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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. As we discussed before the break, starting tomorrow, all New Yorkers 50 and older will be eligible for the COVID 19 vaccine. Meanwhile, about 20 percent of the city's high school students finally went back to the classroom this morning, and many other families who decided to keep their kids' home are going to get the opportunity to opt-in for in-person learning for the rest of the year. Here now to talk about that and more his Mayor de Blasio. He joins us from the Blue Room inside City Hall. Welcome, Mr. Mayor, good to see you.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Hey, Errol. How are you doing today?

Louis: Very well, thanks, and it's been a great day for the high school kids. You welcomed them back to the classroom. You're also opening up a new opt-in period for some of the younger students. I wonder what happens if you get more opt-ins than we actually have available seats. Who will get the priority?

Mayor: Well, Errol, look, first of all, let's just celebrate the fact that we're going to be able to now open up our schools again, you know, the CDC came forward with a new rule that now makes it possible. We're going to start the opt-in process on Wednesday. So, for all the parents out there – we want any parent who wants their child to come back into school who's not now to opt starting Wednesday. It'll go for two weeks, that opt-in period. We want to get elementary school kids. Pre-K, 3-K, Elementary and special education District 75 Elementary back by the end of April. we're still working out what we're going to be able to do with middle and high school kids. But we're hopeful.

Errol, I think we're going to see a strong response, but I also think there's going to be a certain number of parents who are just not ready, who are going to take the attitude that their kids have been remote this long, and they'll wait till September to come back in person. So, I do not foresee having the problem you put forward. We've got a lot of space right now in our classrooms that can be taken up. Remember the teachers used to teaching 20 plus kids in a lot of cases, there's five or 10 kids in the classroom. We've got a lot of capacity that we can now use because of this new CDC decision.

Louis: Is the Department of Education and City Hall – are you officially, I guess the word would be agnostic as to what parents do? Are you offering them a preference or are you going to leave it entirely up to them?

Mayor: Oh, of course it's up to the parents, but I encourage parents to send their kids back. If I were a parent, I'd be doing it. Look, I've talked to so many kids and so many parents who have just deeply missed in-person education and they're right for good reason, because nothing can replace in-person education. Our educators do so much for our kids and kids have been through so much with the coronavirus, not just academically, but emotionally, they need the support that's available for them in a school. So, I certainly encourage parents send your kids back. But as I said, I know, and Chancellor Meisha Ross Porter knows there's going to be a meaningful percentage of parents and kids who are not ready, and we'll respect that as well, for sure. So, I think we're going to make it work, and our goal further is to accommodate as many kids as possible on a five day a week basis as they come back.

Louis: Okay, now projecting ahead to the fall, when you've said you want everyone back in school, five days a week. We spoke the other day with Eva Moskowitz, the founder and the leader of the Success Academy Charter Schools. She mentioned a dispute that she's had with you and your administration over school space in Queens. I wanted to play a short clip of it and get your response. Let's take a look.

***Eva Moskowitz:** We're in the middle of a pandemic. This city has so many problems and the Mayor has time to – for a personal vendetta against Success or against charters. I don't know what it is. Wouldn't it be just a much better solution to house us?*

Louis: So, Mr. Mayor, they've been unable to arrive at an agreement with the administration to get some middle school space in Queens. She says, she thinks that there's a personal element to all of this.

Mayor: You know, she really needs to get a new script. That sounds like something from like seven or eight years ago. No, this is something – I didn't even get briefed on the details of this. I had nothing to do with it. This was about the need for that school space in question to go to special education kids, a plan was delineated that it was going to be focused on those kids. Effort was made to show where there were additional spaces that Success Academy could access privately, which is what the law says. If there's not available space in a public school building the money is given to a charter organization to rent a private space, and there is private space available for Success Academy. So, I think this is another publicity stunt by her, and I don't know why she keeps doing it. We're trying to work with everyone, but we're going to favor the needs of special ed kids and the needs of our school system overall. That's just the decisions we always make.

Louis: But, I mean, given how many closures there have been in the course of the pandemic, there's no need to pit one group of students against the other, right?

Mayor: No, it's not even that it's that when we're making decisions about space and, you know, Errol, in some communities, space is less of an issue in a lot of communities in this city, space is still a real major concern in our public schools, and we're talking about going forward now out of the pandemic where we expect a lot of kids back, we got to make decisions based on what's the most important need. Serving our special ed kids, nothing's more important than serving them, and that the law says if a charter school doesn't get the space it desires, they get the next best thing. They get money to go and privately rent the space, and certainly Success Academy has plenty of their own money on top of it. You know, I just think this is – it's just not – you're not

hearing the truth from her and I wish she would just go and find a space as she's quite capable of doing and move on.

Louis: Okay. let me move on. The vaccination process is now open to New Yorkers, 50 and over good news for me personally. Can the City handle the increased eligibility?

Mayor: Well, we can handle it of course, but the problem is not the eligibility standards. The problem is the supply. Now, we did hear really good news from Senator Schumer and from Jeff Zients who's the COVID coordinator for the Biden administration that we do expect a substantial increase in our supply in the beginning of April, but still not everything we need. We need to get over half a million doses a week. We need local control. We need to get the interference of the state out of this process. We need to get our fair share because we're vaccinating, not only New York city residents, but our institutions are vaccinating folks from the suburbs and New Jersey and Connecticut. We need a much greater share of the vaccine to compensate for that. If we get all those things, we can handle endless numbers of people. Obviously, we will make our goal of five million vaccinations by June – five million New Yorkers fully vaccinated by June. Absolutely confident about that. But the point is, as you add more eligibility, it's going to mean people in some cases will wait longer, because we still don't have the supply we need.

Louis: Got it. The – if I can switch topics, the campaign to battle anti-Asian hate, there was a vigil the other day you attended, and some people chanted “what are you going to do about it?” What is your answer to them? What is the plan going forward?

Mayor: Well, it's a combination of elements. Some of what we have to do to change this situation is what we've had to do before. There were attacks on the Sikh community. There were attacks on Muslims. There were attacks on the Jewish community. Each and every time, we've gathered New Yorkers of all different backgrounds in common cause. We've, you know, really put our arms around whatever communities under attack, done special education efforts publicly in the local area, through the schools. We're going to do all of that. But another piece of this is about using the NYPD to reassure people with additional presence, which we've announced for Asian American communities, and obviously just vigorous prosecution of anyone who's committed these hate crimes. Now a couple of horrible attacks happened just last few days, three attacks, two of the perpetrators already arrested, and they're going to suffer the consequences of what they did. That is a necessary part of the equation. So, we know from previous instances that if we apply all those tools, it sends the right message to the community aggrieved, but it also tends to stop the haters dead in their tracks.

Louis: Okay. I want to ask you about the NYPD's overtime budget. Gothamist is reporting that according to the numbers from the Independent Budget Office, the Department has paid out about \$270 million in overtime in this fiscal year so far when \$253 million was the amount that was a forecast or predicted, and at this current rate overtime is going to equal about \$405 million for the fiscal year by the time we get to June 30th, which is considerably more than what was promised, and I guess in the context of defunding the police, is this kind of going in the opposite direction?

Mayor: Well, I got to break that question in a couple of quick pieces. First of all, with all due respect to the IBO and I do respect them. I don't want to respond to their figures. I'd rather hear what our own Office of Management and Budget says. But what we do know is police overtime

has been reduced. We set very stringent goals. We also had some unexpected realities, obviously over many, many months. A number of different protests of many different sorts, that took a lot of additional police time and overtime. But there's no question that trajectory on overtime is a good one. The overall reality compared to the past is it's going down and we intend to cut it more.

The – going forward, I think it's important to understand. What we've said is let's set the police force levels at the right level for today. Now, that right now is about 35,000 officers. That's right about the number is when I came into office and I think that's what we need. We have dealt with a surge of gun violence in the last year. We need to end that and turn that around, and there's a lot of need in communities all over the city, but we also managed in the last budget to take a certain amount of resources from the NYPD, reduced the head count, move that into youth programs, recreation centers, you know, social services, things that really mattered to communities and to the City Council. I think we're striking that balance and we will continue to reduce crime over time. But, you know, the point to me Errol is really understanding the balance because I know people in communities all over the city want to make sure that gun violence has stopped while we continue to reform the NYPD, and we use stimulus funding to invest in communities and a whole host of new ways.

Louis: Okay, let's leave that there for now. We're going to take a short break. Stand by Mr. Mayor, we're going to be back in just a minute. Stay with us.

[...]

Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall, and once again I'm joined by Mayor de Blasio who joins us from the Blue Room. Mr. Mayor, I wanted to talk to you for a few minutes about the Department of Correction. There've been a number of different stories that have been in the headlines in recent days, and I wanted to, I guess, move through them, and find out what's going on with that department. You've had a couple of inmates – there have been a couple of inmates who have died within just a couple of days of each other, which I think is one of the main concerns. But then there's also this vendor that the department had hired that somehow allowed hundreds, if not thousands of phone calls that was supposed to be confidential, attorney client conversations to be recorded and available to prosecutors. And I guess I'm wondering what is going on with those two items?

Mayor: There's – look, I'm really troubled certainly by those we've lost and there's a full investigation going on to understand what happened. In terms of this vendor, with the phones, it's horrible, it's ridiculous, and that vendor is in a lot of trouble and we're going to do something very different going forward. You know, we've got to address each and every one of these situations and if someone's done something wrong, they have to be held accountable.

Louis: Well, I mean, the New York Jails Coalition in particular is calling for the resignation of the Correction Commissioner. Have you considered taking that step?

Mayor: No, not at all. I'll tell you why. Commissioner Brann has taken on an incredibly tough situation and made real progress. I mean, we're right now in the last steps in ending punitive segregation, ending solitary confinement once and for all in New York City forever. A huge reform, you know, something that will help lead the nation. She has been in the lead putting that

together while ensuring that she can keep a safe environment for folks who are incarcerated and officers alike, a host of reforms have been made. It's a very tough field to work in, but there's no question in my mind, Department Correction continues to improve, and I would just say, you know, when an individual makes a mistake under anyone's command, there have to be consequences. If we see something systemic, we always look at that. But what I see here the most obvious issue here is a vendor that did something they should never have done, that was not what was asked of them, and I have no idea how they did that. Again, we will make sure there's consequences for them, but we've never heard of anything like that before. I certainly do not hold the Commissioner responsible for that.

Louis: Well, I mean, but the backdrop is that, I mean, in your Mayor's Management Report, all of the indicators are pointing in the wrong direction. I mean, you've got violent incidents that are way up, stabbings are up, assaults on staff are up, incidents between inmates are up, and all of that is adjusted for average daily population. So, it's not simply because there's some percentage jump because you have fewer people in custody, even adjusting for the number, more stabbings, more assaults, more inmates – detainees getting hurt.

Mayor: There's a lot of factors there, and obviously everything has been thrown off by the pandemic. But there's no question I've watched the reforms the Commissioners undertaken. There's plenty of indicators, plenty of facts that show the many areas in which these innovations are working. It's a long-term program of reform. It's a very different approach because when we came into City Hall, Corrections was a nightmare, and, you know it. It got a huge amount of coverage and we've been trying for years to get things back on track, and obviously ultimately to close Rikers Island, which is going to be a crucial piece of the equation. That's something I'm very proud of that that is now going to happen. But I think Commissioner Brann has succeeded in moving reforms that will work in the long term. It's a tough process getting there, but we're definitely moving in the right direction.

Louis: I mean, when you see headlines, like, I mean, there were even some suspects that were incorrectly released. I don't know the exact status of them. You may have a more current information than I do, but these are people charged with very serious crimes and some combination of screw ups between Correction, possibly the Prosecutor's Office and the NYPD, the one thing as they say, like, you know, you have one job, the one thing they're supposed to do is hold somebody until they can be adjudicated, and even that didn't go right.

Mayor: There were two cases. One of – in one case, the individual in question has been found and returned to the jail system. The other case we expect that to happen shortly. One had to do with insufficient and inaccurate orders from the Office of Court Administration, which is the State. The other was clearly a mistake, in part by a Department Correction employee, and there is discipline happening in that case. But again, Errol, so I've been here over seven years. This is the only time I remember that particular problem. Maybe it happened one other time, but it's certainly not systemic, and we do have something we have to fix. We're going to add additional double checks into that process, checks and balances. We obviously have to get the Office of Court Administration to also double check their work, so we don't have this again. But the bigger issue here is continuing to make the jails more humane, more training and education, which we've added, transitional jobs for folks coming out of Rikers, closing Rikers ultimately, and ending solitary confinement. And these big reforms take time, but they will change the reality of incarceration and make it redemption oriented, which is ultimately where we have to go.

Louis: So, to the extent that this coalition is circulating a petition saying that, you know, the deaths in custody, the increasing violence that we've seen over the last several years, that doesn't move you to maybe shake things up or take a fundamental look at how things are going?

Mayor: We always are looking. I'm looking at it closely all the time. First Deputy Dean Fuleihan looking at closely all the time. There are issues to be addressed. Don't get me wrong, and anytime, God forbid, an inmate dies, we need to fully investigate and understand that there's something structural that needs to be changed, or if someone needs to be held accountable, I take that very, very seriously. But that's a different question than the one you asked. This is one of the toughest fields in all the public service, and the commissioner has stuck with it, and really again been there creating a host of changes and reforms that are the right direction. So, I'll look at each and every situation and we'll always make adjustments, but I want to separate that from the question of, are we directionally going where we need to go with corrections? I believe the answer is yes.

Louis: Okay, and then I guess one last question in that whole area. The State has been asking the City to hold on to people who are being detained for parole violations prior to their adjudication and being possibly sent back upstate, while my understanding is that they are no longer reimbursing the city for that, and that this is not a small number of people, and this is a considerable expense. Is that going to be on your Albany agenda to maybe change how all of that is working?

Mayor: Yeah, there's so much that needs to be changed with parole, and we have had this on the agenda, and there's a lot more to do going forward. Look, as Errol – as we're finally beginning to have a different conversation about the State of New York and the kind of dynastic shield is wearing off, I hope the question of parole will be looked at finally. The parole system is broken on many levels, from an NYPD perspective, parole is managed in a way that creates a lot of problems in terms of public safety. From a financial perspective, as you said, there's a lot of elements of it that we end up having to pay for, if you're talking about homelessness, there is no planning done by the state of New York when someone goes on parole to actually help them into a job, into a home, it's a very shoddy system that often results in homelessness. There's a lot of problems here. I hope we can now go and really look at this and decide what the State needs to do to run that system properly and protect communities and actually help the people involved to get back on their feet and not end up back in a criminal life.

Louis: Okay. All right. We'll follow up with that another time, but we're at the end of our time for tonight. Thanks so much for joining us. We'll see you next week.

Mayor: Thank you.

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