

THE CITY OF NEW YORK
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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: The USNS Comfort hospital ship docked in the Hudson River earlier today, bringing hundreds of hospital beds to our city, along with more than 1,000 medical personnel. They'll be admitting non-coronavirus to help ease the crush that our hospitals are facing as the number of COVID cases surges. Mayor de Blasio was there when the ship came in and he joins me now from inside City Hall to talk about that and much more. Good evening, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good evening, Errol.

Louis: With the arrival of this ship, with the temporary hospital being built in Central Park, we've got additional capacity. Where do we stand right now with the number of hospital beds that we have as opposed to the number that you think we're going to need?

Mayor: Errol right now, you know, this day we are where we need to be because you know, I issued an executive order canceling elective surgery for hospitals in the city. We did that weeks ago. That led to a lot of space being cleared out. A huge amount of what our hospitals were doing before was elective surgery and also keeping people in longer than they necessarily needed to be. We asked hospitals to clear as many beds as possible and get ready for this, so they have. So we have room to grow in our hospitals, in terms of building out more and more ICU capacity. And that's the name of this game. I mean, remember that before all this started, we had about 20,000 active hospital beds in New York City. Depending on the trajectory of this crisis, we may need to turn all of those hospital-based beds into ICU beds. And use everything else for other types of needs – for hospitalizations that do not involve ICU, for COVID cases that do not involve ICU. That's what Javits will be about. That's what the Comfort will be about. That's what hotels will be about. So today the build out is going well. A few weeks from now, it's going to be very, very intense. And that's what we're preparing for.

Louis: Say a little bit more about hotels. Are you – is the City going to lease or rent out hotels, convert them? What's the prospect here?

Mayor: Yeah, we're all working together. Federal government, State government, City, and I think between the three levels of government we are going to get a lot of hotels. Literally in some cases, leasing entire hotels, converting them into temporary hospitals. Again, not for the folks who need ICU care, but for the folks who need other kinds of care. Ideally hotels near existing hospitals. That's the best. But we can take a hotel floor plan – I talked this through right here at City Hall with the Army Corps of Engineers leadership on Friday night and they showed me the floor plans of how you turn a hotel into an instant hospital. You create a nurse's station

around where the elevators are. I mean they have really simple things they do to flip a switch basically and turn a hotel into a hospital. And we're going to be doing that to the tune of thousands and thousands of rooms.

Louis: The city, as we know, has seen several straight days of record numbers of 9-1-1 calls. NBC has reported that FEMA sent 60 hospitals today to help deal with the strain and the overload. And we're still weeks out from the apex. Is this going to get worse and will we have the capacity to meet the need?

Mayor: Yeah, I think you were referring to FEMA sending ambulances. Yes?

Louis: Yes.

Mayor: Yeah. And we really appreciate – FEMA has been great, Errol. And you know, they saw that we were dealing with a particular challenge with EMS. Also, another thing that we've seen in the case of Elmhurst Hospital, getting patients – Elmhurst has been particularly overcrowded. So, one of the things that Health + Hospitals has done is move patients from Elmhurst who could be moved safely, to other hospitals, including even outside of Queens, like Coney Island Hospital. So, we need the ambulances for both those purposes. Yes. What we are doing with the Fire Department, with EMS is rapidly moving personnel onto EMS, more and more, getting additional vehicles, getting additional shifts. Real emergencies are going to get addressed. That's the bottom line. Commissioner Nigro and I are 100 percent clear about this – real emergencies, the ambulance will be there, the personnel will be there. We know, we've always known a lot of people call 9-1-1 who have something less than the kind of emergency that needs an ambulance. We're going to really be careful to divert those calls, get a doctor on a line, help address people's concerns. A lot of people worried about COVID-19 are calling 9-1-1, even though that's not what you should do if you're, for example, feeling normal symptoms. So we're going to take a series of steps to correct the situation and make sure that every real emergency can be addressed in real time.

Louis: Okay. There are of course, a lot of dimensions to preparedness. The New York Post is reporting that an MTA cleaner named Caridad Santiago died in her apartment over the weekend, apparently from COVID. And her body was there for 24 hours while the family waited in a car. They were afraid of being infected, but it took that long for the Medical Examiner's Office to come and collect her body. And here again we're still not at the apex of this, right?

Mayor: No, we're not. That's a very, very painful example and I feel so bad for that family, what they went through, just the loss alone, let alone having to be put through a horrible situation. I met today with the Administrator for FEMA for the Northeast Region, Tom Von Essen, who was the Fire Commissioner in New York City during 9/11, a real hero and someone very devoted to New York City. We said we're going to need a lot more help from the federal government to address that very, very painful part of the equation of those we lost. And that help is coming. We have to do everything we can to avoid those kinds of situations. So, look, it's going to be tough. You're right. The weeks ahead are going to be very, very tough. I've been trying to warn people, sort of gird them for battle. But on the other hand, thank God, help is coming now. Much more constantly. Remember, Errol, in January, I was asking the federal government for testing. In

February, I was asking them for testing, couldn't get it. As this was getting worse, I was pleading for ventilators, for equipment, supplies, couldn't get it. Finally, in the last say, week or ten days, the federal government has come alive finally. We see a lot of supplies coming in, a lot of equipment coming in, nothing more powerful than the Comfort arriving here and docking in New York City. I think we now have a federal government that at least in many ways is providing us the kind of support we need so we can address these really painful challenges. Now my job is to keep it that way. And I'm constantly talking – I spoke to the Secretary of Defense a few hours ago. I spoke to Peter Navarro from the White House who's supposed to be the lead guy on getting us equipment and supplies, done some real good work for us. This is going to be every day, every hour, making sure we are always ahead of the game and getting the support that we're finally starting to see now for the federal government, but in a consistent manner.

Louis: Okay. I've got a question from while one of our viewers, Mr. Mayor. What is the City doing to make sure older adults get access to emergency food at home? How are we reaching the people who are not already in DFTA, the Department for The Aging's seniors center database? How can neighborhood-based programs help?

Mayor: That's an excellent question. Anyone who cannot get out and get food call 3-1-1 and we'll connect them to the existing approach we have. And we all know about Meals on Wheels. In fact, what we did was we went much farther because our senior centers, once we started shelter in place and social distancing efforts, our senior centers no longer could be a place for seniors to go. So we turned them into kitchens to get meals out to seniors and deliver them. And we have a lot of capacity, in fact, on top of that I named, you know, last week, a Foods Czar Kathryn Garcia, our Sanitation Commissioner who is first rate, who is building out a food delivery system. Because we think a lot more people are going to have this problem who don't have paychecks, can't afford food. But particularly for our seniors who can't get out. So call 3-1-1, we'll connect you to a food delivery at home for everyone who qualifies. But it's going to be part of a much bigger effort over the next few weeks to make sure there's food security in New York City, no matter what else is happening with this crisis.

Louis: Okay. A lot of people, Mr. Mayor are asking where they can find testing sites. I'm assuming these are people who believe or are already sure that they're appropriate candidates to arrive at a testing site. Where can they find out, especially in Harlem and the Bronx?

Mayor: So, the testing again is still prioritized. You know, there's talk out there of really mass-producing faster tests that could be game changers as we go forward. But to-date we are still dependent on the tests that have, you know, a one-day, two-day turnaround. And that's still a limited number. So, that's going to folks who are in real health danger. Our folks who are 70 and over, our folks who have major preexisting conditions, or both older and with preexisting conditions. They're the highest priority. Those are the folks we've been losing the most and we have to protect them. Our health care workers, our first responders. Those who really, really need testing, who are symptomatic and need testing. That's the priority. Everything's done by priority. Everything's done by reservation. You can go to [nyc.gov](https://www.nyc.gov), you can call 3-1-1. Those sites were announced in the last you know, ten days or so. We have not added new ones since. If we are adding any, of course we'll announce them. But so long as people understand, if you're just not feeling well, if you think you've got those, you know, flu or cold kind of symptoms, stay home

three or four days. If they're getting better, just ride it out. And if you can go three days with no fever, you're good, you're done. Go back. We're finally seeing that arrow with cops and firefighters coming back on the job off of COVID-19. That's fantastic. But if you, if you take those three or four days and you're not feeling well, it starts to get worse. You call a doctor and that's when they figure out how and when you get the kind of testing you'd need.

Louis: Okay. Stand by. Mr. Mayor. We're going to take a short break. I'll have much more with Mayor de Blasio in just a minute. Stay with us.

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Louis: Welcome back to Mondays with the Mayor. I'm joined once again by Mayor de Blasio. And Mr. Mayor, there's a lot of talk on social media in particular, as well as some press conference protest that have been organized, people calling for the rent to be suspended or canceled while people are stuck at home by government order and unable to work, unable to earn any income. What's your take on that? And what, realistically, might you be able to do for them?

Mayor: One, I think they're right. And the thing I've done is said that we should have for rent stabilized apartments – that's over a million apartments – over a 2 million – close to, you know, somewhere to two-and-a-half million New Yorkers are in those rent stabilized apartments. Those normally go through the Rent Guidelines Board, which decides what kind of rent increase there will be. I've called for that process to be suspended this year. It will require action by the State, I've asked the State to do that. That would create a rent freeze immediately for those 2 million-plus New Yorkers. So, that's the thing I'm doing where I'm saying, I'm formally asking the State to suspend that rent guidelines process so we can immediately tell those 2 million-plus New Yorkers, you will not have a rent increase in 2020. For those who are not rent stabilized, I think it makes sense to do some kind of rent moratorium. That also would require State action, but I think it's the right thing to do. There's just so many people who do not have the money to pay. And, Errol, one more thing that's been suggested, I think it's a good idea, which is to allow folks who are renters to get their security deposit back to help pay for the rent in the meantime if they don't have money. And certainly, for those who are economically distressed, maybe some don't need to do it, but for anyone who does, they should have that right. It's actually good for landlords too in many cases, because if the renter can't pay at all, the landlord is stuck there too. So, at least, let them use the security deposit. It's sitting in the bank account. You're not legally allowed to touch it if you're a landlord. Let's have the State act on this, allow that money to flow with some kind of provision for, you know, restoring the deposit over time with a, you know, installment plan, something like that. But, right now, it's crazy to ask people who don't have any income to pay rent.

Louis: And, of course, you, while living in Gracie Mansion have rented out your home and two properties you have in Brooklyn. Is that what you're planning to do with your tenants?

Mayor: If they need it, sure. The fact is that anyone who can't pay drawing on that security deposit is a good idea. It works for the landlord, it works for the renter, but, again, with some way of eventually restoring it that makes sense and is on, you know, fair terms for the renter. But yeah, of course. Anyone who can't pay, what are you going to tell them to do? They can't make it

– you know, they can't print the money, that only happens in Washington – and it does happen in Washington, as we recently saw.

Louis: Let me ask you, you mentioned State action – we're getting near the budget deadline. It's coming up next week, as a matter of fact. What are top priorities and have you been in discussions with the Governor and the legislative leaders?

Mayor: Well, I've had extensive conversations with Speaker Heastie and Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins. My team's been talking to their team at length – their teams. Look, first and foremost, let's get it right on Medicaid. Medicaid got a lot of attention before this crisis. It deserves attention again. It was wrong to even think about cutting Medicaid dollars from localities, which was going to put them in horrible financial shape before coronavirus. Now, if you cut a Medicaid, you're going to take away health care from people that need health care in the middle of a pandemic. You're going to force localities to cut even more services when they're stressed already. It makes no sense. You know, in the third stimulus bill there was clearly money – I'm sorry, the second stimulus bill, there was money put aside for Medicaid. The State got money. The City got money. The State should take that money, [inaudible] them over through this crisis. There should be a stimulus – a fourth stimulus, in fact, in April. I've talked to Speaker Pelosi, I've talked to Senator Schumer about this, I've talked to Secretary Mnuchin – there needs to be another stimulus that specifically aids cities, localities, states, replaces the lost revenue – all of that revenue lost because of the coronavirus – makes up for those huge expenses related to coronavirus, makes localities and states whole. That's the only way we're going to have an economic recovery, is if governments are functioning. So, that I think is something that the State can look forward to. But, in the meantime, hold off any Medicaid cuts in the middle of a pandemic – that's priority number-one. Obviously, Errol, we want to make sure that there's a fair outcome on education funding no effort to set us back in a devastating way there. I mean, it's just about basic fairness at this point. We're all in this together. The State should be cautious and look forward to that next stimulus, which I really believe will happen in April.

Louis: You're calling for our schools to be closed – public schools to be closed at least through April 20th. The CDC guideline – the White House guidance is that things should stay closed until the 30th. What's going to happen if your deadline arrives and we're still in the federal guidelines calling for everything to remain closed?

Mayor: Yeah, I mean, right now, I've been honest from day-one when I made the decision on schools and everyone knows I felt very, very uncomfortable taking away education from our children. We've tried to make up for it with distance learning it's not as good, but we're going to do our best. But, Errol, I said back then, we set April 20th as a natural point because it was right after the spring vacation. But it's a hard, hard date to achieve in light of the magnitude of this crisis. If we think it's possible, we'll talk to the federal government. We'll talk to the CDC, of course, our own health officials, but my greater fear is not, you know, oh, you couldn't do April 20th, but you could do April 30th. My fear is this crisis goes far enough into May that we really lose the window to bring back school at all. And, right now, unfortunately, I think that's the likelihood. We'll really try our darnedest, but I think that's the likelihood.

Louis: Okay. A letter that you received from the five district attorneys, one of whom I spoke to today, says that you and Commissioner Brann, the Correction Commissioner, assured the DA's that people being released from Rikers and other detention centers who were serving City sentences would not include people serving time for domestic abuse or domestic violence or sexual assault, sexual crimes. They say that that promise was not met and they're concerned about the strategy being used to reduce the jail population. Wanted to give you a chance to respond.

Mayor: Thank you for that, Errol. I have no evidence whatsoever that, that has not been met. And I think the only area where there might be some misunderstanding or disagreement is there were some specific medical cases that were really aberrant, if you will, within the formula. The original formula we put forward, we said, if you're City sentenced, you don't have, by definition, even a year to serve – the most you can serve as a year. A lot of people only had a months to go on their sentence. We wanted to see those people out for the good of everyone to protect not only them, but everyone else who's still there by spreading out the population and allowing for more distancing. And we said we would exclude folks who their crime involved domestic violence or sexual crimes. At the same time, I said from the beginning of this process, there's a fundamental medical and humanitarian question that if someone was in one of the high risk categories – older, over 50, and especially if they were older than that, over 60, over 70, and if they had the preexisting conditions – and anyone who has both is in profound danger – we had to balance that into the equation. So, we'll go back and talk to the DA's about it. But I do want to be clear, we stuck to those standards. There were some very specific medical situations where Correctional health said, these folks are profoundly in danger and we had to say, wait a minute, it's not right to take someone accused of a crime or even serving a short sentence and put them in literally danger of losing their life. That's what we were trying to do to strike that balance.

Louis: Okay. That brings us to the end of our time. Thank you for spending some time with us, Mr. Mayor. We'll talk again next week.

Mayor: Thank you, Errol.

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