

THE CITY OF NEW YORK
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NEW YORK, NY 10007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: April 5, 2021, 10:20 AM
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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO HOLDS MEDIA AVAILABILITY

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Well, good morning, everyone. It is a beautiful day in New York City. And I hope everyone had a wonderful weekend for so many of you celebrating such an important holiday time. I hope you had a great time with your family, with your loved ones, and everyone kept safe. And we begin a new week and we begin a new week with really wonderful news. In the battle against COVID, we know the most powerful tool we have is vaccination. And this last Friday, we set a new record, Friday, April 2nd, record setting day. On Friday, we provided 100,669 vaccinations in New York City, in the five boroughs. Really striking number showing just how much capacity has been built, how much reach we now have into neighborhoods all over the city, showing the great work our health care heroes are doing, our vaccinators are doing. 100,000 plus vaccinations on Friday and for last week, a new record as well, for the whole week, 524,520 doses given in one week. So, for quite a while now, I've been saying we could break half a million a week if we had the supply. Well, guess what? We got the supply and we have now surpassed half a million doses in a week and we can go farther. So, this is really, really striking. And it shows what is possible. Just Friday, Saturday, Sunday alone was 270,000 doses. I mean, this is amazing stuff. The number of people being vaccinated now in New York City skyrocketing, and more good news ahead as more supplies coming.

So, where do we stand now? Well, to date, we have given 4,462,022 vaccinations. That is more vaccinations than there are people in the State of Oregon. I told you, I ran out of cities to compare too. Now we're comparing to states. And again, it is proof it has always been about supply, supply, supply. Well, we have some good news there too. We expect a big increase in the amount of Johnson & Johnson vaccine, an additional 77,000 doses a week are coming. That's going to help us immensely. And we're reaching folks with Johnson & Johnson vaccine. I got it. Dr. Chokshi got it. It's one and done. And we love that. We're reaching a lot of people who it's particularly important to reach with that vaccine. So, we're going out into communities, pop-up locations, at public housing, houses of worship, obviously are homebound program, which has been fantastic, has reached homebound seniors and other folks who are homebound with the one shot. one and done. So, we're continuing to expand all over the city.

So, you're going to see a number of sites up this week, new sites. Again, we're finding this approach works, to go to the grassroots, to have sites – whether it's in public libraries, YMCA, you see some of the new sites here, the great collaboration we're doing with Google and the Hudson Guild. But also, again, public housing sites have been very, very popular to put up those doses – I mean those appointments, they get snapped up right away. The sites at houses of worship, we will be doing more and more of those across all faiths. This approach is really working. So, expect to see a lot more of it. And we are well on our way, especially given the

incredible success this last week – well, on our way to our goal of five million fully vaccinated adults in New York City by June, very, very exciting news here.

Okay. Now something else exciting is kids have come back to school today from spring break. And we now have more students in classrooms than any city. It's something that has been wonderful to see, that despite it all our kids are so happy to be back in school. Parents want them back in school, educators and staff have done a remarkable job making it work. We, because of the new rules provided by the CDC, we created a new opt-in window. And I want to update you on the opt-in window that this is again something that a lot of families were asking for, one more chance to opt-in. I want to emphasize this will be the last opportunity to opt-in for this school year, going through now through June. And we originally said the opt-in deadline would be until the end of this Wednesday. We're going to extend it to Friday because we have some new information that I think will be important to parents. And we want to give them an opportunity to hear this and let it factor into their decisions.

The most important point from day one of reopening our schools way back in September, was to make sure they were safe for everyone in the school community. Health and safety first, that gold standard that we talked about. Literally looking at the best and most effective approaches to health and safety all over the world, combining them into one gold standard, applying it here. That has worked. And we did things that we saw nowhere else. Like setting up a situation room to monitor the situation and act in each and every instance. We also have had tremendous success with vaccination, not only the overall numbers I just told you about, but as I talked about on Friday, over 65,000 school employees have been vaccinated. And we think that number is actually substantially bigger. Those are just the ones we know about. We think there's more who we just haven't heard the report on yet, but who have been vaccinated. So, when you think about all the health and safety measures that are put in place, they've been so effective. And when you think about the vaccination effort that now has reached so deeply into school communities, we looked at all these facts.

We looked at the data, we looked at the science and we have come to the conclusion it's time for a change. For this reason, we will be replacing the two-case rule. And in the coming days, we will be announcing a replacement rule. And then that will be implemented. We want to let parents know about this because we know for a lot of parents, this will be important to their decision. They are looking for the opportunity to get their kids back in school, but they'd like more stability in the schedule. They want to make sure schools are going to be open. We wanted to give parents this information today and give them the rest of the week until the end of Friday to make a decision on whether they want to opt-in. We're going to work with the unions that represent all school employees, the educators and school staff on the new rule. And again, we will be announcing that new rule and then implementing it in the coming days. As always, we will monitor the situation very carefully with our situation room, with our Department of Health, always focusing on health and safety. This is why our schools have been exceptional throughout.

So, I want you to hear from the Chancellor and from our Health Commissioner, talking about what it means to parents to have the opportunity to come back into school, what it means to keep our schools safe, what we have learned about how to keep them safe and the amazing success

that New York City has had with keeping our schools safe. First talking as an educator, but also as a parent herself, our Chancellor, Meisha Ross Porter.

Schools Chancellor Meisha Ross Porter: Thank you, Mayor de Blasio and welcome back from spring break to all of our collective DOE families. During my first couple of weeks as Chancellor, I had the wonderful opportunity to visit schools all over the five boroughs. I saw the multilayered gold standard approach to health and safety for myself. I did temperature checks at the door and thanked our school safety agents for monitoring the protocols. I thanked our custodial staff who are doing deep cleanings every day. And thanked our kitchen staff for continuing to feed our families during this time. I also saw the diligent mask wearing and social distancing amongst school staff. I saw for myself that our schools are safe.

And I also heard one request over and over again from parents, from teachers, from principals, from families all over New York City – improve the stability and consistency of instruction by changing the two-case rule. I heard this again from everyone. And I'm so happy today that we are answering the call. As the Mayor said, we will have more to share in the coming days regarding this change. However, speaking as an educator, the consistency will do wonders for instruction. Without interruptions due to building closures, teachers will be able to connect more deeply with their students and better understand their academic needs. As a parent, there will be more consistency of in-person instruction as we allow for more stability in our system. I know what it means to have to make quick adjustments. I know what it means to have to adapt overnight and find childcare. And so, this is important for parents as they make decisions about sending their children to school. And it means our older students who are often looking after and helping taking care of their younger siblings can be more consistent in their instruction regularly as a result of this change. We've seen the studies, consulted with medical experts, and based this change from on guidance from the CDC. We will continue with universal mask usage, social distancing, weekly testing, and quick intervention by the situation room to quarantine classrooms in schools when needed.

I know that frequent closures because of the old policy, have made many families wary of in-person learning, opting instead for the consistency of remote learning. So, we are extending, as the Mayor said, the opt-in window from this Wednesday to Friday, April 9th. We want families to have more time to consider returning back to our classrooms. And we want you to have the time to make these decisions in a timely matter. And in the meantime, we will continue to closely monitor the advice of our medical experts. We will continue to stay deeply connected to the science around this pandemic, but the tides have changed and we're looking forward to bringing more consistency to our schools and to our classrooms. And with that, I'll turn it back to the Mayor.

Mayor: Thank you so much, Chancellor. And thank you, I appreciate deeply how much you go out there and listen to parents, to educators, to staff, but also the kids, because I know it's a passion for you to listen to the kids directly. And so many of our children want to be in school, want to be learning what their friends, want to learn from the educators who care so much about them. We want to make sure that happens for everyone for whom that's the right choice.

And now, to speak about the health reality in our schools and the meticulous work that's been done and why we keep learning and making adjustments as we get more and more information, more data from these exceptional efforts – our Health Commissioner Dave Chokshi.

Commissioner Dave Chokshi, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene: Thank you so much, Mr. Mayor. As a doctor, I'm accustomed to making the most important decisions about tests, treatments, and other medical interventions by carefully weighing the risks against the benefits and by rooting those decisions in the most rigorous scientific evidence, which often gets updated and refined over time. Both of those clinical considerations were fundamental to our approach to safe schools over the last few months. Our starting point was that opening schools is a profoundly worthy mission, not just because of the educational benefits, but also because of the many health benefits for children and families. Leading with science is how New York City was able to lead the nation in demonstrating that children can learn in-person while keeping transmission of COVID-19 low. Based on over 700,000 tests conducted to-date, the cumulative positivity rate in schools is 0.57 percent. Our schools remained safe even as we battled through a second wave this fall and winter, which demonstrates that we can protect staff and students even when there is significant community transmission.

The way to beat COVID is not by closing schools excessively, but by suppressing transmission, both inside and outside of schools through a focus on the fundamentals, handwashing, distancing, ventilation, masking, testing, and getting vaccinated. This last step, vaccination, is the most powerful added protection. Back in January, New York was one of the first jurisdictions to make education staff eligible for the vaccine. And to-date, as the Mayor has mentioned, over 65,000 DOE staff have at least one shot. We also know that fully vaccinated people are at lower risk of transmitting infection. So, when adults in school are vaccinated, children in school are even safer. For all of these reasons, there is clear net benefit to revising the two-case threshold for school closures. We recognize that repeated closures result in social, emotional, and educational harm to kids and families. Our aim is to strike the right balance while retaining our gold standard of stringent safety measures for schools.

Now, one final note, as eligibility opens even wider this week, namely to those over the age of 16, I want to encourage everyone to get the vaccine. Appointments are opening up almost every day now. Check nyc.gov/vaccinefinder, or call 877-VAX-4NYC. We now have more than 500 sites open to the public on the vaccine finder. These include vaccine hubs, local clinics, hospitals, pharmacies, community health centers, and others. More supply and, therefore, more appointments are on the way, so check back often. The enthusiasm for vaccination has been a source of inspiration and sharing your story with your family member or neighbor will encourage even more New Yorkers to get their shot. Thank you.

Mayor: Thank you so much, Commissioner. And everyone, look, that last point that Dr. Chokshi made – the enthusiasm, the energy out there. We put these appointments up last week, they got snapped up – over half-a-million. More and more people getting vaccinated is making it easier for yet more beyond to be vaccinated, because that word of mouth – we've been saying now for months – has proven to be true. When someone in your life gets vaccinated, they have a good experience, they spread the word, more and more people willing. We're seeing hesitancy going down. We're seeing willingness to get vaccinated going up. These appointments are being

snapped up and how exciting that we're finally getting something like the supply that we need. I'd sure like to see even more than that, because we've proven we can go well beyond half-a-million a week now, but it's finally turning the corner, and, boy, the demand is sure there.

So, now, let me go over to indicators for today. Number one, daily number of people admitted to New York City hospitals for suspected COVID-19 – today's report, 183 patients. That's a good number. We're watching every day, but that is definitely a number we like to see, one of the lowest in quite a while. Confirmed positivity, 61.38 percent. And hospitalization rate, 3.63 per 100,000. Number two, new reported cases on a seven-day average – today's report, 3,170 cases. And number three, percentage of people testing citywide positive for COVID-19 – today's report, on the seven-day rolling average, 6.55 percent.

Just say a few words in Spanish on the topic of our schools –

[Mayor de Blasio speaks in Spanish]

With that, I'll turn to our colleagues in the media. And please let me know the name and outlet of each journalist.

Moderator: Hi, all. We'll now begin our Q-and-A. With us today as Chancellor Porter, Commissioner Chokshi, Dr. Ted Long, and Senior Advisor Dr. Jay Varma. With that, we'll go to Emily from NY1.

Question: Good morning, Mayor de Blasio, and everyone on the call.

Mayor: Good morning, Emily. How are you?

Question: I'm well. Thank you very much. I hope you are too. May have a hint or a sneak peek at what you're considering as a replacement for that two-case rule? And will it be announced before that Friday opt-in deadline?

Mayor: Emily, I like the very earnest attempt – we'll give you the private sneak peek here, live on television. And I like that. Now, Emily, we got a little more work to do on the new rule. I can certainly say, the two-case rule will be gone, and we're working on what we think is a new rule. We do want to talk to all of the organizations, the unions that represent the folks who work in our schools, and we want to go over the evidence we have with them and talk about what the new rule should be, and then we'll have that announcement in the coming days. But look, what we do know is moving off two cases is going to lead to schools being open much more consistently. That we can say with assurance – all the models we've done proved that anything different than the two-case rule will lead to greater consistency in schools being open. Go ahead, Emily.

Question: And the new rule will come before the opt-in deadline on Friday, for parents to consider?

Mayor: Again, Emily, we're working that out. I don't want to say the exact date yet – very soon, one way or another. But what I think I can say this, having talked to a lot of parents, and I know

the Chancellor has as well – a lot of parents have said to us, the two-case rule obviously has led to an extraordinary number of closures. We know that any other standard will lead to a lot fewer closures. That's what parents want to know, that it will not be this approach, it will be something different and something that will lead to fewer closures – that, I can guarantee. As quickly as we have it nailed down, we will announce it.

Moderator: Next is Juliet from 1010 WINS.

Question: Hey. Good morning, Mr. Mayor. Good morning, everyone. How are you?

Mayor: Very well. Hope you had a good Easter, Juliet.

Question: Yes, I did. Thank you. And you?

Mayor: Very nice. Thank you. Very mellow.

Question: Yes, the same. So, I did want to ask you about the new marijuana law. I spoke with Chief of Department Rodney Harrison, Friday. He says when he was a precinct commander in Harlem, marijuana smoke was a major complaint of residents who said they smell it outside their buildings or near playgrounds where their kids were playing. He says, City and community leaders have to come up with a plan for this. So, how are you addressing this?

Mayor: That's a real concern for a lot of people, and I know parents have particular concerns. Juliet, look, we have very strong laws in this city related to cigarette smoke that also relate to marijuana smoke now. Every place where you're prohibited from smoking cigarettes, you're also prohibited from smoking marijuana. I think it's about educating people on that and, obviously, doing the right kind of enforcement. So, we can get that right, I really do believe it. It'll take time, it'll be an adjustment, but we're going to educate people as to this new reality and then make it work. Go ahead, Juliet.

Question: Okay. And my next question involves Broadway. The St. James Theatre held an invitation-only event the other night with Nathan Lane and Savion Glover as sort of a test run for some kind of Broadway reopening. Do you think more theaters can do limited or smaller shows on a test run basis with public audience?

Mayor: Look, we want to work with the Broadway community and the cultural community in general to bring them back strong. And I think, for some, these smaller gatherings make sense. For some, it really only makes sense to come back when they have a bigger audience. Whether that means going outdoors, you know, in the warm months, or, what we've talked about with a lot of the Broadway theaters, it looks like September when we can really bring back a full audience with the right precautions in place. I think we're – you know, we're ready to work with whatever model works. I went on Friday to help kick off a very, very powerful show, *Blindness*, at the theater up in Union Square – the Daryl Roth Theatre – and it's amazing how much it means to people, to the folks in the cultural community to finally get back to work and do what they love and do what means so much to all of us. But also, I talked a lot of the audience that was waiting in line, and it was just incredibly important to them to be coming back, feeling live

performance again as part of the real identity in New York City. So, we want to see that happen and we want to see it happen safely. And whatever way works for a theater, they can do it safely, we'll be right there with them to help make it happen. And, starting this month, we'll be doing the vaccination center for the Broadway community and mobile vaccinations for the off-Broadway community to help move that all along. Go ahead.

Moderator: Next is Andrew from WNBC.

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

Mayor: Good morning, Andrew. How are you?

Question: I'm okay, thanks. I wanted to ask, I haven't heard your concerns lately about the pace of reopening. We have seen spikes in other states, we have seen alarming spikes in other countries based on variants. Tonight at 11:00 PM, the curfew lifts in places like the gyms, and [inaudible] –

Moderator: Andrew, are you there?

Mayor: I think I can answer the beginning of his question, because I got enough there, but see if you can get him back for a second question. Andrew, we're going to hope to –

Question: [Inaudible]

Mayor: Oh, there you go. There you go.

Question: Yeah. [Inaudible] are we concerned about the pace of reopening and are you [inaudible]?

Mayor: All right. Well, go ahead. We're going to take that part of the question and move with that, and I'll get Dr. Chokshi in this in a second, and then let's see if you guys can get Andrew to stabilize for his second question. Stay still, Andrew. Whatever you're doing, stop moving around.

Okay. Of course, I'm concerned about the pace reopening. We need to get it right and it should be led by the data and the science. So, for example, there are things that can be done with a lot of precautions, a lot of health and safety measures, a lot of supervision – those I absolutely want to see happen. And we just talked about the cultural community, they're being very careful and responsible the way they're coming back. A lot of this is going to be outdoors in the meantime, careful limits. That's exactly what we want – heavy emphasis on vaccination. There've been some decisions that I think the State has made that were a mistake, the fitness class is an obvious one. I'm concerned about the collegiate sports going back to indoors. I don't see why that is necessary at this point. So, I think it is important to, like, really be careful and take it one step at a time, because doing the things that we are doing now are the right things that we can control properly, I would not want us to go farther than that until we make sure we're on the right track. Dr. Chokshi?

Commissioner Chokshi: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. And just picking up where you left off, if the question is, are we concerned – then, you know, our experience with COVID-19 leads to a clear answer – yes, we have to remain concerned. We have to remain vigilant all the more so because we have a chance to be in the home stretch of this marathon, because of vaccination. And the places where we are the most concerned are what we have consistently messaged over the last few weeks and the last few months. We know outdoors is safer than indoors. We know that places where people are not able to wear a mask consistently and properly are higher risk activities. And we know that larger gatherings confer more risks than smaller gatherings. So, those are the activities where we really have to ensure that we remain cautious and methodical with respect to reopening.

Mayor: Thank you. Go ahead. Andrew, are you back? Andrew? Andrew, Andrew? Try again, Andrew. What – I have no idea what kind of device you're on, Andrew, try again. Andrew, I would urge you – take someone else's phone and call in. No, no Andrew.

Moderator: Andrew, we're going to try to come back to you.

Mayor: We'll try and get you for another one. Go ahead.

Moderator: Next is Katie from the Wall Street Journal.

Mayor: All right, Katie, can you hear us?

Question: I hope you can hear me. I – can you hear me?

Mayor: Yes, you are not on Andrew's phone. So, it's working.

Question: I hope Andrew gets, I don't know, Fios or something. My question – I have two education questions. For the Chancellor, the first is about the summer. What is the summer school for Chapter 683, which is for D75 students, what is that going to look like? Fully blended, I mean, fully in school or blended, or will there be a remote option for parents?

Chancellor Porter: Was that about District 75 students? I didn't hear part of it.

Mayor: Katie, you meant District 75 students, right?

Chancellor Porter: Yep, yep –

Question: Yeah. Chapter 683, I think it's called. Yeah.

Chancellor Porter: So, we are going to support them 12 months as we have. We're still working through our summer plans. We are looking to have some in-person, some remote options based on what families need. So, more to come on that one.

Mayor: Go ahead, Katie.

Question: Thanks. And my second education question is related to accommodations given to teachers. Could you explain if there were additional accommodations given at certain points of the year? Why, if someone had been in school – and just explain the process. And would there be any point where you could retract an accommodation for a teacher for any reason?

Chancellor Porter: So, the accommodations are an open process, and it is connected to a medical request in most cases. We have not looked to retract any accommodations because we want to make sure that we are keeping people healthy, safe, and well. We are looking and having conversations with our union partners about what that means as we go into next year, particularly as more and more vaccines become available. As the doctor said, the more adults are vaccinated, the safer our community is, and we've done an amazing job to make the vaccinations available across the city to DOE employees. And so, that's what we're looking forward to.

Mayor: Thank you very much. Go ahead and –

Moderator: We're going to try Andrew Siff.

Mayor: We're going to try and get done. Okay. Andrew, can you hear us?

Question: I'm here. I'm here. Can you hear me?

Mayor: Much better, Andrew.

Question: You know, I would credit Avery Cohen with the enhanced audio for this call. So, whatever you're paying her Mayor, you should double it.

Mayor: Okay. Right away.

[Laughter]

Question: All right. So, my second question is, you've said for weeks and weeks supply, supply, supply. If you only had supply, you could reach the pace. You now have finally reached that benchmark that you've talked about. I'm wondering if you and your health team have, believe it or not, discussed the likely threshold in a few weeks where you might reach the point where you have, I hesitate to say, too much supply, but where you reached the point where you're literally having to go into communities, imploring people to get vaccinated, because you have it at hundreds and hundreds of sites and not enough people have signed up for appointments. Have you put a guesstimate on when that date might be when it switches to more supply than demand?

Mayor: I will start as the layman and I'll turn to Dr. Chokshi and Dr. Long. Boy, Andrew, would I like to have that problem. So, first of all, let me start with that.

[Laughter]

We spent so many weeks not having the supply we needed, that if we had too much supply that would be a very good problem to have. But I do not personally anticipate that problem in the short term. I know there was some talk about May being, kind of, a tipping around the country. But I see demand going up here constantly. And I'll – you know, I'll believe it when I see it, that we have too much supply. Right now, I'm like, send me all the supply you got. We have plenty of demand, Dr. Chokshi.

Commissioner Chokshi: Thanks, Mr. Mayor. And, you know, like you I very much look forward to the day when we have enough supply to actually meet the very robust demand that we continue to see. To answer the question, I do think that that day will come, and I think most likely, it is in May here in New York City as well. But what I'll add is that we have not been, you know, resting on our laurels by any means when it comes to ensuring that we're ready for that day as well. Over the last several months we have done so much in partnership with trusted messengers in communities, whether faith leaders or community-based organizations, to have the conversations that people need to have to change minds and get people ready for vaccination, answering the questions they may have about specific vaccines answering the questions that they have about side-effects and what the benefits of vaccination are. So, even as we look ahead to that day in May, what we're going to do throughout April as well is continue to have those community conversations so that demand is as strong as possible as we approach that point.

Mayor: Dr. Long.

Executive Director Ted Long, Test and Trace Corps.: Yeah. I agree with everything that Dr. Chokshi said. And I would add three points around the issue of, we're planning ahead now to make sure that we can get through to all of the New Yorkers that are most vulnerable, whether you're an older New Yorker or whether you live in one of our communities that's been most highly impacted by the coronavirus. So, three additional things that we're doing now that will carry forward, that will help us to achieve that goal of bringing people in, especially those that need to be brought in the most. Number one, we have canvassers that are on the ground every day now that have now helped to arrange 50,000 vaccine appointments for people in the Task Force on Racial Inclusion and Equity neighborhoods. Number two, through our Test and Trace Corps data, we have information on where all of our cases in contact are. So, we're looking at people that are, again, those older New Yorkers or people that live in the most highly impacted neighborhoods proactively calling them and bringing them in for vaccines, which has been highly effective. And we'll continue to do that when supply outpaces demand. And then number three is we've now, you know, continued our walk up pilot for New Yorkers that are 75 or above, at our three Test and Trace Corps sites. We've done more than 500 vaccines since we made this announcement last week. It's clearly something that is helping New Yorkers that they're prioritizing. We're going to continue all of these efforts to make sure that we get as many New Yorkers vaccinated as quickly as possible and save lives. Thank you.

Mayor: Thank you. Go ahead.

Moderator: Next is Derick from WABC.

Question: Hey, good morning. I just – I wanted to ask well, a couple of questions [inaudible] –

[Laughter]

The first question just has to do with the schools. And I'd like to know – I'm curious how many schools are currently closed because of this two-case rule?

Mayor: Well, I can tell you that the vast, vast majority of schools are open. That's the good news Derick, I'll give you the number I have now. What I have for today is 1,481 schools are open. So, we can get you the exact number. Some are closed temporarily for review, but others are closed for the longer timeframe, but again, not all of them because of the two-case rule, let's be really clear about that. The two-case rule only applies in certain instances. There's other reasons why a school gets closed. So, that's the overall number today. But what we can say is this, we know that the two-case rule has led to a number of schools being closed, that it could have been kept open. We want to come up with a rule that we think makes more sense. Unquestionably, more schools will be open as a result of the new rule. That we can say with assurance. Go ahead, Derick.

Question: Next question just has to do with the data, with the COVID data. And, obviously, it looks like the trend is going in the right direction. You have cases going down, hospitalizations decreasing. It looks like the trend, at least. Is that indication that the vaccines are starting to take hold and, you know, we're moving potentially into the homestretch of this?

Mayor: I will start, let me get Dr. Varma into this. I would say, Derick, I like your optimism and I'm an optimistic person, too. So, I certainly see some real progress there, but I also think clearly, it's too early to draw conclusions. Dr. Chokshi just made the point, you know, throughout the coronavirus era, we have learned, you know, there's a lot, we need to keep learning and the data and the science, if you stick it, good things happen, but that means the data changes every day, every week you pay attention to it. What I would say is I think we're winning the race against the coronavirus. I think we are, especially with the numbers we saw last week, getting over half a million New Yorkers vaccinated last week. That's how you win the race against the coronavirus and the variants. It is just massive vaccination. So last week we showed what's possible, but the ball game is definitely not over. Go ahead, Dr. Varma.

Senior Advisor Jay Varma: Great. Thank you very much. Yeah, and I would concur that, you know, based on the data that we have right now, we aren't seeing any worsening in our outcomes, and that is an important, good sign because we have seen that variants have taken over and become the most common strains here in New York City. Under normal conditions, without a vaccine, that would have led to another wave, a third wave. And because of the incredible work that New Yorkers had done coming out to get vaccinated, we've been able to hold our levels at a level that we don't like to be at but you have to remember what it could be like if we didn't have those vaccines. So, I do think that we really do have the possibility to make tremendous progress over the next four to eight weeks. If we continue this pace of vaccinations that we've seen this week, we're going to be at a level where the vast majority of New Yorkers have some form of protection, and we're going to also, you know, have the headwinds of better weather and other things. But again, to just reemphasize the point that Commissioner Chokshi and others have made, and the Mayor has made, that doesn't mean we can let up now. So, it's really critical and important that people continue to observe those precautions. And I would particularly flag the

fact that, you know, this past week has been an important holiday for many people, whether for spring break or for religious reasons, and that almost certainly led to people gathering in potentially places that were risky. So, we do have to be prepared and encourage people to make sure they get tested this week and make sure they continue to observe those precautions because we know how important that is.

Mayor: Thank you. Go ahead.

Moderator: Next is Amanda from Politico.

Question: Good morning, Mr. Mayor, how are you?

Mayor: Hey, Amanda, how you been?

Question: I'm doing well. Thank you. So, I've been hearing anecdotally that people who go to a New York City Health + Hospitals or Health Departments site for a vaccine are having trouble making their second appointment. And they're finding that they're able to go to a pharmacy instead like a CVS. So, I was wondering if that presents any problems in terms of, like, logistics with the vaccine supply and, you know, making sure you have enough doses for the second dose, [inaudible] people are coming. So that's like, that's – so, I just wanted to check that [inaudible] –

Mayor: I appreciate the question. I'll turn to Dr. Chokshi and Dr. Long since you mentioned each of their agencies. But Amanda, look, I am not hearing that for whatever it's worth. We talk about this, you know, multiple times a day. I am not hearing that we're having a problem with making the second dose appointments. But let me have the two doctors speak to it. As to the question, if you go one place and get your first and go another place to get your second, does the overall system make adjustments for that? I think the broad answer is yes, because we're talking about massive volume here, and I think those kind of individual actions can be easily accounted for, but let's have the doctor speak to both of those points.

Commissioner Chokshi: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. And Amanda, yes, we have not heard that problem that you're referring to and we would –

Mayor: I'm sorry to interrupt. Amanda, we would definitely like information about if you're hearing specific sites, as I often say to members of the media, we appreciate it when you help us see problems that need to be addressed. So, please let our team know if it is about specific sites. Go ahead, Dave.

Commissioner Chokshi: Thank you, sir. Yes. And that's exactly right. Please do give us any information that you have, and we'll be sure to follow up on it. You know, I've been out at our sites myself, several of them, and have not heard about that particular challenge. So, we'll be taking a deeper look at it. I have, for what it's worth heard, the opposite problem, which is that there have been some challenges in scheduling second dose appointments at some pharmacies. And those patients are coming to Health Department and Health + Hospitals sites to get their second doses, which, of course, we accept so that people can complete their vaccination series.

But regardless of the particulars, the second point that the Mayor said is exactly right. We have ways in our systems to be able to track second doses including in cases when people get them from different sites to ensure that people complete their vaccination series.

Mayor: Thank you. Dr. Long.

Executive Director Long: Yeah. Amanda, I appreciate you raising this. We definitely have not heard this at New York City Health + Hospitals or at our Test and Trace sites. I agree with everything that Dr. Chokshi said in terms of how we've set up our system, but feedback is really helpful. So, if you don't mind, you know how to reach us, we'd love to hear where you're hearing that so that we can look into it ourselves.

Mayor: Thank you. Go ahead, Amanda.

Question: Great. Thank you all. And then, Dr. Long, I wanted to follow up with you on your previous comments regarding the 50,000 appointments that are being made. Can you elaborate a little bit more, because I know that there's been volunteer groups who are going into certain communities, especially in Queens where there's so many languages being spoken, to really help people who might struggle with the forms to fill out to go get the vaccine? But I'm wondering if you could elaborate a little bit more on, like, what exactly is going on in terms of sending people into these neighborhoods to get people vaccinated and kind of the Test and Trace Corps' role. Is it shifting a little bit now that we're focusing more on vaccines or are they still contact tracing, like they were at, you know, at the peak of last spring?

Director Long: Yeah, thanks. Two great questions there. So, the first is on how we're approaching the vaccine effort, may have referenced what we're doing with canvassers. So, one of the things that we've learned from testing is that if you just build a testing site, that's not enough to get people through the door, and especially to get people that are the most vulnerable through the door. We've learned that with our, for example, our hyper-local effort in Sunset Park, where we are, and we're able to, by having trusted messengers and working with community-based organizations, get enough people through the door for testing that we drove down to percent that were testing positive by two-thirds, and we did the exact same thing in Soundview, but if it wasn't for our engagement with community-based organizations who people in those communities trusted and other trusted messengers, we would not have succeeded. We're taking those principles that we've learned through the coronavirus, and working with the Department of Health to apply them now for vaccines.

So, in particular, I shared with you the number that 50,000 appointments have been made through our canvasser efforts, which again are our team members that go into our communities, the specific communities where we know we have the most vulnerable people, and focus on bringing people in to get tested and the way that literally can save their lives. In addition to that, we also work with community-based organizations, houses of worship, trusted leaders in all of our communities, and I would actually argue that that's the secret ingredient to all of our success with testing, doing more per capita testing than any other country, pretty much in the world, with the exception of some of the smaller European countries, and I think it's, what's making us successful in the vaccine effort as well—

Mayor: Ted, I want you to just clarify one thing, when you say we're doing more testing in countries, I think you're saying New York City is doing more testing than – not the United States of America as a whole. Could you clarify that?

Director Long: Yes, I'm speaking as a citizen of New York City. Yes, New York City has more per capita testing and has for a long time and almost any other country in the world. Some of the exceptions are like Luxembourg I think does a bit more, Slovakia—

Mayor: Damn, Luxembourg. Ted, you've got to beat Luxembourg.

Director Long: We'll double our efforts sir. With respect to contact tracing, Amanda, I appreciate you asking about that. So, our 4,000-strong contact tracers are continuing to be in full force. We've been reaching our data from two weeks ago, 96 percent of every single new case in New York City, complete interviews with warden, 80 percent of all of the new cases in New York City, and we use all that data to have a forward-looking break chain of transmission, but also have a backwards look and see where we were, our sources of infection are now. Specific people, locations. We have a model that helps us to deploy our resources, and that's how we decide where we put our testing units, helps us decide where we put our accelerated contact tracing models, and that's something that we're willing to continue doing a full force. We won't stop every chain of transmission we break is a potential life saved. You can count on us.

Mayor: Thank you. Go ahead.

Moderator: Time for two more first, we'll go to James from PIX 11.

Question: All right, I guess that makes me the penultimate.

Mayor: You are the penultimate – very good, the King's English. How are you today, James?

Question: Great. Thank you, and I hope you and everyone on the call are well.

Mayor: Absolutely. So what's on your mind today?

Question: Alright, well, an education question here for you and for the Chancellor as well, perhaps. Look, the majority of students still in public school are learning from home. With the changes that you're talking about today, this change in the two-person rule, the two-case rule. What kind of numbers of registrations do you hope to see for in-person instruction after Friday, after this new deadline for the rest of the school year?

Mayor: James, I'll start and I'll turn to the Chancellor. I mean, look, so again, I want to emphasize we're going to extend a Friday and this, you know, this will be the last opt-in just looking at the calendar. You know, we've got April, May, June left in this school year and for kids to benefit from the time in-person, this would be the last opt-in, and I really think it's a matter for each parent and child to decide. We did want to clarify this because we heard from so many parents that they were really concerned about the two-case rule and they wanted clarity.

They wanted to know if their child came back, it would be a more stable schedule, a more consistent schedule. So, we wanted to say, yes, it will be we're changing this rule because we can do it safely, and we want you to have that stability for the remaining three months of the school year. But it is a very individual choice and there's no wrong choices, whatever a parent and child feel is right for them. We know a lot of kids would benefit from being back in the classroom. But they have to feel that's right for them. Chancellor.

Chancellor Porter: Yeah. I agree with the Mayor. I think it is a decision that families have to make. There's not a number connected to it, but I think what is connected to it is more consistency of in-person instruction, and for families who are grappling day to day with “do I want to opt-in or not opt-in” knowing that the two-case rule is going to be addressed and they will have an opportunity to be in class on a more regular and consistent basis will help inform the decision that families make.

Mayor: Go ahead, James.

Question: Okay, well, I'll switch gears. Casinos, gyms, a variety of other venues, get their curfews revoked as of today. This will be abolished. What, if anything, does that mean for the New York City economy and what are your thoughts about it not applying to restaurants and bars?

Mayor: Well, I will express my concern and let me let Dr. Chokshi and Dr. Varma into this. Look, I think the concepts around time, and I'll speak as a layman, they can speak as the doctors, that the later you go, behavior can be affected, and I think one of the things that's really clear is we need people to be conscientious. You know, we're in this home stretch, battling COVID, we need people to be disciplined and conscientious. I think it's fair to say there's a variety of situations in which people are not as disciplined or conscientious, and I think when it gets later in day, when they're more tired, certainly, you know, if they've had a drink or one thing or another there's different realities. So, I'm someone who thinks keeping some limits on is smart while we're in this final battle against COVID. So, I certainly have some concerns, but let me turn it to the doctors to tell you their assessment.

Commissioner Chokshi: I think you're right, Mr. Mayor, and, you know, as you've heard from us time and time again this is the time for us to not abandon the things that have worked for us during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it's particularly important right now when we still see a relatively high level of cases, but we have a chance to bend that curve downward. So, my message to my fellow New Yorkers is a simple one. Let's keep doing the things that we know have worked over the last few months, and let's take particular caution with those activities where it's harder to wear a mask consistently and properly, or where you may have lost some inhibitions because, you know, you've had a drink or two, or if you're in an environment where there's a lot of shouting or physical exertion, which we know also facilitates the spread of the virus. So, now is the time for us to be smart so that we can finally turn the corner on this devastating pandemic.

Mayor: Thank you. Go ahead. Oh, I'm sorry, Dr. Varma. You want to add?

Senior Advisor Varma: Nothing else from me?

Mayor: Okay, go ahead.

Moderator: Last, we'll go to Nolan from the Post.

Question: Hey, good morning, everybody.

Mayor: Hey, Nolan. How was your weekend?

Question: It was good. How about those Baltimore Orioles?

Mayor: God, Nolan. You know, I'm impressed that you're paying close attention to a painful subject like that. Yes, God blessed the Baltimore Orioles. They won fair and square. How about those Toronto Blue Jays, Nolan?

Question: If I rooted for the Yankees that would hurt. I had a question, back to schools for a second. You've given parents a couple of extra days to up their kids back into in-person learning based on changes that you have yet to announce to the two-case rule in city schools. How are parents supposed to make that decision when you haven't even announced what the new rule is? Why should they have faith in this process?

Mayor: It's going to be more than two, and therefore they can have faith that the problem really had been as we experienced, as the data kept coming back, that the two-case rule didn't make sense anymore, and I've talked to lots of parents. I was a public school parent. I don't think they're out there with, you know, banners saying they want it to be X number of cases or Y number of cases. I think what folks feel and they're right, is that the two-case rule had outlived its usefulness. So, it will be gone. There will be a new rule in place soon. What it means is schools will be open more and more consistently. That's what parents want to know. You know, that's the conversation I've had with that's the conversation the Chancellor's had. So, we're telling people – that is a given, and as soon as the final details are worked out, we'll fill in the blank some more. Go ahead, Nolan.

Question: Yeah. Secondly, we've done a bunch of stories highlighting the disparities in vaccine access and in vaccine distribution across the city, where public and private distributors, the bulk of them are in Manhattan, south of a 110th street. The most vaccinated ZIP codes in the city are also typically in Manhattan, south of a 110th street, and just today to pull up the chart again, the least vaccinated ZIP codes in the city are typically ZIP codes listed on your list of priority neighborhoods and also places where you guys have made a number of announcements about trying to improve access. So, I'm wondering what isn't happening, right? So, why is Far Rockaway, why is Hunts Point, why is Bed-Stuy, why is Crown Heights, why is Brownsville – why are all these neighborhoods still, three months into this, still at the bottom of the list when it comes to, you know, places where shots are making it into arms?

Mayor: It's a good question. I will start and I'll turn to Dr. Chokshi. Nolan, I think the pattern we saw in the beginning is still is a fundamental issue here, although I think it's getting better. In the

beginning, we saw a huge skew in terms of willingness to be vaccinated, and it cut very much along income lines and ethnic lines. That again, I think that difference is closing over time, and we want to do everything to help close it more, and I believe when we get into the height of vaccination, which will be, you know, this month, next month, June, as we really are getting ample supply, I think you're going to see that gap close more and more, but there has been a disparity in willingness and all the other challenges that go with an unequal society folks who have a lot of benefits have had a better time accessing, and that's something we have to be honest about. But our job is to overcome that, to go out in communities, to create grassroots sites, to do the door-to-door efforts, to do homebound seniors, all the things that we think will help to bring more fairness, equality to the process, and over time, I do think it will even up quite a bit. Dr. Chokshi.

Commissioner Chokshi: Thank you, sir, and, and yes, I also very much appreciate this question because we have striven to make our vaccination campaign one that is not just safe and swift, but also equitable, and we have made strides particularly with respect to race and place in terms of closing the gaps that do exist. But I'll be the first one to tell you that we still have work to do a lot of that as you've pointed out has focused on improving access, and those 500 sites that are now publicly available, as I mentioned, is emblematic of making sure that people are able to get vaccinated, not just at a hospital or not at a mass vaccination site but at their local doctor's office at a pharmacy as well, and we've also as Dr. Long mentioned, invested a lot in outreach, but you will see us double down even further in the coming weeks in making sure that we are getting out into neighborhoods and communities to spread the word about vaccination, and our commitment is to continue closing those gaps.

Mayor: Thank you very much, Doctor. Well, as we conclude the day everyone, look, we are in a race. There's no question about it. We are trying to outrun COVID and the variants and make sure the city can move forward, and I can say today, we're winning that race because the amazing news from last week, over half a million New Yorkers vaccinated last week alone, and on Friday, over a hundred thousand in one day, proving that there's so much capacity out there so long as we get the supply. And we're also more hopeful in April, in May, we'll finally be getting the supply we've needed. This is a very exciting moment because we can turn the corner. We can outrun these variants, but it depends on you. Everyone who has not yet been vaccinated, going out there and getting vaccinated as quickly as possible. The standards are now going to be opened up as of this week for everyone, very clear, very straightforward. Now it's up to you to go out there and get vaccinated. Also, remember sometimes if you're already vaccinated, the best thing you can do is help someone else, someone else in your life and your family, someone you care about might need a little help getting to a vaccination site or help signing up for the appointment. You can help make the difference. So, New Yorkers have been heroic, it's the exact right word, heroic in fighting COVID over the last year. Here's one more chance to be heroes to beat back this disease. Make sure everyone gets vaccinated and bring the city back strong. Thank you, everybody.

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