

THE CITY OF NEW YORK
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NEW YORK, NY 10007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 20, 2020, 10:00 AM
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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON THE BRIAN LEHRER
SHOW**

Brian Lehrer: And now we start as we usually do on Fridays with our weekly Ask the Mayor segment – my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio at 212-433-WNYC – 212-433-9692 – or, you can tweet a question, just use the hashtag #AsktheMayor. And good morning, Mr. Mayor, welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, Brian. And thank you and all the people you listed for all the work you're doing. It's very, very important that people get accurate information and it's very reassuring to New Yorkers to know they can turn to all of you. So, thanks to your whole team and, you know, we all need you. Appreciate what you're doing.

Lehrer: Thank you. I know you're calling on the President to use his powers under the Defense Production Act to help get us the millions of masks and thousands of respirators our health care system needs in very short order. What could happen under such a presidential order?

Mayor: So, the President has invoked the Defense Production Act and that allows him to mandate that industries produce what is needed for the national good. And factories, literally, that produce the goods we need have to do it on the highest production level, has to be prioritized for distribution to where the need is greatest. I mean, Brian, let's be very clear, right now, with the almost 4,000 cases confirmed coronavirus as of 6:00 pm yesterday in New York City, and 26 people who have passed away, we now have about 30 percent of the cases in the United States of America and about 70 percent of the cases in New York State, and New York State, unquestionably, is the leading state in this point in the nation for this problem. With the Defense Production Act, the President could simply say, okay, these industries are now going to produce at maximum these kinds of factories that produce something similar, are going to convert to produce, for example, the ventilators at maximum and then distribute them where they're needed most. And I think the best way to ensure that is to bring the United States military into the equation. They have the best logistical capacity. They also have a huge amount of medical personnel and supplies of their own. Now, Brian, what's happening right now is, all of that capacity is sitting at bases all over the United States, while, right now, we're at the front and other parts of the country are front where people are suffering and they're going to be dying more and more. And I don't mean to be too dramatic here, it's just a fact. It is a fact that a lot of people are going to die who don't need to die if this doesn't happen quickly. How on earth is our military not mobilized? I know the military would answer the call instantly and know what to do, but they are being left to their bases while people are suffering. It makes no sense.

Lehrer: So, what kind of response have you gotten from the White House?

Mayor: Of course, nothing. I'm sorry that I have to say of course. I reached out to Vice President Pence a few days back, he sent me to Secretary Azar of Health and Human Services who was receptive and helpful on the narrow question of getting us some testing approval for one company. But we've continually asked for supplies, they've sent us a very small amount. I'm going to try today again to talk to Pence, Azar, to talk to the VA Secretary Wilkie to activate the Veterans Administration's Hospitals and capacity in the city, which would also help a lot. But honestly – and I know Senator Schumer has been trying – everyone and anyone in the executive branch as well, I've talked to him about it. But we couldn't be clearer about what we're asking for. We've documented it. We've repeated it publicly, privately. You know, the Senate Minority leader has asked, I've asked as the leader of the nation's largest city. They're not responding and they're not responding either out of ignorance or they're not responding on purpose, which I think history is going to judge very harshly. You know, we're talking about, ironically, a New Yorker in the White House who right now is betraying New York City. We're talking about a president who is basically doing what Herbert Hoover did at the beginning of the Depression and minimizing the danger and refusing to use available federal action. And people are going to die and they shouldn't. They don't have to if we could get the support that we're asking for. We have two or three weeks before our hospitals at a point where they cannot provide the care they are capable of because they won't have the equipment and the supplies. That's how clear it is.

Lehrer: California's Governor Gavin Newsom has issued a statewide stay-at-home order, as I'm sure you know. Pennsylvania's governor ordered all non-essential businesses to temporarily close. How different are those things from what you're already asking of New Yorkers in the city and do you think we need to go further?

Mayor: We need to go to a shelter in place model. In California, they're calling it safe at home. What Governor Newsome did was exactly right, it's very similar to what San Francisco did earlier in the week. It is a public health order. It is an order to people who are non-essential industries to go home, stay home. That does not mean you can't go to the grocery store or the pharmacy. You have to, obviously – and this is accounted for in these orders – anyone who wants to understand it, I've seen the San Francisco website where they lay it out. It's very clear. It is balanced. People still can get food, medicine. People can still get outside, get some exercise, walk their dog, but they have to socially distance. And it's enforceable, it's a public health order. If people try to assemble, they'll be broken up. If people loiter on the street and aren't out there for a specific purpose, they'll be sent back home. So, it's enforceable. But I think I really believe this, Brian, if we have a clear order to our people to change their habits immediately, they've gotten plenty of education on the problem of this virus and what is starting to do, I think people are going to be receptive. We've seen that in many ways already, but they need an order and they need to be crystal clear – this is what you can do, this is what you can't do. And if you're not one of these essential industries, if you're not involved in a health care – you're not a healthcare provider or a first responder or someone who keeps, you know, electricity running or water running or basics, you should be home. You should shut your store if you – if you're involved in providing food to people, we need you. If you're selling, you know, items to tourists or if you're selling a regular old, you know, luxury goods or anything like that, there's no way in the world you should be open right now. So, we've got to have a sharp delineation. This is what's essential,

this is what's not, everyone else get home. That's what California has done and I think it's the model that should be followed literally everywhere in the nation that's facing this threat, because it's the only way we know – and our public health leaders say this, Brian – it's the only way we know to slow down the speed of this spread of this disease. If we don't slow it down, our hospitals will simply not be able to handle the burden. And if we do slow it down, we give time for resupply and time to prepare more health care facilities.

Lehrer: So, why not just order that shelter in place right now, right here?

Mayor: The State of New York, under its emergency powers, has the right to make this decision. I respect that. I've said publicly, I think Governor Cuomo has made right decisions throughout this crisis and I've supported him in that. On this one, I think no one likes the idea. I don't blame him or me or anyone who would hesitate to do something this intense. But the time has come. It's his call. I respect him. We've been talking. But I think what California did will be the moment that people all over the country will say, now other states and cities must take on this model because, otherwise, if you wait too long it will not have the effect of slowing down this disease.

Lehrer: You know, I can't let go yet of this request or making of the President. I know we moved on to the next thing, which is what you can do and what the Governor can do. But what you're saying sounds so urgent with New York having 30 percent – I even saw on other news organizations 40 percent of the cases in the United States, I guess that's New York State – and if the military really has the capacity to be mobilized or it's the – maybe it's the private sector under this act that the President could order these things under to make thousands of respirators really fast. I don't know if there are plants in place where he can just order that to be done or make these, I think you said yesterday, millions of masks more than we have are going to be needed in a matter of weeks in the health care system. I can't let go of this yet. What's their reluctance?

Mayor: Brian, you know, look, all I can analyze at this point is that, one, for some perverse combination of sort of optical reasons, political reasons, denial, whatever it is, or just lack of leadership, lack of coherent professional leadership. And we know that over the months, you know, the, the team that started in the White House was a much more professional and stronger team. We miss people like General Kelly, for example, who I don't think would've had a doubt in his mind that it was time to mobilize the military. I think there's been a diminution of the capacity of the federal government in terms of the executive leadership. And I think there's denial and I think there's political considerations and there's just a lack of connection to reality. Of all the people you have thought who would want to activate the military, I would've thought Donald Trump would be that person. He has been just so evidently unwilling to pull the trigger and move the one force that could make a difference. I know this much about our military – they can move very fast and make a huge difference. They do it in wartime, of course, they could do it in peace time and they're the best shot we got. If you've got a factory in Ohio or Illinois that could produce a lot of mass or a lot of ventilators, I don't have a doubt in my mind the military could get them here and ensure the right prioritization. But on the Defense Production Act, clearly there are companies in America that produce these goods and there are companies that produce similar goods that could be converted on an urgent basis. And we don't need everything instantly, we need a steady supply to try to keep ahead of this crisis. And I would think any president in the history of this republic, seeing the nation's largest city, two of the largest States

in California and New York, all deeply endangered, thousands of lives on the line, maybe tens of thousands of lives on the line – how on earth would that president not use the power they have as Commander in Chief? Why do you invoke – why does the President evoke that, the Defense Production Act and then not use it? It's inexplicable. So, Brian, my view is, take everything to maximum right now to save lives. And it won't be a perfect, I know that, but if we knew that more and more supplies were coming on a steady basis, we could keep rationing, we could keep doing our best to get from day to day, because starting in the first or second week of April, we're just going to play and run out. If we got even some resupply even could buy a few more days so they could produce more. You know, we could keep going. But, right now, there's literally – literally, no response.

Lehrer: Maxine, in Manhattan, you're on WNYC with Mayor de Blasio. Hello, Maxine.

Question: Good morning, Brian. Good morning, Mr. Mayor. I am calling on behalf of [inaudible] USA, which is a viral testing lab and an immunology testing lab to tell you and the City of New York and America that we have available 500,000 tests virtually immediately. We can provide samples within two days and we have these blood serum tests with FDA approval already. So, they are fully, scientifically tested.

Lehrer: So, why isn't this happening, Maxine? Why do you have to call a radio show to talk to the Mayor?

Question: Brian, I have been attempting to get to the CDC. I have been attempting to get to the New York State Department of Health. I have spoken to my Congresswoman. The materials have been presented to them and I am calling you so that the Mayor can put me in contact with the appropriate people.

Lehrer: And I'm going to leave it there, because we have so many callers, except to say, Mr. Mayor, do you want to take our contact information?

Mayor: Of course. And, Maxine, if you'll give your information right now to WNYC, we're going to follow up instantly after this call and one of our top health officials will reach you directly.

Lehrer: Jack, in Brooklyn. You're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Jack.

Question: Good morning, Brian. Good morning, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Good morning.

Question: Until the end of the call for social distancing, I'm calling on you, Mayor de Blasio and the Governor, to immediately place a moratorium on rent, mortgage and debt payments for individuals and small business, as well as putting in a long-lasting financial relief package for workers and families. When is this going to happen? Why haven't we seen it yet?

Mayor: Jack, thank you. Look, I think you're directionally right. I think we have to figure out how to do some kind of moratorium for both residents and small business. I'm going to find out if that's anything within the power of the City or if that can only be done with State law or State action, but I think it's the right thing to do. We have to obviously make sure when the smoke clears that the folks who own the buildings are going to somehow be whole and able to keep running their buildings. But, right now, people are suffering. People don't have income for food or medicine. So, I agree with you and we're going to try and figure it out. Jack, the reason everything is being figured out, it's hand to mouth right now and I don't think that's a surprise to anyone. We are trying to figure out each step and right now my most central concern is trying to build out our hospital capacity urgently and somehow find the supplies we need to keep health care going. That is my first concern. But not far behind is to try and make sure people have the resources to buy food and medicine. So, I will pursue the rent moratorium idea immediately and see if it's something the City can do or if we have to get the State to do it.

Lehrer: Sylvia, in Upper Manhattan, you're on WNYC with Mayor de Blasio. Hi Sylvia.

Question: Hi. Thank you for taking my call. I'm 73 and really trying to stay at home, but I do have to get out to get groceries. I live in Northern Manhattan. And my problem is that the big, the main grocery store in our neighborhood has absolutely no social spacing going on. It's nightmare in there. There's panic buying going on. I took one foot, you know, one step into the store yesterday and told the guy standing guard who was doing nothing. you know, that this is not a safe place to buy groceries. You've got, you know – so is there anything that can be done to enforce – because the grocery stores are precious for those of us who can't buy food online, who can't afford to do that. So, is there any way to enforce grocery stores, you know, being safer about this?

Lehrer: Sylvia, thank you. And Mr. Mayor, I've heard this from a number of listeners and I wonder if you could even mandate something like appointment shopping at grocery stores so that they maintain six-foot distancing?

Mayor: There's been several ideas, whether it's appointment shopping or special times for seniors. Those are ideas we're working on right now. I think the important thing in this case with Sylvia, please give your information WNYC. I need that location. We'll send the NYPD over right away. And look as we move deeper into this crisis, and I do hope we very quickly get to a public health order for the social distancing and for the shelter-in-place, again, in the style of California. The NYPD is going to play a crucial role and other city agencies in enforcement. And look, I don't think it means a heavy, heavy hand. I think it means reminding people, educating people, warning people, and when necessary, saying guys, you got to create some distance here. We're going to open this up. Other people need to hold back so these shoppers can finish doing what they're doing and get out of here. And obviously we don't want to see the lines where people are tight. If we ever have lines, we want people spread out. Social distancing is pretty straight forward. You're trying to keep six feet away from anyone else. It's easier said than done in New York City obviously, but at least we know what the rule is. Six feet away from each other, as close as possible to that and we can enforce that. And the NYPD – no organization is better at enforcing and doing it in a smart way than NYPD. So I want this location. I will send the NYPD over there immediately, but we will also work to get them to recognize for

neighborhood policing, any sites in their communities that are having a similar problem and get the PD to get present there and create more space.

Lehrer: Minnesota and Vermont, by the way, just classified grocery store workers as emergency workers, which gives them access to childcare. Here I believe it's just for health care, transit and first responders. Even in California, of course grocery stores are considered essential and they're being allowed to stay open. Would you consider doing what they're doing in Minnesota and Vermont with respect to childcare?

Mayor: Yeah. First of all, I do think obviously the folks who keep the grocery stores open, the pharmacies open, of course they are essential workers. We have to figure out quickly how much capacity we have in terms of the enrichment centers we're going to set up for the first responders, for the – we've said already, we're going to have them for sure for the children of first responders, health care workers, transit workers. And we're trying to figure out how much capacity we can get, how many we can cover. I think there's a very fair argument for the grocery workers as well, but we have to come up with a formalized list. We hope to have that as early as today and then we'll apply it. But Brian, and you know again, always trying to be honest. It depends on how many spaces we have, how many kids we can accommodate and trying to really somehow ration that properly.

Lehrer: Cindy, in Brooklyn, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Cindy.

Question: Hi. Can you hear me?

Lehrer: Can hear you.

Mayor: Yes.

Question: Hi, thanks for taking my call. I'm a small business owner in Brooklyn, Beacon's Closet. We have four locations. We took the measure of closing last Friday because we're really high volume and we're concerned for our customers and our staff. Last week we filled out the interest survey that you have for the 75k, up to 75k low-interest loan. And I know that you opened the grants for the less than five businesses yesterday, but we still have no, there's still no application for that loan that you're offering. Can you tell me when that might be and why it's not available for us to fill out yet?

Mayor: Let me check. Is it Cindy, is that, am I getting the name right?

Question: Yes, that's right.

Mayor: Cindy, please give your information to WNYC. I am – I want to get that clear. I don't understand why on Earth that wouldn't be up. We announced that far enough ago that everything should be up and running. So, something's wrong and I want to fix it. And either the information is not being made available the way it should, or something has been dropped that we have to fix immediately. Because we obviously intend to get those loans and grants out there to try and help. Now, even since we announced that Cindy, the world has changed so radically that is fair to say

the only way a lot of small businesses will get the relief they need is with a massive federal aid package. It's gone far, far beyond anything that the City could possibly do. But I at least want to follow through on the things we started. So, I will find out immediately what's going on with that. Give us your information and we'll make sure people follow up with you so you can start processing that immediately.

Lehrer: And a similar concern from a listener who says she's a now unemployed bartender, but the online site for unemployment benefits wasn't working as of yesterday. And she says she and her, some of her friends really need the money. Are you aware of problems with that site?

Mayor: I have heard that and I have to follow up, my best understanding that's run by the State, but we'll work with them immediately to see what will need to be done to get that to handle more volume. Clearly there's going to be massive need. I mean, Brian one, we'll work on this immediately. And it sits a bigger problem. And I again, want to always be honest with New Yorkers, we're going to have more and more people who don't have money, just plain don't have money, don't have a place to get money, need food, need medicine. That's what's going on here. It's going to get worse. We're going to do our damndest as a city to figure out how to get food out there into communities, to people who need them across the city, every neighborhood. But it's a daunting situation. We've never had to do this before, obviously in our memory as a city. We're going to try and figure out a way to do that. In the meantime, what we need is the federal government to just flood the zone, to get money in the hands of people, to do maximum income replacement direct to people in the city and all over the country, to cancel student loan payments, to do everything that the federal government has in its power. The federal government prints money, literally. They can take on any amount of burden. And this is going to be one of the greatest national crises in generations. So that is the only way we're going to truly make people whole. But in the meantime, we're going to try and set up some very basic structures to at least try and make sure people have food to keep going. And we'll try and figure out anything we can do to help expedite things like unemployment benefits.

Lehrer: Let me come back to the grocery stores for a minute. We're getting a similar story now that they heard Sylvia in Upper Manhattan from somebody citing a particular Trader Joe's in Brooklyn. And your response to her was the first reference that I believe I've heard to using the police to enforce social distancing. Are you really prepared to use the police to enforce social distancing? And would it be better perhaps to start with some kind of an order that's grocery store specific?

Mayor: Again, the answer is yes. I am a realist, Brian, and we're talking about an ever-changing situation everyone's trying to make sense of. I think we need a public health order in the style of California that clarifies to everyone what they're supposed to do, what they're not supposed to do, who's essential, who's not. But then you still have the issue of people will under that order be allowed to go to the grocery store. If they are not properly distancing, and I urge people to recognize, is on all of us. I'll talk about the enforcement, but it's also a matter of every one of us taking responsibility. If you get too close to other people, you're running the risk of contracting the disease and then spreading it to your family. Or you're running the risk of giving the disease to someone else. That's just not what we should be doing right now. Everyone needs to be serious about what social distancing means. But, of course, we have the best enforcement entity

on Earth, the NYPD. It's totally appropriate for them to again educate, warn, use the ability of someone in uniform to create some clarity and say, nope, that's too many people in one place, clear it out. We've been doing that already with the original order related to public gatherings in spaces, bars, restaurants, et cetera. NYPD officers, Fire Department personnel, others, Sheriff's Office, Buildings Department have gone out. They've had relatively few examples, but there's one example that was reported. For example, there was a wedding group that was supposed to be under 50 people and they tried to do 150. And you know, City officials arrived and sent everyone home. So we will use our enforcement powers. We don't want to have to be too draconian, but we must enforce all of these rules. I think it's absolutely appropriate.

Lehrer: By the way, you mentioned that, you mentioned that wedding. One of our tweets from a listener says they tried to go get married, but the Marriage Bureau was closed. Is that deemed a nonessential service and closed in New York City?

Mayor: I'm going to confirm that. And Brian, you'll forgive me and to all your listeners, forgive me. The things are moving so fast that I'm getting updates all the time. It would not surprise me if it's closed because as I announced yesterday, we're sending home 250,000 City workers by Sunday. And that's going to be on a long-term basis. We have to clear everything out. So, anyone who did not have to be in their work location is going to work from home or work in an alternative capacity. So, I will confirm to you about the Marriage Bureau and see if my team can confirm it right now. But obviously, and it's painful because it's such an important moment in people's lives, but we're also dealing with a crisis that we've never seen before. So, if it is closed down, it doesn't surprise me, but I'll confirm it back to you.

Lehrer: Some people getting married are anticipating the health insurance benefits that are going to go to the uninsured spouse. Just saying there's a relevance there for some people.

Mayor: There is, there is. But we also have a broader reality that we must go to urgent social distancing. Brian, I want your listeners to understand why. If we don't slow down the growth of this disease, it will create a dynamic where our health care system cannot protect people and cannot save lives that could be saved. And the fact is unless we have much more intense social distancing, the disease will spread faster than it needs to. It's as simple as that. We have to do things we would never have thought of doing and it's a simple equation. If you don't get a lot more social distancing, like now, the disease will spread so fast that it will get to the point where our health care system cannot serve people properly. If we conversantly, actually do more serious social distancing, we'll slow down the growth of this disease meaningfully. And give ourselves a chance to get resupplied and keep our health system able to serve people. That is the choice right now.

Lehrer: We're going to run out of time soon. Question –

Mayor: And Brian, one other point, very important, I'm sorry. People who do not have insurance, it's a little moot at this point. If you don't have health insurance, our public hospitals and clinics are still going to serve you. We're in a wartime dynamic. Of course, I want people to have insurance if they can. But the most important thing is no one should think if they don't have insurance, they're not going to get served. So even if the reason someone's getting married is for

insurance, I get it. But if you can't get served anywhere else, you will be served in our public facilities.

Lehrer: Glad you said that. Last question from a listener and then I'm going to try to close one with one if you have time. You announced that you'll release, this is via Twitter – listen writes, you announced you will release 40 people from Rikers. But Rikers is a fundamental public health crisis. And I will add from what I know that the Chief Physician there, Dr. Ross MacDonald, warns a storm is coming in those close quarters, please let as many out as you possibly can. So what's the status of that?

Mayor: I agree that we need to let as many out as we possibly can. And the structure we've set up for that is to determine with our Office of Criminal Justice and NYPD, anyone who can be released either because they have the pressing health dynamics that qualify them. And also of course they have to be someone that we believe we can responsibly release, you know, their offenses are minimal in the scheme of things. They are not someone we expect to re-offend, low-level offense, etcetera. So, we're working that through. 40 is the first group. It requires approval from the State and/or DAs. And then we'll look for anyone and everyone more. I'm very, very concerned about the situation. I will also tell you, this is fact, that because the number of people incarcerated is about half as what the number it was when I came into office, there's actually a lot of space available on Rikers and in our jail system to socially distance people and isolate people. We also have very strong health care provided by Health + Hospitals in our jail system. So, we understand the danger, but we have a lot of capacity to address it. We're going to constantly see if there are more people that can be released, but we have to be smart about this equation. We still need our criminal justice system to function at this moment.

Lehrer: And I want to close –

Mayor: I am being told the Marriage Bureau closed, starting today. So, are they going to be working today or not? Let me clarify. They are not working today – closed. So, the Marriage Bureau, closed as of today. That is fact.

Lehrer: Until further notice

Mayor: Of course. But I think further notice – again, real talk for all New Yorkers, further notice is when we start to come out of this crisis, which on the trajectory we're on is many weeks away. It's certainly – the thing is going to get a lot worse in April, and I'm worried about whether May could even be worse than that. So, this is going to be a long battle. I've been trying to be very real with people about it.

Lehrer: And let me come back to close where you started because you've certainly got me on board with this, that if the game is – the essential game that is life and death is getting enough supplies like ventilators and masks into the health care system here where we have 30 to 40 percent of the cases in the country, and if the president really could make that happen to a large degree by invoking the Defense Production Act in the way that you're requesting – is there anything you can do to get other mayors and governors on board? They all have their interests

for their own localities, but to lobby the president on behalf of this unique concentration in New York to do this for us.

Mayor: Of course, I've been working with the U. S. Conference of Mayors and I believe governors will be very helpful across the board. I mean, it's been noted that some of the Republican governors have been leaders in calling for more urgent action. So, we'll look for every colleague to weigh in. But to me, Brian, we have to be blunt. The president invoked the Defense Production Act and then – meaning he activated it and then gave no order to produce anything. So, there's something strange. Everyone understands the military could have been mobilized already, can be mobilized this moment. So, this is almost willful ignorance, willful betrayal of New York City by the president. I don't know if he's doing it on purpose. I don't know if he is – somehow thinks this is something he is – some revenge he's taking. I don't know what the hell is going on here, but it's so obvious.

So yes, we will look for anyone and everyone who can lobby the president and have an impact on – I'll call business leaders who have a relationship with them, everyone. But it's so far beyond anything that we could possibly logically follow. It is a pandemic, it is a global crisis – thousands of Americans infected and it's just begun. This is the tip of the iceberg – and a president who praises our military so often, rightfully so, not activating the military. You know, who is giving him his instructions? Where is he getting the idea that our military should stay at their bases in the middle of the biggest health care crisis we've seen in generations? I will try and get anyone and everyone to lobby, but I think it goes far beyond that.

Lehrer: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. Talk to you next week.

Mayor: Thank you.

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