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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL**

**Errol Louis:** Welcome back to Inside City Hall. As we told you before the break, the City is ramping up its vaccination efforts by adding additional sites and pushing for a faster pace of distribution. After getting criticized over the slow start. This comes as the seven-day positivity rate is reached nine percent according to city figures, while officials continue to monitor any possible cases of a new strain that we now know is in New York State. Mayor de Blasio joins me now to talk about all of that and much more from the Blue Room inside City Hall. Good evening, Mr. Mayor and Happy New Year.

**Mayor Bill de Blasio:** Happy New Year to you, Errol. How you feel?

**Louis:** Just fine, thanks. Let's get right into it. Is the current holdup due to bureaucracy? Was there a delay because of the state's rules or just the – I guess the normal difficulty of getting a big project launched?

**Mayor:** A big new project for sure, with a vaccine that our health care professionals have never dealt with before a different kind of vaccine, intense refrigeration needed, a lot of things that have to be sorted out that had to be done carefully, safely, and now we're ready to take off. Our goal is to have around 100,000 vaccinations this week, but by the end of January to have about 400,000 a week. So we're looking to do a million doses in January and what we need is the freedom and flexibility to do this. We need the federal government to make sure we have the supply and to make the process simpler than it is now. We need the state government to give us the freedom to reach essential workers, folks over 75, who are vulnerable – teachers, cops, everyday New Yorkers who protect us, and we need the manufacturers obviously to keep producing the vaccine. We've got enough supply for the next week or two, but we don't have more than that, and we need it to keep being delivered.

But look, all these pieces can come together and we can do something extraordinary in January and the months beyond. So the focus right now should be on all levels of government, just helping our medical personnel, our health care heroes, to do this job, supporting them and trusting them to get this work done.

**Louis:** Do you need additional staffing in order to hit the pace that you're looking for?

**Mayor:** We're going to be using all the health care personnel of this city. We're going to be bringing in volunteer city employees. We certainly want to draw on medical personnel who are part of our medical reserve. We're going to use everything it takes, and if we need to get folks on special contracts to come in, whatever it takes, the City of New York is going to make sure the

personnel is there. So look, we've got about 125 sites now. That's going to go up to 160 or so by the end of the week, 250, by the end of the month. So the sites are expanding. The staff is expanding. We need the ability to give this vaccine to people who are ready for it.

That's the other, x-factor here, Errol. You've got right now, most experts are saying somewhere in the 30 percent, maybe 40 percent range of folks who are not yet ready to take the vaccine. So, the problem is you don't just look at a group of people and say, Oh, everyone's going to put their arm out. No, a certain number of them are not ready yet. That's why you need as much flexibility as possible to move to the next category, the next category, while people get more acclimated, more comfortable, and I know a lot of folks who are hesitant today, come back in February, March, April, they're going to want that vaccine.

**Louis:** The Governor laid out a chart today showing hospital systems that have used up all of their vaccines the minute they got them and hospital systems, including Health + Hospitals, that were at the lower end. He calls that “constructive impatience,” and he also threatened to impose fines if the vaccines don't get out faster, I think it was your spokesperson who called that punitive and unnecessary. Where's the truth in between those things? I mean, the Governor's stance I believe is that if he doesn't do this kind of pushing, we don't get the results that we need?

**Mayor:** Yeah, look, that's just arrogance. Listen, does he think that our health care professionals are uninterested in vaccinating people? How about trusting the people who have been our heroes? This is what I say the Governor, and I respect the Governor spoken during a lot of times last few weeks, this is what I say to him: respect and trust are health care professionals. They are the people who do the work. They are the people who know best. They want to get people vaccinated. No one's more motivated than them. Help them, support them. Don't fine them, don't threaten them. Respect them and help them. So, for example, what he said about Health + Hospitals is just blatantly inaccurate. A lot of that delivery to Health + Hospitals came in in the last 24 hours. They weren't even in the position to turn around and use it, it just got there. But the bottom line is Health + Hospitals is preparing to help lead the way to reach people.

But as I said, by the end of this week at 160 sites all over this city, of course, they want to get the job done and they're moving heaven and earth, but you know what? Errol, here's the blunt truth in our city public hospitals until just a couple of days ago, the state rules literally did not allow our doctors to vaccinate everyone in the hospital who wanted to be vaccinated. There was a lot of staff were not allowed to be vaccinated. If someone was a patient there, over 75, they still weren't on the priority list. Come on. We need rules that maximize the pace, that help us speed up and reach the people who are available, who are priority and who are ready, willing, and able. It's common sense. So the state can help us here. Stop threatening people, stop suggesting – when you threaten people with a fine, it paralyzes them. It doesn't free them up to act. It doesn't encourage them to be bold. It paralyzes people. So, take away the fines and the rhetoric. Just say, okay, health care professionals, let's get going. How do we do this together? And what my health care professionals, our health leadership is saying to me is give us the freedom to the two categories, 1A, 1B, so that we can get to those essential workers. So that we can get to folks over 75, teachers, cops let's get to all those folks, and that will give us lots of willing and ready people, and we can be going 24 hours a day. That's how we move this forward.

**Louis:** Let me drill down on that, and I don't want to make any assumptions about what you're saying here. Are you saying you want the freedom to vaccinate, for example, a lot more senior citizens, regardless of whether or not they happen to live in a nursing home or assisted living facility?

**Mayor:** I know, and our health leadership has made this clear locally and all over the country, at over 75 years old people are vulnerable. So of course, the first concern I have agreed with the state on this a hundred percent. First concern is the most frontline health care heroes and folks that live and work in nursing homes, and a lot of that work is being done. In fact, we need the federal government to step up because they have a chunk of that nursing home work that that needs to speed up. But when you think about the hundreds of thousands of folks who are absolutely precious and crucial, our seniors, our essential workers, our teachers, our cops, I want to get onto them as well, and I want to keep the pace moving. So, if I've got those folks in places, many cases where we can vaccinate a lot of people quickly and efficiently at all hours a day, why wouldn't we get the freedom to do that? Keep focusing on the people in the original categories, but bluntly, Errol, some of those people don't want to be vaccinated, and so why be held up?

If in our hospitals we had a full green light, vaccinate everyone, who's a member of your staff, vaccinate everyone over 75, broader guidelines from beginning, we would have already vaccinated a lot more people. So again, I trust the health care professionals. They're saying to me, "give us flexibility, we can go a lot faster," and that's what I'm saying to the state. With absolute respect, the state's done a lot of good work, but it's time to trust health care officials around the state and here in the city to get the job done.

**Louis:** With your current constellation of constraints and requirements, can the city administer the rest of its vaccines by the end of this week?

**Mayor:** There's no way with what we have on hand under the current rules. Again, that's just category 1A, and you got to add in the particular challenges and logistics that come with that category, plus the fact again, probably 30 percent or more people don't want the vaccine at this moment. No, you cannot use the supply we have efficiently with those standards. If you give us the freedom to do both categories, any essential workers and anyone over 75, this thing will take off. That's the point, and isn't the goal here that every additional human being, every additional New Yorker that gets vaccinated, we're one step closer to ending this crisis. So, they're all priority people. What kind of essential worker is not a priority person, what person over 75 is not a vulnerable and priority person. I want all of these categories in place simultaneously.

**Louis:** But yeah, yeah. This reminds me of something of the protocols that were involved in testing. Not everybody could get a test, initially. It was only this category, that category, we spun our wheels and wasted quite a lot of time trying to figure that out.

**Mayor:** And once we made it for everyone – I mean, we had a day, a few weeks ago where we had over a hundred thousand New Yorkers tested because now it's for everyone. That's what we have to do. Keep expanding the categories. So it's fast and people know they are welcome right now. What people are hearing who want a vaccine is it's not ready for you yet. I want the

message to be the, all of those good people who need it. All those people who serve us, all those people are vulnerable over 75, the vaccine's ready for you now come and get it. We're going to find you. We're going to work with you. That's the message we should be sending.

**Louis:** Okay. I've got a couple of more vaccination questions, Mr. Mayor, standby. We're going to take a short break here. I'll have more with Mayor de Blasio in just a minute. Stay with us.

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Welcome back to Inside City Hall. I'm once again joined by Mayor de Blasio from the Blue Room inside City Hall. Mr. Mayor, the president of the teacher's union, Michael Mulgrew released a statement this afternoon, calling on the City to use State measures for determining the rates of infection. And he said, if the community infection rate in the city hits nine percent, which we apparently are at, the safe thing to do is to close the schools, even if the in-school rate is lower. What is your reaction to that?

**Mayor:** That the State sets the rules and the State numbers are what the State has been making its decisions based on. Obviously, their number is very different. But the central point is the safety of our schools. What I talked about this morning, 100,000 students and staff, teachers, et cetera, were tested in those weeks in December when school was back. And we ended up with a positivity rate of 0.68 percent. Think about that. You're talking about so much safer dynamics, such a safer environment. Look, we went to a lot of effort to make sure our schools would be safe. And we created literally a gold standard of health and safety measures. And now we're testing every single week. And if the school's not safe, we shut it down. If there's cases in the school and that hits those criteria, we shut it down. But the vast majority of schools of course have stayed open, have been really safe. We want to keep them open. We want to serve our kids and our families. And there's no place safer to be in New York City than in our public schools. That's been proven now for months.

**Louis:** Well, I mean, right before Christmas, despite those good numbers, there were I think almost 300 school buildings and programs that were closed because of the testing, the positive rates that were coming up among some educators and students. And that's over 1,000 classrooms – children and teachers who have to quarantine and parents who have to make plans. That sort of a thing. If we're going to keep buildings open, no matter what, what about the remote learning that most students are using exclusively?

**Mayor:** First of all, I, obviously you and I go back a long way. I'm not sure I agree with that last number you offered. But I do want to say this, we have 878 schools that are open now. Some are going to be closed specifically because of cases. But overall, I'm talking about our overall universe, 878 schools, serving so many kids and parents who need it. And the vast majority have stayed open. So that's why we keep going. Look, I, again, I think we have something that works, that has been working even with an uptick in cases. 0.68 percent is lower than we were at our best points in the summer in this city. So clearly, you know our doctors say this Errol, I mean, our health care leadership says, wait a minute, if you have everyone wearing a mask, if you have the place cleaned non-stop, there's social distancing observed. You know, you put all these measures in place and constant testing, much more than you see in the rest of society. Everyone's

being tested constantly in our schools. You're going to have a really safe environment. It's literally the safest place in New York City, so we should keep our schools open.

**Louis:** Okay. So, I mean, so even in some neighborhoods I know in parts of Brooklyn and parts of the South Bronx, you've got positivity rates that are, you know, double digit, 16 percent, you know, 12 percent. Are you comfortable with schools staying open in the middle of those kinds of neighborhoods?

**Mayor:** Yeah. Because of what we've learned. And again, I'm listening to the doctors. Again, I really want to emphasize, I make my decisions based on what our health care leadership tell me and the data and the science. So, what they're saying is these numbers are astoundingly consistent. And they tell us something very important. Which is what's happened now in our schools, systematically is we've reached the kind of safety that we need to get back to as a whole city. And we will in the coming weeks, particularly as the vaccine is implemented more and more. We've achieved in our schools, what we wish we could achieve in every business, every home. We've achieved the kind of safety measures at work. And any time there are cases that require a closure, it's immediate. So why would we turn away from that? It's not about what's happening in the rest of the city or the rest of the neighborhoods. It's about what's happening in that school community. And what's happening in school communities consistently is they are overwhelmingly, amazingly safe. And a lot of good people, health care professionals and staff and parents work constantly to keep them safe. So, I honor their efforts and I want to keep them open for our kids.

**Louis:** We have on the screen right now, the seven-day positivity rate showing double digits in a handful of neighborhoods, Wakefield, Woodlawn, Hunts Point, Borough Park, Sunset Park, Richmond Hill, South Ozone Park. Are special efforts being targeted to those ZIP codes? Or are we at a point of community spread where you've got to deal with the whole city and not just particular neighborhoods?

**Mayor:** A couple of things, one, yes, throughout this crisis, when we've seen upticks in some neighborhoods, what we do is we send more testing in, more outreach, more mask distribution. That's helped a lot. This particular surge has been so intense over the last few weeks, but I am hopeful. And I think the State shares this view that in these next few weeks, we get farther and farther away from the holidays and the gatherings, the numbers will start to decline towards the latter part of January. But much more importantly, vaccinations that will now start to happen. Not just in the tens of thousands, but hundreds of thousands per week. Remember even the first dose of the vaccine gives people a lot of protection. So, I think there's going to be great downward pressure on these numbers in the course of January going into February. But in the end, you know, we go with all of our efforts where the need is greatest. So, vaccination, as we start to go out to communities, we're going to focus on the communities that were hardest hit by COVID. We need that. We need that equity. We need to think about where were the most cases, where did the most people die? The sad, sad, painful reality, but that also tells us where we're going to do the most in terms of grassroots vaccination efforts.

**Louis:** We've been talking about the UK variant, the especially contagious variety of the coronavirus that we now know is in New York State. Are you looking for that in particular in the

tests that the City Health Department is getting? Or are you going to just discover it in the course of doing the regular screenings?

**Mayor:** Look what our health care leadership is saying so far is thank God, this new variant is not more deadly. It is apparently more contagious. It spreads more easily. But in the end, it's the same ball game, right? It's the same strategy. Get people vaccinated, get people doing the basic health and safety measures. It works in either case with either variant. And the vaccine is effective based on what we know now toward this variant. So, it does not change the fundamental game plan. We need the most New Yorkers following the health and safety guidance of our Health Department. We need the most people vaccinated as quickly as possible. That's the same way we defeat this new variant.

**Louis:** Okay. We only have a little time, but I did want to ask a non COVID question. We had a major increase in murders last year, but an even larger jump in shootings. Even more disturbing of course, is that nearly 70 percent of the shootings last year remain unsolved according to the NYPD. That's a clearing rate of about, well, a little under 32 percent according to the NYPD data as of the end of the year. Is there a plan to specifically deal with that question, shootings and solving them?

**Mayor:** Yeah. And it is something I think the Commissioner has been very clear about. We are rebuilding the close bonds at the community level that helps people to come forward. We need in a lot of cases, people to come forward and provide information, provide testimony. Deepening neighborhood policing, we know that works. It worked for six years, straight driving down crime, improving relationship between police and community. Get us away from this perfect storm of COVID. And it's a whole open situation again, where neighborhood policing, precision policing CompStat do the incredible things that they do. But we know as things start to normalize a little more, that clearance rate is going to go up. And we'll apply whatever resources it takes to make that happen.

**Louis:** You mentioned by the way, the Umbrella Hotel in Kew Gardens, where there was this triple shooting over New Year's Eve. You say that you want to close it down. At least one local official there said that his office has gotten over a hundred complaints since July. Is there something other than blood on the streets that can be a trigger to take action against some of these places?

**Mayor:** You know, Errol private property rights are pretty damn strong. And, in some cases, too strong. But I think this is the straw that breaks the camel's back. I want that place shut down. We're going to lose every tool the City has, and I'll have an update by tomorrow on what our Law Department thinks is the right course of action. But bottom line, it's a danger to the community. It should be shut down.

**Louis:** Okay. We'll leave it there for now. And we'll pick it up, good luck with this first week of 2021, getting the vaccinations done. And thanks for spending some time tonight.

**Mayor:** Thank you very much, Errol.

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