

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 it's time for our weekly Ask the Mayor segment, 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, use the hashtag #AsktheMayor and we'll watch that Twitter thread go by. Good morning, Mr. Mayor. Welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, Brian. How are you doing today?

Lehrer: I'm doing well. Thank you. And let me begin on the impact of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine pause on public health in the city. I believe I heard you say this week that there's enough Pfizer and Moderna supply to go around. But also, that the pause would slow down the shots at home program for homebound elderly and disabled New Yorkers because the Johnson & Johnson is best for that. So, can you be as specific as you can, about how large that effect is in the short run? And how the City is compensating given the refrigeration requirements of the Pfizer and Moderna?

Mayor: Yeah. Very important question. Thank you for it. First of all, overall picture – really important to note. So, you know, a week ago I told you we had set a record last Thursday, 104,000 vaccinations. So, to give you a comparison, even with this Johnson & Johnson challenge, the fact we had to pull all of it immediately for, you know, temporarily. Yesterday was 94,000 vaccinations in the city. So, that's still a really healthy number. And that clearly keeps us well above our weekly goal. We want to be doing a half million vaccinations a week or more going forward. So, so far, the effect is limited. You're right, the homebound pro program is where's the biggest impact. Now, remember from the beginning, we said the number of people who wanted to be vaccinated and needed that, that, you know, service right to their apartment, right to their home. We didn't have a final number because we needed to see who came forward and was willing. But we figured it was somewhere in the neighborhood up to 15,000 people, looked like to be the top possibility. So, right now we definitely have thousands more people we want to get to. I think what we're going to find out here. This is what our health care leadership is saying, Brian, that they don't know what the CDC will do ultimately and the FDA, but they think the likeliest outcome will be some kind of limitation on Johnson & Johnson. Meaning it could be used for a number of people, but other people, they would urge to use other you know, Moderna, Pfizer. If that's the guidance and if the guidance is clear that it's still okay for seniors, we would go back to using Johnson & Johnson for the homebound. If it is the guidance that we should not use Johnson & Johnson for seniors, then we'll go to Moderna and we'll go to Pfizer. But remember that will then take a more cumbersome process with a second shot. And it will just take longer obviously to reach everyone.

Lehrer: I see the good news that COVID hospitalizations among senior citizens in the city are down about 50 percent compared to January. Just as around 60 percent of senior citizen New Yorkers have been vaccinated. Good evidence of vaccine effectiveness. But I also see that the site TurboVax, which helps people find vaccine appointments, says their traffic is down around 70 percent. Which Mr. TurboVax speculates might mean supply has already caught up with demand in the city. And we may be entering a new phase where vaccine hesitancy is the much bigger issue than vaccine availability. So, I'm curious how much you see it that way and what your best strategies are now for addressing vaccine hesitancy in a next phase way?

Mayor: I definitely am concerned about vaccine hesitancy, but I would say two things that sort of jumped to me. One, we're not having a problem at all, filling our appointments. I mean, that number I just gave you from yesterday, 94,000 is, you know, that's still one of our all time, best days we've ever had. So, we are filling the appointments. The difference really is – the difference been going online and being totally frustrated, you can't get an appointment anywhere, you know, and struggling. Versus going online and actually there is an appointment readily available. We like, I like the current situation a lot better. I actually think it's encouraging people who were hesitant or just, you know, were put off by the inconvenience, that now it's easy. And I actually think it's going to help us reach a lot of people we weren't reaching. To the larger hesitancy reality. We have definitely seen a shift and I've been talking to leaders all over the city, particularly in communities of color, who all are saying, and we're seeing it at our vaccine sites, less hesitancy all the time, more and more people coming forward. Clearly related to how pervasive vaccination is becoming. So, more and more people are hearing from their neighbors, their family, their friends, that it is okay, and that is encouraging folks to come forward. But I think the next frontier, if you will, is to deepen our efforts in communities of color at the grassroots, more NYCHA vaccination drives, community centers, more going into houses of worship of all faiths. This is what's working and I think this is what helps us overcome hesitancy as we go forward.

Lehrer: Andrew in Jackson Heights, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Andrew.

Question: Good morning. My name is Andrew Sokolof-Diaz and I'm the co-president and co-founder of the 89th Tenants Unidos Association in Jackson Heights, Queens. We represent over 200 families Mr. Mayor. 500 residents in those two buildings in that eight-alarm fire that we lost last week. We used to live at 8907 34th Avenue with my wife and my two-month-old baby and my dog, Mika. We are all displaced from home at a hotel in Jamaica where pets aren't allowed. And New York City HPD is forcing us into shelters across the city, far away from home. Mr. Mayer, what we need from you today is an indefinite extension of these hotels so that we're not forced into shelters. All across the city displaced from our communities. HPD is a City agency you have direct control over. Will you please commit to an indefinite extension of the hotels in Queens as close as possible to Jackson Heights, so that we can live with dignity following this crisis?

Lehrer: Mr. Mayor?

Mayor: Yeah, Andrew. Yeah. Andrew, thank you. I really appreciate that you're calling in. I'm so sorry – I really feel horrible for you and all the families who have gone through this and please leave your information with WNYC because we do, I can tell you right now, absolutely. I want to extend the hotels. I want to figure out what's a long-term way of helping you and all the

other families. But right now, for the immediate future, we will extend the hotels. We want people to be as close to their home community as possible. And this was a horrible, devastating fire. Hundreds of people affected, and we need to protect you and your family and help you through this. So, we will extend the hotels for now. And then we're going to try and figure out what is a good, larger solution to help you and all the families that have gone through this.

Lehrer: So, Andrew, leave your – go ahead, Andrew. You want to follow up? Go ahead.

Question: I just, you know, I appreciate that response, but, you know, we really can't be strung along week to week. People are panicking in their room. You know, we're street vendors, we're essential workers, we're public servants that worked for the City in those buildings, the local economy is at risk. There's so much to lose. You know, we really, really are depending on you to do right by us, to not forget us. As I sit here in our hotel room and I overlook, you know, South Jamaica where the sewer backup happened last week and they were put in hotels. So, I thank you. And really everything is in your hands.

Mayor: Thank you, Andrew. Yeah, we are not going to forget Andrew or any of these families. We want to make sure that we find a real solution. So, no – immediately let's extend the hotels, but then we need a larger solution so these families can be whole. And that's what we'll get to work on.

Lehrer: We will take your contact information off the air. Andrew, if you want to take it to connect you directly with the Mayor's Office. Alfred on the Lower East Side, you're on WNYC with Mayor de Blasio. Hi, Alfred.

Question: Hi Brian. Thanks for taking my call. And good morning, Mr. Mayor. I am a City worker. And I, as well as I would say, most of my colleagues at my agency are concerned about the timeline for City employees returning to work. I understand that the data, the COVID data's going in the right direction, vaccinations are up and that's all really encouraging. But by virtually every milestone that the City has set for itself, testing, positivity rate, new cases, hospitalizations, we haven't met any of the milestones that we met last summer, at which point it started, you know, things started to be safe for things to open back up. And a lot of my colleagues, myself included, we kind of feel like, like Guinea pigs. And we're basically two weeks out from when City employees are supposed to return to work. And I, for my agency, at least we've received no guidance on the rationale behind why it's happening in May before a lot of the milestones have been met. Who's going to return to work? I mean, it's really close to when things are, you know, when we're supposed to return to work. We haven't – we've received virtually no communication on what that return looks like. And I, and a lot of us are scared. You know, we don't know – a lot of us have long commutes to our agencies. A colleague of mine on my team, she's Chinese and she's afraid to get on the train to go to work because of all the rise in anti-Asian crime. And she doesn't, she doesn't want to go back to work. And so, there are just so many factors that I think people are really kind of scratching their heads as to why there's such a rush? I understand we want the city to get back to normal. I want that. I want New York City thriving again. But, you know, we kind of feel like Guinea pigs a little bit in this move to get the city back to work. And, you know, I just, I'm nervous without any guidance or rationale, like two weeks ahead of when we're supposed to return to work.

Lehrer: And I can say Mr. Mayor, we're getting quite a number of contacts from City employees with similar questions and concerns about that return-to-work date on the phones and on Twitter today.

Mayor: Well, here's what I'd say. And I appreciate the question from Alfred for sure. And, you know, I want to start with the fact that I value the work that City workers do. And this is why he's talking about what's the rationale? Let me, let me offer it from the beginning. And then I definitely want to talk about the health and safety reality. You know, about 80 percent of our City workers are at frontline jobs right now. And they went through extraordinary challenges. In many cases, Health + Hospitals, police, fire, you name it. Folks who are at the frontline throughout, continue to be. Our schools obviously have an open throughout, have been very, very successful as an example of safety and serving kids who really needed the help. And we've got a lot of work to do to bring this city back. And we need our City employees that work in offices to come back because we need to do more work and better work to serve the people of the city to bring this city back. It's, you know, this is the recovery moment. This is our one chance to get recovery, right. And I can tell you having been at City Hall the whole time that we do so much better, we get so much more done, we communicate so much better. We think so much better when people are in-person, at least part of the time. So, that is why it's so important to bring people back. And what's going to happen because of distancing is, you know, people will come back some days and work remotely other days. But it's going to help us get more done for the people of this city. And it will be done safely because we've proven in so many of our City workplaces, we can do this safely and we've proven it in our schools. And there's a very extensive health and safety plan that each agency has put together. And, you know, I think Alfred makes a good point, if that's not being communicated well enough to the employees, we've got to do better. But I mean, let's also talk about vaccination over 130,000 City employees have gotten vaccinated. There's obviously vaccination available now to anyone who needs it. Whether it's Alfred, or anyone else can go to vax4nyc.nyc.gov and get an appointment this minute. So, anyone who is concerned should definitely take that additional step. But the final point, Brian is what Alfred was saying about where do we stand? So, let's talk about today's indicators. You know, the positivity level for New York City today is 5.35 percent, which is just above the threshold of five percent. That you know, we, our health care team says you've got below five percent, you're in a very stable situation. We're right on the verge of that. Our hospitalization number for the day is 168. That's well below the threshold. You know, in fact, the data and the science is telling us, this is exactly the right time to bring people back. And our health care leaders have been deeply involved in the effort to decide when our City employees in the officers should come back and how to do it. So, I'm confident we can do this very, very safely.

Lehrer: But if you are a head of the private sector in this respect, are you calling on more private sector companies to bring their workers back to Midtown and Downtown office buildings?

Mayor: I definitely think it's time for people to come back. I think the private sector has learned how to do it safely too. And certainly we're sharing, our health team is talking to a lot of folks in the private sector about the right ways to do things, the right ventilation, right PPE, distancing, cleaning, mask wearing, it works. I mean, this is what you know, Dr. Varma, Dr. Chokshi, Dr. Katz have just said this over and over. When you apply all those standards, you are inherently safer than any place else. And that's what we're going to be doing in the City offices. And that's what the private sector can be doing and is doing already in the places that have come back. But I

definitely think this is part of New York City coming back for all of us. People need their livelihoods back. Hundreds of thousands of people still don't have their jobs back. This is how we achieve it. But most importantly, from public sector point of view, we have a lot to do to help people who have been through so much. And that's part of the healing of this city too. The public sector, reaching people in need, making sure they're getting all the support they need. And that moves us forward.

Lehrer: Let me ask you both about crime and about a new opportunity you have for transparency on police misconduct. On crime, I see the Wall Street Journal quoting NYPD officials today who say police have seized more guns so far this year than in the same period of any year, since 1996. With more guns coming from legal purchases in the South, but then being sold illegally here. And yet, despite the police seizing so many more guns, there is still the surge in shootings. What's being done? And what more can be done?

Mayor Look, Brian, I'm going to summarize it. And we're going to be saying a lot more over the next few weeks. But the summary is this, first bring police and community together. And that's what has been the really intensive work in these last months. The reforms that we worked on for months, the, that were passed by the City Council, the disciplinary matrix, work being done precinct by precinct, to re-bond police and community, to hear community concerns. Now, communities will be involved in the selection of their precinct commanders. That's very important to a lot of folks in communities all over the city. That's job one, but it is also obviously about the work of finding the guns, getting them off the street, dealing with a lot of very complicated gang dynamics and avoiding retaliations, and then Cure Violence Movement, Crisis Management System. We are really deepening this investment, you know, even to the great credit of the Biden administration, now our federal government is recognizing – they're putting billions into community-based solutions to violence. It's never been just about policing. It also has to be about community-based solutions. We're making those investments. I think those are going to have a big impact especially this summer. We're going to have to do all of the above, but it also is about bringing back jobs, bringing back schools, the things that kind of re-glue the life of our communities. That's another way to turn the situation around.

Lehrer: So, you're talking about reconnecting police and communities, two things on that. On transparency around police misconduct, I understand the police union lawsuit designed to block disciplinary records from being released is being dismissed. So, you now have a legal opportunity to release all discipline and misconduct records, including of people higher up in the chain of command, but from what I understand, very few have been released so far. So, will you release all the discipline and misconduct records of these armed public employees? And if not, why not?

Mayor: Yeah, Brian respectfully, I'm surprised that your statement, very few have been released, a huge amount has been released already. And so, I just, you know, I – in a spirit of openness and integrity – when I hear a statement like that, I got to say, no, that's just not right. That the amount of that's been released now on the discipline of officers over many years, all ranks is extraordinary, and now this allows us to do more because this lawsuit was the one thing standing in the way. So, we do intend to release a lot more and we'll have the details on that soon, but, you know, this is a really important thing, ending the really broken law in Albany, which the legislature did last year, and now getting this lawsuit out of the way, opens up tremendous opportunity for more transparency and a lot to out, and a lot more is coming.

Lehrer: And also on this thread, the news organization, The City, heard your comment Monday on Hot 97 about the police killing of Daunte Wright by the Minnesota police officer who apparently fired her gun by mistake, instead of her taser, and you asked why are people allowed to be police officers if they don't know how to handle their weapon? But the news organization The City notes, community leaders in Brooklyn want to ask the Mayor and police brass the same thing as they questioned the recent assignment of Chief John Chell to head up the Brooklyn North Detective Bureau, it marked the latest high-profile job for a cop who says he accidentally fired his gun in the fatal 2008 shooting of a young black man. So, Mr. Mayor, why is that promotion okay? And why is it not a double standard on your part based on what you said on Monday?

Mayor: Well, Brian, first of all, extremely different cases. I don't know every fact and so I can't pretend to give you a perfect chapter and verse, but I can tell you what I know. We're talking about the difference between an officer in Minnesota who didn't know the difference or claims not to know the difference between a gun and her taser versus an officer who was confronted with a car apparently trying to run him down and fired accidentally in the context of dealing with a car bearing down on him. They're very, very different situations, and there's been extensive due process in the case of Chief Chell over, you know, both the civilian process and the internal police department process. It really is not comparable to what happened in Minnesota, but more importantly, you know, I've spent a lot of time in central Brooklyn – I'm obviously a Brooklynite – and what I've heard very consistently, not from everyone, but from most people, is that as a precinct commander, then Inspector Chell, was regarded as very responsive to community, very sensitive to community, a real exemplar of neighborhood policing, and he called a community meeting in fact to talk about the incident and to talk to community members about what happened and to say to them, I want to explain what happened. I want to hear your concerns and your questions and really brought out in the open. I think it's a very different situation, some of these situations, that some of these horrible, horrible, disgusting situations we're seeing around the country.

Lehrer: With protests rising again now around the incidents in Minnesota and Chicago, do you have plans for the NYPD to police any differently if things get bigger in the city than they did last summer? And of course, they came under so much criticism for things that you've admitted in too many cases where police misconduct on the protesters against police misconduct?

Mayor: Well, I'll say a couple things, now, obviously you've already kind of foreshadowed the answer because I've said many, many times, including on this show, that we made mistakes. I made mistakes last year and we learned from them, and I agree with what the Department of Investigation did, and they laid out a series of recommendations, which we're implementing literally all of to make change. And for folks who have been at protests lately is a very different approach led by our community affairs officers and with a very different understanding of the sensitivity has to be shown. And, again, the vast majority of protestors are peaceful protestors who have every right to be outraged at this point. There still are some – you know, sometimes when someone shows up whom aims to do violence per se, and that has to be addressed, but I think the approach that we're using this year was very different and we did learn from the mistakes of the past. And, you know, we're hoping and praying that everything that happens in Minnesota from this point on causes people to have more faith, not less faith, but we will be ready in any circumstance, obviously.

Lehrer: Joel in Greenpoint, you're on WNYC with Mayor de Blasio. Hi, Joel.

Question: Hi, Brian. Good morning. Good morning, Mr. Mayor. Mr. Mayor, before I start, I just want to say that I listen to you every week and I respect the difficulty of your job and I do not envy your position, so thank you. I have comment and a question regarding your plans and stance on an issue. I'm an owner of a small bar restaurant in North Brooklyn. Everyone knows that our industry has been decimated this past year, but I don't believe that in general people understand to what extent. I've grown to despise the word pivot. We never pivoted. We shut off the engine. We dismantled the vehicle. We rebuilt the machine to succeed in a new environment. We made immense structural changes to our business model in order to survive and a large part of what has allowed to make the structural change is the Open Restaurants Program, and I thank you for that. What has allowed us the freedom and opportunity to invest in the Open Restaurants Program, is you stated many times, that it's here to stay and it will be a permanent program. I learned this week that the program in fact has an end date of September 30th, if the program ends, I believe it would be a death knell for our industry. It will signal that the expectation of both public and of our government leaders is that where you're now supposed to survive on a business model that died in March of 2020, and it may never exist again. I'd like to ask if you will publicly pledge to have a permanent program in place prior to the end date, or can you promise that this date will be extended if the city is unable to develop guidelines for a permanent program before September 30th?

Mayor: Yeah, and Joel, thank you for the question, because if there's confusion out there, which obviously there is, we got to address it. No, I've been really, really public about the fact that both Open Streets and Open Restaurants will be permanent. There's some things we have to finalize legally, legislatively to get everything in place, but, you know, I've been trying to say this now for months and a month, it both will be permanent. You can bank on the programs being permit. Now with Open Streets, some streets work, and some didn't. So, there's times when they've been moved, you know, some communities said, hey, this one didn't work out, or we found it was not the right location, there was a better location, that kind of thing, that variation will happen. But Open Streets as a concept is locked in going forward. Open Restaurants as is, you can put the, you know, the seats out on the sidewalk or in the curb, obviously with some restrictions like a bus stop, a fire hydrant, whatever it may be, that is permanent. You know, you can invest in whatever you want to do for the outdoor element under Open Restaurants with the assurance it will be permanent year after year, and it's been incredible success. And I want to thank you and, you know, everyone else who fought their way through COVID because restaurants, bars, so much that kept the city going and now we're going to be part of our recovery, and I'm really excited because I actually think out of crisis, we're going to see something incredibly good and beautiful of like the streets of New York City coming alive and outdoor dining being an extraordinary thing this summer. So, that is permanent. Please give your information to WNYC so we can work with you to make sure that anything you need to build out, what you're trying to do is clear, and you know, you can get that done and keep employing people and keep doing something great for the neighborhood.

Lehrer: Joel, thanks. We'll take your contact information if you want to leave it. Another question about the streets from my neck of the woods here and Upper Manhattan, I've seen multiple people writing in various venues about a surge of the number of incredibly loud cars and motorcycles that appear to be racing with souped up engines that sound like they've been

modified to be louder than the manufacturer made them, which is illegal, at all hours of the day and night. People are saying it's noise pollution, and it's also dangerous, speeding and violation of your Vision Zero goals. Fort Washington Avenue, south of Fort Tryon Park in Washington Heights seems to be one prime location. There are others further North in Inwood, but people feel like nobody's enforcing against this. I know this was an issue last spring around the city and the season seems to be starting again. Do you have a plan for this year since you had experience with this issue in 2020?

Mayor: Yeah, look – and this is, I think you're really hitting an important point. First of all, I take this very seriously. I hear the noise. I don't like it. Of course, we're going to stop speeding. It goes against to everything with Vision Zero that we believe in. Let's be clear, the way to handle this is going to involve more police enforcement and we got to do it the right way, and you know, I think your question kind of brings out the constant balance point that we need to strike where lots and lots of people want to see police enforcement of certain things, particularly around quality-of-life issues, like you just raise. They also want to see understandably changes in the approach to policing, that's the balance we have to strike, but the way to address this will inevitably involve having to bring in the NYPD in the right way. But I don't – you know, speeding is absolutely unacceptable and dangerous, and noise pollution is really oppressive to people in neighborhoods. So, we'll focus on where it's happening and the tools, we need to stop it for sure.

Lehrer: Let's get one more caller on. Cheyenne in Queens, your own WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Cheyenne.

Question: Hi, my name is Cheyenne. I grew up in the New York City's foster care system. I'm proud to be a part of the Fair Futures Campaign to ensure all youth in foster care like me have a fair future, coach, tutors, and specialist we need to graduate high school, college, and to be successful in our careers. I have a coach currently, and because of that, I am a freshman at John Jay college, and that's why it's so important for New York City to baseline \$20 million for Fair Futures, so young people like me can keep their most valuable lifeline. Can we count on you to stand with us, to ensure all foster youth have the support they deserve, Mr. Mayor?

Mayor: Thank you, Cheyenne. And Cheyenne, please give your information to WNYC because I want my folks to follow up with you. Thank you for advocating for others and congratulations to you because obviously, you're, you're doing great stuff, and I don't know the specifics of what we're planning. I do know, I believe – and I've worked on this for a long, long time – that we've got to do more to support kids in foster care and help them to have that kind of real future planning and support that you described. You know, what's the pathway to college or career, how we are laying that out in providing the support behind this. So, I believe in the idea, let me find out exactly how we're going to approach it in this budget, but I definitely believe in the idea and I'm glad you're putting it on my screen to remind me to talk to everyone about how we're going to do this. And again, just appreciate you for what you've achieved and for advocating for everyone else.

Lehrer: Let me see if I can do a couple of quick things with you before you go. One, we're getting a number of tweets from public school parents who ask, I'll read one of them as an example, of what's going on with three-foot guidance in schools. Department of Education has pulled down guidance from the website. Schools reporting, they're being told, they must pause

planning. Is that being changed? Anything you know about that? Because we're getting a number of these.

Mayor: Yeah, I'll make sure it's real clear. So, on the 26th, a week from this coming Monday, everyone who opted-in, it's about 51,000 kids opted-in, they'll come to school. In middle school and high school, they'll come to school as the same six-foot standard. In elementary school, it'll be six feet and a lot of places because they can have all those kids come back and still maintain the six feet, which ideal. Where three feet is necessary, it's now appropriate and it's legal and it's verified by both the CDC and the State, we want to do a process with each school to figure out, you know, where that makes sense, which classrooms that make sense, the right way to do it. So, we're doing that process now, and I'm aptly confident that will all happen in time. So, what people can count on is if you're opting back in, you'll come in on the 26th and there'll be a seat for you.

Lehrer: And last thing real quick, now that the city has cut ties with the Trump Organization, you're looking for someone new to run the Wollman Skating Rink in Central Park I see, and the Central Park Conservancy wants it to be them, and they say, they're concerned that it will go to a commercial operator. What would you say to them about this and what you're looking for in that role post-Trump – anytime we can say post-Trump, it's a good day – but what are you looking for in that role?

Mayor: You're right about post-Trump is a good, good phrase. Goodbye to the Trump Organization, now it's an opportunity for folks who do this kind of work to put forward their proposals. Our number one priority is having the rink open for the skating season, you know, at the end of the fall, beginning of the winter, and we want to see different proposals of who can do that best. We're certainly welcome a proposal from the Central Park Conservancy. They do great work. And then we'll look at them and make a decision on what makes sense for the long term. So, it's pretty much straight forward as that, just making sure we have an organization that can run it, run it well and open it on time later in 2021.

Lehrer: Thanks as always Mr. Mayor, talk to you next week.

Mayor: Take care now, Brian.

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