinate people who were doing these vital services and that we reach all sections of the community. We know right now there's a lot of pent-up demand and a lot of different people wanting to be vaccinated. And we all have to remember the goal is to vaccinate everyone, as you have said. There's no bad vaccination, but we do want to work hard to prioritize the people who most need it and get them vaccinated as quickly as possible. Thank you, sir.

Mayor: Thank you, Dr. Chokshi.

Commissioner Dave Chokshi, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene: Thank you, sir. What I would add is, just to acknowledge that access is the first step. Putting our sites in the places where we know people will most benefit in the neighborhoods that have been hardest hit, this has been very important to us, and the Mayor has charged us with doing that across New York City. But we know that that is only the first step, and so we're also working closely each day with community-based organizations, with faith leaders, as you heard today, and with the associations that represent home care workers and nurses and others when it comes to more specifically targeting certain sites. So, we'll keep working on that each day so that tomorrow is better than today.

Mayor: Amen. Go ahead, Gloria.

Question: Thank you. Mr. Mayor, I also wanted to ask your reaction to the reports that we have heard about in the last day, regarding Governor Cuomo, what Lindsey Boylan has alleged took place during that airplane trip, and during her time working for the Cuomo administration. I wanted you to react specifically to what she is alleging. And if I could also ask you what you think should happen in this moment. You've talked recently about what it's like to be bullied by the Governor. You've described that these are some of the behaviors and the way that he tends to treat people. So, I wonder if you think that this is also a part of the problem and what you believe should happen next.

Mayor: Gloria, look, these allegations are really disturbing. Let's be clear about that, they're really disturbing. We have to, as New Yorkers, we've got to take this seriously. When a woman comes forward with this kind of very specific allegations, they have to be taken seriously. We need a full and independent investigation. I want to emphasize the word independent – investigation by some individual or entity that is not compromised, is not something that is dominated by the Governor's Office, but an independent investigation, because this is just unacceptable. This kind of behavior, if it's true, is unacceptable in any public servant, in anybody. So, we've got to get the truth about this. Go ahead.

Moderator: The next is Henry from Bloomberg.

Question: Hello, Mr. Mayor. How are you doing today?

Mayor: I'm doing well, Henry. Starting my day with kids coming back to school, it does not get better than that, honestly.

Question: Well, that's good to hear. I wanted to ask you about the choice of certain ZIP codes as priority ZIP codes versus not priority ZIP codes, because when you look at the City data – and I admit, I'm looking at data that's about a week old – you see certain neighborhoods that have very low vaccination rates, like Hell's Kitchen, or Rosedale, Queens, or Laurelton-Rosedale that are not priority areas. East Williamsburg in Williamsburg, these are low vaccination-rate areas, and they're not high priority areas, according to the City – Crown Heights, Brooklyn. And I'm just wondering why there's little – Borough Park is another one, Crown Heights – why there isn't a connection – why there is a disconnect between some of these neighborhoods that have very low vaccination rates and they're not high priority neighborhoods for vaccine sites?

Mayor: Henry, I appreciate the question, but I don't want there to be a misinterpretation of the work that's going on. Crown Heights is a great example. We have a Health Department vaccination site in Crown Heights. The fact is when we defined, based on everything we experienced with this entire coronavirus crisis, the sharp disparities, where we had lost the most fellow New Yorkers, where the impact had been the most horrible, and on top of that, the history of poverty and other challenges, that's where we put the focus. To get out there with not full total resources that we'd like to have yet, we don't have the supply we'd like to have, but with the supply, we do have trying to make sure we focus on the places where the impact was the worst, because that's where you have to do the most work to protect lives. But at the same time, all the communities that you're talking about, we have ongoing efforts to reach and vaccination sites in and around those communities, and this is just the beginning. When we get the supply we need, we will be doing half a million vaccinations a day. We will be adding sites more and more - deeper into communities. I'd like to go beyond half a million vaccinations a day, and I think we can do that. So, we're still some weeks away from having the kind of supply we deserve, but there's no question in my mind, we're reaching all of the communities you named in different ways, and we're going to be able to do a lot more when we have supply. Go ahead, Henry.

Question: Okay. But I just would like to also say there are neighborhoods with very high vaccination rates that are high priority neighborhoods, according to where you're citing vaccination efforts like Rockaway Park or Manhattan Valley. But, let me move on to my next question, because you've answered it to as fully as you want to answer it. The decision to partly open movie theaters and expand wedding capacity and banquets, et cetera, et cetera. I know it's a State decision, but you know, this is a very densely populated city and we've got these variants coming that apparently are overcoming vaccines, that the vaccine isn't necessarily very effective against some of these variants, particularly the one that's been found in New York City, and they're about more than 50 cases so far. Isn't this concerning to you and the health officials in New York City, and is there any discussion between the city and state about maybe holding off on congregating in this manner?

Mayor: I'm definitely concerned about the variants and I'm going to turn to Dr. Varma to speak to that. Henry, look, you're right. The State is making these decisions. I think we should go back to normal governance. I've said that very clearly. I hope the legislature will act to return normal governance to New York City so that we can make more of these decisions for our own people. But so long as the State is making the decisions, we're going to do everything we can to ensure people are safe, to make sure there's proper inspections, proper protocols, and we're going to watch very carefully, and if we see from the data and the science, that things are not working out, I'm going to say it out loud. I'm going to make sure that it's very clear that people in New York City, if we see any of these moves, not working, having unintended consequences, we're going to do something about it. But where I would not agree with you is on your characterization of the impact of the vaccine on the variant. I actually think, in general, the research keeps coming back that the vaccines do have the impact we hope for, and that's something we need to stay focused on. So, Dr. Varma, could you speak to that?

Senior Advisor Dr. Jay Varma: Yeah, thank you very much. I really want to echo what the Mayor's last comment is. You know, there's, there's a gap, unfortunately in scientific reporting that's going on publicly. People are translating findings that people find in the laboratory, like there is this mutation in this virus into an outcome of the human. We really don't know enough about human immunity to draw those direct conclusions. That's why we do clinical trials. That's

why we collect data continuously, and what we see from trial after trial, including all of the data from Johnson & Johnson, is that the two vaccines that are authorized in the US, the J&J vaccine, which is likely to be authorized, are incredibly effective at preventing severe illness, hospitalizations, and deaths. The two things that we're most concerned about protecting against, and they do that in multiple different places. The J&J vaccine, for example, studied in the US, in South Africa, in Brazil, three locations, three different types of genetic variants that are circulating commonly. So, I really do want to emphasize what the Mayor has said, both about the importance of regular preventive measures, and getting vaccinated. These vaccines are very effective at preventing people from getting sick.

Mayor: Thank you.

Moderator: The next is Sydney Pereira from Gothamist.

Question: Good morning, Mr. Mayor. I also have a question about this new variant. I guess I'm wondering if you and the other health officials could speak to what New Yorkers should think and feel when they're reading this news, and like what it means for how they should act in their day-to-day life, based on what we know particularly about this new variant that researchers from Caltech and Columbia are reporting, and yes, that's the question.

Mayor: Yeah, obviously we just have seen those reports and I think it's important we put them in perspective. I want Dr. Varma to do that. So, both speak to the more recent report, but also your very good question. How should New Yorkers think about in terms of their daily life? Dr. Varma?

Senior Advisor Varma: So, let's start with the second point first since that is really – the most single most important message that New Yorkers need to hear is that we need you to continue to do all of the things that we've been doing. We realized this is painful and difficult, but persistence is really important. Follow the guidance on masks, particularly the guidance on potentially wearing two masks if you don't have a well-fitting mask. Maintain your distance, wash your hands, get tested, and when your turn comes up, get vaccinated. That is the single most important message that every New Yorker should have.

Now, the second thing, and this is where it gets more complicated, is that when you read this news you need to be a little skeptical of everything you read. Not all variants are a public health concern. Some variants are just, that they're variants. They're just a little bit different. Some variants are variants of interest. They have changes in their structure that might change the virus's property, and some variants are variants of what we call public health concern. They have these mutations, and we have enough data to show that they change, whether the virus is more infectious, whether it's more lethal, whether it can change immunity, something out.

So, right now, at least for the report that we hear, you know, we have from Columbia, we need to just consider this a variant of interest, something that the interesting that we need to follow in track, but it doesn't change anything about our public health concern. We need more data in studies to understand that, and then finally, I would just make a call that we, we definitely want all of our academic partners to be working closely with us, sharing their data, sharing their findings, because this is a challenging battle, and public health is a team activity, and we really do want all team members to be working together.

Mayor: Thank you. Go ahead, Sydney.

Question: Thank you, and could you, Dr. Varma, and the Mayor, and whoever else wants to answer this question speak to like what the city is now going to do as far as further researching this new variant and then like what – is this going to be? Another one the sequencing lab is looking at, and yeah, what are the kind of the next steps for finding out more about this to determine like, if it is a public health concern or remains more just a variant of interest like you were saying, Dr. Varma.

Mayor: Yeah, and Sydney, I'm going to turn to Jay to just finish this point through, but look, I think it's understandable – back to everyday New Yorkers, it's understandable. People hear variant, it is a cause for concern, of course, and there's something about it that's unknown and that gets people worried. I don't blame anyone who's feeling that way, but I want to really take the essence of what Dr. Varma is saying here until there's evidence that tells us that a variant is not handled well by vaccine, for example, or a variant has different impacts. We shouldn't assume the worst. We should say, we need the full truth. We need the facts, because so far, the experience with the variants has been even where there's been some proof of being more transmissible, for example, it has not changed. The reality has not changed. The impact of the disease is not changed our ability to fight the disease with the vaccine and all the other measures we take. So, I just, I want to demystify a little bit until there's hard facts. Stay the course, use the strategies that are working, but Dr. Varma, you want to finish out that question?

Senior Advisor Varma: Yeah, no, absolutely, and just to emphasize, we have been working incredibly intensively on improving our ability to detect these new strains. The City Health Department's laboratory has been working non-stop. We have our pandemic response laboratory, and we have all of these academic partners who have been working well with us. So, we are able to detect and track this new strain that's been reported, and we'll continue to follow it. We have the ability also to now collect information about those patients and to understand better whether or not they have different features or outcomes and do our Test and Trace Corps, which is the best performing Test and Trace Corps in the country – has the ability to also [inaudible] you know, if somebody was infected, did they spread it to other people more often than something else? And that's really the key here. You need to piece together three pieces of information, the virus, what you study in the lab, what happens to the person who gets sick and may be hospitalized, and then what happens to all of their contacts, and that's really what our Health Department, our Test and Trace Corps and all our laboratories are really well-designed to do.

Mayor: Thank you.

Moderator: The next is Michael Gartland from the Daily News.

Question: Good morning, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Hello, Michael, how are you?

Question: I'm good. So, I've got another question on these variants. Can you talk about, or the top health officials on the call, how prevalent these new variants are that were reported in the times yesterday? Where we're seeing clusters of them throughout the city? And is there any evidence to indicate that these variants are what is causing the infection rate in the city to remain

– I know it's going down, but it's not going down at the same rate as other parts of the state in the country, and I was wondering if there's any indication that the variants are responsible in some way or another for that?

Mayor: I'll turn to Dr. Chokshi. But just to say, we talked about this a couple of times this week our difference from the rest of the country, besides the fact that we're one of the most densely populated places in the country, and that certainly is a place where the coronavirus has more impact. Obviously, you know, the poverty that adds to the challenges, but really, it's also that we're testing much more than almost any place, and so we're getting a truer measure of what's happening. I would dare say in a lot of parts of the country, the data is a little more questionable because it just isn't as much testing going on. So, again, we believe in a lot of testing, we believe in a lot of transparency, but that may seem to present a number higher, when in fact, I suspect we're not seeing the whole picture of how high the rates are in some other places. That's my preface – now to Dr. Chokshi.

Commissioner Chokshi: Thank you, sir, and just to answer the specific questions, first. No, you know, we don't have any evidence at this point that the variants are, you know, that this New York variant that the one five, two six is what is contributing to the trajectory of cases, which we should emphasize, continue to decrease. We also don't have any evidence at this point that the variant is concentrated in certain parts of the city, and I want to just take the opportunity to emphasize some of the big picture here, because that's what we have to hang on to. The science around this is just less established compared to other variants, like the UK variant, which we are tracking very closely as well, and so as we get the information from these new studies, you know, while they are important, as Dr. Varma said, they remain quite exploratory with respect to the real-world effects, and that's the most important thing from the public health perspective. Whether it's a new strain that spreads more easily or causes more severe illness or reduces vaccine effectiveness, we have no indication that that's the case yet. So, we'll continue to collaborate with our partners on those important scientific questions, but we shouldn't let our scientific understanding outpace, what we know works today with respect to public health precautions.

Mayor: Amen. Go ahead, Michael.

Question: My second question has to do with Terry Monahan and his departure from the NYPD does that have anything to do with the Attorney General's lawsuit in which, you know, he's name figured in, and you know, there've been reports that he's going to remain in an advisory role. Is that accurate, and if it is, what would his responsibilities be as it remaining on the advisory role?

Mayor: Michael, we're going to have a – so the answer to your first question about the Attorney General, the answer's no. An answer to your second question, we're going to have a bonus press conference today at around 12-noon, and we'll be speaking about the important developments of the NYPD so I'm going to not speak to the second question yet. I'll talk about that at the next press conference.

Moderator: The next is Marcia from WCBS.

Question: Good morning Mr. Mayor. I'd like to go back to the op-ed piece that Karen Hinton wrote where she sort-of lumped you in with Governor Cuomo in terms of how you treat your

female staff. She said that she, you had acted towards them when a condescending fashion, and it made them feel less-than, and I guess her word was marginalized. I wonder how you feel about that and whether you think that there should be an independent investigation?

Mayor: I don't think it's accurate at all. As I talked about yesterday, from the beginning of this administration, to this moment, our leadership team has been majority women, four out of six Deputy Mayors, right this moment. The head of our recovery effort that we announced this week, Lorraine Grillo. These are folks who I have turned to, believe in, listened to, respect. We all talk through the issues, and these are incredibly tough issues, and we'll have, you know, real conversations to figure out how to get where we need to go. But my respect for the women who are playing such a crucial leadership role in this administration is clear by the choices of the folks I've made and the leadership and impact they're making. So that's the truth. Go ahead, Marcia.

Question: So, I guess a lot of people are wondering about why Lindsey Boylan, at the time this happened, didn't go to a police officer or a law enforcement person to report her concerns and why she's coming – making, going public. Now, do you have any thoughts on that?

Mayor: Marcia, I can't speculate on that. I know we need a full and independent investigation. I mean this is a very serious charge. We've got to know the truth and we've got to know the truth from an investigator or an investigative entity that is truly independent, that can actually get to the truth and not feel that in some way they're not allowed to pursue the truth. So, we got to get that done the right way. That's the important thing at this point.

Moderator: The next is Reema from Chalkbeat.

Question: Hi, Mr. Mayor, everyone on the call, how are you doing?

Mayor: Good Reema, were you with us this morning?

Question: I was not, no, but I did sort of take pictures and I will say that first day schools are always – it's always joyous to see kids going back.

Mayor: Amen.

Question: So, my first question is about middle schools. You know, middle schoolers have been out of buildings longer than their elementary school peers and their D75 peers, and same with high schoolers, they're still not back. And we know that – you know, because of they've been out of buildings, is there any effort to gauge where they are now that they're back, both academically and socio-emotionally right now? I know that the administration is working out a plan for next year, but are there any extra supports or plans right now to see where those children are?

Mayor: The answer is certainly, yes. I'll turn to the Chancellor. We're really excited about what we'll be doing in the fall with academic screening for all the kids and mental health screening, but that work, obviously has been continuing this year, even though with the challenge of remote, we all know we can't do it as well as we can in person. It's great to have the kids back

because it will allow for, right now, the ability to get a better take on what's going on with them and to help them right now. So, Chancellor, could you speak to that?

Chancellor Carranza: Yes, sir. So, Reema, in addition to obviously all of the work that our teachers continue to do remotely and in-person to gauge where students are academically in their trajectory, we also have provided a number of resources to teachers as well that will help them to assess not only the academic status of their students, but also the social, emotional status of their students, screeners, we've trained thousands of teachers already. We continue to train teachers. We've trained principals that will only ramp up as we plan for return in the fall. That being said, teachers know their students best, so, I can't tell you how many of the schools that I've visited, both in-person and through a virtual platform in which teachers are conducting these kinds of inquiries into where are you in terms of learning for students, but also where are you in terms of how are you feeling? What's bothering you? What do you like? The Mayor and I observed today one of those activities where they spun virtually a wheel, roulette, and then it landed on a question and the question happened to be what brings you joy. Now, during this pandemic, obviously, we've all had to deal with the trauma of the pandemic, but just giving a student the opportunity to flip the question, instead of what are you dealing with into what brings you joy, allowed children and adults to actually express what does bring them joy, which connects them to again the better parts of the social, emotional landscape in their classroom. So, there are a number of things that teachers are doing, and schools are doing and it looks different in every school, but every school, every community, every classroom knows their children better than anyone else and our hope is to build on that and give a super structure, if you will, as we return to fall.

Mayor: Amen. Go ahead, Reema.

Question: Okay. So, my second question is about standardized testing, I'm sure you're aware of the federal government's decision this week that mandates standardized testing, but there's going to be a lot more flexibility in how those tests will be offered. Now, this is of course, like this is up to the State Education Department, but given New York City's [inaudible] and how different children are learning differently this year, more than ever. I'm wondering if you have any sense for what sort of standardized testing could best work. We do know that the State has declined to do any remote testing because they believe it's not feasible. So, what are some things that you're thinking could best work for those tests this year? And generally, what are your thoughts on the US DOE decision?

Mayor: Reema, look, I'll turn to the Chancellor, but I'll just say we're all concerned given everything that has happened about whether high stakes testing is going to get us a true measure of what's going on. Obviously, I've been concerned about the problems with high stakes testing for many years, but my sense of the federal action is it actually gives a tremendous amount of flexibility. So, I want us to really carefully study what's going on and, you know, and work with that flexibility. Chancellor?

Chancellor Carranza: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. So Reema, we continue to work very closely with the Commissioner and with the Chancellor, quite frankly, the federal guidance did give some flexibilities. Absolutely. But we've continued and I've continued with them to engage with federal authorities around really highlighting from a grassroots perspective what are the

challenges in summative assessments? Now, summative assessments, and I join with the Mayor, I'd never been a fan of summative assessments. There's a famous educational researcher named Doug Reeves who said summative assessments are autopsies. You don't learn anything from them. It's at the end of the year. We should be doing formative assessments, which are much more like physical exams. It gives you information right now that you can act on as a teacher, where are the gaps? Where have children fallen behind? Where can you intervene? We are much more – I would say we are totally focused on formative assessments and supporting schools that are already implementing for formative assessments.

Now, look – now as an educator, there is no question, we know that children have fallen behind, that is the whole genesis under that undergirds our COVID plan, returned to learning plan. So, we know that we don't have to give a summative a test for that. So as an educator, I would say to parents, there is an opt-out, and if there's ever a time for parents to consider whether that opt out makes sense for you, this is the time, because we do not want to impose additional trauma on students that have already been traumatized, and then say, we have to test students that are in-person and not students that are in remote, and it just makes no sense in a pandemic to apply the rules of the past, pre-pandemic to a pandemic situation. So, as I said, the Commissioner and I continue to work very closely together on this, and we will be very, very transparent with our community around what are the options that we have while we continue to advocate at the federal level for let's have a real common-sense policy in this regard.

Mayor: Thank you. Go ahead.

Moderator: We have time for two more today. And the next is Reuvain from Chalkbeat – from Hamodia.

Mayor: Okay. You've changed his outlet –

Question: I thought I got a new job for a minute. Good morning, Mr. Mayor –

Mayor: How are you doing? You have range you have Reuvain. You could go anywhere and be great.

Question: Thank you. Thank you. I hope my boss is not listening, but I have a question about the delivery of vaccines to homebound seniors. I know you've been talking for a while about how you look forward to the Johnson & Johnson, this way you could only bring one – you know, you could just have one shot instead of two. But the Johnson & Johnson vaccine has been shown to be considerably less effective than Pfizer and Moderna. These home-bound seniors are, you know, presumably at a lot more risk if they catch COVID, they often have comorbidities and such. So, isn't it a risk here that we're giving them something less effective?

Mayor: No, I really don't believe that's the case. I want to turn to Dr. Katz. What matters most when we're vaccinating a senior is to protect their life, to protect against any potential they could lose their life to COVID, to protect against the worst impacts of COVID, to protect against hospitalization. From everything I've heard from our medical team, Johnson & Johnson vaccine does that well, it does it with one dose only, does it with much less refrigeration, so it's exactly

the right kind of vaccine to go to buildings where seniors are and do that one-on-one vaccination. Now, I would argue it's exactly what we do need. Dr. Katz, could you speak to that?

President Katz: I only wish Mr. Mayor I could give you an honorary medical degree for your answer to that question. Absolutely, what we, as doctors, as New Yorkers care about is preventing serious hospitalization and deaths, and the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is every bit as good as the Pfizer and Moderna at preventing those serious outcomes. And the fact that it's a single dose and that it does not need special refrigeration will make it so easy. I can't wait until March when I'm vaccinating my patients at Gouverneur with that vaccine, I have full confidence in it. Thank you, sir.

Mayor: Thank you. Go ahead, Reuvain.

Question: Correct me if I'm wrong, but the studies have been shown with Pfizer and Moderna that even – specifically Pfizer, that even one shot is something like 85 percent effective, which is, again, more than the one shot from Johnson & Johnson. So, if we're doing – once we want to say that for the seniors and want to do one shot, wouldn't the single Pfizer, Moderna shot be at least, if not more effective than the single J & J shot.

Mayor: Appreciate the question. I'm going to give Dr. Varma this one, because again, I do hear the various comparisons and we keep learning about each vaccine, but I want to emphasize when you have the ability, especially with homebound seniors, to get to them in their home, in their apartment, which is very hard to do with a vaccine that requires intensive refrigeration, but much easier to do with the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. Again, think about the mission you, you raise the mission very rightfully. We want to get to home bound seniors, including some of our Holocaust survivors who are home bound, seniors. We have a vaccine that will protect their lives and it's the right one for that mission and we're going to go home by home. But Dr. Varma on the comparative efficacy, could you give the explanation?

Senior Advisor Varma: Yeah, no, thank you for the question. And I know this is also going to be challenging because you're going to read news stories about the effectiveness of a single dose. You know, those are all derived from evaluations that are occurring in real time from the UK, from Israel, and they are useful and important. You know, it does become a real challenge, there was a public health recommendation, what is our standard of certainty and because vaccines are being given to healthy people and people already have enough concerns about, you know, whether this is dangerous in some way to them. You know, we feel really strongly that right now were going to have the capacity to vaccinate people, we should follow the current guidance from FDA and CDC, which is to give two full doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccine, and assuming the J & J vaccine gets approved and then authorized in the next few days to give them that single dose. If we learn more information to change that recommendation, we will certainly apply it. But yeah, we feel very comfortable with the fact that using the J & J vaccine for home bound seniors, based on the data that's presented so far, is going to protect them just as well as the other vaccines as well.

Mayor: Thank you.

Moderator: Last question for today, it goes to Ben Evansky from Fox News.

Question: Hi, Mr. Mayor, thank you for taking my question. First question, given the growing criticism and problems facing the Governor, do you think it's time for him to maybe take a time out and deal with his problems rather than continue to deny everything, can take a look at them directly deal with them?

Mayor: Well, Lord knows, I'm not here to give him advice, nor is he listening, but the point to me is we need a full investigation. We need a full investigation, independent investigation of what happened with the nursing homes, what happened with the thousands of people who died. Their families have not gotten the answers. We don't understand whether the truth was told or not. We know information was not given on a timely basis. We know mistakes were made. We know that we have not had an accounting that tells us how to save lives going forward and change the approach to nursing homes. So, we need that full investigation, and we also need a full independent investigation of these new allegations of sexual harassment. That's what needs to happen, regardless of what he does, that's what needs to happen. Go ahead.

Question: And just a second question on schools, given that the last opt-in was offered in November when we still didn't have the vaccine, given the positive progress, now we do have a vaccine. Do you think that opt-in should be offered or when will another option be offered to parents?

Mayor: That's a great question. Look, let's do things a little bit in sequence. Right now, job one, today, bring back middle schools, bring them back strong, 1,200 schools open in New York City. That's fantastic. Next step is to move to bring them back high school. We are also watching for that turning point, which I really hope we'll see soon, whereas vaccination levels rise, and case levels decline, we might see a much better health care situation. We might then be in a point where we could do a new opt-in and bring more kids back, but we're not there yet. We have to get evidence that we're there and we are obviously are watching these variants in particular, which are still in the X-factor here. So, I would say to you, middle school today, high school soon, and then the hope for the window to open for another opt-in during this school year, and of course, what we're all more and more focused on coming back strong in September where every single child who wants to be in school can be accommodated in school. That's our goal and I really do believe we're going to reach that goal.

And I'll conclude with that point. Look, seeing kids back in school today, again, really just gives you hope. You can start to see the city, what it's going to look like when we bring things back. It's such an important moment for kids. It's such an important moment for families. This is one step, one powerful step on the road back, and what's clear to me, anytime, I'm out in a community, as I was today in the Bronx, talk at folks in neighborhoods, they are ready for New York. City's great comeback, and they're going to make it happen. New Yorkers are going to make it happen. New Yorkers are raring to go and today is another step forward. So, congratulations, everyone. Thank you.

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