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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Good evening, I'm Errol Louis. The coronavirus pandemic continues to kill hundreds of New Yorkers every day, but there are some signs of possible ending or winding down of the spread of the virus. Joining me now to talk about that and much more is Mayor Bill de Blasio, joining us from inside City Hall in the Blue Room. Good to see you Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good to talk with you, Errol.

Louis: What are the numbers that suggest to you we may be about to turn a corner on this thing?

Mayor: Yeah and Errol, I'm going to tell you about the numbers, but with a really important qualifier and I want all New Yorkers to understand this. We can't count our chickens before they're hatched. This has been, you know, a good few days for sure. It's obviously telling us something, but we've got a long way to go. And in fact there is a real danger if we were to loosen up too quickly, of a resurgence of this disease. I'm hearing this from the health care experts everywhere I turn. So just want to say to everyone, let's be smart about this. Let's get this thing done once the right way. Push this disease back once and for all. But the indicators are now something that the City of New York's making public, the ones that we actually think are the truest, most important indicator of what's going on. So, you can go to nyc.gov/coronavirus, see a variety of information that will be made public every single day. But what we're looking at now is the trend line here in terms of the number of hospitalizations related to the coronavirus, the number of folks who are in the ICU at any given point related to coronavirus. And then what our testing is showing, our citywide testing and the testing done at our city public health lab. So we're going to put up these indicators each day. What I've said is they need to all move together, down. They need to all reduce together over a period of about 10 days to two weeks. If we see that consistent pattern, that's when we start to be able to talk about some changing of the restrictions, some opening up. But that's a high bar. We're setting a high bar on purpose. So today, the first day of this effort we saw improvement compared to the previous day. So a good first day, but that has to happen regularly and sometimes you won't be shocked. One might go in one direction, one might go another direction. You need to see 10 days to two weeks, sustained constant progress. That's the high bar we're setting here via our Department of Health.

Louis: When it comes to testing in particular, I mean most people have not been exposed to the virus. So even if we do lots and lots and lots of testing, what we would expect to find out is that most people have not been exposed to the virus, right?

Mayor: Well, it's a little more complex. There's a big discussion going on now about how many New Yorkers really have been exposed and for how long. There's so much we still don't know. The entire international medical community still doesn't know so much about this disease. It didn't even exist six months ago in terms of affecting human beings. But what we do know is there's many more New Yorkers who have had the coronavirus, then the number that have tested positive. The number that have tested positive in New York City is over 100,000. Unquestionably, every health expert that I've spoken to, all the health leadership in New York City all say that number is much higher in reality. We don't know it because we can't know it. We can't -- we don't have the testing capacity. We've never had the testing capacity. We're fighting every day to get it. And hopefully someday soon we'll have it. But we also are talking about something that's been with us, you know, a month or two, maybe even longer. So we don't know the exact numbers, but we sure as hell know its many hundreds of thousands of people. And most, as we've said, all along about 80 percent have a very minimal experience. Thank God. So I think that's what's happened to many New Yorkers. Now, I've also said what our experts believe is more than half of all New Yorkers will contract this disease before this is all over. But again, the vast majority, a very mild version of it.

Louis: So as we continue to watch these numbers and see what good could come of it, what's your best estimate of what kind of numbers we'd need to see before anything resembling a reopening of the economy could be on the table?

Mayor: Yeah, very, very important question there. Look, I think the way I'd say it is this, to try and make it as straightforward as possible for everyone. April's going to continue to be a tough month and we've still seen an increase each day in the number of ventilators that are needed. We are still seeing -- it's so tragic how many of our fellow New Yorkers are passing away. Every family's been affected it feels like, in one form or another. Everyone knows someone who's been suffering from this disease. So April is still going to be tough. Into May. In May, I'm hoping to see improvement. Will it be enough improvement to say that we're really turning a corner and getting out of this phase of widespread transmission? We don't know that yet. I think that's either going to be May or June. One or the other, but we don't know when. We don't know exactly how. When you get out of the widespread transmission phase, two more phases ahead, low level transmission, which is when you can go back where we were over a month ago and you can actually track each case individually. The disease detectives, you'll remember them from the Department of Health, can go out, trace everyone's individual contacts, make sure that people are tested. Do they need to be quarantined? They are quarantined. It's a much more individualized situation. You keep containing the disease more and more and more. The final phase, which I think we're looking at the end of the summer, beginning of September hopefully, is what's called, you know, no transmission really. It means there's an occasional case, maybe a case that comes in from overseas. But no real transmission happening in the community, not needing to trace a lot of networks of people. You basically end this sequence of the disease. We want to try and get through that whole stretch between now and the beginning of September.

Louis: Okay. I've got a question for you about public housing. Politico New York reported on some of the problems in public housing. As you know, a number of developments are actually what are called NORCs, naturally occurring retirement communities, a high percentage of senior

citizens, people who are therefore at risk and vulnerable to the coronavirus. Do you know of any clusters of cases showing up in public housing?

Mayor: No. What we know is that our public housing residents need a lot of support. I've been talking to the leadership at NYCHA about the consistent cleaning program they put in place, bringing in additional contractors to do that. So that's been important. Buildings are regularly being cleaned in this moment of crisis. Obviously for NYCHA residents who have had their lives disrupted by all the job loss, for folks who can no longer pay the rent in NYCHA, what NYCHA is doing is saying if you've lost your income, all you have to do is document it and then you're not going to have to pay rent until you have an income again. So I think NYCHA has been very responsive, but I – no I don't see any particular cluster. But anything we see out there, of course we're going to respond to. But so far we have not seen that particular reality.

Louis: What you just described has rather serious budgetary implications for the Housing Authority, doesn't it?

Mayor: It does. And Errol look, talk about tough choices. I mean, you know, we're going to be talking about the budget in the days ahead. It's going to be tough all around. And I want to emphasize when we think about what we have to do in this time of crisis, it's as simple as this. The City government has to make sure that people are healthy, that they're safe, that they have a roof over their head and they have enough food to eat. That's what we're focusing on now. Those basics all the time. So even though it means a financial burden for NYCHA, we've got to make sure that people have a roof over their head. If a public housing resident lost their income, no fault of their own, the biggest economic crisis since the Great Depression, we're not going to penalize them. We're not going to hurt them. We're certainly not going to evict them. If they don't have an income, they don't have an income. We're not going to make them pay if they don't have an income.

Louis: On a related note I know you and the Council wanted to increase money to food banks. The need seems to only be going in one direction, however. Do we have enough resources being directed toward this hunger catastrophe?

Mayor: We're going to keep building it up. I mean, I named Kathryn Garcia as our Foods Czar explicitly because we saw a gathering storm when it comes to hunger in this city. And I will not let any New Yorker go hungry, period. So here's what we're doing. We did a great plan with the City Council and we'll be talking a lot about that this week, to make sure those local food banks can keep going. We have 435 sites all over the city. Public school sites where any New Yorker of any age can get three meals a day, grab-and-go, for free for as many family members as they need. Absolutely for free. You can call 3-1-1 to find out where to do that. And more and more we're building up the ability to deliver food to seniors and other folks who can't get out. Also, you can get that through 3-1-1. But we are got a lot more to say on this in the next few days. Because this -- exactly what you're saying Errol. This is going to have to expand rapidly because more and more people are running out of money. You can't get food, you know, you can't walk into the supermarket and say, Hey, I'd really like this food for free. You know, more and more people just don't have a paycheck. They don't have a way to support themselves. And this is the

part of the coronavirus crisis that's being underrated. The hunger problem is going to grow, but New York City is ahead of it. We're going to make sure everyone gets the food they need.

Louis: Okay. Stand by Mr. Mayor.

[...]

Louis: Welcome back to the program. I'm talking with Mayor Bill de Blasio who joins us from inside City Hall. And Mr. Mayor, I wanted to ask you, your Corrections Commissioner, Commissioner Brann, where has she been? Is she in this state these days?

Mayor: Errol, she's been dealing with all of these challenges and been one of the key people in the effort to make sure that folks who could be and should be released have been released. And you know, so Commissioner Cynthia Brann, the team at Corrections, NYPD, the team at City Hall, Mayor's Office on Criminal Justice, everyone's been working together to make sure that we keep everyone at Rikers safe and the whole Correction system, that we release people who can be appropriately released, particularly those who have the most serious medical conditions, and obviously continue to provide health care for those who are incarcerated, working with H + H with Correctional Health. That whole team's been working together constantly.

And you know, Errol, I heard this question earlier, I'm absolutely confused by this. The big human cry – and it was fair – was people, a lot of advocates saying rightfully, I think we have a humanitarian issue here, who can be released, what's the right way to do this? And Cynthia Brann is one of the people who organized the strategy to make sure that now it's about 1,200, I believe inmates have been released as a humanitarian act, as an act of mercy and protecting people, including those who are still incarcerated because they're now in an environment where there's fewer people and safer for them –

Louis: I was actually raising it because I was more concerned about the half dozen or so Corrections employees who have died so far. And I don't – I mean I just, you don't hear it mentioned at the briefings, she doesn't seem to attend the briefings –

Mayor: [Inaudible] wait a minute, Errol. It's the same exact issue in the sense that what we need for our officers is also to make sure that there are not any more inmates there than should be there. So, we're trying to protect our officers in a variety of ways. But the – I really believe one of the most central ways to protect our correction officers who are doing a great job in a really tough situation is to reduce that population. The overall population is down 1,200, 1,300 people compared to where it was at the beginning of March. That's a really big deal. We started at over 5,000, we're now almost down to close to 4,000. That's actually about everyone's safety, including the people who do the work.

Louis: Yeah, let me ask you a different question. The governor of California, the mayor of San Francisco they basically saw an uptick around the same time we in New York realized that there was going to be real trouble with the coronavirus. They seem to have handled it very differently and have lower numbers to show for it as far as fatalities and cases and so forth. What can we learn from our cousins on the West Coast there?

Mayor: Well, they have a different reality. I mean, first of all, I think very highly of the actions taken by Mayor London Breed in San Francisco and Governor Gavin Newsom from California. I think they were two of the great leaders in this crisis nationally. And I give them both a lot of credit and once Mayor Breed went to shelter in place and the surrounding counties, you know, that's what proved to me, it could be done effectively. And I called for it right after and I'm glad we got it done quickly in this city and in this state. But I think we have to be very clear that it's an entirely different environment there. San Francisco, obviously, it's about a tenth of the size of New York City. It's a much lower scale city in so many ways, certainly has an immigrant population, but nowhere near the number of folks, lower income folks, immigrant folks, folks dealing with historic health challenges. In fact, San Francisco, bluntly, we know for years now has been a city that gentrified so much that it really didn't resemble most other cities in the country. That's not to take away from their achievement. The achievement was great, but San Francisco and the surrounding counties do not bear a whole lot of resemblance to the incredibly densely populated dynamics in New York City. The poverty we deal with tragically, the fact that there are so many immigrants here who have been driven away from health care by so many of the things we've seen coming out of Washington. Just the scale is entirely different. But I think they did a great job. I think our reality though was in many ways a tougher reality.

Louis: What kind of an emotional toll is all of this taking on New Yorkers and what's the plan to deal with the emotional and psychological damage that has undoubtedly been done?

Mayor: Yeah, it's a great question, Errol. There's going to be a lot we have to do. I think all New Yorkers are feeling this. I think we're all in a kind of shock at just how much damage this disease has done so suddenly. I think we're going to be feeling it for a long, long time. Even if we start to overcome the disease, this is going to leave a mark on all of us and the recovery is going to be tough. We have to make sure the recovery is one in which, you know, people are really supported in it, including folks who have the least. So I'm adamant that this recovery has to be an act of justice and fairness, including addressing the health disparities and the mental health disparities that exist in all of this city.

But I think right now what we're seeing, for example, with the mental health capacity that we make available to the public through Thrive, a huge uptick in New Yorkers turning to that available free counseling. We know kids are going to need a lot of help. And one of the things the Chancellor's talked about is really intensifying mental health efforts for young people even before they come back to school. When we come back in September, it's going to have to be really a massive mental health campaign to help school communities who have lost people. They've lost teachers, they've lost principals, lost family members, kids that are going to be traumatized. So, we've not been through a crisis that reached this far and we've had horrible moments in this city before. Painful moments. But this one is like, literally every single ZIP code has been affected. And we're going to have to figure out how to provide mental health on a much greater level, particularly for the folks – I'm thinking about the kids here, I'm thinking about the parents who have been through a lot of trauma, are going to need a lot of support.

Louis: Well, let me ask you a little bit about politics. Bernie Sanders, the candidate that you supported, chose today, I'm not sure why, to come out and endorse Joe Biden. There was some

speculation that a number of Bernie Sanders supporters were making noises about not necessarily getting behind the presumptive nominee. What would you advise as far as Democrats' ability to coalesce behind Joe Biden at this?

Mayor: No, we all have to. We all have to support Joe Biden now. There's no question. Look, a long ago, it seems like a long time ago, 2019, doesn't it Errol, but in 2019, I was a candidate for president and we all, every single one of the candidates – and I remember this vividly talking to my colleagues – everyone said publicly, privately, whoever's the nominee, we will be behind a hundred percent. And it's Joe Biden, he earned it fair and square. And I give him a lot of credit. He went through a long, tough campaign, though he was down a lot of times, people were counting him out, they used to – they counted out Bernie Sanders, he came back, they counted out Joe Biden, he also came back. But Joe Biden won fair and square. And now it is the responsibility of all progressives, all Democrats to close ranks behind Joe Biden support him in every way we can. And Errol, I'll tell you, I talked to people all over the country. I mean, I got an extraordinary perspective last year. I think there are very few people, literally very few, that call themselves either a Democrat or progressive who are not going to come out for Joe Biden. Because in the end, even before the coronavirus, there was such tremendous reasons to put aside any differences and close ranks and get a new president. But, unfortunately, what we've seen from the White House in this crisis has only amplified it. And I think a lot of people, including a lot of independents and Republicans, are now going to be willing to vote for Joe Biden because they've seen, you know, so much pain that could have been avoided with different leadership in the White House.

Louis: What in particular didn't happen that you think could have been done differently by the White House?

Mayor: Well, we know now that warnings were being given, explicit warnings by the intelligence community and senior officials that the president didn't share with the public and didn't act on. And then we know that the number one thing that we needed was the testing. And we know right on the heels of the testing would have been to activate the Defense Production Act immediately months ago to put all of America on a war footing to produce the ventilators, the PPEs. I mean, I've got – for this city, we have enough PPEs for this week. We're still fighting to get enough for next week. We're the biggest city in America. And think about a lot of other cities that are struggling. So no, the president, you know he ignored profound warning signs and did not mobilize all the tools of the government to protect people.

And now we're – people's lives are being lost. And it still isn't this – this country is still not on a war footing. Let's be clear, this is coronavirus has been with us for quite a while. Under any scenario, we should have been on a war footing. I called for the president – I talked to him directly. I called on him to enlist medical personnel from around the country and work with the military to make sure they were brought where the need was greatest. Nothing ever happened. So I think, you know, we're here talking about a crisis, not an election, but I do think when the election comes, the American people are going to look at all that and say, our leader didn't lead.

Louis: Okay, we're going to leave it there for now. We will see you again next week, Mr. Mayor, thanks for spending some time with us.

Mayor: Thank you, Errol.

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