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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. As we discussed before the break, some high school students are getting ready to return to the classroom in just a couple of weeks. Meanwhile, the city is ramping up efforts to inoculate homebound seniors with the newly arrived Johnson & Johnson vaccine. Mayor de Blasio joins me now from the Blue Room inside City Hall to talk about all of this and much more. Good evening, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good evening, Errol. How are you doing?

Louis: Just fine, thank you. I wanted to start with this question of the schools reopening. As we have reported, the numbers look – it looks like about 20-odd percent of the student body, about 55,000 students, will be ready to go back in just a few weeks, and this is drawn primarily from the pool of those who opted in months ago. Is there going to be another window in which parents can opt in?

Mayor: Well, I hope there will be, Errol. I can't confirm that yet because it really has to do with what's happening with the coronavirus. Look I, first of all, just want to say for kids to be able to come back, I mean, what it means for kids and families is huge. I'm a firm believer we need to get our kids back to the schools. The emotional impact this crisis has had on kids, let alone the academic impact. The need to be back with their friends, the need to be back with teachers, in-person where the best learning could happen. This is really important. Now, if I can get to another opt-in, I would love to, but I'd need to see the cases go down a lot. We need to have more information about the variants. We need to have more people vaccinated, but as I said earlier today, look, that's a possibility and there's time on the clock. It's only the beginning of March. There's four more months in the school year. So, we're going to keep that option open.

Louis: When the students are back in person, will the same triggers be in place for the closure of a classroom or a school?

Mayor: That's where we are now, and you know, I've said we're re-evaluating that because we want to make sure we get it right. We've had a very careful, cautious approach to health and safety, which is why, you know, we have had amazing results in our schools. Our schools are literally the safest places in New York City, and we want to keep it that way. But at the same time, we're learning as we go along. We obviously, as of today, we have over 2.3 million vaccinations given, and that's in the city and that's rising rapidly. So, the situation is changing and in many ways improving, and we're going to look at that standard again and see if it still makes sense in this atmosphere.

Louis: So, judging by the current pace of the reopening that seems to be happening broadly across different areas, not just the schools, but also restaurants. You've talked about bringing back parts of your administration, city workers and so forth, back into their offices. Do we need to expand the range of people who are eligible for vaccination?

Mayor: Well, I certainly think there are a number of people who should be eligible right now and are not. Right now, for example, our sanitation workers are not eligible – that makes no sense. Right folks who serve in our criminal justice system, folks who are working in courts, prosecutor's offices, jurors themselves are not authorized. I've been demanding that of the state, because we need the court system back. We need the criminal justice system to function for the safety of all. There's a number of areas where people should be authorized right now, and as we continue to succeed vaccinating more and more folks I've said, we can do a half billion vaccinations a week, if we have the supply, by definition, you want to start opening up the standards more over time. So, some of it right away, I'd say Errol, and then some other categories opened up after we get, you know, a little more ahead of steam here with the supply.

Louis: How does that conversation go? I mean, is it you specifically speaking with say the Governor, or is it your health department talking to their health department? How do you make that request, and what is the form of them saying no or not yet?

Mayor: Well, there's been a lot of different elements over, we're talking months now, and sometimes it was me to the Governor. Sometimes it was my senior staff to his senior staff, or the health leadership to the state health leadership. It's been different examples, but unfortunately, what we found many times, Errol was the state took a very narrow view. You remember, I had to fight for the freedom to vaccinate. I had to fight so that senior citizens can be vaccinated, first responders. The state was not collegial about that. They didn't work through the reality on the ground. That's part of why I believe we need a full restoration of local control and bluntly, a lot of times, the only way I could get the state to act going way back to when I called for shelter in place back at the beginning of this crisis, one of the only ways to get the state to act was to go public, and so that's what happened with freedom to vaccinate as well. So, we try the internal discussions, but it is not surprising when we have to just bring it out to the people to get results.

Louis: I imagine it's gotten even a little bit more difficult in recent days now that you've gone on the record multiple times saying that you don't – you're not surprised at some of the problems that have beset the Governor and that he may or may not be able to continue in his job.

Mayor: Well, look, there again are lots of different people who have conversations. I don't think this affects the relationship between agencies by and large. Certainly, there are staff members who continue to talk to each other, no matter what. Yeah, maybe a complicate some things, but the bottom line is, you know, we're not talking about a normal approach to begin with. You know, again, there should have been local control. We're still fighting for that, and too many times, I know I did this, and I know, you know, mayors and county executives around the state, the same thing where we'd bring forward a need, and we did not hear a kind of collegial open response from Albany. When I originally said we needed to shelter in place, you know, the response was dismissive. Well, unfortunately, because of that, the action was taken later than it should have been, and the same with freedom to vaccinate. We could have been reaching people

sooner, but you know what, I'm going to keep doing the same thing. I'll keep calling them like I see them, and if we can't get things done through normal channels, we'll bring it out in the open.

Louis: As far as lessons learned, you'll be leaving office at the end of the year, and we'll see a new administration eventually in Albany. What would you tell future administrations they need to do? As far as that working together.

Mayor: Cooperate. Respect the role that each has to play. There's an understandable normal tension between state government and local government, everywhere in the country. I talk to mayors all over the country. It's not just here, it's everywhere on one level, but the difference is the level of cooperation. The ability to listen to each other's realities, work together, share or divide labor. I mean that's the norm in a lot of places, particularly if people are in the same party, and I think the fact is you got to have respect. Look, I can tell you that the local leaders around this state, the county executives, the mayors, the town supervisors all over the state are trying their damndest to help their people and protect them. The health care officials all around the state are capable people doing the work on the ground. That should be respected, and unfortunately, the attitude in Albany for too long has been to be dismissive and controlling, but that's not what works. The actual work has done in so many ways on the ground. So, my hope is with a new mayor and a new governor, there'll be a different kind of relationship. It can be a collegial relationship even with the different responsibilities, and that's what I like to see going forward. I hope that's what happens.

Louis: In retrospect, do you think that should have been on the agenda when you were running in 2013 and 2017? It wasn't something that we asked the candidates, like, you know, how do you get along with the people in Albany?

Mayor: Well, I think it's hard to talk about abstractly. I think you can only, you know, do it and, and realize what it means in practice. You can't sort of do it, you know, in a classroom, if you will, honestly, it not a case study, you have to have to get out there and do it. But I think the fact is a Mayor of New York City has to be ready to defend New York City's interest, and the people in the city. When I called for freedom to vaccinate it did not matter to me if the state was doing the wrong thing. It was my job to speak up, and Ed Koch used to talk about this, and this is an area where I really agreed with Ed Koch, you know, Mayor of New York City should be thankful to a governor who does the right thing for the people in New York City, and praise them and support them when they do the right thing, and when they do the wrong thing, stand up to them because it's my responsibility, it's my job to defend people's interests. And so, I think any mayor should come into the job with that assumption, when you can get along with a governor, that's ideal. But if that governor is being unfair to people in New York City, you got to get right up in their face. That's the way to get things done.

Louis: Okay, stand by, Mr. Mayor. We are going to take a quick break here. Don't go anywhere. I'll have more with Mayor de Blasio in just a minute. Stay with us.

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Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall, I'm once again joined by Mayor de Blasio, he joins us from the Blue Room. And Mr. Mayor on that question of you asking for permission to vaccinate and not necessarily getting it from Albany, I understand, and I saw it on social media, one of your people – I guess it was one of your press people – saying that you've asked for permission to vaccinate people who are in confinement within the jail system, Rikers Island and elsewhere, and that has not been – permission has not been provided. I'm wondering if you could say a little bit more about it?

Mayor: Sure. We – first of all, where there has been progress, and I'll get the exact number, I believe it's 800 folks who are incarcerated in our jail system have been vaccinated because there was a carve out by the State for folks who had certain conditions. That was something, but we need the freedom to do more and let our medical personnel in our jails make that determination, you know, the correctional health is run by Health + Hospitals. I think it should be up to them if someone needs to be vaccinated. So, we – it's an exact example why we need more local control and there's so many others, as I said, what I want to do to help get the court system back or serving our sanitation workers. These seem to me cases where the state has set arbitrary standards that don't necessarily work for us, and we at the local level have a better sense. So, I, you know, we've been asking the state for that freedom, so far, we have not gotten it.

Louis: This is – these are decisions with real consequences, mindful of the report that the city put out just today about an investigation that found at least three inmates, two were named, one was not, who died over the course of the last year in part, because they were not given the proper protection, they were not given the proper isolation that the proper protocols were not followed. I, it just strikes me as the kind of an emergency where there's got to be a yes or no decision, one that might have life and death consequences.

Mayor: Yeah, let me say that, first of all, when we saw this crisis hit in March and April one of the things I was very concerned about was everyone in our jail system, our officers, and those who were incarcerated. We put together a plan to have as many folks gotten out as possible that could be done safely, ended up being 1,500 to 1,600 inmates were released for the protection of everyone, so that we could reduce the jail population and make it a safer situation for everyone. That was the right thing to do. We tried to in every way get folks to health care they needed, but as you know, when you remember back to March and April, there were still so many things we were learning, and it's very painful to think that we lost some people in the midst of this crisis, but we've got to now learn from that and take from that, that if we have the ability to vaccinate folks who happen to be incarcerated of course we should do that for anyone who's vulnerable. And this is an example where the state should say, that's a local decision. Let the people who let the health officials in the jails decide, that's not for a bureaucrat in Albany to decide, that's for the health officials in the jails to the side, and that's the kind of freedom that could make all the difference.

Louis: Let's talk for a few minutes about housing. Mr. Mayor, I'm going to be moderating a forum with eight of the mayoral candidates, and we're going to stick to – or focus on housing and homelessness. Your, you know, you put some things in motion that will survive your mayoralty. You've made and met a number of different promises. You adjusted some of your plan. You ran into a little controversy here and there. Well, from what you have been able to experience over

the last eight years, what do you want the next mayor to focus on? What do you think would be the most important areas to get into, to make sure we increase the stock of affordable housing?

Mayor: Errol, I answer quickly, but I can do it a little bit by process of elimination. I mean, look, I fought very hard with a lot of good folks to improve protections for folks who are rent stabilized and who have rent control, that a lot of that was achieved in Albany. So, that's stronger than it used to be. Obviously, we've changed the Rent Guideline Boards. We did rent freezes where appropriate and lower rent increases were appropriate. That's a big change, so we've proven that could be done. Our affordable housing plans on track for 300,000 affordable apartments. I think the next mayor should continue that, that's working. I think an area, Errol, that's worth delving into more is public housing. I am convinced there's a way to save public housing in the city, but it's going to take an approach that protects residents, that protects their rights, that does not privatize, that keeps public housing, public housing, but brings in outside resources that we don't have. There's a \$40 billion need in NYCHA and the plan put forward by our NYCHA Chair Greg Russ does that. I would like to see a real discussion in this town about how we save NYCHA, because for everyone who says, oh, don't worry, the federal government will come and save us all, I – look, I have more faith than Joe Biden than I do Donald Trump for sure, but \$40 billion, you know, the day we'd get \$40 billion, I'll believe it when I see it. We need solutions now. And I don't think people should pander on this one, I think they should be honest about the fact it's not fair to ask NYCHA residents to live in a situation of buildings that have been suffering for decades and not come up with a realistic plan. Our NYCHA Chair Greg Russ has done that. I hope candidates running for mayor look at that honestly, and realize that's the kind of plan we need?

Louis: Do you want to help lead that discussion? Is this possibly, maybe one of your last campaigns before leaving the office?

Mayor: Look, I think it's important to have that discussion start from the grassroots, honestly, and that's what Greg has been doing. He's been talking to resident leaders all over the city and getting more and more support and people who are seeing their developments improved by these type of approaches - and this is important – Greg's modifying approach started by President Obama which is the, the RAD program, which again, strikes this powerful balance, protecting residents, protecting their rights and privileges and avoiding anything like privatization, continuing public control, but bringing in resources for rehabbing entire buildings. We have now evidence all over the city of how this works. So, I certainly support it, but I think Greg's got the right approach. The best support is to go to the grassroots and get the buy-in of NYCHA residents.

Louis: Yeah, and you've seen enough of this conversation to know that the main objection that comes up and there are a number of elected officials who go right there immediately, is that it's a plot, it's a trick, it's not going to work, it's an attempt to privatize public housing.

Mayor: Except it does work and it has worked. And I'll tell you something, Congressman Greg Meeks is a great example of this, he told me very honestly, this is about four years ago, that he had originally been very queasy about the RAD initiative that President Obama created and he worried it might in some way lead to public housing being less public, but then one of the

buildings, one of the developments in his district in the Rockaways, the Ocean Bay Development, which had a lot of trouble, lot of physical trouble, a lot of challenges, was a part of this program, got totally rehabbed. I've been there. It's absolutely amazing what's been done. It's now got management that really takes care of it working closely with the residents. He became a convert. He went with me to the Bronx to a site, to Betances Houses to talk about what happened in Queens and to tell folks in the Bronx it worked, now that development in the Bronx has gone through it too, and we're hearing great response from the residents. So, this is not a theory. This is something that's working right now in New York City and I would urge all elected officials have concerns and questions, go see the ones that have actually - go see these developments, go talk to the residents who now have an apartment that's brand new, have hallways that are clean and elevators that are working and doors that lock and listen to the voices of these working people, these good people who have suffered for so long that finally are getting what they deserve. It, you know what? No one has a better idea. This is the way to protect the residents, but also give them the standard of living they deserve.

Louis: Okay. We're going to pick it up at the housing forum on Thursday, we'll let you know the results and we'll see you again next week. Thanks for joining me.

Mayor: Thank you, Errol.

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