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**RUSH TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO DELIVERS REMARKS ON HUNGER AND FOOD
INSECURITY AT ST. JOHN'S BREAD & LIFE**

Mayor Bill de Blasio: We want everyone who takes part in one of these food programs to have for breakfast what Joel Berg has for breakfast, because they will have an energetic day. Joel, you never fail to impress me with your truly righteous energy. And for years and years, you've stood up for people who are hungry in this city. And I know sometimes it felt to you like you were a voice in the wilderness, but guess what? Your voice was heard over the years. It really shaped a lot of changes in this city, and it certainly had a very big impact on the way we approach these issues. Let's thank Joel Berg for all he does.

[Applause]

Well, a very happy Thanksgiving to everyone.

And, you know, when we're here today, we're reminded of the meaning of Thanksgiving in a different way. There is a feast happening, there is a gathering of people, and there is a joy, because people are helping each other, people are supporting each other – there's a sense of community. But it's also against a backdrop that isn't joyous, because so many people have to be here because they just can't afford food. And we have to be clear about the fact that even people working hard in so many cases can't afford food.

We have to really look at what that means about the ways our nation has gone backwards. And you know, Joel said it very powerfully – imagine that in the 1970s we were on the verge of solving the hunger problem in this country. How have we gone backwards? We're not any less rich as a nation. What's happened, in fact, is that that wealth is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. And we're rewarding – in terms of the policies of this nation, we're rewarding wealth instead of work.

So there's no doubt of how many people are working hard and unable to make ends meet. I've been talking about it over the last few years – the 46 percent of New Yorkers at or near the poverty level. You've seen recent data that proves it again. You've seen public opinion surveys where people are talking about their own lives and how much they're struggling.

This is not an acceptable status quo – it just isn't.

And everyone has to be a part of changing it.

Obviously, we need very different policies in Washington and Albany. We have to keep making more changes here in the city. The private sector has to make changes as well.

I've been calling upon the private sector to increase wages and benefits voluntarily. And some – not because of me – but some have made that choice for their own beliefs, because their own beliefs – because they think that's what they should do as good corporate citizens or because they believe, as Henry Ford did, that to have a

functioning economy, working people actually have to have money to spend. And if they can barely make ends meet, you don't have a middle class and you don't have a thriving economy where people are buying things and therefore more and more people are employed at better and better wages. But the private sector has to step up, because this state of affairs can't go on. It just can't. So we have to work on all those fronts.

But in the meantime, I want to thank everyone at St. John's Bread and Life. This is an extraordinary organization. Just being here is very life-affirming. It's a beautiful facility – I know people have worked very hard to create a facility that could serve people with dignity and respect. There's a great energy among the staff and the volunteers. And they've been at it for three decades, feeding neighbors in need – and what noble work that is – 2,500 meals every day to some of the hungriest New Yorkers, plus help getting people to medical care and legal counseling and so much as well.

So if you work here, I'm going to ask you to join in; if you don't work here, even more enthusiastically, let's thank everyone at St. John's Bread and Life for all they do.

[Applause]

And many, many people are part of this effort, again, at St. John's. I want to thank Tony Butler and Christy Robb for their leadership. I want to thank Council Member Robert Cornegy, who you'll hear from in a moment, who has been a great partner in so much of the work of trying to reach people who need a helping hand. And from our administration, I want to thank Gil Taylor, who works so hard every day at being the commissioner for Homeless Services in New York City. It is a job for a strong man, and, Gil, we thank you for your strength, taking on that job every day. Barbara Turk, the director of Mayor's Office of Food Policy, thank you for helping us to change the approach – as Joel said, to make it stronger than it's ever been before – thank you for your leadership.

So it's the time of year when we naturally take stock, and we are thankful. We're thankful for what we have. And I have to tell you – I find this all the time – I hear more gratitude from the poorest New Yorkers than from anyone else. And it's one of those things that always is eye-opening – folks who often have very little, but are incredibly thankful for that which they have, are thankful that they woke up that morning, are thankful that there are people to help them find that next meal. I think this is a society where we all need to work at being a little more thankful. I certainly, at this time of year, am thankful for the blessings I have, particularly for my family.

But let's take that thankfulness and think about the next person who needs our help and what we can do. And this crisis that Joel described, which is absolutely connected to the inequality crisis, to the affordability crisis that this city confronts, it's not something we can allow to stand. And it's – you know, you can hear the words and think, well, does that mean we're going to call it out every year and feel bad about it, or are we actually going to find a way to change it?

In this city, we believe we are finding some of the ways to change it, but we will have to fight on many other fronts for the bigger changes.

1.4 million New Yorkers cannot adequately feed themselves and their families, think about that – 1.4 million. That's not a strong and sustainable dynamic; that's not a society that's firing on all cylinders; that's not us at our best. There has to be a series of changes. And people overwhelmingly – I find this all the time – people don't want to have to choose between food and the rent or food and healthcare. They have no choice. They have no choice. And I certainly know from previous generations of my family many, many people over the years had to make those choices in past generations. But, again, we thought we had advanced our way out of it. As the greatest nation in the world we thought we had moved beyond that, but no – 1.4 million people in the largest most sophisticated city in the country – 1.4 million people.

And it is so often people – excuse me – people who are working, and that’s the thing we have to look in the eye. So many negative stereotypes were propagated about lower-income folks over the years, but one thing that is finally breaking through today is people are working and that’s not enough. As Joel said, one job, two jobs, even three jobs at the minimum wage we have, and with the cost of living in this city, it’s not enough. People still have to make those extraordinarily tough choices between the basics. And that’s why we need to make a series of changes.

What we know our obligation to do here in this city is to put the resources into the food kitchen – the food pantries, the soup kitchens that have worked so well, that have made such an impact. We support, through our Emergency Food Assistance Program, 485 pantries and kitchens in the five boroughs. So we know it’s our obligation to be out there, provide that support. And last fiscal year we distributed over 10.4 million pounds of food. And that was, again, serving an average of 1.2 million people every month. We’ve increased that funding now, so that we can reach even more people. That’s one of the things we have an obligation to do.

We have an obligation to keep working despite the cutbacks in the SNAP program and Food Stamps – to keep working to get that support to people who are eligible, something I know Joel has worked on for years and I’ve had the honor of partnering with him many times. We’re going to keep doing that work because someone who deserves that federal benefit, we don’t want to see it held back from them. We want them to have good healthy food.

And I really want to thank everyone at St. John’s because one of the things I got educated on today – because you’re doing something very smart – you’re focusing on healthier and healthier food all the time. A lot of whole-wheat products and a lot of very healthy choices are provided to people to help make this food that they get even better for them, and that’s something we need to work on. And that’s something that Food Stamps is a crucial part of.

But, again, we can keep doing this – we will keep doing this to help people in need. This is not a solution. The solution is a higher minimum wage. The solution is better benefits for people, is more affordable housing. This is what will actually change people’s lives. Hundreds of thousands of people living in poverty right now in this city don’t need to, if we would only raise their minimum wage. This is what we talked about in our OneNYC plan. We say if we get to that \$15 dollar minimum wage that so many people are fighting for all over the country, that we will be able to raise 800,000 people out of poverty – almost one in ten New Yorkers – over the next decade. In addition to – or I should say in combination with our other efforts, the affordable housing efforts, paid sick leave, so many other things we’re trying to do to reach people, pre-k, afterschool that takes huge expenses off of families’ budgets – these things will work, but we can’t do it alone. We must have action in both Albany and Washington if we really want to have a thriving middle-class city again.

So I want to this moment not only say a very happy Thanksgiving to all my fellow New Yorkers, but also say to the people who actually are the most generous people anywhere in the country – because New Yorkers, behind our rough exteriors, we have a heart of gold, we really do – and people in this city are kind and compassionate – so if you feel that you want to help people at this holiday season, please reach out to 3-1-1 and you’ll be directed at how to donate food or how to make a monetary donation to organizations like St. John’s Bread and Life.

It is a very powerful thing to do – to celebrate your own thankfulness, to celebrate the bounty that your own family will experience over the next few days, help some other people to have that same opportunity.

Call 3-1-1, make a donation. Call 3-1-1 if you want to volunteer, if you want to support great organizations like this and be right there to help people in need.

I tell you – people who are in need are so thankful that others who are more fortunate come out to help them.

So that's a way we can take our gratitude and put it into action. And then, let's remember, when Thanksgiving is over, when Christmas is over, when all the holidays are over, you just got to stick to it, because the holiday season brings out a special understanding in us, but this battle will go on, and we need people to be a part of it until we actually can get a decent standard of living to all our people.

Quickly in Spanish and then I'd like to turn to Council Member Cornegy, who represents this community.

[Mayor de Blasio speaks in Spanish]

And with that, again, a strong partner in the work of helping people in need and in so much of the work of this administration, the man who represents this wonderful community, Council Member Robert Cornegy –

[Applause]

[...]

Mayor: Alright. Thank you and very happy Thanksgiving to everyone. Thank you.

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