

THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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

**Brian Lehrer:** So, right now, if you want to call and ask the Mayor a question 646-435-7280, 646-435-7280, 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. How are you doing?

**Lehrer:** I'm doing all right. And I told everybody that you were later than usual because you were doing a news conference announcing vaccine protocols for the city now that it's been approved by the FDA. What can you tell us?

**Mayor:** Well, Brian, very important day for New York City because we expect a vaccine very, very shortly to start arriving in the city. We are setting up on Monday, a command center, a Vaccine Command Center that will control the distribution and the logistics, but also beyond that, the community outreach, the efforts to ensure equity and fairness in the distribution, the public information and transparency that I think is going to be crucial for people feeling more trust in the vaccine and in the process of distribution. This has to be fast and intense, this distribution effort, but it also must be fair. And today at the press conference, Deputy Mayor Melanie Hartzog, who's also a co-chair of our Task Force on Racial Inclusion and Equity, talked about how the command center will guarantee equitable distribution with a heavy focus on the 27 communities of color most affected by COVID in this city, and Dr. Torian Easterling, who's the First Deputy Commissioner for the Health Department and the Chief Equity Officer, talked about the kind of community outreach and trust-building that will be needed in African-American, Latino, and Asian communities, working with community leaders, working with faith leaders, public housing resident leaders, to really convince people that this is the right thing to do. We know there's a lot of distrust in communities of color toward government, and a lot of concern about the vaccine. Leaders of color in this administration, in this City government are going to be taking the lead, going out into communities, talking very personally about the fact that the vaccine is safe and that it is important to turning the tide on the coronavirus. And so

today we laid out just how that operational work will happen, but also the work of equity and fairness.

**Lehrer:** So, there's that double-edged sword there that there's more distrust, presumably in communities of color in the medical establishment for all kinds of historical and present reasons that might dissuade people from taking a vaccine. At the same time, we know the COVID case and hospitalization and death racial disparities have been so stark, and people are wondering if there's going to be enough of a prioritization. So, I know you said something about that in what you just said but tell us more. How is that accounted for in determining who gets to be vaccinated early on?

**Mayor:** Well, first – to your first part of your point, Dr. Torian Easterling spoken as a Black man about that history of racial discrimination in American medicine. He talked about the horrible experimentation on the Black people that occurred over the years. That was another form of structural racism, that left a horrible legacy and distrust beyond any other kind of distrust that people have towards government [inaudible] trust in the medical community. And he took that head on and he said, look his job as First Deputy Health Commissioner is to show people that this vaccine is about solving a problem, about serving a community that's really borne the brunt and to make it very personal, he talked about he and his family would be taking the vaccine and he would be going out into communities to testify about its effectiveness and safety and getting more and more community allies on board. So, I think, Brian, it is about being blunt about that bad history and empowering leaders of color to lead the way to make sure that this distribution happens.

And we've been very clear, and I want to say it plainly, it doesn't matter if you're wealthy or famous, if you're a celebrity, you're not cutting the line in New York City when it comes to the vaccine distribution. The first level of distribution goes to frontline health care workers, a lot of whom are not highly paid people. This is the people who are protecting all of us and saving our lives and, obviously, nursing home residents and nursing home workers. And then the focus is on other health care workers, first responders, then on folks who are over 65 and/or have those preexisting serious medical conditions. And we're going to focus, as we start to go into those bigger categories, on communities of color that have borne the brunt, those 27 neighborhoods, Black and Latino and Asian, that bore the brunt of the crisis, we know where they are. That's where the first attention needs to be. So, our health leadership is very, very clear we're going to scrupulously monitor the distribution of this vaccine. Our command center is going to be watching constantly all the health care partners to make sure the priorities are being followed. And if we see any instances where they're not being followed that can be addressed immediately and with consequence because people have to have faith that this is being done equitably.

**Lehrer:** Let's take a call. Carolyn in Manhattan, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Carolyn.

**Question:** Yes. Hi. Can you hear me?

**Mayor:** Yes, Carolyn. Yeah, we can hear.

**Question:** Thank you, Brian. Thank you, Mr. Mayor. I want to ask about long-term care facilities for the disabled. Adults with developmental disabilities are at increased risk of death. They're in

high risk settings, but they may be, you know, under the age of 65. And so, I want to know if they will be prioritized for the vaccine. These group homes were [inaudible] my sister lives in one and these group homes were decimated by the coronavirus this past spring. It really tore through their homes and a lot of people died from it. So, I want to know if they will be prioritized in this first round of vaccinations.

**Mayor:** Very glad you're asking the question, Carolyn, because I think you're raising a really important point that there's specific realities in those facilities that really make folks have a need for this vaccine. I'm glad you're saying it. I want to make sure we get the priorities right. I'm going to share this question with our health care leadership. They are working with the State and the federal government on those priorities. We're going to make sure that we account for where this is in the priority structure, but I hear you loud and clear. It has to be accounted for quickly. Will you please give your information to WNYC so that we can get back to you with an update once we get that clear answer.

**Lehrer:** Carolyn we'll take that contact info from you. Erica on Staten Island, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Erica.

**Question:** Hi, Mr. Mayor, my question is this – why are we mandating that the children in our schools get tested? I know firemen aren't mandated. They come from different boroughs sometimes, different homes, and they're quite literally living together, and they don't have to get mandated. Hospital workers aren't mandated to get testing. Police officers. All these people who do shift work together, they're spending 12 hours together, and they aren't mandated to get testing. What are we doing to our kids here? My three-year-old has to get tested even though he's in a DOE program. And he said today, he said, mama, I don't ever want to get tested again. I just – I can't understand what we're doing and what the ramifications of this – what will this do to our kids in the future. Especially going forward, what are these kids supposed to say if a doctor or a coach or anyone in any institution touches their body inappropriately? You know, my message to my children has always been, nobody ever touches your body, nobody has the right to touch your body. So, this, what is happening, and I understand we're in a pandemic, but given what I said about all these other people who go into all these other buildings, I don't understand how to make it work in my head.

**Mayor:** Okay. Erica, heartfelt question. I appreciate it. And you know, I am a parent and certainly remember when my kids are young. So, look, first to the point about no one touches your body, a very important message. Obviously, in this case, we're talking about health care workers and we take very, very seriously the care and sensitivity they have to bring. But I just want to say, as a parent, no one touches your body, but health care professionals are the exception to that always because every single one of us in the course of our lives needs health care where a professional has to work with us directly. But I do appreciate very much your point, especially for a three-year-old, very young age. The testing mandate does not extend to 3-K, pre-K, and kindergarten. I want to make sure that's clear and for everyone else, the reason that it has been such an important – and so I should say one thing. Erica, please leave your information with WNYC because I don't know if you have a three-year-old why that is happening in the school, because that's not part of the mandate, but the – and we will fix that obviously.

But Erica, to the bigger point, the mandate of testing is one of the things that gave everybody confidence in our schools being safe. And we had it from the very beginning. We expanded on it

as we've seen this uptick in the virus. One of the ways that we kept our schools going, 878 schools are open right this minute in New York City, is because we added additional testing. It has allowed us to use our situation room as the clearing house to know that each school was safe or that some action needed to be taken based on the testing, it happened quickly. New York City schools have been the gold standard of health and safety in this country. And we're open when a vast majority of major school systems, major cities in America are closed. And testing has been a big, big part of it. So, I would say to you, it is a very strategic act to use the testing as a way to show that we can keep schools safe, to make sure each school community is safe, to give confidence to parents, educators, staff. It's worked, but we do, as I said, exempt the youngest kids. And there are also medical exemptions for anyone who gets that from a doctor. So, I hear you loud and clear, but I think we are striking that balance.

**Lehrer:** What about the requirements for others who come in contact with people? She mentioned health care workers, for example.

**Mayor:** Again, the reality in each institution is they determine what is going to keep their people safe. Health care institutions go through all sorts of health protocols regularly. And we obviously trust our health care leadership to figure out what will keep their workers safe. Each place is different, but I want to emphasize – this is not, again, Brian. I want to be clear. This is not an academic comparative discussion. This is about real kids, real families, real educators, and staff. This is what has worked to make New York City public schools the safest in the nation. One could debate it all day long, but I want to go back to the facts. It's worked. Our schools are safe. They've been proven safe. That's what we aspire to and that's what we achieved.

**Lehrer:** So, let me follow up on her public school question with another public school question. Of course, the schools reopened this week for students up through elementary school and for special-ed students in District 75 schools. But the families who came back revealed again a stark disparity. As the New York Times reported it this week, “At every turn, Mr. de Blasio insisted that the city's most vulnerable children needed open schools, but there are nearly 12,000 more white children returning to public school buildings than Black students, even though there are many more Black students than white students in the system overall.” So, my question is Mr. Mayor, how surprised or disturbed are you by this and what kind of policy response does that require?

**Mayor:** I think that's just not the whole story. That quote does not portray the larger reality. First of all, I want to serve all kids. I think we talk a lot about race. I want to talk about class as well. I want to serve kids of all – families of all income levels across the racial spectrum. You have kids from families who are disadvantaged in all sorts of ways. I want to serve everyone. But right now, in New York City public schools, about three-quarters of the kids attending class, are children of color, either African-American, Latino, or Asian. That's the fact. The way it has been presented, I know people love to get into their particular themes, but they're not portraying the reality. Seventy-five percent of the kids in our schools right now in-person are children of color. That's the fact.

**Lehrer:** A follow up. Robert in Queens, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Robert.

**Question:** Hi, can you hear me okay?

**Lehrer:** Yes, we can.

**Mayor:** Yes, Robert, how you doing?

**Question:** Hi, how are you?

**Mayor:** [Inaudible]

**Question:** Thank you for everything that you've been doing for the city in this crazy pandemic situation. But I got to tell you, I just heard you talk about, you know, being for the school and everything, but the principals are having a horrible time with it. I know because my wife's a principal and it's becoming increasingly more and more difficult for her to get her job done. And I'm a teacher also, and my principal's having a hard time with this, because there are certain groups of parents that want to dictate how the school should be run during this pandemic, with the setback that they don't – the schools don't have the money. They don't have the teaching staff for doing the remote and the in-school learning. And when a teacher and a parent go head to head, nobody wins. And you know that. The problem is, is that we can't seem to get a clear roadmap for everything. If there is no money for teachers and programs are being slashed and kicked back, and parents still want to have [inaudible] so they need help. And I'm in tears right now because I see it. And it's been going on for three months now, principals are doing a hell of a job, but they need help.

**Mayor:** Robert, thank you. I can tell you really are speaking from the heart and I appreciate it. And look, I just fundamentally believe in our New York City public schools. My kids went every single minute, from pre-K to 12th grade, to New York City public schools. I spent so much of the last few decades in school buildings. I totally believe in the abilities of our principals and our teachers. And they've been put through hell. I mean, let's start at the beginning. They have been put through hell. It's been incredibly difficult having to go all remote out of nowhere back in March, and then coming back and trying to get it right. But I want to tell you, Robert, look, New York City could have made a decision, which I think would have been the wrong one and the unfair one to our kids and families, we could've said, the simpler thing would be go all remote from the beginning. I think it would've been a huge mistake. That's what the vast majority of major cities in America did. You know, Los Angeles never has gotten open, for example, the whole time. We said, no, we needed in-person education. In-person education was going to make a huge difference because I believe in educators. I know if you get a child, even a few days a week, you are going to be able to reach them and shape them and support them in a way you could never do on a screen. And emotionally, children need the support of the caring, loving professionals in a school building and of each other that they get in the school building. And even in some –

**Question:** Right, but –

**Mayor:** – Some degree. So, look, just to finish the point. So that's why we believe that it was so fundamental to open, but we have been, from the beginning, hearing when the principals said more staffing was needed. And one, we've been sending in – we do have more staffing right this minute for principals who need it. There's constantly additional staffing being applied. But second, by going to five-day-a-week in as many places that we can, we're going to cut out – for so many kids, we're going to be cutting out the blended, remote piece, which was one of the

challenging pieces. If we have more and more kids who were either in school five days a week, or at home all remote all the time, it's actually going to allow us to use our staff a lot better. And I think it's going to be better for teachers and principals alike.

**Lehrer:** Robert, I'll give you a very brief follow-up.

**Question:** Yes. Thank you, Brian. I understand what you're saying, Mr. Mayor. But the problem is, is that even when you have more staffing coming, there are certain programs that were put in place at schools that no longer have funding to get those programs up and running. And that's why a lot of these parents, I call them helicopter parents, want those programs, but there's no money for it. And if you [inaudible] teachers, then you have no teachers there, but the parents don't understand that. And they are clogging the system by the complaints and everything. You need to be more clear in telling them –

**Lehrer:** Robert, thank you. Thank you very much. Well, let me follow up on that this way, unless you want to say anything about that, I think it was –

**Mayor:** Very quickly, Brian. Very quickly. Robert is making an important point and I would say it to all my fellow parents. You do need to show sensitivity to everything that parents – excuse me, to everything that principals and teachers are going through. Parents do need to understand that principals and teachers are trying their damndest under very adverse circumstances. But they also have to understand, yeah, there isn't everything that would be available in a normal school year because there's a pandemic. It will be over. We have a vaccine. It will be over – when we come back in September we're going to be largely back to normal. This is one very tough year. We're trying to get kids as much as we can, but Robert's right. It won't be everything people want, and people have to be understanding of each other and let's get the best we can for the kids under this circumstance.

**Lehrer:** I want to ask you a policing and crime question and bail policy question. This week, Police Commissioner Shea said gun violence is approaching the highest point it's been in 14 years. Number of shootings this year compared to any of the past 13 years. He acknowledged the pandemic has played a role in the crime rate, but he made another link between the crime rate and bail reform. He told NY1 that people caught with guns are “back on the street, committing gun violence” three or four days later. My question is gun crimes are felonies, judges have always been able to set bail on someone accused of a violent felony, both before and after the bail reform took effect this year and even with the tweaks that were made in July. So, what data do you have that people caught with guns go out and commit more gun crimes? Is there any data?

**Mayor:** Brian, look, we've got a lot of things happening here, and I want to be fair because I've seen those comments and it absolutely centers on – I would disagree with your characterization. What I say and what the Commissioner says is the same thing, the perfect storm that we went through with COVID caused all of this. It caused people not to have work, not to have school, not to have houses of worship. Everything that people depended on was gone and gun violence surged in that context. You had the police force down a lot of officers because people were sick. There were all sorts of factors here. So, we got to put this in perspective. That's what set all of this off. Clearly, we're going to have to look at everything – the fact our court systems have been down. We do need aggressive prosecution of gun cases. That is a clear fact. There have been too

many times obviously where people have committed gun offenses and repeated committed offenses like that. We've got to address this holistically, but the – we don't get to address anything until we end this pandemic and turn the corner and get the court system back running, get all these pieces in place that until February, were allowing us to be the safest we had ever been as a city.

**Lehrer:** But for the record, are you saying that because the bail reform does not apply to people who commit violent crimes with guns that there is no data that bail reform is contributing to the gun crimes?

**Mayor:** I am saying, Brian, that every piece of this equation has come together to create a very, very difficult reality where we do not see the kinds of norms that kept violence from happening, including a functioning court system. It's every piece coming together. It's been a perfect storm. We clearly know there's a lot more violence. Brian, I talk to people in communities affected by this violence, and let's be very clear, this city, we have a long way to go in terms of creating equality in the city. There are some communities that are really feeling the pain of this gun violence and others, not. When you talk to folks who live in the communities who are affected by gun violence, they see that this is an unacceptable state of affairs, it must be turned around. We're going to have to use a lot of tools to do it, but it's not one thing. It's all these things together that created this reality.

**Lehrer:** But then I'm going to ask you one more time. Is bail reform one of those things, or is there no data to back that up?

**Mayor:** There's lots of data showing each of these pieces has had an impact.

**Lehrer:** Joe, in Hamilton Heights, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello.

**Question:** Hi, Mr. Mayor, my name is Joe and I'm a homeowner and I've been here almost 20 years. And in the last year, Hamilton Heights has kind of become Hamilton Speedway and cars are going up and down our streets at very fast measures. And on top of it, a lot of these cars have been adjusted so that the muffler exhaust system is so loud. I was talking to my neighbor yesterday, we couldn't even hear each other, and I can hear these cars two and three blocks away. Is there anything that could be done, like speed bumps or cameras or more policing, something to get these cars to slow down?

**Mayor:** Yes, Joe, the answer's yes. And I'd like you, please, to give your information to WNYC. You identify a real issue, and this is part of what Vision Zero has been all about, which is to reduce speeding, whether it's speed cameras or more enforcement or speed bumps, whatever it takes. Speeding is obviously the central danger that Vision Zero seeks to address. So, we're going to see what we can do with your community. I'll have folks reach out from the Department of Transportation and also NYPD in terms of both, if we're going to do something structural, like a speed bump, but also the kind of enforcement. But I think you're also pointing out the noise issue. And this is, I think, one of these – it's very hard to address noise pollution, but it's a huge problem in the city, in some ways a growing problem. And we're working on some ideas about how to start to turn the tide on noise pollution too, because I think that's something that New Yorkers feel and it's disturbing to us, and we got to figure a way to quiet down a little bit, going forward, because we deserve a better quality of life.

**Lehrer:** We've got one minute left and let me slip in one other policy question. You've been for a millionaire's tax for a long time. Now the New York State Senate supermajority may actually pass one to help with the COVID fiscal crisis, but they're also considering a \$3 per delivery surcharge on online deliveries, other than essentials like food to help save the MTA from fiscal disaster. Do you support that tax?

**Mayor:** No. I got to tell you that's unfortunately not a progressive tax. I support progressive taxation, a tax on millionaires and billionaires. Remember, Brian, shockingly, during this horrible COVID crisis Wall Street has been booming, the rich have gotten richer. It's time to ask them to pay their fair share. They haven't paid their fair share in decades. So, I'm thrilled that there's a super majority in the State Senate. I hope they get to work right away with the Assembly and pass a millionaire's tax and any other form of progressive taxation. But something that hits every single person out there, including struggling, working people, low-income people, folks who lost their jobs that are still – who need to get packages that could mean medicine, that could mean food, it can mean all sorts of things. No, that's the wrong way to go.

**Lehrer:** Thanks as always, Mr. Mayor, and thanks for laying out the new vaccine protocols with the breaking news that the vaccine is going to be approved today by the FDA. Obviously, we'll follow up and we always appreciate it. Talk to you next week.

**Mayor:** Take care, Brian.

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