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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON
THE BRIAN LEHRER SHOW**

Brian Lehrer: Brian Lehrer on WNYC. And now, it is time for our weekly Ask the Mayor call-in, my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio at 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0. Or you can tweet a question, just use the hashtag #AsktheMayor. Good morning, Mr. Mayor. Welcome back to WNYC. Whoops, I can't hear the Mayor –

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning. I forgot that mute button. Good morning, Brian. How are you doing today?

Lehrer: Good. How about you?

Mayor: Good. Good. Thank you.

Lehrer: I'm sure you want to talk about reopening the city fully on July 1st. But I'd like to ask you first about the controversial reopening that you've ordered for Monday, the 80,000 City workers with office jobs who can no longer work from home full time starting Monday. And we keep getting contacted by City workers who think this is wrong for various reasons, and even question your motives. So, my first question on this is, I know they're only going in a few days a week to prevent too many people from being in the office at once, but why require them to come in at all while we still have community spread and variants? I know the numbers are going down, but there's still reportedly so much evidence that many people have been more productive at home as well, they argue?

Mayor: Okay. That is just not what we have found. We do not find that people are more productive at home. We find that people are more productive in the workplace and we are public servants. We are here to help people to get through this crisis and to help the city recover. I have been at City Hall every day since March 1st. A lot of my colleagues have, 80 percent of City workers have been at their posts, even in the toughest times. No, people need to come back because we have work to do, to bring this city back. The facts, according to our health care leadership, not people reading articles, but the actual leaders who have seen us through this crisis – looking at our indicators today, Brian, positivity level, now just above three percent plummeting, hospital admissions plummeting, hospitalization rate is now at two percent – excuse me, at two per 100,000. That means we are at the threshold now that we've been trying to get to. a 6.5 million vaccinations in New York City. No, it's a very, very different circumstance than it was. And our health care leaders are clear, this is the right time for folks to come back. And we got a lot of work to do. And we're going to take a lot of smart precautions. I have some little bit of breaking news that's related for you. And it is the parallel to our public schools. As of today,

we will have performed one million COVID tests in our public schools, one million. And here is the latest positivity level based on the testing yesterday, 0.34 percent. That's highly pertinent because we're using the same exact strategies to keep city offices safe as we have used successfully in our public schools.

Lehrer: And so, will teachers be required to go back to their classrooms as part of this? Because we keep hearing from parents and students themselves who talk about being frustrated as they returned, that they're doing zoom in a room? They're in the classroom, the teacher is at home.

Mayor: Again, we set a pattern for this year. We had an opt-in period, over 50,000 new students came in on Monday. We have obviously a huge number of teachers and school staff in schools. We have people that were on medical accommodation going back a long way. And remote learning that's been structured for families now for months and months. The basic reality is the opt-in told us that families made a choice. Most of them wanted to stay with what they had out of continuity, understandable. But in September we're going to open schools fully. There's no question now based on everything we're seeing, we'll be able to have every child back, have all our educators back and school staff. But the bottom line is look, the reason I announced the July 1st date for full reopening is because of the data and the science. It's 100 percent clear now. When you get 6.5 million vaccinations done and tens of thousands more each and every day, we now are winning the race against COVID and the variants. And we got to act like it. We've got to own the moment and get out there and bring this city back.

Lehrer: So, when you say fully reopen on July 1st, does that mean fully, fully – no capacity limits on restaurants, 20,000 people in Madison Square Garden, every piece of indoor gym equipment occupied, no more six feet, Carnegie Hall filled to the rafters with older classical music listeners? All of that?

Mayor: That is literally the goal. There obviously could be some particular exceptions depending on what the data and the science tells us. Right now, we're seeing absolutely consistent, striking progress directly, causally related to the vast number of vaccinations. So, the simple message to all New Yorkers, if you have not gotten vaccinated, it's the time right now. It is easier than ever. And if you like this idea of a full reopening, I think the vast majority of New Yorkers do, go out and get vaccinated if you haven't already. Go to vax4nyc.nyc.gov for a location, or you can call 8-7-7-VAX-4-NYC, locations all over the city. I want to particularly urge your listeners, Brian to experience what I experienced at the American Museum of Natural History. Get vaccinated under the whale, memorable – experience you will remember your whole life. And you'll get free fur admissions to the museum in the bargain. We're going to be doing a lot more of those kinds of exciting opportunities and incentives. But so long as we keep moving on vaccination, we have the real potential to have everything open, full strength.

Lehrer: We have a Twitter question on exactly that. So, I'll throw that one in first. Listener writes where is the street level, aggressive public info campaign on vaccines? Seems DOE posters, Department of Education posters for Pre-K for All and Community Education Council elections all over the place, but zero about vaccines, hashtag #AsktheMayor.

Mayor: I think that's a damn good point. I mean, obviously there's a little bit of a difference Pre-K for All is something that built up over years. But yeah, there are a lot of posters out for those Community Education Council elections, and that's a good thing. I think that's a really fair point that we can do better on. We're going to be doing a lot of advertising, multiple languages, community ethnic media, a digital campaign. But I think that's right. The street level kind of poster and visibility also helps. Especially at this next phase where I think it's about helping people to get vaccinated who are perfectly open to it, but want it to be easy, want it to be convenient. For the first time in the last few weeks it has been. I think that's a good suggestion and we will take that suggestion up for sure.

Lehrer: You know, mayoral candidate, Ray McGuire, proposed giving – I believe it's giving each new vaccinated person going forward, I don't think this would be retroactive. But since we're in the, you know, harder to reach or harder to convince people at this point, give each new one a hundred bucks. Good idea?

Mayor: You know I'm not sure. I understand the impulse. I think that adds up very quickly. But we're going to look at different kinds of incentives. We definitely, where I would agree with him is we need incentives, whether it's the opportunity at the American Museum of Natural History or all sorts of other kinds of incentives. Whether that one's the right one, I want to think about that some more.

Lehrer: Amit in Jamaica, Queens – Amit, is that how you say it? In Jamaica, Queens, you're on WNYC. Hi there.

Question: Thank you. That's how you say it. Hello, Mr. Lehrer and Mayor de Blasio. My name is Amit, and I am a bus rider from Jamaica, Queens. Mayor de Blasio, in 2019 you promised to speed up buses by 25 percent but New York City still has the slowest buses in the nation. Spring is finally here, which means the Department of Transportation can start painting bus lanes again, to speed up buses for riders. When the privileged are able to work from home while low-income riders and people of color rely on unreliable public transportation to get to work, New Yorkers are experiencing a tale of two cities. Nearly half of all essential workers fighting this pandemic are bus riders. And 75 percent of those riders across the city are people of color. We deserve a city that prioritizes our time and prioritizes our buses on our commute. Bus riders are thrilled about the new 60 new miles of bus lanes you installed last year. We're excited to see innovative solutions like the 181st Street busway that just opened up near Mr. Lehrer in Washington Heights. These projects work, however, just a few miles here and there are not helping enough riders. Mayor de Blasio, if you truly want to end the tale of two cities on our roads and deliver an equitable recovery for New York, will you add 30 miles of bus lanes to city streets in your last year in office?

Lehrer: There's the question. Go ahead.

Mayor: Yeah. Amit, thank you for your question. For eight years I've been fighting the tale of two cities, whether it's Pre-K for All, or affordable housing for hundreds of thousands of people, or rent freezes, or more bus lanes and bus ways, many, many things. So, I'm quite sure about that priority and living it every single day, which is why we have to have recovery for all of us. As

part of that recovery, absolutely we're going to have a lot more going on in terms of buses. Today, I was up at 181st Street for this incredible new busway which takes the slowest bus route in Manhattan and finally makes it work for working people. We obviously are moving busways and new bus lanes all over the city. Last year was a record year, even amidst the pandemic for expanding bus lane capacity. We're going to be doing a lot more this year and we'll have announcements in the coming weeks as part of the budget process. So, I think better than words, actions that we've proven, I've proven how much I'm committed to this. And you're about to see a substantial amount more.

Lehrer: Amit, thank you for your call. I hope that's a good answer. Another question from Twitter, why is it taking so long to reinstate the composting program? Whoops, that one just blinked off here as another tweet came in. There we go – sorry it moves too quickly.

Mayor: Escaping question, Brian?

Lehrer: That's right. When you're on, the Twitter feed goes really, really fast. So, okay. I found it again. Why is it taking so long to reinstate the composting program? If the City is back fully in July, why not composting too?

Mayor: We want to move quickly. It does take a few months to ramp up. I'm trying to remember the exact progression. But you know, it will be up and running this year. We're talking about moving this to, you know, ultimately something that will be citywide. We're starting with an opt-in, which I think is the right way to start. But I will check on any ability to speed up. I certainly – I'm a deep, personal believer in composting. Brian, if you have not seen my family composting video, encouraging people to compost from 2014, you're missing a work of art. But let me see if there's a way we can speed up the current timeline.

Lehrer: On the reopening. I know Governor Cuomo just likes to mess with you, but does he have a point – I can say that as –

Mayor: You are a truth teller, Brian.

Lehrer: I can say that as a matter of report, it's not opinion. But does he have a point when he says we cannot know here on April 30th, what conditions will be like on July 1st? I'll give you these examples. Oregon and Washington State, just re-imposed restrictions because they have hospitalizations up by 15 percent and 18 percent over the last two weeks, not to mention the resurgences we're seeing in some other countries. So, how can you say today what will be with this changeable virus two months from tomorrow?

Mayor: Brian, by that standard, we would never set a goal for anything because anything could change in the world. I think here we have facts on our side. We have 6.5 million vaccinations. The rate of vaccination continues to be strong. Folks are coming for their second doses very consistently in New York City. My goal is five million fully-vaccinated New Yorkers by the end of June, right now, 70.7 percent have received at least one dose – in terms of my progress towards that goal, 70.7 percent have received at least one dose. I feel great about the trajectory we're on for a vaccination. The health care indicators are speaking clearly. Our health

care team analyzed all this and said, look, we can do this on this timeline. It gives us a lot of time to go out and get people vaccinated and get ready. But the Governor legendarily, doesn't talk to his health care team, doesn't trust health care professionals. A lot of them have left because they realized he wasn't even seeking their guidance, and he, you know, if he wants to make decisions based on the data and the science, that's what we're doing here, and then we're saying we need goals. We need to keep this recovery going, but in a smart and careful way, and if the data and science tells us something else, we have to make an adjustment, well, we certainly know how to do that.

Lehrer: Ameel in Fresh Meadows, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Ameel.

Question: Hi, thank you for taking my call. Hello, Mr. Mayor and Mr. Lehrer. As a former New York City teacher, and New York City employee, I heard from other people, word of mouth, and finally from the UFT that the City is in negotiations with the city's municipal unions to replace our regular Medicare coverage with Medicare advantage plans and a cost-savings plan, saving the City money. That means that retirees who are on fixed income pensions will be paying more and getting less for the medical coverage. According to the City and you, Mr. Mayor. It's all right to cut retirees medical coverage while you prepare to hire more people for newly created agencies and cleaning up the city parks, spending unnecessary money on these projects, you also boast of getting money from the federal government from the recent stimulus relief package. Where is this money coming from and going to? You claim that other politicians need to be more transparent. Shouldn't just include you too. Shouldn't this be made more public so that all New Yorkers are aware of what the City and you are planning to do to the seniors and retirees who devoted their lives to this city. Who isn't being more transparent now?

Mayor: Ameel, respectfully we show by our actions, our respect for retirees in this city, all the people who serve the people of this city and we provide extraordinary benefits, such as don't exist hardly any place else in America right now, and the discussions about how can we save money while still keeping benefits strong is something we do because we need to preserve those benefits for the long haul. There's always pressure on pensions and health care benefits. It constantly has to look for ways to keep it efficient, but keep serving people well. I think we can strike that balance. I really do. I think our commitment, my commitment, the city's commitment retirees cannot be questioned. It is unparalleled in the nation.

When you say it is unnecessary to clean up New York City with all due respect, I just think you're playing wrong. I'm thinking about eight and a half million people. I respect retirees greatly, but my job is to serve eight and a half million New Yorkers who would like a cleaner city who know that the comeback would benefit from cleaning up the city, getting rid of the litter, getting rid of graffiti. That's what our City Cleanup Corps is going to do, and we're going to employ 10,000 people who have been out of work in the bargain, and again, deep respect for retirees, but I care a lot about people who are unemployed right now and breadwinners for their families and need a job. So, that's why we're doing the City Cleanup Corps.

Lehrer: Listener on the reopening tweets. "How about Excelsior Pass-only days at city attractions like museums," and so for people who don't know what the Excelsior pass is, it's

another way of asking what about some days at museums and other attractions where you only get in if you're vaccinated or prove a test?

Mayor: I think that's an interesting idea, Brian. I think what you're going to see is private institutions, businesses, or maybe cultural institutions, theaters. I'm not going to be surprised at all. If they determined they want standards like that, proof of vaccination and-or proof of a recent negative COVID test, or maybe rapid testing on the scene. I think that's going to be one of the tools that helps us to have a full reopening. I think it'll be more of use in some places, certain types of locations more than others, but I think it's a real interesting tool. So, that's a helpful suggestion we're certainly going to look at.

Lehrer: And on the reopening or the mandatory return to work for city office workers on Monday, to what degree is this about sending a message to other employers, to bring their workers back in order to help get more people eating at restaurants and shopping in the business districts again, for the sake of the larger economy?

Mayor: The reason to do this again, Brian, you know, very important to note, 180,000 city employees have been vaccinated very important to know that 80 percent of the workforce is right now at their jobs and has been through the height of the pandemic. We've got to do the work to bring the city back. I will have this discussion with anyone. Anytime in person is more effective, more efficient, there's more collaboration, there's more creativity. As a manager, night and day when I'm dealing with people in person then via Zoom, and we've got a lot of work to do. We've got to bring back the city strong. So, that's the reason. We can just do more for people. I do think, you know, others in the private sector will see it as an important indicator that there will be more activity around those buildings will help small businesses. Undoubtedly, I think it'll help bring back jobs and save jobs, but the reason to do it is the quality of the work and the fact that we're starting to come out of this pandemic and it's time to start owning the recovery.

Lehrer: And so, one question about how, because somebody wrote to me that the City has been inconsistent with its guidance and failed to monitor whether or not the various agencies are complying with best practices, and they say complicating the situation is the reality that thousands of city workers worked in leased office spaces. So, let me unpack that and ask you two questions. How will you monitor and enforce best safety protocols once they go back Monday and two, how are you controlling ventilation and other conditions in spaces that are leased that the City doesn't own?

Mayor: Okay, fair questions, and what I'd say is the, the strengths of the approach. One, as I said, based on what we saw in the public schools, which has been literally extraordinary and proven over and over again – a million tests to confirm how safe the schools have been. We're taking the exact same methodologies, applying them here. I announced this in January. So, agencies have had so much time to get ready. You know, that really, I mean, they've had January, February, March, April to get ready and to put these measures in place, whether they're in a leased building or whether they're in the city building, and the fact is that, you know, the guidance has been put out to the agencies and employees. It's a very meticulous plan. What I'm sure you're going to get people who say, you know, being either cynical or not having heard all the information that there has been something they don't like, but what we have is a clear track

record here of the models that work and that's, what's been applied very carefully, and as you said, at the beginning, Brian folks are going to be in for part of the time in most settings, not all the time, and there's going to be distancing on top of masks, on top of cleaning, on top of ventilation. It will be a safe environment.

Lehrer: Miguel, in the Bronx, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Miguel.

Question: Hi. How are you? Longtime listener. Mr. Mayor, what are you planning on doing with all the motorcycle gangs and up and terrorizing the Upper section of Manhattan and the Bronx for the past couple of years?

Lehrer: This is a noise question, right?

Question: Sorry?

Lehrer: When you say terrorizing, is this a noise question?

Question: Noise. There are some incidents where I've been driving around the city and it's just like anywhere from 50 to 100 vehicles, mostly ATVs and dirt bikes, and they just like take Broadway and run red lights, and it's just a mess.

Mayor: Miguel, first of all, excuse me, I'm really concerned about this, and I have gotten regular reports of this problem, and we have to lean in more police resources to address this. This is something that, you know, really in so many ways bothers people in communities, whether it's the noise or the safety concerns. We have had problems like this over the years and found effective strategies to stop it, but it came with really concentrating resources. This is what precision policing is all about. If we have a particular problem, we move resources in that direction until we break the momentum of it and change the reality. So, I will talk with police leadership about addressing this problem in Upper Manhattan, in the Bronx.

Brian, one other note on the previous question for city employees who want to get the whole guide, there's an extensive guide to be office reopening, can go to nyc.gov/DCAS – Department of Citywide Administrative Services. So, it's nyc.gov/DCAS, and can see the whole carefully organized guide as to how the openings being handled.

Lehrer: Thank you, and in our last minute one more question about law enforcement in the Bronx. Listener tweets “please ask the Mayor to provide an update on the efforts to catch the individual responsible for the anti-Semitic vandalism in Riverdale and express your support for NYPD efforts to protect the Jewish community. Thank you.” writes this listener. Yeah, it was, was it four synagogues vandalized last week?

Mayor: Yeah, this is a very troubling situation. I want to say to the listener I 100 percent want to affirm we do not accept the anti-Semitism. We do not accept attacks on synagogues or any houses of worship. The NYPD has a pretty good idea of who this is, and I think we will see an arrest shortly. But it's very troubling, and what I've said is, you know, there's a lot of tools we need to use against bias crimes, but one of those tools is to show consequences and this case, I think you will see those consequences soon.

Lehrer: Thanks, as always, Mr. Mayor. Have a good weekend. Talk to you next week.

Mayor: Thanks a lot, Brian.

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