

THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
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NEW YORK, NY 10007

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:** February 8, 2021, 10:30 AM

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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO HOLDS MEDIA AVAILABILITY**

**Mayor Bill de Blasio:** Good morning, everyone. Well, first very important reflection I have to offer. It may not have been the greatest Super Bowl of all time, but it is now established who's the greatest quarterback of all time, Tom Brady, greatest of all time. I think we now have all the evidence we need. So, congratulations, Tom, job well done. But I want to talk about some other folks who are clearly the greatest of all time. And we saw it again this weekend as we dealt with the snowstorm. The men and women of our Sanitation Department, also greatest of all time. Amazing job once again. Thank you everyone at Sanitation. Thank you for everything you did with this storm and amazing job last week. And we depend on you and you never let us down. Thank you all.

So, as we now enter into another week, it's time to talk about the thing we're going to be talking about every single week, which is how to bring the city back, bring the city back strong, a recovery for all of us. This is what we have to build here in this city. And obviously it begins with making sure we get the most people vaccinated as quickly as possible. Now we need more help from the federal government. That is clear. We need more help from the State government, that is clear, but we're going to keep vaccinating. We're going to keep reaching New Yorkers. We're going to keep making it easier and easier, going down to the grassroots where the people are. So, we continue to create more and more vaccination opportunities around the five boroughs. Friday, Yankee Stadium was unbelievable, just wonderful to be there in the Bronx at a site dedicated to the people of the Bronx, to make sure that folks who were amongst the hardest hit in New York City had the opportunity to get vaccinated. Friday was Opening Say for vaccination at Yankee Stadium. It was exciting. A lot of people, really ready to get vaccinated. We've seen really high demand there and we are going to keep making sure there's more and more appointments at that site in the Bronx. But now we have to keep going, reach deeply into all the boroughs.

And look, so far, an update on the numbers – we have so far provided vaccinations, 997,844 vaccinations from day one, 997,844 doses so far. That is more than the entire population of Austin, Texas, which is the 11th largest city in America. So again, even with the supply problems, vaccination effort keeps growing. But if we have the supply, we could do amazing things. We could be vaccinating half a million people a week, if we have the supply. And we are going to keep fighting for the supply.

In the meantime, building out sites – an exciting announcement that on Wednesday. Citi Field is going to be open as a site. Citi Field, this is one that we've been hoping for, for a long time, get up and running. I want to thank the Mets. This is going to be great for the people of Queens. The focus will be on residents of the borough of Queens. There'll also be a special vaccination effort at Citi Field because they have a huge parking lot there for TLC drivers. So, these are folks who

we all depend on, Taxi and Limousine Commission, licensed drivers. We need them to help us get around this city. They're vulnerable. We want to make sure that there are specific appointments set aside for them. Also, food service workers, folks we depend on. Folks who really have taken care of us and were there throughout this whole crisis. There'll be special appointments for TLC licensed drivers and food service workers from all over the five boroughs can go to Citi Field for appointments. And of course, again, a preference and a focus on the people of Queens to make sure we reach deep into that borough that was hit so hard by the coronavirus. So, Citi Field opens this coming Wednesday, 10 am. And we're going to continue to build out, but we need supply. We need supply to keep making these efforts go farther and farther. Okay. Now the goal here with the Citi Field site and certainly the Yankee Stadium site is to get them to 24/7. Make sure we can get as many people in. We know a lot of people want those late night, early morning hours. We want to make sure that there's more and more opportunities for people, but we need the supply. In the meantime, anyone who wants to go to the Citi Field site, get vaccinated there. You can go to [nyc.gov/vaccinefinder](https://nyc.gov/vaccinefinder) or call 8-7-7-VAX-4-NYC.

Now when we talk about recovery for all of us, when we talk about the city coming back strong, so much of it depends on our public schools. And our public schools have done amazing work throughout this crisis. Our educators, our school staff, everyone has really stepped up. And our public schools coming back strong is going to be one of the foundations of everything that happens going forward. And I'm very pleased to announce that for our children in the middle grades, grades six to eight, you are coming back to school in-person for all who were signed up for in-person education. It's going to start up again Thursday, February 25th. And we're really excited about that. We know kids are ready to come back. Teachers and staff are excited to see the kids again. Teachers and staff will come in on the 24th to get ready. And then in-person education for kids at the middle grades, grades six to eight, up and running Thursday, February 25th. This is going to be great for New York City. And a lot of work has gone into this to make sure we are ready. And of course, to always put health and safety first. And here to tell you about it, and he'll be telling you about really the amazing efforts that he and his team have undertaken to get this right and keep us bringing back schools, our Chancellor, Richard Carranza.

**Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza:** Thank you, Mr. Mayor. I am so excited that we're able to announce a return for middle school students today. Our educators have done an incredible job supporting students remotely, but as we've said from the beginning, nothing can replace in-person learning and the support that our students receive in-person. We're so thrilled to be able to provide that. And I won't come – it won't come without additional support because we will not compromise on safety. We're hiring additional staff to support our situation room in responding quickly to schools. We're adding teams to conduct weekly testing in middle schools, as well as continued weekly testing in all of our elementary schools. We're also prioritizing in-person staff returning to work for vaccine access at City hubs from February 12th through the 21st and over mid-winter recess. It's been a year like no other, and I'm so grateful for the resilience and persistence of our students, our staff, and our families. I can't wait to see our middle-grade students return to their buildings in just a couple of weeks.

I'd also like to remind families of another exciting opportunity. Beginning February 24th, 3K and Pre-K for All applications are open. Families can apply online at [myschools.nyc](https://myschools.nyc) or over the phone at 7-1-8-9-3-5-2-0-0-9. Very briefly in Spanish –

[Chancellor Carranza speaks in Spanish:]

With that, Mr. Mayor I'll turn it back over to you.

**Mayor:** Thank you very much, Chancellor. And Chancellor, thanks to you and your team. I am thinking back fondly, remember we went to visit a school in the – we went to one in the Bronx and one in Brooklyn. And we were looking at the preparations for school to begin. I remember very vividly at the school in Brooklyn, the custodial team showing us all the PPE they had ready, all the cleaning they were doing. We saw this all over the five boroughs when we visited. The folks in our schools, the administrators, the educators, the staff, the custodial teams, everyone really worked hard to create a gold standard for health and safety for our schools. We literally borrowed the best ideas and the best practices from around the world, our medical team working with our team at the Department of Education, our schools have been remarkably safe, in fact, the safest places in New York City. It's been just something outstanding and that's why we know it's time to bring back our middle grade kids now. And I know our children are ready, our parents are ready for kids to be back in school. So, we're really excited about this.

Okay. Now, a lot of things happening, and we're going to keep making progress all throughout 2021, because we need a recovery for all of us. And recovery for all of us means bringing back everything that makes New York City great. And that course means supporting our arts and culture, supporting the artists and the cultural community who are part of the lifeblood of this city. We are the greatest city in the world in large measure because art and culture runs through the veins of the city like no other place on earth. And we are so proud of that. We got to bring this community back strong. It's been hit really hard by COVID. Whether you're talking about the biggest cultural institutions, down to the smallest community-based cultural nonprofit, it's been really tough. And we particularly need to bring back that most vibrant element of our culture, which is live performance, live theater, nightlife, music, concerts, all those things need to start coming back. And so, really important new development, that there's help from the federal government. I know, our senator, Chuck Schumer, fought hard for this to make sure there was money specifically in COVID relief packages to help live performance spaces and other cultural spaces. And we have to make sure that those folks on the ground get the aid that they need. We have to make sure that New York City cultural institutions get the help they need as part of the comeback. So, we are going to make sure we do an outreach effort to help our cultural institutions here in the city. We're going to go over some of the ways we're going to do that with our Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment. This is part of a wonderful initiative we're calling Curtains Up NYC. And I want you to feel the energy of that, Curtains Up NYC means we're coming back. It means our cultural sector, but it also means the whole city coming back, because all of the city is a stage – we can all agree on that. So, we're going to go over the details, but anyone who can qualify and interested in qualifying for this funding, can go to [nyc.gov/curtainsupNYC](https://nyc.gov/curtainsupNYC). And here to tell you more about this new federal aid and the way we're going to help get it to New York City institutions, the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, Anne del Castillo.

**Commissioner Anne del Castillo, Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment:** Thank you. And thank you, Mayor de Blasio for pushing for this legislation and for your support in launching Curtains Up NYC. As the Mayor said, arts and entertainment are the heart of New York City. They're what make us a global capital and they're what fuel our local economy – \$150 billion in economic output, half-a-million jobs. Live venues, in particular, are a critical piece of

our creative community and have arguably been among the hardest hit. They were the first to close and, in all likelihood, they will be the last to open. The impact of these closings though extends far beyond the stages on which these performances take place. Live performance, whether in a nightclub, a music theater, or a theater generate roughly \$15 billion in economic activity – it's why people come to New York City. On average last year, 65 percent – not last year, two years ago, 65 percent of our theater audiences were visitors to New York City. And when people go to see shows, they typically also go to dinner, grab a cocktail, grab a coffee, stop by shops in the neighborhood. Our film office is located in Midtown Manhattan, where, on a typical day, I would see throngs of people in restaurants, coffee shops, souvenir shops. So, when live performance goes, the neighborhood shuts down. And that's why we all thought so hard for the Shuttered Venue Operators Grants – the Mayor, our agency partners, the New York Independent Venue Association, and our colleagues at the federal level. But I personally know how critical this funding is. Before I joined City government, I worked in arts and entertainment for over 25 years, largely as a producer and fundraiser, and I know how difficult it is to apply for these grants. And that's why my agency and the Department of Small Business Services created Curtains Up NYC, to help ensure that every single federal dollar possible goes to our venues here in New York City – live venues, theater club, theaters clubs, performing arts spaces, theatrical producers, talent representatives, movie theaters – we want to give them the assistance they need to put forward the strongest application, and, importantly, be first in line. People can sign up today so that they are ready to apply as soon as the applications go up. Information is available at [nyc.gov/curtainsupNYC](https://nyc.gov/curtainsupNYC). We hope you'll help us spread the word and thank you.

**Mayor:** Thank you so much, Anne. And, look, everyone, this is part of how we come back strong. So, we're going to work hard to make sure that New York City culture institutions get the help that they need, and they can get back strong, bring people back to work, help neighborhoods come back to life. And you know what? People are going to see it and people are going to start gravitating back to New York City, because of everything we have here. It's going to all come alive in 2021, and that's going to be exciting to be a part of.

Okay, let's now go to our indicators for the day. Number one, daily number of people admitted to New York City hospitals for suspected COVID-19 – today's report is 220 patients. We have a 71.43 percent confirmed positivity level. And the hospitalization rate, 5.07 per 100,000. Number two, new reported cases on a seven-day average – today's report, 3,491 cases. And number three, percentage of people testing positive city-wide for COVID – today, on a seven-day rolling average, the percentage is 8.28 percent.

A few words in Spanish, and I want to go back to the announcement earlier about the Citi Field site opening up for vaccinations.

[Mayor de Blasio speaks in Spanish]

With that, we'll turn to our colleagues and the media. Please let me know the name and outlet of each journalist.

**Moderator:** We'll now begin our Q-and-A. As a reminder, we're joined today by Chancellor Carranza, by Commissioner del Castillo, Commissioner Grayson, Commissioner Criswell, Commissioner Doris, Dr. Katz, and Senior Advisor Dr. Jay Varma. First question today goes to Jessica Gould from WNYC.

**Question:** Hi, so it's great to see that you're prioritizing middle school educators for the vaccinations. But in the case that it's only the first shot, there's a delay before it protects them. And so, what are you going to say to educators who are going to be asked to go back before they're fully vaccinated?

**Mayor:** I'll start and the Chancellor can join me. Look, I say that because of the incredible efforts of everyone in our school system, our schools are amongst the safest places in all of New York City. Again, that gold standard of health and safety measures has really worked consistently. So, we know that everyone will be going into an environment that is safe. We'll be having lots of extra effort as it starts out to make sure everything is working right. But it's been proven time and time again. Chancellor?

**Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza:** Yes, sir. I would only add that. You know, just look at the data, and the data is really very, very clear that these are safe environments. We continue to work very closely with our colleagues in the Health Department, Test and Trace, Health + Hospitals. We also have added additional air purifiers in every middle school. So, we're up and running. We're ready to go. And what I would say to educators is, just continue to follow the guidance that's been put out. If you do that, we will continue to have this safe environment for not only our students, but those that serve our students.

**Mayor:** Go ahead.

**Question:** In terms of the variants though – I mean, I'm hearing that what has been safe before, what has worked before may not be working as precautions against these variants that are so much more contagious. So, again, to these educators who are concerned about going back with the looming exponential increase of these variants, can you respond to that?

**Mayor:** Yeah. Jessica, I'll start and I'll turn to Dr. Jay Varma, because we've talked about this a lot. Obviously, we take the variants very seriously, to say the least. But we also know that the same measures, those foundational efforts to keep people safe, work – the social distancing, the constant cleaning, the ventilation – all of the things – the mask wearing. I mean, you know, these are things done so consistently in our schools, more than pretty much any place else in the city, and we know that works. So, I think we've got a situation here where if – look, if everyone were doing the things we were doing in our schools, the whole situation in the city would be different and better. But, Dr. Varma, why don't you speak to that question?

**Senior Advisor Jay Varma:** Great. Thank you for the question. And I would just really echo actually what the Mayor has just said. We are – first of all, we are obviously very concerned. We want to continue to be as vigilant as we possibly can both to control transmission among the strains that are, you know, present and dominant right now, as well as any new strains that might emerge. Now, I know a lot of the concern extends to what happened in Europe, where schools were kept open during the peak of their epidemic and then after these new variant strains took over, they ended up closing their school system. And I think it's important to understand, as the Mayor has just said, but just to be very explicit about it, there were no European countries adopting the same rigorous approach that we have adopted here. That means universal masking, regardless of age, universal maintaining of physical distance, aggressive symptom screening, all of the ventilation improvements that you've seen. And now, this additional layer that we've

added, which is the weekly testing regimen combined with vigorous contact tracing. So, when you combine all those things together, there really isn't a comparison to what's going on other places. And then, of course, we are going to continue to see the additional added benefit of people getting back needed. We know that it takes time for people to build immunity, but the existing measures we have, have proven safe and I anticipate we'll continue to prove safe.

**Mayor:** Thank you. Go ahead.

**Moderator:** As a programming note, we're also joined by Dr. Ted Long. The next is Shant from the Daily News.

**Question:** Yeah. Good morning, everyone. On the middle schools, I was wondering if you can say how many are going to go back to in-person learning five days week right out the gate. And if you don't have a specific number, can you give a ballpark? Like, 50 percent? A different percent? Thanks.

**Mayor:** Thank you. Very important questions, Shant. I'm going to start, I'll turn to the Chancellor. We discussed this on Friday and I wish I could quote the exact numbers, but I was struck immediately by the extent to which right away we'll have a number of middle schools at five days a week, either for the whole school community or for at least a majority. Now, this is something that keeps evolving as we get a clearer sense of which kids really intend – which parents really choose to have their kids in school in person. Those who want in-person education, we want to get it to them as many days a week as possible. Ideally, five days a week. Those who don't, you know, are not sure about it – you know, then remote education is right for them. But we will certainly have a number of schools doing five day a week for a very big chunk of their student community and we want to keep building that out. Chancellor, do you want to speak to that?

**Chancellor Carranza:** Yes, sir. So, of the 471 middle schools, we fully expect that half will be able to open their doors on the 25th, offering a five-day-a-week instruction to their students. And we know that the other middle schools are going to continue to program and reprogram to get to the goal of having five-day-a-week. In the rare occasions or the occasions where perhaps space just isn't available, we will continue to prioritize vulnerable groups of students, including students with disabilities, students in temporary housing, multilingual learners, etcetera, so that even in a school that is not fully five days a week, the most vulnerable student populations can receive five-day-a-week instruction.

**Mayor:** Thank you. Go ahead, Shant.

**Question:** Yeah. Thanks for that. So, on testing, you were mentioning, you know, weekly testing at middle schools. Can you say if you're doing anything to boost testing supplies? And also, I know Chancellor Carranza said that the Situation Room would get additional staffers. Can you share some more detail on that?

**Mayor:** Yeah, we can get you very specific facts. But the testing capacity, we've been building it up throughout. I'll turn to Dr. Long, if he wants to talk a little about that, but we have been building it up throughout. And the Situation Room, which has been absolutely crucial – and this is another one of the models here – Dr. Varma was talking about the models we developed here

in New York City that borrowed from different ideas around the world. We also created some of our own, and the Situation Room is an example of that. And I want to thank everyone who's been a part of the Situation Room, especially its leader, Commissioner Melanie La Rocca, who has done a fantastic job. That's something that we created here. That's a homegrown idea that really helped to move quickly whenever there was a case in the school, working with Test and Trace Corps. And we're going to keep building up the staffing of the Situation Room to make sure it's always there for folks. But we do have the capacity. What we found by doing – this, sort of, learning by doing – is that we can constantly increase the capacity to meet our needs. Dr. Long, do you want to speak to that?

**Director Ted Long, NYC Test and Trace:** Yeah. Thank you, sir. I think you covered all the key points. I'll just emphasize that, across the board, we've been building our testing capacity. In fact, across the city now, we've been able to reach approximately 120,000 tests in a given day. So, we've built the capacity across the city and we're applying all those same tools to the schools. And we're 100 percent confident that we have the capacity that we need to keep our students and our teachers safe, which is always our highest priority. So, thanks, Shant.

**Mayor:** Thank you.

**Moderator:** The next is Matt Chayes from Newsday.

**Question:** Hey. Good morning, all. Thanks for taking the questions. The first is a practical one – what proof is going to be required for food service workers who work off the books and want to get a vaccine in Citi Field – I mean, can anyone just show up and say, hey, I'm a food service worker, I work off the books and don't have any proof?

**Mayor:** No, of course not. It's a good question, Matt. No, we want to make sure that people really do have proof. This is something that's – you know, when we're providing a focused, priority effort to help some of the most essential workers and people we've depended on, we've got to make sure it's actually the folks who have done the work. And so, we're going to obviously have some checks and balances in place on that. Among our colleagues, if someone has a handy answer on how that's going to work, Dr. Varma, Dr. Katz, Dr. Long, if one of you have an answer or else, we'll get it to Matt right after. Someone want to comment? Okay, we're going to get to Matt right after. Go ahead Matt.

**Question:** Okay, I'm looking forward. Another question, in December the Health Commissioner issued an advisory telling people who are 65 plus or who otherwise vulnerable to COVID to stay home and away from others, if possible. So, do you plan on modifying that advisory – excuse me – modifying that advisory in any way to account for those who are vaccinated? And then second, relatedly, there are older people who are isolating due to worries of getting the virus themselves, once they're vaccinated, can this population ease up in any way on the most extreme measures that are aimed at them? How about two people who are vaccinated? Can they relax a little bit? I'm not asking that they can throw –

**Mayor:** That's a lot of – a lot of pieces. Let me try –

**Question:** And I need to ask this part because I want you to answer it, you know, the right way –

**Mayor:** Yeah, yeah, but again, my friend, let us try and answer the bigger picture. We'll have plenty of time to keep working on these issues, I assure you, but let – you're asking a really important foundational question. Let's try and get to the core question. I'll start and then turn to Dr. Katz and Dr. Varma. Really important question, how do people comport themselves even after they are initially vaccinated, fully vaccinated, other people in their home are vaccinated, very, very important. What I want to emphasize as a layman and then the doctors will talk from their perspective is, we need to be careful in this atmosphere where – still a lot of folks dealing with COVID out there - we need to not let down our guard. And so, keeping to masks, keeping to social distancing until we really get to a critical mass point is crucial, and then that's something that we'll be talking about very openly as we lead up to it, what it looks like to reach that critical mass point and then how people might change their behavior. But until we get a well down the road, and certainly no earlier than June, we've got to stick to the same kind of precautions we have now. Dr. Katz, Dr. Varma, you want to speak to it?

**President and CEO Mitchell Katz, NYC Health + Hospitals:** I'd like to Mr. Mayor, I fully agree with you, but I also want to extoll the efficacy of the vaccine, and I think it's important that people understand that getting vaccinated really does matter and will bring us back. So, since doctors often disagree, I want to tell the reporter the advice I give to my 98-year-old father and my 93-year-old mother, they are going to get their second vaccine this week, and I've told them that 10 days after they have gotten their second vaccine, their older son and older daughter who have - they haven't been able to visit with because they are a part of separate households can now come and see them, and that they can see other friends of theirs who have been vaccinated. But that when they go out, they still need to wear a mask and use other precautions. So, I think we want to give people both the sense of protection and the sense of hope that vaccination really is going to return New York City back to the amazing, dynamic place it is. Thank you, sir.

**Mayor:** Thank you, Jay, you want to add?

**Senior Advisor Varma:** Yeah, I would just say that this is a situation where we're going to have to have people understand that we have a recommendation for today and we're going to have a recommendation so it's going to change probably in the very near future. At the exact moment, you know, echoing what the Mayor had said, you know, we're in a situation that is still dynamic. Lots of people are still either not vaccinated or just about to get their first dose. It does take 10 to 14 days after that second dose to develop immunity. They're still emerging information in a new vaccine coming. So, at the current time, we really do recommend that people continue to observe all the things that we're recommending, but it is very likely in the near future when more people are vaccinated and disease rates have come down, we can alter our recommendations.

**Mayor:** Thank you. Go ahead.

**Moderator:** The next is Rich Lamb from WCBS 880.

**Question:** Good morning, Mr. Mayor, and everybody on the call.

**Mayor:** Hey, Rich, how you doing today?



**Question:** Okay. So, I'm just wondering what changed in the middle schools. Why now? Why is it okay now to reopen them? You know, now I say, but the 25th? What were the factors that went into the decision here and why not the high schools?

**Mayor:** Yeah, so we're certainly going to look at high schools next. High schools, I want to get our high school kids back during the course of the current school year, but there's going to be more work needed. High schools are a more complex situation, but it's certainly our goal to do that, and we'll have more to say on that going forward. But for middle school, we just we had the pieces we needed. We had the testing capacity built out. We had the ability to build out a situation room. We've seen how effective the health and safety measures have been in the schools. They continue to be effective, but it's also for our kids, and I'll speak to this, you know, I think it's important that we dwell on this for a minute, so I'll ask the Chancellor and Dr. Varma to speak about this too. Our kids need to be in school. Those, again, those families that choose to have kids in school, our kids really benefit emotionally, intellectually, and even in terms of their physical health, getting out to school, being in the school community, being somewhere where there's caring adults who can help them out in so many ways, and a lot of kids have not done well with their isolation and need a chance to be back in the school community, and we're convinced we can do it safely. So, this is why it's the right time. Chancellor?

**Chancellor Carranza:** Thank you, Mr. Mayor. So, the perverse nature of the social isolation that the Mayor spoke of for students, it's real, and it really is having an impact on students. I've heard from number of families and educators that have talked to, to me about the fact that their students are suffering. So, at every conceivable opportunity, when we can do this safely, and we can, as the Mayor's talked about, the capacity we've built and the ability to bring students back, we're going to do it. And that's what's changed is we've built capacity and we continue to build capacity. But we also have this very deep-seated desire to make sure that, that the isolation and the harm of not being with other human beings that our children have suffered with, that we can start in doing that and we can get them back safely in-person, that's why we're doing that.

**Mayor:** And Dr. Varma, you want to speak to the situation?

**Senior Advisor Varma:** Sure. Yeah, as both the doctor, as well as a parent of three kids who attended New York City public schools for six years, I just have to really emphasize just the value of schools for health overall. It's emotional health, its mental health, its physical health, and everything we do in life is about balancing risks. And so, we have seen a risk of COVID, we know how real and dangerous it is, and we've developed a model to reduce that risk. What we haven't done is figure out a model to reduce isolation and the mental and emotional and physical harm from being separated. And so, as the Chancellor and the Mayor has said, the best approach to that is to bring kids back to in-person schooling, and we only do that when we found a way to reduce and manage the risk of COVID, which we have developed a very successful model for doing.

**Mayor:** Thank you. Go ahead, Rich.

**Question:** So, a different topic here. So, given, you know, the massive problems that we've seen in regard to the supply of the vaccine, are you still a firm believer in the idea of making those second doses first doses? Or do you see that there could be some problems there?

**Mayor:** No, I am a firm believer in that, Rich, I'll tell you why. You know, I've been in regular touch with leaders of the Biden administration working on their COVID effort, and I do believe there's so many, just very specific indications that our supply will grow over time. Very, you know, one that's been very, very public is the fact that the Johnson and Johnson vaccine will be here in a matter of weeks. So, we have assurances that are believable, that are tangible, that we'll have more and more supply. Given that fact, that we can put that into our approach to making sure a second doses will be available and given that it's clear that some flexibility around the timing of a second doses is acceptable medically. It just makes sense to focus on first doses. The protection they provide them, this is what I think is not getting enough attention in the public discussion, the first dose provides immediate protection. Is it perfect protection? No, but it provides substantial protection to folks who are really vulnerable, particularly seniors, and I'm also very aware of what it means to them emotionally. And I look – our seniors have been here throughout their lives, making everything possible for all the rest of us. A lot of them have really worked hard. A lot of them have suffered a lot during this crisis, making sure every single one of them possible gets a first dose should be an imperative for all of us, and we know the second doses will be there in short order. But holding back, artificially, I think is a fundamental mistake. I think it's a strategic mistake and I think it's unfair to the seniors who have done so much for all of us.

**Moderator:** The next is Christina Veiga from Chalkbeat.

**Question:** Hi, Mayor and Chancellor, thanks for taking my question. I really want to push and go back to the situation room. We keep hearing that there is the capacity there, but it seems like you're saying it will be built up. I'm wondering if the capacity – and you also were not able to provide any specific details on what the staffing levels are, so can you talk about how many more tests are we talking about going on weekly in middle schools and what does the capacity look like for that? And is the staffing already in place for a beefed-up situation room, or is that still something that's being worked on?

**Mayor:** No, Christina, staff has been hired in anticipation of students in the middle grades coming back. They're being trained now and prepared, but again, the situation room already has hundreds of folks doing the work and they've proven to be very, very effective at it. So, we can get you the exact hiring figures and all, but we're quite confident that we have the capacity. On the question of the testing, again, we're doing something you're not seeing any place else, weekly testing in all our schools and we're doing the exact same thing in the middle grades. So, the testing capacity is there. It has been built up over time. I'll let Dr. Long speak to it. But remember, week after week New York City has been adding testing capacity in general, and we have the capacity now to devote specifically to middle schools. Go ahead, Dr. Long.

**Executive Director Long:** Yeah, no, that's a great question. So, specifically in the situation room, first, we are building our capacity there and we have a clear idea of how many staff we'll need. I'll give you an example of that. So, we brought on 27 more tracers, are we bringing on another 35 that we'll need before the situation room can accommodate middle schools going live, and we have a clear plan for that. So, we know what the numbers are there and we're hiring appropriately. On the testing side, as the Mayor said, we've been building up our capacity and we look at the number of teams that need to be at each school in order to do the weekly testing per school and we have the teams already set up. We're very confident we can do it. Across the city we're doing 120,000 tests on our good days. So, we're ready.

**Mayor:** Yeah, and I want to emphasize that Christina, 120,000 tests per day, when you add everything we're doing citywide. So, this capacity is a very different situation that even a few months ago, the testing capacity has really built up intensely. We have our pandemic response lab doing a lot of our processing. That was a homegrown lab here in New York City to speed the processing of tests. So, we're in a situation now where we can do a lot more testing than we used to and that's another one of the reasons why we're ready to go with the middle grades. Go ahead, Christina.

**Question:** Thanks, and my second question is, you've said a number of times that you're aiming for a full reopening of schools in the fall and I'm wondering if you can define what that means. Does that mean everybody going five-days-a-week or does it mean something different and will there still be an option for all remote next fall?

**Mayor:** We've got a lot of work to do to get the details together, Christina, but I would say your initial assumption is exactly right. Five-day-a-week education in-person, because remember our goal right now is by June to have reached five million New Yorkers vaccinated, and we have the supply, unquestionably we can do that because we can vaccinate half-a-million people a week now. So that's June, you know, school doesn't start until September. If we're an environment where the city is overwhelmingly vaccinated, we're able to bring school back as it was, you know, same physical proportion, the same number of kids in classrooms. We're able to do that kind of thing and we'll keep other important precautions in place, obviously. But the goal is five-day-a-week education for our kids. As we get closer, we'll determine, of course, if there's a remote piece needed as well that will have everything to do with what's happening in the general situation with COVID and what parents are looking for, but we have to be able to welcome back every family, every student that wants to learn in-person by September, that's the bottom-line. Chancellor, you want to speak to this?

**Chancellor Carranza:** Yes, sir. So, what I would add, Christina, is that our goal is to have in-person learning, as a Mayor has stated, but I think this whole notion of virtual learning, remote learning, electronic distance learning, that's going to stay with us well beyond the end of the pandemic because it does also provide students with an opportunity to enhance their learning, personalize their learning, do some self-directed investigation. Think of the power of a group of five students being able to work on a project, and instead of having to be in one place together, they could do it on Google classroom in the evening. So, it creates these opportunities as well to really accelerate and enhance instruction. So, we're looking at it and the Mayor and I have announced our plan for recovery. We're looking at this being a component of what the new normal looks like post-pandemic in a good way, not to replace in-person learning, but to keep the best parts of what we really built in terms of capacity and keep that going into the future.

**Mayor:** Amen. Go ahead.

**Moderator:** The next is Kala from PIX11.

**Question:** Hey, good morning, Mr. Mayor. Happy Monday to you.

**Mayor:** Happy Monday, Kala. How are you?

**Question:** Good, thanks. So, I want to know if students would be given another chance to opt in this year?

**Mayor:** A very important question, Kala, thank you for that. Right now, remember for the middle grades, we had just done an opt in period back in November. So those opt-ins will be honored. Unfortunately, because everything happening with COVID and those kids were not able to come back in person yet, but now they will. So that opt in will be honored now. In terms of further opt-in, opt-ins, it will depend on the overall situation with COVID. We're hopeful that we could see, you know, a really positive trend here, and if we get to see a very different situation with vaccinations, with the overall case numbers, et cetera, that would be the occasion to put another opt-in into play, but we're not there yet. Go ahead, Kala.

**Question:** I also wanted to know how long do teachers' medical accommodations last. So, when we're talking about next year already, and you say that you want to open up full strength, five days a week, what about the teachers who chose not to get vaccinated, or who just haven't had time because of shortages through the summer, and they're not ready to go back in September. And, also what about the parents who don't feel like their kids would be safe in school still? Because the reality is 70 percent of students are still remote learning, right?

**Mayor:** Yeah, and Kala, let me I'll turn to the Chancellor also, but let me just say: it's February, and September is a long way away, in light of, you know, what we're dealing with, with COVID. And again, the goal is, as part of our recovery effort, by June have five million New Yorkers vaccinated. That's an entirely different reality. We're always going to be sensitive to families that might still have concerns, to educators and staff that might still have concerns. We're going to really work on that, but we have a lot of time to work that out. The bottom line now is we need to recover. We need to bring this city back. We need our schools back full strength, and everything we're seeing now, including the extraordinary commitment of the Biden administration to moving more and more vaccine to cities all over the country. You know, everything we're seeing says that we'll be in an entirely different situation, even by the end of the spring and the beginning of the summer, let alone by September. So, a lot to work out, and a lot of people we want to hear from, and a lot of people we want to consult with, but I feel confident we can bring the pieces together. Chancellor.

**Chancellor Carranza:** Yes, sir. You're absolutely right. So, the medical accommodations are the exemptions that are in place currently. There is no plan to sunset those this school year, they will remain in place for the remainder of this school year. With all of the looming good news that the Mayor has talked about in terms of vaccination, and the commitment of the federal government to help us, that only looks better and better. But, like every single aspect of this pandemic, we're going to let the facts and the science drive our decisions. So, there is a long time until September. So, depending on what's happening with the virus, what's happening with the vaccines, what's happening with us generally and broader in the community, those circumstances will drive any decisions on policy changes. But, it's way too early to think about that right now.

**Mayor:** Go ahead.

**Moderator:** We have time for two more for today. The next is Debralee from the Manhattan Times.

**Question:** Hey, good morning. Can everyone hear me?

**Mayor:** Yes, Debralee. We haven't heard from you in a while. How are you doing?

**Question:** Glad to be connected. All as well. I wanted to follow up, Mr. Mayor, on something that's been discussed in the last few weeks, and that's about the city data you've been showing, some of the stark racial disparities among our groups in terms of the vaccination rates that the city itself is putting out. And I wanted to discuss with you and have here from your, your panel, how you feel that the City is handling it now, and specifically when you look at some of the screening questionnaires and some of the online portals, they specifically ask for health insurance information, and even though that is a prerequisite for the vaccine, it seems that as a screening protocol, that in fact may be disproportionately affecting the very communities you're trying to reach. Can you speak to that and see how that might be rectified, particularly when the calls and the online systems tend to be beset with delays?

**Mayor:** That's a really good question, Debralee, and I appreciate it. So, let me start, and then my colleagues can jump in – my health care colleagues. Look, we do not want to give people information that might be misleading. So, I think this is something that's come up before about whether we need to change the message in the application process. Asking for health insurance information if people have is understandable, but you're right, if it in any way suggests that people can't get the vaccine without health insurance, that's a real problem, because that is not the truth that you can get the vaccine regardless of whether you have health insurance. And we obviously want to make sure people do get health insurance, and I'll start with Dr. Katz in a second, and he can remind everyone about the fact that NYC Care is available to folks who don't qualify for other insurance. But look, the equity effort starts with having 60 percent of the vaccination centers in communities of color, in the places that were hardest hit by COVID, and we want to move more and more of the outreach to the places where we're seeing hesitancy and do a – we're doing a big grassroots effort. We want to keep deepening that. But I take very seriously that if something in the application form is throwing people off, that we have to address that there. So, Dr. Katz, could you speak to that and to, again, the access to health support for anyone who needs it, and then if any of the other doctors—

**President Katz:** Sure, Mr. Mayor, and thanks to you, and launching NYC Care, we are able to offer everyone in New York City who isn't insured a primary care doctor, a place that they can get care and assurance that they will never get bills that they cannot afford due to getting health care, and as you say, sir, we at Health + Hospitals, having insurance is never a barrier for getting care and people know that. I mean, if you go back to the start of the epidemic of COVID, why was Elmhurst so filled with patients with COVID? Because immigrants knew that they could go to Elmhurst and be cared for despite not having despite their immigration status, they knew that they would be welcomed and taken care of. So, you know, for us this is a major issue we have not heard complaints about insurance in part because we make it very clear that yes, if you have insurance, we take the insurance information. If you don't have insurance, you have the same access as anyone else to the care. So, I don't think that at least in the health and hospital system or in our city public health system the insurance issue has been a barrier. Thank you, sir.

**Mayor:** Thank you, Dr. Varma, Dr. Long, you want to add? Okay, go ahead, Debralee.

**Question:** I just want to be quick. Can you hear me now?

**Mayor:** Yes.

**Question:** Great. So just as a quick rejoinder to that, I wanted to make clear that while HHC might necessarily have a built-in constituent base that understand its policies, I'm speaking specifically for the online portal, including the SOMOS vaccinations that were set up for everyone, but for the Bronx residents. It's a required field, as it stands now, and so as a result, if you don't have that information, you're essentially not able to get past that space. Now, if you punch in a variable. You, you can sort of work around it, but if you don't know what it shows up by the consistently required field, which just allows for you to continue. So, I wonder if there might be more information that can be put out regarding - in regards to that, because it is in fact, a disincentive

And no, it's really fair point, and we're going to get to work on this immediately. We talked to folks from SOMOS about this on Friday, and they affirmed publicly that they're going to vaccinate people regardless of insurance coverage. But I hear you loud and clear – if people receive it when they're applying as required field, and they can't get around it, or they don't think they can get around it, then it is creating a disincentive. We don't want that. So, we'll work with the folks of SOMOS, and any other providers to make sure that that application doesn't seem to be excluding people. We can't have that. We need everyone to get vaccinated. We need everyone to feel comfortable getting vaccinated. It's free, it's available to all. So, this is a good catch and thank you for raising it. We will definitely get that fixed.

**Moderator:** Last question today goes to Abu from Bangla Patrika.

**Question:** Hello, Mayor. How are you?

**Mayor:** Good, Abu. How are you feeling?

**Question:** Good. Thank you so much. My question is the – do you have any idea or any plan that when the city that, where the vaccination and everything is going, the infection rate is going in the lower, away from the city could be in a different shape, or normal life?

**Mayor:** Wow. Big, very big question, Abu. Look, I think the smart thing to say is we need to take this one step at a time. While I projected in the State of the City that we will be bringing our public employees back who are not currently at work sites. They'll come back, starting in May. That in June, we'll reach five million vaccinations, so long as we have the supply of vaccine. I think you're going to see a constant reenergizing of our economy. So, a lot is going to happen, and obviously, as we just talked about reopening the schools fully in September, but we want at the same time, emphasize – let's keep the smart precautions in place because they've been working, they've been helping, and we're going to listen to our health care leaders who are going to follow the data and science.

So I think it's too early to project, you know, “normalcy.” I've said publicly, I know our health care leaders have to, let's think about from now to June, keeping all the different precautions we're living with in place to really get this right, and then we'll be talking before we get to June about the changes we can make, restrictions that can start to come off. But I think if you're

talking about our economy coming back, our life coming back, I think you're thinking about this summer and fall. You're going to see a real intensive uptick, but if you're talking about not having any of the precautions in place, that's something we have to be really smart and careful about how we do that, and we'll be led by our health care leadership on that. Go ahead, Abu.

**Question:** The second question is the Biden administration – they're thinking to help about, as you know in this country, about 12 million undocumented people living here, to give them a path for legalization. So, if anything happened and how New York City would help the people who want to apply for the application and other stuff.

**Mayor:** Yeah, I am very excited that we're having an actual national conversation about comprehensive immigration reform, and I think this is the time to get it done, and President Biden's the right leader to get it to make it happen. You have, and I talked about this a lot in recent years, you know, 11-12 million people who are part of the fabric of our country. We've got to stop this madness of acting like they don't exist and, and going without a solution, there should be a pathway to citizenship for the folks who are here, and once that becomes federal policy, New York City will reach out throughout immigrant communities to help people to achieve that pathway to citizenship. Our Office of Immigrant Affairs, very energetically, actively connected to the grassroots, working with so many wonderful organizations that help immigrants. We're going to be front and center getting this done.

We already saw with IDNYC, the ability to serve immigrant communities, including folks who are currently undocumented. We see with NYC Care, we just talked about the ability to help folks, even if they're undocumented, to get health care coverage we've been doing this. We know how to do this. Give us comprehensive immigration reform, and New York City will lead the way in terms of helping people on that pathway to citizenship right away.

All right, everyone. As we conclude today, look, again, we're going to be constantly throughout this year. Talk about what recovery looks like, and we know it has to be a recovery for all of us, and today really great examples of how we bring our city back, the strong vaccination effort, going right down to the grassroots, the effort to help our cultural institutions come back strong, bringing back our middle grade kids, and that's going to be so exciting and bring it back to school across the board in September. These are the building blocks are the building blocks to recovery, but they're also the building blocks to a recovery that is equitable, that is fair. That helps us go farther, helps us become an even better city. So, 2021 is going to be a very exciting year, and today is further evidence of the shape of things to come. Thank you, everyone.

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