

THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON THE BRIAN LEHRER SHOW**

**Brian Lehrer:** It's the Brian Lehrer Show on WNYC. Good morning again everyone and now our weekly Ask The Mayor segment my questions in yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio. Our phones are open at our new call in number which allows our producers to screen your calls from home. It's 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0. 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0. Or you can always tweet a question. Just use the hashtag #AskTheMayor for these segments. And as I mentioned at the beginning of the show, and a few times already today, Ask The Mayor has now moved for the foreseeable future from its old 10 o'clock slot on Fridays to here around 11 or a little after 11 because of a coronavirus-era change in the Mayor's schedule. And with that, good morning Mr. Mayor, welcome back to WNYC.

**Mayor Bill de Blasio:** Good morning Brian and thank you to everyone at WNYC for your flexibility because we are doing morning press conferences so everyone can get the latest updates. So, I appreciate you helping us to set this new time.

**Lehrer:** Now, you used to do your daily press conferences in the afternoon. So, let me ask you a political question. Is that so you can set the day's news agenda for New York by going before Governor Cuomo daily briefings?

**Mayor:** No, it's just about making sure that we get information out that is fresh at the beginning of the day. We've -- in the beginning we all were trying to make sense of so much incoming, so many changing circumstances. And now, you know, we've had a little bit of improvement, I emphasize a little bit. It's allowed us to create more consistency and I think it's just valuable to start each day giving people the updates that they need, giving them the latest. And then everyone can go on from there.

**Lehrer:** And I see that in the press conference that just ended among the other things you announced five additional test sites for frontline health care workers at a rate of 3,500 tests per week. And also opening up 11,000 hotel rooms for people who need to quarantine away from loved ones. You want to talk about those additional testing sites?

**Mayor:** Yes. And that'll all be available on nyc.gov, the details. It's actually a new City program through our public hospitals and clinics. That will start at about 2,500 a week at five sites around the city. But I expect that to ramp up intensely quickly. Another set of five different sites, a partnership we're doing with a private health care provider and with a 1199 SEIU Health Care Workers Union. That's going to be about 3,500 a week. Those are both targeted to the

communities that we've seen specifically hardest hit in this crisis where we've seen the highest level of incidents of this disease and particular challenges among folks who are older with those preexisting conditions. So they will be the specific target for all of this testing. With the addition that with the sites we've done with 1199 and One Medical, the private entity, those will be focused both on community members who are over 65 and have preexisting conditions and on health care workers, adult home workers, folks who work with the disabled.

So these are very important new initiatives, but they're just a beginning Brian of something much bigger as the City is now starting in the beginning in May, we'll be producing our own test kits. We're finally getting some test kits in from the open market. We are going to be able to do a lot more testing and we'll use it strategically for now. But what we really need to get to is very, very widespread testing. That's part of how we get out of this tough, tough phase with the disease. And then the hotel rooms compliment this point for folks who are particularly vulnerable and folks who are in many cases what we're seeing in the neighborhoods hardest hit, which we've seen are lower income communities, immigrant communities, communities of color, places that have had much less health care available even though people deserved it, they didn't have it because of economic injustice that folks in those neighborhoods who live in crowded conditions in their home, often multigenerational homes, need opportunities to isolate. If obviously they're symptomatic, if they test positive, that have been around someone who tested positive, the hotel rooms will help us give an option for anyone who needs to isolate from the rest of their family. They'll be able to get that support for free.

**Lehrer:** And do I understand that the hotel rooms are going to be prioritized for people who live in crowded housing circumstances or am I over interpreting that?

**Mayor:** No, you're interpreting it correctly, Brian. So look, all New Yorkers, I mean, we know every New Yorker deals with having less space than we'd all like, but you know, there are certainly people in the city who live in homes, live in apartments where there's some space, there's others who live in just horribly crowded dynamics. Again, many times multigenerational families, some of them doubled up, even tripled up. That's a result of poverty and many other challenges. For folks that are in sort of extremely crowded conditions, we're making a priority for sure, that if someone in one of those situations, if someone is symptomatic, if someone's tested positive, if someone's been in close proximity recently to someone who tested positive, we want to make sure to particularly get anyone out of those homes who may be vulnerable. And if for example, any member of a family, let's say there's, you know, ten people under one roof. If one gets sick, we want to isolate that person from everyone else to protect everyone else. So we're going to be using this very strategically and we'll constantly build the supply as needed. But this is also targeted, especially at the places where we've seen the problem growing because of these very realities.

**Lehrer:** And before we get to phone calls, when you talk about ramping up testing, any reactions to the three phase reopening guidelines the President and his team announced last night? They acknowledged that New York and New Jersey are not ready for this at this time, but they also did say a sufficient availability of tests in any area of the country is going to be one of the prerequisites for doing it, you know, without flying blind. So did they give you any helpful tools to work with for gauging when and how?

**Mayor:** You know, minimally I think is the answer. You know, this just in, we need testing, right? Breaking news. I mean it's been the strangest and most troubling part of this whole equation from January on, because I first demanded testing from the federal government on January 24th. And we've still never seen it. So I think what you saw is there were some broad strokes to that plan that I think made some sense and clearly they acknowledged the differences that different places are experiencing. But the problem with the Trump administration to date is they haven't provided the testing and they're not acting on the stimulus. And these are two things, there's literally two things where the federal government could play a decisive role, getting testing to all parts of the country that need it in really great quantities. And moving right now on Stimulus 3.5 to provide the relief to cities and states that need it right now that have lost billions and billions of dollars of revenue so we can maintain basic services and start to work towards a recovery. These are two things they could be doing right now they're not doing. And particularly the stimulus, that is literally right now – I mean, the word from Washington now, Brian, is that if Donald Trump said to Mitch McConnell, you need to move this Stimulus 3.5, the Republican Senate will go along. It could be signed today, tomorrow. It could be moved on immediately by unanimous consent in the Senate. So that is the productive thing the federal government should do. Instead, we're not seeing action on that and we're being told, Hey, testing matters, but we can't help you. You know, that's just not going to do much for us.

**Lehrer:** Right. They made it very clear again last night that testing is up to the states and localities around the country. And when you combine that -- and we shouldn't harp on this because there are things at the city level that you have to deal with, but when you combine that with the President's statement earlier in the week that he has total authority to tell the states what to do if he chooses to. We have a President who is claiming total authority but zero responsibility. So there we are. Dr. Harris in Manhattan, you're on WNYC with Mayor de Blasio. Hello.

**Question:** Hi. Thank you. Good morning. So I have a question based on science. So is that we know, as a health professional that N95 masks and gloves properly used prevent infection in nearly all cases. So the question I have –

**Lehrer:** And you know that – Doctor, you know, eight o'clock tonight, it takes effect in the city that everybody who's out in a public space needs to be wearing a face covering. So then what's your question?

**Question:** Right. Thank God. But that's not N95 masks, which is the problem. [Inaudible] why the City is not providing free, every New Yorker N95 masks and gloves and providing the instructional videos to wear them properly is beyond me. And of course [inaudible] enough. So why the City does not force factories in the city, like in World War II to provide those masks free to everyone and then actually people can get back to work and be safe.

**Lehrer:** Mr. Mayor, Dr. Harris, I'm going to leave it there and get a response. But even before getting back to work, which is down the road, even just for going out in public under the current stay at home conditions, you are requiring the masks at eight o'clock. And he's asking you to use

a kind of municipal version of the Defense Production Act and make companies in the city ramp up mask production because I don't know where to get a mask, do you?

**Mayor:** No. And let's be clear. So first of all, you want to really help your listeners to understand the huge difference between the N95 mask, which is a top of the line medical mask that our health care workers need to be safe in many circumstances. Versus a face covering, which I've said from the beginning, until only, you know, a couple of weeks ago there was not even evidence that the face coverings would have the impact and that that was something that was important as we understood the disease. When more data came in, our health care leadership said, you know what? Face coverings would help. Now let's tell people to use them. But that meant for an everyday in New York a bandana, a scarf or the kind of mask you can buy in a hardware store, not a sophisticated medical N95 mask. So I want to really make that a clear, sharp distinction. To Dr. Harris's question, which I appreciate, but I think it's leaving out a crucial part of the equation. N95 masks have been very hard to come by for months. We have literally been in a hand to mouth situation. I've reported it very publicly through my press conferences Brian. There were days where we were not at all sure we would have enough N95 masks for our health care professionals, for just a few days ahead. I can say at this point it looks good for next week, but it doesn't yet for the week after that. And I'm just talking about the needs of health care professionals and first responders. So I think Dr. Harris's question is a good one, but needs to recognize that the supply all over this country has been stressed and N95 masks were not something clearly made in New York City. And we've tried to ramp up production in New York City on a variety of things we need including things like the face shields for health care workers and first responders, the surgical gowns. We've been working on ventilators and now of course test kits. I'm going to see what we can do and those all have to be created from scratch because there's no homegrown industry. All of that has to be created. I'm going to see if there's a chance to start up N95 production on a big scale.

There are other ideas out there as well about ways to sterilize N95 masks and put them back into operation. There's a lot we're looking at right now, but the only way we could talk about N95 masks for the general public is if we had a massive supply. And right now, we literally don't have enough on a regular basis and a sustained basis to even give people what we want to give them. Right now, we're on what's called a crisis standard for our health care workers and first responders. We want to get to a higher standard of protection for them, that would be job one. But for everyday New Yorkers, as our health care leaders have said in this city, the homemade options, the bandanas, the scarves protect other people, protect the community. That's the goal right now.

**Lehrer:** Nic in Brooklyn, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Nic.

**Question:** Hi, Brian. Hi, Mr. Mayor. Thank you so much for taking my call and for everything that you both do for the city. I'm calling with regard to the situation right now at Columbia University with grad students in housing. They are in apartments, not dorms. And they find that they will be unable to pay their rent over the summer because they're not able to sublet out their apartments, they can't get the extra jobs that they used to get, and many of these are international students who cannot leave because, you know, there are restrictions in their home countries, the borders are closed. And Columbia has made it very clear that they will not offer any rent relief

during the crisis. The only thing they've done is offer \$500 in a case-by-case basis for reimbursement to move out by April 22nd. So, my question for the Mayor is if the students are unable to leave and can't pay rent, how can the City protect them from retribution from the university, which is both their employer and their landlord?

**Mayor:** This is – I really appreciate this question and I'm astounded as you lay it out. I have not heard this before, and I'll get my team on it immediately. I'm going to ask my general counsel to follow up. I am perplexed why, if these students don't have other options, particularly those who cannot go back to their home country – why Columbia would not be more flexible. Columbia University obviously has a vast financial endowment. So, I'm going to be mindful that I haven't heard all the facts and I haven't heard the university's side of the story, but I will work on this today with my team because something doesn't sound right about asking people to pay who can't pay or telling people they have to leave, if they don't have some place to go, especially if it's, you know, one of the wealthiest institutions in the city. So, we will follow up on that. If you'll give your information to WNYC, I'll make sure our team follows up with you today and keeps you posted on how we're handling this.

**Lehrer:** Great. So, Nic, hang on, we'll take your contact information off the air. And even more widely on the question of housing – you probably know by now that tenant activists are trying to organize a widespread rent strike for many people who will owe May 1st rents in the city. As it's reported on Patch.com, for example, it says housing advocates hope as many as one million New Yorkers will participate in the May 1st rent strike to pressure Governor Cuomo to cancel rent for the duration of the stay in place order extended to May 15th and through June. Their demands also include a rent freeze for 2020 and housing for about 92,000 New York City dwellers currently without homes. Do you support the rent strike from May 1st?

**Mayor:** Not per say, no. I do believe the State has to act. And so, let me separate the two pieces. Look here in the city, first of all, no evictions are being allowed. We need that to be continued and we need to make sure that the eviction moratorium – we've been working with the state on this – that eviction moratorium needs to go not only through this crisis but 60 days past this crisis to protect people. So, we've ensured no evictions up to now. We need to keep that going for this crisis so that anyone who legitimately can't pay is obviously not in a situation where they would ever be evicted. And anyone who feels that is happening to them needs to call 3-1-1 because we will get you support and we'll get you a lawyer if needed to make sure that no landlord is trying to get you out of a building. That's absolutely unacceptable.

We've been pushing the State – and, again, there's been good conversations and I think there is some progress starting – pushing the state to allow the use of security deposits. So, that would immediately free up money so tenants could use their security deposits to pay rent. We've been pushing the State to come up with a plan that if you're unable to pay rent, you don't have to until you have income back and then you pay on a payment plan to repay over time. All of those changes are needed. So, I do think the state needs to act. I agree with those saying the State needs to act. I don't agree with a rent strike because there's too many folks who are trying to keep their buildings going. There's a lot of smaller landlords in particular who if they don't have any income coming in, they're not going to be able to keep their buildings going. And then you have a very bad situation for everyone. So, we've got to strike a balance here.

On rent freeze, that's what I've called for our Rent Guidelines to do for over two million New Yorkers who live in rent stabilized housing. I'm hopeful that action will be taken soon. And then people know that they have a rent freeze for this year. But bottom line here, the State should act quickly –

**Lehrer:** Could there be a rent freeze for non-rent stabilized rentals?

**Mayor:** Again, I don't know if that is within the State's power. It may be, but I think the other things I've suggested would achieve the same impact. If the State would allow renters to use their security deposits to pay rent now and would put a clear plan in place that if you cannot pay, you have up to a year until you have to start paying and then you pay on some kind of payment plan, that kind of approach would make sense in a crisis like this.

**Lehrer:** Question via Twitter from listener Carolina, she asks, can someone ask him about how undocumented New Yorkers apply for the one-time payments from the immigrant emergency relief fund that you announced yesterday?

**Mayor:** Yes. It's a great question. Thank you, Carolina. Carolina, I'm going to speak broadly about this on purpose because I want to make sure everyone is protected in this process. The goal of this fund is to help immigrants, including those who are undocumented, who were left out of the national stimulus programs. And again, want to thank the Open Society Foundations for providing the support, thank George Soros and Patrick Gaspard who led the way on this. Those resources will go to the Mayor's Fund, they will go to grassroots organizations that work with immigrant communities, and people will have access to that to keep their families going during this crisis. I think the right way to say it is a lot of great community-based organizations that know how to reach people in need will spread the word and do so. There's not a single point of application for obvious reasons but we will make sure and those – much more importantly, those grassroots organizations know their communities, know how to reach people. The word will spread, I assure you, rapidly for those who can't get other forms of support that this is the way to get it. And I think it's something that will be very, very helpful for everyday New Yorkers who happened to be undocumented.

**Lehrer:** You also announced this week that beaches and pools will be closed this summer and I want to read to you from an email I've got –

**Mayor:** Yeah, Brian – I'm sorry Brian, I need to interrupt you because that wasn't what I announced. I announced that pools –

**Lehrer:** Go ahead.

**Mayor:** Pools are not in the City budget.

**Lehrer:** Okay.

**Mayor:** One, because we don't have any money, two because pools mean people gathering in a small space and we did not feel we could do that safely for anything we could project [inaudible] summer. Beaches I've said we are not able to open them when they would be, which is Memorial Day, which is very soon. I don't see any time soon being able to have large numbers of people on the beaches like normal, but I have not said that that's ruled out for the whole summer. I've simply said we're not in a position to open them on schedule.

**Lehrer:** I apologize. I always want to be as accurate as I can so thank you for that clarification. With respect to the pools. I want to read to you from an email I got from former Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, who served under Mayor Bloomberg, as you know. He sent me this this morning and he writes, "I've been very grateful for and supportive of pretty much everything Mayor de Blasio has done in response to coronavirus." He called it spectacular, heroic, sage, and compassionate, so he doesn't hate you. But then he writes, "However, his announcement on Thursday that the City will close all of its public pools this summer, raised some serious alarms for me." Then he goes into citing science that shows water does not transmit the virus. And he cites not only the stresses on kids in the city who can't cool off, but also the history of kids drowning, he says, in places like the Bronx River when they don't have access to safe and lifeguarded places to swim. So, have you heard these arguments and is that something you might be reconsidering?

**Mayor:** Well, look, I do – I appreciate the point and I don't take it lightly. I think the way it was – to be honest, I didn't see the original, I got the interpretation of it and certainly the notion of New Yorkers swimming in the rivers en masse, I just don't think is a reality. I think the Bronx River situation is real and I appreciate that point and we will have to be very careful about that and we will have to be careful about the beaches. Here's the bottom line – we've got to start from a health and safety point of view. The coronavirus has killed a huge number of New Yorkers. We are far from out of the woods and we must defeat it or else, you know, you're going to see a lot more people die and a lot more people sick and no ability to restart our lives.

So, job one is to defeat the coronavirus and if we start allowing mass gatherings at pools and beaches before we're ready, that will certainly contribute to a boomerang where the disease starts to reassert. That's unacceptable. So, when you then say, okay, we're not able to do those things yet, how do we make sure that young people in particular don't choose dangerous options? We're going to have to do a lot of education and warning to young people and their parents, we are going to have to make sure there's a lot of enforcement out at the places where they might go. And those are, you know, finite. It's not everywhere obviously. There's certain places where there's been – you know, where you could get into the water, which would be the obvious places. That's where we would put NYPD and Parks enforcement and others.

It is a very tough situation, Brian. First of all, I would love for the beaches to be opened on schedule. It's just not realistic. But I understand if you say we can't do it one way, we've got to then compensate for it with really smart enforcement to protect people. So, compared to thousands and thousands, you know, tens of thousands of more cases in the coronavirus and hundreds or thousands of more people dying from it, I think it's better safe than sorry to limit these big public gatherings. But that does not negate the point that Benepe is making that we want to be careful that there is enforcement so we don't lose a single young person who is

seeking some other kind of alternative and that'll be a tough balance to strike. But that's what we'll do.

**Lehrer:** I know you got to go in a minute. Let me ask you two quick ones. If short answers are possible to these. One is Dr. Fauci, in his briefing last night with the president, estimated that the country would be in good shape maybe in the fall for very widespread testing. Do you have an estimate for New York?

**Mayor:** I want to do better than that because until you have widespread testing, you cannot get back to normal. I mean the absolute – you know, we've seen some of the good examples from around the world. You need it. I hope we can do a lot better than that. And that's including, you know, building our own homegrown test kits and trying to do that on a bigger scale. I want it – for kids to come back to school in September, we would have to have had a lot of testing in place ahead of that.

**Lehrer:** So you see a prospect for that for New York?

**Mayor:** I'm saying we have to do it if we want to get to that in September. So, one part is what we will do, but the federal governments still have to step up or I don't see how we get there.

**Lehrer:** And last thing, a little presidential politics. I don't see that you've endorsed Joe Biden yet. Did I miss it?

**Mayor:** No. I said the other day – I was asked a question, I don't know what show was on, but I said absolutely. I always said I would support the Democratic nominee. He's going to be the Democratic nominee. I absolutely support him and I'll do anything I can to help him. I have not been focused on presidential politics right now. I've been focused on keeping New Yorkers safe and healthy. But absolutely I look forward to supporting and helping Joe Biden in any way I can to become our next president.

**Lehrer:** Thank you, as always, Mr. Mayor. Talk to you next week.

**Mayor:** Take care now.

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