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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Bobby Cuza: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. As we told you before the break, the City is expected to receive 170,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses in the next few days after major delays caused by last week's severe winter storm throughout the country. Mayor de Blasio joins me now from the Blue Room inside City Hall to talk about all of this and much more. Good evening, Mr. Mayor, welcome back.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Hey, Bobby, how are you doing?

Cuza: Alright. So, it seems this logjam has been broken. All these vaccine deliveries that we were supposed to get last week are now arriving beginning today. Talk about how much this set back the vaccination effort?

Mayor: Well, it slowed us down, but that being said, I think we're going to have a really strong week this week, cause we're basically going to take all the last week's doses and this week's doses and combine them and have, you know, hopefully as strong or stronger a week than we've ever had. The most we got done in one week was 320,000. We could be doing 500,000 or more right this moment. So, you know, I welcome the fact that a lot of supply is rushing in because it's finally going to allow us to crank up our capacity, but that's obviously for a brief period of time. What we need is consistent supply.

And right now, pharmaceutical companies - I don't know what's going on here, Bobby. There are three American pharmaceutical companies, that's it. None of the others are participating. That doesn't make sense. I think the Biden administration should use the defense production act to really get a whole host of American pharmaceutical companies in the production game. We need the federal government to help us. We need the state government to help us. We need the freedom to vaccinate. We need a lot less red tape. We need the shipments to come directly into New York City and we need local governance again. So, we can just maximize the vaccinations, especially in the places where we're seeing the most disparity, where we see the impact of COVID was worst, in communities of color, in immigrant neighborhoods. We need the freedom to reach those folks, and if we had it, we could be doing a lot more.

Cuza: NY1 reported over the weekend, we found some folks who had their second dose appointments canceled over the weekend, presumably because of those delays caused by the storm, but that shouldn't be happening, right? Because aren't second doses supposed to be basically reserved and set aside for those who have been scheduled for second doses.

Mayor: Yeah, and that's - I haven't heard of anyone having a problem because there wasn't a supply of second doses. In fact, my complaint is too many. Second doses are being held back when we can't even give people a first dose, which would give substantial protection. We've been

saying all along first dose gives about 50 percent protection. There's a new study now saying with Pfizer, it may be more like 80 percent or more. I don't think the system's set up properly. I think the focus should be on first doses knowing a lot more suppliers coming later on in March and particularly April. But on that particular instance, Bobby, that's not what I've been hearing. Maybe somehow that happened in a few cases, but it really hasn't been the norm. We schedule only for the supply we have on-hand.

Cuza: Not directly related to vaccination, but related to the recovery, you announced today a plan for JFK airport that will include the promise of something like 20,000 jobs, many of them, if not, most of them for local residents in Southeast Queens. Talk about how this is going to work and what kind of jobs we're talking about.

Mayor: Big day for recovery today for New York City. I'm going to talk about that incredible JFK announcement. Also, we were in – I was out in Far Rockaway – hundreds of units of affordable housing being completed there. That's going to help revitalize the Far Rockaway community. I named our new Recovery Czar today, Lorraine Grillo, who's going to be crucial to our recovery efforts going forward, but JFK's a great story. 20,000 jobs expected in the coming years, big redevelopment of JFK, but it required the city to agree with the Port Authority on a plan, and what we said is we need it to be a plan that supports the local community, Southeast Queens, historically African American communities that have not gotten their fair share. We worked with Congressman Greg Meeks, Borough President Donovan Richards, came up with a great plan. A lot of the money from JFK will go to minority and women-owned businesses. A lot of the hiring will be from the surrounding neighborhoods in Southeast Queens. This is the kind of development that we need that's actually about a recovery for all of us, not just the rich get richer, but a recovery for working people. So, this JFK plan, it's something we've been wanting for a long time to make the airports do more for surrounding communities, and this is a big day for Queens.

Cuza: Governor Cuomo today announced that movie theaters will be reopening in the city as of late next week, up to 50 people at any one time inside of a theater. Is this a good idea, bad idea?

Mayor: We're always going to judge by the facts, our health team, and I talked to my health team every single day. They'll be watching the data and the science to see how decisions by the state are playing out. The state gets to make that decision, but we're going to be watching very carefully, and obviously the meantime working hard to make sure it's implemented safely. That's always going to be our focus, but you know, we, I have a concern and my medical team has a concern about these variants. That really could change the environment, so we want to be very watchful as these new openings occur.

Cuza: You're often asked whenever one of these reopenings happens, are you going to go eat outside? Are you going to go inside of a restaurant? So, are you ready to go see a movie?

Mayor: I'm a big movie fan at some point I certainly will, but I want to make sure first and foremost, my first focus is making sure for everyone, that movie theaters are safe. Look, we've had to do this – when indoor dining was first opened up, our Health Department did a lot of work with the restaurant community to make sure it was done safely. Same with outdoor dining. We're going to do the same thing with the movie theaters, really focus on educating them, inspections, make sure it's done safely.

Cuza: Mr. Mayor, I am a very happy man today. Both of my young school-aged daughters were in school, in-person, which has been a rarity. I actually went back and counted since Christmas. My first grader has been in-person in school six days because the school has been closed down so often because of COVID cases. Because of privacy, we don't always know exactly what the story is with those cases, but it seems they've been isolated cases. There's been no actual transmission in classrooms. I wonder if your thinking has changed on this, whether we may actually be too conservative in the protocols that we're using to close down schools?

Mayor: Well, I've spoken to this publicly. We are looking at that again because the original plan was put together in August and September when we were dealing with a very, very different situation. But look, the fundamental principle here is health and safety first. We built a gold standard of health and safety. We took the best practices from around the country, around the world we've put them into one plan – by the way, the New York City approach to reopening schools - it was clearly the basis for the CDC's new guidelines for the whole country because it worked. The amount of COVID positivity in our public schools is extraordinarily low. They are the safest places in New York City right now. We want to keep it that way, but that specific approach that you mentioned there, Bobby, we're going to keep re-evaluating that because things are changing, and we do see some real improvement in the schools in terms of the number of schools open. I've been watching over the last few weeks as we went through February actually constantly saw improvement in the number of schools open each day, and so as the situation improves, we want to reevaluate everything. Obviously, the big news this week, middle schools coming back Thursday, I'm really excited about that, and then we'll be talking about high school. After that, we got a lot to do to bring back this school year as fully as possible, and then I want everyone. I want every child to be ready to come back in September, in-person. That's the aggressive approach I want us to take in New York City.

Cuza: Governor Cuomo, obviously dealing with a firestorm over this nursing home story, deaths in nursing home during the beginning of the pandemic. Now the legislature looks like it may be moving to curb his emergency powers that were granted back at the beginning of the pandemic. I know you've talked about this before, but what would you like to see here in terms of emergency powers and who actually gets to decide what sort of restrictions are in place related to COVID?

Mayor: Look, New York City should be able to make its own decisions. We have one of the best health departments in the world. We have an amazing public health capacity with Health + Hospitals, our public hospitals and clinics. This city proved it could lead the fight against COVID, and yet our hands are constantly being tied. We're not able to do the things that we know would allow us to vaccinate more people. I had to fight the state for the freedom to vaccinate. The state said, no, seniors couldn't be vaccinated. The state said, no, firefighters, police officers couldn't be vaccinated. I had to fight for the right for those people to be vaccinated. Those people we depend on and our seniors, our elders, we care about every family. I talked to Bobby, every family with someone 65 years or older, was scared to death for the senior citizen in their lives, and they wanted them to get the freedom to vaccinate. But the state said no. Now imagine how that feels to everyone. So, give the control to New York City. We can make the decisions for our people best, and if I had normal, the same governance that we used to have for years and years and years, I guarantee you we can be vaccinating more people more quickly in this city.

Cuza: All right, Mr. Mayor, don't go away. We're going to take a short break. I will have more with Mayor de Blasio when we come back. Stay with us.

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Cuza: Welcome back to Inside City Hall, I'm once again joined by Mayor de Blasio. Mr. Mayor, I want to ask you about these new mental health crisis teams. This is something we've been hearing about for a long time, basically mental health teams consisting of a social worker, and a couple of FDNY EMTs will respond to emergency calls that relate to mental health rather than the NYPD. We now know this is going to happen as a pilot program in a handful of precincts in Harlem and East Harlem. Is this now a commitment that the city is making to take this city wide? And also, I wonder what the repercussions are here for NYPD staffing and for its budget?

Mayor: Well, I want this to be citywide. Absolutely, Bobby. This is the way of the future. The idea that if you have a call, a family in distress, someone with a mental health challenge, there's no history of violence, there's no weapon present, that's a call that should be handled by civilians, folks with the right training, mental health abilities, go in there and help that family. That's what we want to see. You know, there is a history of violence, if there is a weapon present, if people feel they're in danger, of course we want the NYPD to be present. So, it will depend on each call, but I want to see this pilot rapidly expand and we're going to be talking about that the next few months as we look to the budget in June, what we have to do to build this out next year in a very big way, later this year into 2022, because I think we've learned so much about how to better reach people with a mental health challenge. In the last years we put a lot of time and energy into mental health and this administration. It was not a priority in previous administrations. I really came to the feeling and you know, my wife, Chirlane McCray, did as well, that so much we're talking about, homelessness, incarceration, dropout rates, so many things came back to mental health challenges. So, we're making a fundamental investment here to say let's change how we approach it, and then the NYPD can take that time and energy that's freed up and focus it on the things that they do the best, which is to protect public safety in general. That balance needs to be re-struck and, you know what, I'm absolutely certain we can do it. And then, NYPD is a 100 percent on board because we all want to see a better balance here.

Cuza: There have been a number of high-profile tragedies in recent years where there were fatal encounters between police and people having mental health issues. Is this something that we have been seen more of in recent years, these types of emergency calls related to mental health?

Mayor: I think there's more consciousness of them. I think there's more honesty about them, more openness, and one of the things we've done over these years with 8-8-8-NYC-WELL, with Thrive, with all the initiatives to get people to come forward and be open about mental health issues and de-stigmatize mental health is to encourage people to not sweep it under the rug, not ignore it, not call it something else, be open about it. So, I think for decades we were dealing with a huge number of mental health problems, you saw it with homelessness, you saw it with a lot of crime, you saw it again, a lot of people in – what I learned, jails, not only here, all over the country, 30 – 40 percent of people incarcerated have an underlying mental health challenge. This has been going on for literally decades, but now we're talking about it, we're acknowledging it, we're treating it differently, and I think that's actually healthy. I think it'll take us time to really figure out the best approach, but this is the right thing to do. So, what we know is, again, sometimes there's really is violence involved, that's going to require it NYPD, but the vast

majority of calls that come into 9-1-1 related to mental health challenges, do not involve a weapon, do not involve violence, more and more of those can be handled by civilians.

Cuza: As you know, Governor Cuomo has mandated that all municipalities around the State produce a report – a plan on policing reform by April 1st which is coming up pretty fast. I know you've announced some police reforms in recent weeks, including the disciplinary matrix, but what happens between now and April 1st, is there going to be new reforms announced? Is there going to be a package of legislation?

Mayor: Yeah, I'll tell you something, we've done a lot and we know how to do police reform. End to stop and frisk, reduce mass incarceration, greatly reduced arrest, retrained the entire police force in de-escalation and implicit bias, we put body cameras on all our officers, we've been doing reform nonstop, discipline matrix revolutionizes discipline in this city, strengthened the CCRB, bringing precinct commanders into a deeper connection with communities. Communities are going to help us decide who the precinct commanders should be, but there's more coming between now and April 1st, you're going to see a host of new reforms that we're working on right now with the City Council. There's been a lot of public hearings, a lot of input sought and more will come in, we are absolutely on track and it's been a good process with the public and with the City Council. There's definitely more reform coming, and we got to go at the underlying culture of policing, which must be reformed to get to where we really want to go with our vision of neighborhood policing. We have more to do, and we're going to do it over this next month.

Cuza: We learned last week there is a plan potentially in the works to hire 475 new school safety officers. As I understand it, this is not finalized, but what is the thinking here, particularly given the fact that school safety officers are supposed to go – be taken away from the NYPD and into the Department of Education?

Mayor: Well, first of all, it has not been finalized at all. But, second of all, we know there's going to be school safety, and I want to just thank the men and women of school safety. I've spent a lot of time in our public schools. My kids went to public schools. I know the school safety officers as people really care about kids, they care about families, they're watching out for them all day long. A lot of them are really in a lot of ways like aunts and uncles to a lot of kids in the school and really look out for them and counsel them, support them, but also keep a safe environment, we need them. Now, right now the NYPD eventually they're going to be moved over to the Department of Education, but we still need to have enough school safety officers. So, that's really the crucial issue we have to figure out in the coming months.

Cuza: Mr. Mayor, the City has moved to sever its contracts with the Trump Organization, that included those two skating rinks in Central Park, including the renowned Wollman Rink. Now, as you know, the rinks were supposed to shut down as of February 24th, but that proved to be an unpopular decision and it seems just in the last day or so the city reversed course and decided to let those rinks stay open at least for the duration of the season, what happened there?

Mayor: I think what happened here is two needs that both were important and weren't balanced the way they could have been. From the beginning, it was quite clear after the horrible events at the Capitol in DC that this was no longer an acceptable situation and the city moved to sever all ties with the Trump Organization for all the contracts that they did with the city. I always wanted

to make sure we kept ice skating available for kids and families throughout the season. There should have been a different approach, honestly to make sure that that was done. I think the action was taken a little faster than it should have been because there was not an alternative in place. If there had been an alternative place, this date might've been fine. But now we've made very clear, you know, for the remainder of the ice-skating season, let kids and families enjoy this amenity, and then we sever the ties, and we move to a new company will come in and take it over, and not accompany associated with such treacherous, treasonous acts as what we saw at the Capitol.

Cuza: I want to read you a tweet that came out – I don't know if you had a chance to look at this, this was actually from Eric Trump. He said, Mr. Mayor, thank you for keeping the rinks open. You've just made countless New York City families incredibly happy. This is a bright moment from New York and please know we appreciate it - and this is the part I like, the last sentence – I look forward to saying “thanks” in-person, “thanks” in quotation marks. I don't know if this was sincere or what, but what do you – what do you make of this? Are you going to accept thanks from Eric Trump?

Mayor: That meeting won't be happening, Bobby. So, I don't know if it's sarcastic or not, but it sure is academic because I am not meeting with him or any member of that family after what they did to this country. You know, when you encourage and support a riot against our government as something that just fundamentally ate away at our democracy, come on. People need to remember and not forgive.

Cuza: All right, Mr. Mayor, we're going to leave it there. Thank you as always for joining us and we will see you next week.

Mayor: Thank you, Bobby.

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