

THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
NEW YORK, NY 10007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: April 23, 2020

CONTACT: pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov, (212) 788-2958

**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON THE AMSTERDAM NEWS
PODCAST**

Cyril Josh Barker: My guest today is New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, who's going to be speaking with me today about how COVID-19 is impacting the city and what's ahead. This is his first time on the podcast and we are so happy to have him. Welcome to the podcast, Mayor de Blasio. How are you?

Mayor Bill de Blasio: I'm doing okay, Josh. We're all going through a lot, but I'm hanging in. How you doing?

Barker: I'm doing the same. Just hanging in there. Well, first and foremost, I do want to ask you about a concern that a lot of our readers have and a lot of people in the city have, and that is how COVID-19 is impacting the black community here in New York. What are your words on that? Can you share your thoughts on how that's being handled?

Mayor: Yeah, we're seeing a really disturbing disparity where people of African descent are being hit very hard by this disease, disproportionately hard. And it goes back to a lot of things we all know too well, it goes back to massive disparities in health care predating this crisis, the fact that health care in this country is given out according to income and, you know, is not universal the way it should be. And the fact that, you know, all the structural racism and everything, we're all fighting against has left so many people of African descent vulnerable in this crisis. And it's pointing out a really painful illustration of how we have to do things very differently in the future. The city's already trying to make a lot of changes, but there's more we have to make, but the country – this country, it's like a total clear wakeup call that we're dealing with unacceptable health care disparities and we need a very, very different approach to health care going forward.

Barker: Thank you so much. And also tell us a little bit about what's going on to slow the spread of coronavirus. People are still social distancing, you know, businesses are closed. Tell us what's being done to stop the spread.

Mayor: Yeah, Josh, the most important actions – closing down those nonessential businesses, closing down the schools, closing down bars and restaurants, all of that while requiring people to stay home to the maximum extent possible and to practice social distance and enforcing the social distancing. All of that has really added up. The reason we are finally able to say that our health care system has held through this crisis, our health care workers have held was because New Yorkers did the right thing and really followed those standards, and it helped us begin to turn the corner. But the big question is where do we go from here? I think what you're going to

see is the month of May now becomes decisive. We've got to hold on to this kind of tough discipline approach while bringing into play a lot more testing and the kind of test-and-trace approach I've talked about the last few days. That means heavy contact tracing. If someone is tested – is positive or has the symptoms, we want to know who they were in close contact with so we can go and test those people too, and isolate and quarantine anyone who needs it with a lot of support.

This is going to be a very aggressive plan, unlike anything you've seen so far in the United States, anything you've seen in New York City historically. We're talking about, we're going to be doing tens of thousands, and then I hope hundreds of thousands, of tests per day eventually. We have tens of thousands of hotel rooms ready to help people with isolation and quarantine. It's going to be very aggressive and May is going to be decisive. This is when we bring all this online to the maximum extent possible. The big X factor here, Josh, is do we get the kind of testing capacity we need right now? Only the federal government could help us do that. They failed miserably throughout. We're finding some testing capacity of our own. We're building that up, but we really need, like, profound amounts of a federal involvement to get this testing capacity up to where we need to really shut this disease down. And that is still not something that we you know, we can have any guarantees around.

Barker: And I know that you recently put testing sites in some of our black and brown neighborhoods, in Harlem and Brooklyn, in the South Bronx and in Southeast Queens. Can you give us a progress report on how that's going? Are more people getting tested? Are more people taking advantage of it? And how is it going overall?

Mayor: It's going really well. I mean we've put up now the five centers that are part of our Health + Hospitals, our public hospitals, including East New York in Brooklyn, Vanderbilt Health Clinic on Staten Island, Queens Hospital in Jamaica side, Sydenham in Harlem, Morrisania in the Bronx. They're getting a good response and it's just starting, the word is spreading rapidly and more and more people are coming in. Obviously free tests, walk-up tests with a focus on people, not only from the community but who have those preexisting conditions or are older, who are most vulnerable. We got five other sites that we are doing with the 1199 – Local 1199 SEIU, the health care workers union. We're doing that for their members but also for the larger community. And then a new set of sites that are opening now, also going to be at Health + Hospital sites in Fort Greene, Brooklyn; Mott Haven in the Bronx, and the Lower East Side plus sites that will be specifically in public housing developments. Jonathan Williams Houses in Williamsburg, Woodside Houses in Queens, Saint Nicholas Houses in Harlem.

So, we're expanding this grassroots testing rapidly. And the goal here is that this is going to really be in the front of our efforts to fight the disparity, but it's only a – kind of a vanguard of something much, much bigger where I want to see us not increase by thousands of tests a day, but citywide by tens of thousands of tests a day. And again, ultimately, if I had my perfect world, it would be, we could do hundreds of thousands of tests a day to really shut this disease down.

Barker: You recently made the decision to close school for the rest of the year. I know that was a difficult decision. We've been hearing from a lot of families about how they're dealing with it. One of the main things that we're hearing is that there are still some students that don't have the

materials and necessary things that they need to do remote learning. First of all, can you elaborate a little bit on your decision to close the schools the rest of the year and about how more hardware is being given to students in the city?

Mayor: Yeah, Josh, it was a very tough and painful decision because I understand – you know, I was a public school parent for all of my kids' education. I understand how much parents rely on the schools for everything, for a safe place for the kids, the education of the kids, food for the kids, you name it. And the way parents are working such long hours, it's one of the things that they really rely on. So, I really tried to see if there's any way we could keep school going. It proved to be impossible. What we said is [inaudible] going to have to start an online learning system from scratch, you know, to do something for 1.1 million kids that has never been done before. We're making progress, but it's still a work in progress. And the one thing that has been clear is every child that needs a device, every child who does not have what they need [inaudible] the actual device or the internet service to participate online learning, it'll be given to them for free.

The Department of Education is doing that as we speak. We've got 300,000 iPads in from Apple and we're screening very quickly the kids that've gone really well in the last few weeks as more and more of the iPads come in. The problem is there are some kids we haven't heard from, some families we haven't heard from who still have a need. So, I want you to please get the word out. You can just call 3-1-1 – if you're a family of a public school child who doesn't have a device, that doesn't have internet service, all you have to do is call 3-1-1 and we can get it to you quickly. So, we've got the devices now finally, we need to make sure we reach everyone who still hasn't come forward and needs them.

Barker: One other thing – a couple of things I want to talk about. Well, the other thing was about the small businesses. Small businesses are suffering right now and they need help and you know, employees need to get – you know keep working. And I specifically want you to talk about the New York City Small Business Continuity Loan Fund which is aimed at helping out a lot of our small businesses.

Mayor: Yeah. So, we put that loan fund and a grant program out too. The loan fund was for businesses of a hundred employees or fewer. The grants were for the smallest kind of mom-and-pop, you know, five employees or less. And we devoted about \$50 million early on in this crisis. We got a huge number of applications and so we're going to be putting all that money out rapidly. It will all be used up quickly for sure. And what we're seeing so far in loans and grants is that about 30 percent are going to M/WBEs, to minority- and women-owned businesses, which is something we want to make sure is – you know, continues to deepen because that's consistent with the larger goals we had before COVID-19, of getting more and more City contracts to M/WBEs. That 30 percent goal is actually what we've been trying to achieve with billions and billions of dollars of City contracts and we're getting closer to it all the time. So, it's a very sad situation we're all dealing with, but at least it's good that these loans and grants are going out rapidly and they're reflecting our whole city and our whole community.

Barker: And we're starting to see some signs that things are starting to get back to somewhat of normal. I know that the announcement was made that the USS Comfort was, you know, left the

city. There's no longer a need for that. And that marinas were open recently here in New York, which is a little glimmer of hope for a lot of people who want things to get back to normal. But the question that on everybody's mind is, when will we be back to normal? When will we be able to not be working from home, not social distance, going back to school? And how is that process going to look? Because you know, some cities are kind of speeding it up a little bit, maybe not in the best way that they should, but what is it going to take for New York City to get back to some type of normalcy?

Mayor: Yeah. Josh, this is the most, sort of, fundamental question I hear from so many people. First of all, I'm very concerned about some of the states that are rushing to reopen. And I don't have – you know, I don't live there. I don't see everything that's happening there. But what I'm hearing from people in those states is a deep concern that their leaders are making decisions more about political considerations and economic considerations, rather than protect the lives of their people. And that worries me a lot. Here, we are taking a very careful cautious approach because we've seen the devastating impact here and we're not going to let this disease reassert. We are starting to beat it back. Our health care workers have done amazing, amazing work beating back this disease, but the people have too, but it's taken a lot of consistency. So, my point would be, first, one of caution. We're on the right track. We got to stay that track. We cannot take our foot off the gas.

The second thing I'd say is I look, sort of, to the beginning of school as the time I feel the most confident about – meaning to say we said we'd start school in September. That gives us a lot of time to create the right approach to starting school where people can feel safe about it. Obviously, testing is going to be crucial to that when you work back from there, the way I'd say it is in May we go into heavy testing and contact tracing. That's going to help us constrain this disease. So, I know what we got to do in May and I know it's going to take time to achieve the further beating back of the disease. I feel very good about things getting substantially back to normal by September. So, the question becomes what happens in those middle months? June, July, August. How fast can we go? And that's the great unknown.

I think if we have really great discipline from New Yorkers and great success with building up testing and contact tracing, that's going to go faster. If that's not – if we don't have enough testing, for example, if the federal government doesn't step up and there's just not enough testing, it's going to go slower. But somewhere between, you know, the end of May and the beginning of school is going to be a point where we start to loosen up.

Barker: And will that happen in stages? Because are you going to – I mean, have you thought of a plan yet that's going to open the city in a process? Because obviously we can't flip a light switch on and have everything open at the same time. But is that being thought about, is that being put in place, what's going on with that?

Mayor: Unquestionably. As you said, it's going to be stages. It's not – there is no flipping of the switch. You're absolutely right. It will be slow, careful stages. I don't mean slow like we want to take more time than we need, what I'm saying is we're going to make decisions based on facts and we're putting out these indicators all the time that people can see every day, all New Yorkers can see them together and know where things are going. When we get to a certain point of

improvement – we have these three leading indicators that I talk about each morning. When those improve for, you know, give or take, two weeks, is when we can anticipate some initial loosening up. But again, it also depends on people staying with the rules we put out for now and living by them, depends on getting more testing in. All of it's going to be sort of interactive. We're going to watch it all every single day, but at some point, if things go well, we say, okay, certain things now can loosen up some more and then we see how we do with that. If that goes well, then you loosen up some more, and sort of go in stages with, I hope, the end point being no later than the start of school where we get to something that really feels much more normal. But again, maybe with hard work all around we could get there much sooner.

Barker: Alright, Mayor de Blasio, my last question for you is what's your message to New Yorkers? You know, people are dealing with a lot of different things, some of these things at the same time, you know, job loss, illness, lack of finances, several things. What is your message to New Yorkers at this time as we go through this COVID-19 pandemic?

Mayor: Most important message is that New Yorkers have been heroic, not just the health care workers and the first responders, but everyday people have shown a lot of fight back and a lot of spirits and also have really adapted to these tough new rules. And that's the only reason why we're fighting back this disease, it's what everyday people have done. So, I just give my deepest appreciation to all New Yorkers for that. I'd say for all the folks hurting, and it's a huge percentage of the city that's hurting right now, the City is there for you, especially for folks who are hungry. Just call 3-1-1, we'll get you food or tell you where you can get food in your community. For folks who need medical help, just call 3-1-1 and we can connect you to our public hospitals and get you the help you need.

We're really trying to step up in a very energetic way and forceful way to get people what they need. But the biggest question going forward is, will the help be there from Washington? We need two things from Washington. We need testing, really pervasive testing, and we need that stimulus bill to make New York City whole so we can afford to give people all the services that they need. And we need to fight for that and that's going to be in May. That's going to be a decisive moment whether we get what we deserve or not. So, that's what we're working on right now, but I can say that the City is going to – we're going to give everything we got to keep people safe, to keep them healthy, to get them food, keep a roof over their head, protect where they live and their ability to keep living there. We can't do everything the federal government can do. We need them to step up and we need to keep pounding away to get them to step up, to fill in the rest of the equation and really help people back.

The last thing I'll say is it's going to be an opportunity here, not just to restart and to recover, but to transform. I don't want to see New York City go back to the status quo before COVID-19. We were doing some good things as a city, for sure, but that status quo before COVID-19 is not acceptable to me. Those disparities that became so sharp are not acceptable to me. We have to see it as a transformative moment. And when you think about moments in history, the Great Depression is a very powerful example – horrible, painful moment but out of that came some of the biggest changes that we're still feeling in our lives now in the direction of economic justice, social justice, and dare I say, we need racial justice to be front and center in this equation. So, don't see it as just restart. We have to see it as a restart with transformation.

Barker: Alright, well listen, Mayor de Blasio, I really appreciate you being on the podcast and thank you so much for being here.

Mayor: Thank you, Josh. Hang in there.

###