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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 if it's Friday, it's Ask the Mayor day, my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio. Our phones are open at 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0. For your questions for the Mayor, 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0. Or you can tweet a question, just use the hashtag, #AskTheMayor. And good morning, Mr. Mayor. Welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, Brian. And I have some breaking COVID news for you.

Lehrer: I'm all ears.

Mayor: Breaking news – new records set yesterday for vaccinations in New York City, 93,380 vaccinations yesterday, Thursday. That's the most by far that's been achieved in a single day. Very good sign for the future. One other piece of news, we can now confirm that we have 65,000 Department of Education employees who have been vaccinated.

Lehrer: I guess those are all good trends. Looking at the vaccine data, it looks like the number of vaccine takers might've peaked though in early March, March 1st from the numbers I'm seeing showed a seven-day average of about 50,000 people taking first doses a day. Now I'm seeing it as 32,000. So, what does that mean?

Mayor: Well, I wouldn't read into that any lack of demand. Demand is absolutely skyrocketing. The reality is you've got first doses and second doses, so more and more people are now coming in for a second dose. We obviously have to reserve those doses and that takes up a bigger piece of each day. But what we're finding, especially as eligibility has been expanding, is just, we put appointments up, they get snapped up immediately. We are seeing less hesitancy for sure, particularly in communities of color where there was some real issues with hesitancy originally, we're definitely seeing improvement there. So, I think we're going to be able to fill every appointment we have for months to come.

Lehrer: And at the same time, I'm looking at the New York Times COVID tracker for New York City, cases are up 22 percent in the last two weeks, deaths are up a couple of percentage points. There were nearly 200 new hospitalizations for COVID in the city yesterday. I saw in another report, 200 is considered a danger marker toward the potential for overload, and you're calling for people not to get together in crowds for Easter, I understand. So where are we today, vaccinations aside, in terms of the state of the virus in the city?

Mayor: Well, first of all, very important question. I'd say I won't put vaccinations aside because vaccinations obviously are going to change those numbers rapidly over time. But I would say this first of all, on gatherings for Easter, for a Passover, everything we're saying the same thing our health leadership is saying, please, one more time, keep it small, keep it safe, social distancing, mask wearing when you're not eating. This is the last time we have to do this. This is the last year we'll deal with this, by next year people can gather together as normal. So, please let's really protect each other one more time. But to the overall numbers, the hospitalization numbers, the one we are particularly concerned about, that actually, Brian, over the last few weeks, we've had a number of days where we're below 200, that had not been true for quite a while. So that trend has been a little more favorable because we're starting to get back down to the area we need to be. Overall, we've seen, you know, a sea change compared to what we saw a year ago in terms of the ability of hospitals to handle these cases. So, I'd say we do see the pressure of the variants, that some of what you're referring to. Absolutely. We take that very seriously, but I think in the end, as we are particularly able to do more vaccination, so this is why this number this morning, the 93,000 from yesterday, is so important. We really can outrace the variants if we keep expanding the number of vaccinations.

Lehrer: Tell me again the – I know you wanted to highlight the Department of Education numbers. So, tell us again about the teachers' numbers and remind us, do teachers and DOE staff have to identify that their teachers when they sign-up so you can really know how many teachers are getting vaccinated?

Mayor: Well, in fact, we believe there are a lot more than this number. This is just the number we've been able to document. It is all educators and staff combined, 65,000 confirmed vaccinations, but we do believe there's a substantial number beyond that. And so that's a really, really good sign. We have about 110,000 staff total in our buildings now. So, you know, this as we're making tremendous progress in terms of getting DOE employees vaccinated.

Lehrer: Well, is there a way to distinguish between private school teachers and New York City public school teachers in that number?

Mayor: This is DOE – I want to be very clear – this is New York City Department of Education. 65,000 is just our department of education employees, educators, and staff.

Lehrer: So, does this have specific implications for – to what degree the public school has reopened between now and the end of the year or in September?

Mayor: I think it helps. We already know that the CDC has said we can change the approach, go from that six-foot rule to that three-foot rule. That's what we're planning on. We have an opt-in period right now for parents to choose to have their kids come back if they want to, that's going to go through next Wednesday. And the CDC guidance is what's crucial here. We're waiting for the State of New York to speak to it, but the guidance is based on the evidence that has been found in schools all over the country of how to keep schools safe. This is just an additional, very, very positive factor, when you get this higher percentage of the adults in the buildings vaccinated. That is a game changer. One of the things Dr. Jay Varma, my senior advisor, did a

scholarly journal article a few weeks back that pointed out about 80 percent of infections in schools were coming from the adults in the schools. And when you get adults vaccinated on this high of level, it fundamentally changed the reality. On top of that, we already had persistently low levels of COVID in our schools now for months. So, this is a real good sign.

Lehrer: Question in this ballpark from the listener on Twitter. Mama Mommy – okay. This tweeter is going as “Mama Mommy Mom”. So, we know at this person's role is, and the tweet says, we can't let the Mayor go today without asking about the two-case rule. It's been two months that he's thinking about it, please ask the mayor, says, Mama Mommy Mom. And I guess that's the rule that with two cases, even unrelated in a building, the school closes, and a lot of parents remain very frustrated by that.

Mayor: Now I understand their frustrations and to be fair there's different types of rules depending on whether there is a relationship with the cases or not, and that's what our health team put together to protect everyone. But look, again, we see a very different reality now because of a very high level of vaccination which is fantastic because everything that we've been able to prove about how to keep schools safe, really with a gold standard of health and safety measures. So, next week we'll have an update on the two-case rule, we're doing a little more work with our health team on the right way to approach things, but we will have an update on that next week.

Lehrer: I saw Eliza Shapiro, the Times education reporter, speculating the union is very much against changing the two-case rule, and for families worried about in-person schooling, they're worried if they do with it, that this won't convince those families to come back. Can you come at only the part of that?

Mayor: Well, I'm not going to speak for the union. I would say to the question of family's comfort. First of all, that's a very individual decision, and I know some families are going to want to wait until September when we plan on having everyone back who is ready to come back. But I do think a lot of families are looking at the current situation, they see how safe the schools have been, we want to get them all the information possible. It's why I think it's important for families to understand just how many people have now been vaccinated in the schools, and I think that's the most important factor. For those open to coming back, and there are certainly some who are just generically not open, I respect that, but for those open to coming back, I think what they're looking at is can we continue to prove the health and safety levels in the school. I think the evidence has been overwhelming. Now, you know, high level of vaccination of schools, and the CDC guidance and the CDC guidance was based on the new CDC, not the previous one which we sometimes had to question, but Joe Biden's CDC, looking at the evidence from all over the country and seeing how consistently clear it has been that schools can be kept very, very safe with the right measures, and those are the measures we're using here.

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

Question: Oh, hi. Can you hear me?

Lehrer: Uh-huh.

Question: Okay, great, thank you. So, I'm a progressive, but I'm still unfortunate little conflicted about the whole issue of marijuana legalization. I know we obviously have to fix the terrible and unfair aspect of mass incarceration and I believe peoples have right to smoke. The problem is I don't want to have to smoke with them and I'm already, as it is, people smoke openly on my front stoop. It creeps into my apartment. There's a children's school on my block and people smoke next to the playground. So, my question is, is legalization an all or nothing proposition, anywhere and everywhere, or their ways to create boundaries and concrete boundaries like coffee shops in Amsterdam, designated public smoking areas, even in a park, like a designated part of a park, but also making it off limits elsewhere? Or is toxic marijuana smoke simply going to be ubiquitous? Thank you so much, Mr. Mayor. Thank you, Brian.

Lehrer: Thank you, Jonathan. Mr. Mayor?

Mayor: Thank you, Jonathan. Really, really good question. And I think a lot of people have, you know, a range of feelings about a new reality, but I think the most important point here is legalization is the right thing to do. The reality we've dealt with for so many years of something being ubiquitous, but officially illegal, that wasn't really productive. The new law makes clear that marijuana smoking is only allowed where cigarette smoking is allowed, and that's real important, because in this city we have really clear and extensive limits on cigarette smoking, which is a really good thing, and this city led the way and, and a lot of the rest of the country has followed. So, there's many, many places you cannot smoke a cigarette in New York City, including in a lot of areas and parks, and the same rules will be applied to marijuana. I also think, Jonathan, you made a real important point there, is like, is everything set in stone or not? I would urge people to realize this is a beginning. There's a lot that will be worked on at the State level to figure out the right regulations related to marijuana, particularly dispensaries, issues like that. That's going to take a while to be worked through and as we're experiencing it, of course there's an opportunity to make adjustments. But that the first thing to know is not allowed wherever cigarette smoking is not allowed.

Lehrer: But it is a big change that under this new State law, as of today, as of two days ago, smoking marijuana openly in public, outdoors in places where cigarette smoking is allowed, is now legal and that's really new and different. So, I'm curious what this will mean for the way that you have the NYPD interact with enforcing any remaining marijuana laws. There still have been thousands of marijuana arrests a year under your watch, though down significantly, and still proportionately of young – disproportionately of young Black and brown people. So, what will this new legal public smoking change in terms of NYPD behavior?

Mayor: Well, I think it'll change things a lot. You're right that over the last years we've greatly reduced marijuana arrests and moved much more where there was even a need for enforcement to summons. And this takes a number of the areas where there might have been previously an arrest or summons and just takes them off the table. There still are things that are illegal, particularly related to sales on a larger level, but that's something – look, we're going to make the adjustments now to this law, you will definitely see changes in the NYPD approach. And I think we're all going to learn by doing this, but the bottom line is I think the good news in this is it allows us to focus attention on a lot of other areas which I think deserve attention more than this

in terms of how we police and certainly allows us to get past the mistakes of decades in which people's lives were ruined by convictions for very small marijuana offenses. The expungement of those past convictions is a really important part of this law. So, you know, I see the challenges, Brian, as I know work through some stuff, but I do want to celebrate. There's a lot of good here.

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

Question: Hi. Thanks for taking my question, Brian. Mr. Mayor, last week families who have lost loved ones to the NYPD sent a letter to City Council. The letter states their strong opposition to your police reform and reinvention plan because it does not adequately defund the NYPD. They also opposed the plan because of claims to hold police officers accountable for brutalizing, sexually harassing, or assaulting and killing New Yorkers. But as we know, many officers who have killed New Yorkers are still on the force and collecting paychecks, including Officer Wayne Isaacs who killed Delrawn Small in 2016. Will you commit to directing the NYPD to stop stalling and turnover all Wayne Isaac's related files to the CCRB, and will you commit to scheduling Wayne Isaac's disciplinary trial for the spring so that he can be fired for killing Delrawn Small?

Mayor: So, first of all, respect the question, but I think anyone who reads – in my opinion – anyone who reads the full reports related to the reform plan, I believe you're going to see a lot in there that changes the NYPD and changes the relationship between the NYPD and community and adds a lot more accountability. It's going to change the composition of the police force because there will now be a preference for hiring New York City residents, which means more and more people of color will be on the police force. It changes disciplinary approaches, make sure that promotions are based on disciplinary history, as well as positive factors. There's a lot in there that I think changes the fundamental reality. So, I just have to say that, and I urge people go look at the full reform report, look at the disciplinary matrix, I think you will see a lot that's different from the past.

The second point on that trial, I think it's a high priority to start at quickly. Everything has been slowed by COVID, obviously, but I know the CCRB wants to start it quickly. I certainly want to start it quickly. I can't give you an exact date, but I want it to move as quickly as possible and I'll try and see if we can publicly put out what that timeline is. I do think it's really important for that to be resolved once and for all.

Lehrer: Chris in Park Slope, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Chris.

Question: Good morning, Mr. Mayor. I'm wondering, I know you haven't endorsed anybody for mayor, but we're all facing an election this summer with many, many candidates. And now that you've been Mayor for almost two full terms, I wonder what you think are the most important skills that a candidate and a Mayor ought to have. Is it management skills, policy vision, familiarity with the city, ethnic representation, the ability to communicate your stamina? And I know to some degree, all of those things are important, but when you take a step back from your time as Mayor, what stands out as the most important characteristics of a good mayor?

Mayor: What a great question, wow. Well, Chris, I obviously, you immediately saw that – your list was fantastic by the way, all of those are factors, you're right. It is all of the above. I think what I would put front and center is empathy. A connection to the people and a real empathy for what people live through every day. I think one of the things that really bothered me when I was in the City Council, when I was Public Advocate, was I felt there was a real massive empathy gap. I felt, with all due respect to Mayor Bloomberg, and he did some good work, but I really didn't feel like he could connect and understand the everyday life of people in the city, and, you know, I, for example, was the first Mayor with a child in the public schools while serving as Mayor, at least that anyone could identify or in recent memory. I think that's an example of, you know, being able to connect with what people are actually going through and govern with their eyes, you know, with their perspective. I think, you know, not having it be a Manhattan-centric approach to governing, but truly five-borough, since seven million people live in the outer boroughs, and that's really where the center of gravity should be in so many ways. So, that's what I'd say, and obviously, look, if we want an object lesson of lack of empathy, it would be Donald Trump on another level. But I think, I think a mayor, especially today with what everyone has gone through with COVID, needs all those elements you talked about as high a measure as possible, but they really have to feel the lives of the people, and be able to communicate back to people a vision that fits their lives and their reality.

Lehrer: Let's go next to Noah in Nassau County, but a city worker. Noah, you're on WNYC with the Mayor.

Question: Hi, Mayor, how are you?

Mayor: Good Noah, how're you doing?

Question: Good. So, I am a municipal worker, working at an agency for the city, obviously, and I'm just wondering why is it that City Hall is having municipal workers return to the office although there is the possibility of another surge and is City Hall reevaluating the May 3rd date for that return, and also my agency specifically, much of the work that we do is still being done remotely, and there's really no need for us to be in the office. I understand that at some point you'll want to have us back in the office, as I do agree with that, but I just think now is a little bit too early, and in my agency specifically, there's a lot of growing concern with the May 3rd return date. Further, state workers don't have to go back until July 2nd. So, was just wondering if you could maybe expand on this and if City Hall's maybe re-evaluating the May 3rd start date? Thanks.

Mayor: Thank you, Noah, and thank you for the work you do on behalf of the people this city. Look, we have been making all these decisions based on the data, based on the science with our health care team and what we learned in the schools and what we've learned, you know, anywhere public employees are working, is if you put the right health and safety measures in place, that's what matters. So, we are planning on bringing folks back beginning May 3rd. We'll constantly watch what's happening for sure. We're always watching to see if anything comes up. That changes the approach. But right now, I feel very comfortable because we're going to have all of the elements that work so clearly in the schools, mask-wearing, distancing, constant cleaning, you know, proper ventilation, et cetera, and you know, we are confident. The City

workplaces, we control them, obviously. A lot of the concern I've had over time is when you're talking about places where the public sector can't reach in, or doesn't know what's happening, and people unfortunately take liberties and don't follow the rules. In our own workplaces, we can guarantee that things are done the right way, and I do believe that people do better work when they come back together, even with restrictions, and that's been my experience. Look, I've been at City Hall the whole time. I could not do what I do to say at least remotely, my job's a little different perhaps than many others, but I know the folks who've been at City Hall throughout. We get a lot of what we need to do for the people done because we do interact in person. That makes a huge difference, but we do it safely.

Lehrer: Well, let me ask you kind of a follow-up question that combines the last two callers concerns in a way. Noah there about returning to offices and the previous caller who asked you about what you want in the next mayor. Mayoral candidate Andrew Yang spoke to a business group yesterday, as you probably saw and proposed a commuter incentive to come back to offices in person for the private sector, the opposite of a commuter tax, which progressives usually want to impose on people coming to the city for their livelihoods if they don't live here, because they use city services a lot, but pay their taxes to their bedroom communities. So, Andrew Yang wants the opposite of a commuter tax because he says, like you say, that the City's recovery depends on people going back to office work in person. So, he wants to pay commuters to come back to their office jobs in the city. Do you support that concept?

Mayor: I am surprised at that concept. I have not seen this specific proposal, so I'll just be careful not to speak in detail until I do, but I'm surprised at it. I think the more essential way to approach things is to continue to vaccinate folks, continue to prove the models that work for safety, to keep the City reopening the things that we can reopen safely. We talked about Broadway last week, had a tremendous excitement about that. That's a little ways down the line, but we're going to reopen Broadway safely. We're going to bring back our theater and cultural community. A lot of it will be outdoors this summer, but by with Broadway, by September, back indoors. So, I think it is recreating the life of the city and continuing to deepen the vaccinations. That's really the best way to get people back. I think that's what's going to work most, fundamentally.

Lehrer: You haven't said yet if you'll endorse in the Democratic primary to succeed you, but would I be right if, I guess to Andrew Yang would not be your first choice.

Mayor: Brian, I admire your journalistic skill, but again, I've been real clear that, you know, I'm not answering any of those questions until I see a lot more from this field. It's early still, it's a little under three months away until that election. I think we have not heard enough from these candidates and I'm watching carefully, and if at some point I feel it's important to weigh in. I will, but w that's a ways down the line.

Lehrer: By the way, we have some breaking news from the CDC. I wonder if I can get a spontaneous comment from you regarding how you think this might or should affect people's travel plans to or from New York. This is from the Washington Post's write-up just out, for domestic travel people who are two weeks past their final shot, do not need to get a coronavirus test before after their trips and do not need to self-quarantine after travel. That means

grandparents who were fully vaccinated can fly to visit their grandchildren without getting a coronavirus test or self-quarantine, provided they follow the other recommendations, recommended public health measures, such as wearing masks on planes, buses, trains, and other forms of public transportation. Do you have a comment on that, and how it might relate to your interest in tourism returning to New York, for example?

Mayor: Yeah, I think, you know, my, my first impression, I want to see all the details, but my first impression is that's sensible to say that folks who have been fully vaccinated we can treat differently, and I think it, in fact, the good news about that is it rewards vaccination, which is what we want to see. We want everyone to realize the power of vaccination. I think right now we know that the polling shows it and just our own experience. The vast majority of people do want to be vaccinated and are working hard to get vaccinated. But I think the more people understand that vaccination is the way to travel, the way to getting back to work, et cetera, the better off we'll be, because there's still a certain number of people who need to be motivated. This kind of rule. I think hearing it, first blush, sounds sensible.

Lehrer: Do you want tourists to hold off for a while on coming to Times Square and other crowded places in New York?

Mayor: Well, first of all, I want us to be careful about crowding overall for the foreseeable future, and you know, I think there's been a lot of good measures in place to avoid crowding at some of the places that historically it's happened, and we need to keep doing that, but do I want tourists to come back? Of course, and more and more you know, right now we have over four million vaccinations have happened in this city, and as you heard, you know, with 93,000 yesterday alone, you know, rapidly increasing, you're going to see that have more and more effect, and certainly folks coming here fall in the right health and safety guidance but coming here and participating in the city makes a lot of sense. I think you're going to see a lot this summer. My prediction, Brian, is that this summer you're going to see a huge amount of domestic tourism directed to New York City, folks are not going to be traveling as much internationally that are going to want some place that they feel good about, and I think, you know, we're, we're going to hit that goal of five million fully vaccinated, New Yorkers by June by summer. I think it's going to be verifiable that this is a place you can come and do a lot of great activities, a lot of great outdoor, cultural activities, outdoor dining, and a lot of other things and be safe, and so I think it'll be a big part of our recovery.

Lehrer: Peter in Washington Heights. You're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Peter.

Question: Hi, Brian. Hello, Mr. Mayor. I'm with a group of residents in Washington Heights and Harlem. We're trying to save an 1851 house linked to the Underground Railroad and it's set to be bulldozed. We went to the Landmarks Commission, and they gave us their standard rejection. Sorry, the house is too run down to be landmarked, even though it's the last remnant of an Abolitionist community that was just discovered in a community of color where landmarks are rare. Last week, Jumaane Williams, the Public Advocate came to visit. He said that communities of color are always told why things can't happen, but whiter, wealthier neighborhoods get landmarked all the time, and you can see this if you just pull up the Landmark Commission's own online map of where landmark buildings, landmark districts are in the city. Only you can

help change this at this point. How can we work together to fix this problem and save this touchstone to our city's history? Thanks.

Mayor: Thank you for the question, Peter. I want to look into this further that there is a site and maybe you're speaking about the same one, I believe on Riverside Drive that I know has gotten some careful consideration. That one, I need to double check, but I do think that that connection, that story is a little grayer than in some other cases we dealt with. We just did have an example of landmarking on Duffield Street in Brooklyn, something I was involved in, and my wife Chirlane was involved in, that I think was a great example of exactly what you're saying. You know, more landmarking of the true history of the city, the history of people of color, the history of the Abolitionist movement. There's a lot more that can and should be landmarked. In fact, this is something that is going to be looked at by our new Racial Justice Commission, how we rethink our entire approach to preserving our history and to landmarking. I will look again at the site you're raising, but again, I think each one is different, and we just have to make sure if we're trying to achieve that goal, that we are dealing with sites that really do fit that vision.

Lehrer: Can he follow up to get the results of your review?

Mayor: Yes. Peter, please give us your information to WNYC and we will have folks follow up with you today.

Lehrer: Peter, thanks. Hang on. We'll take your contact information, Mr. Mayor, can you stay on to help one 85-year-old homebound person, who just called in and is having trouble getting access to a shot?

Mayor: Absolutely.

Lehrer: Ilene in Greenwich Village. You're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Ilene.

Question: Hi, Brian. Hi, Mayor. Thank you very much. Yes, I did the – called the vaccine command center, the [inaudible] number on March 17th, and they told me they took my name and phone number and told me that somebody would be calling. And indeed, on the 26th, someone, and here's the question, from the Public Engagement Unit or who said she was from that and may have been legit, took more information, date of birth, and so forth and said, the Fire Department would be calling me within two weeks, which this is just about. My concern is not so much access because this may come to pass, but I get all the seniors yet, a lot of scam calls that are targeted specifically at infirmities, age, health. I get false Medicare, false Walgreens, and so what can be done in terms of the agency and in terms of the seniors themselves to identify – this is a phone, I don't have internet.

Lehrer: I understand, and I have to cut in for time Ilene, but I just want to be clear. You think you are on the way to getting that shot, coming to your home, as there is a program for seniors in your circumstance, you think you're going – that's going to work?

Question: It may. My question is about the authenticity of the call and how to verify it?

Lehrer: Yeah, I understand. The calls are so rampant, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Yeah, no, Ilene's making a very good point. First of all, Ilene, please give your information to WNYC at the end of this call so that we can make sure that you get your vaccination quickly. The Vaccine Command Center and the Public Engagement Unit, those are real places, real pieces of the city government. Those are all legit, and in fact, I was with the medical personnel, the nurses, and the folks from the fire department just a few days ago, as they were going out, fanning out all over the city, go into people's homes to do these in-person vaccinations. They – it is painstaking. It does take a lot of time to reach everyone because they literally have to go to each department, each home, and take time with each person, but they are moving steadily through thousands and thousands of people who need in-person, in-home vaccination. So, yes, help is coming, and we will make sure you get an appointment right away.

Lehrer: And the scam calls come in constantly, which I guess was her main point. Is there anything more the city can do?

Mayor: Yeah, it's a great question, and I will pursue that. I think the bottom line is, you know, we'll try and figure out a way that our folks can identify themselves, in a way that is clarifying. But I would say everyone should be, you know, I think many, many seniors are aware of this. Be really careful when people are offering you something and asking you for your personal information and anything related to money, obviously. Well trying to figure out the right way to get our message across and confirm it. It might be smart to send a follow-up letter or something like that that will help to confirm. But the most important thing is even while we're trying to deal with the issue of the scams, the work has happening and thousands of bound, seniors and other folks who are homebound are getting the vaccinations right in their homes.

Lehrer: Well, maybe one of these days I'll respond to one of these scam calls and do it on the air, and you can give me somebody from law enforcement to listen in and we'll bust somebody live on the radio. We'll see.

Mayor: You want a live bust, I'm impressed. You have a sense for the dramatic, Brian.

Lehrer: Thank you, as always, Mr. Mayor, talk to you next week. Happy Easter.

Mayor: Happy Easter. Take care now.

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