

Transcript: Mayor Eric, Adams Attorney General Letitia James Announce the First of \$256 Million Coming to New York City to Combat the Opioid Crisis

April 21, 2022

New York Attorney General Letitia James: So good afternoon, everyone. And today marks a significant milestone in our collective fight to combat the opioid crisis, a scourge on the state. New York City and all 62 counties across the state officially began receiving the first dollars from our opioid settlements, the \$1.5 billion that we've received for the state so far. And these restricted funds, and I want to thank the members of the state legislature as a result of conversations, these funds will be placed in a lockbox and they will go primarily to treatment, prevention and education, and to reverse overdoses. These funds will have an immediate impact on our communities and for individuals on the ground who are struggling with drug addiction.

Attorney General James: This is the result of, as you know, my office's litigation against big pharma for the devastation and destruction that they've caused not only in New York but all across this nation. And its devastation and destruction has claimed so many lives and impacted so many families. And we're here today to turn the tide on this crisis.

Attorney General James: I'm pleased to be joined by our mayor, Mayor Eric Adams, who is committed to addressing this crisis and ensuring that New Yorkers have access to the programs and treatment needed to recover and rebuild. We have also been joined by the commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Dr. Ashwin Vasan, and the Manhattan borough president, Mark Levine, and of Council Member Keith Powers, Assembly Member Harvey Epstein, the New York chief medical examiner, Jason Graham, and the Bellevue Hospital CEO, Bill Hicks, they've also joined us as well.

Attorney General James: As a result of these settlements today, New York City will receive more than \$88.9 million. This represents the majority of the money that New York City will receive in the year 2022, and the first portion of the total amount of money that New York City will receive, \$256 million that the five boroughs will get overall over a period of time.

Attorney General James: And I want to be clear, this is just the beginning. Our work is not done. We still have ongoing litigation. But it's really critically important that these funds get to New York City because it means that we can save lives starting today and tomorrow. It means that there are more resources primarily to teach our young people about the dangers of drugs and opioids, in particular to talk to individuals about fentanyl and how dangerous that is and how that has resulted in a significant number of people losing their lives, and to prevent someone from misusing a prescription for the first time, and to teach individuals who are in the throes of addiction, struggling with addiction, and to save lives from people who are dying from an overdose by distributing narcan to law enforcement officers.

Attorney General James: And also it means, as a law enforcement officer, working with NYPD and law enforcement officers all across the state of New York to interdict drugs as they come into the state of New York. And it also means that we can support programs like the ones here at Bellevue which provide a range of in and outpatient treatment and counseling services, because we all know that 2020 was the deadliest year for overdoses our country has experienced. Let me say that again. 2020, we lost more Americans than our country has ever experienced from overdoses. And sadly, unfortunately the data might only get worse, and we haven't received it yet for 2021.

Attorney General James: So there's no dollar amount that can make up for what we've already lost. No amount of money that can make up for the loss of loved ones, for children, parents, for our individuals that have had to pray over and hold funerals all throughout the state of New York. And we need to prevent drug companies from this deception in the future and to hold them accountable, and to help New Yorkers end the terrible cycle of hopelessness opioids has caused in this state, in this city and in this country. But most importantly, to save lives.

Attorney General James: Several years ago, I made a promise to families when I was campaigning that I would do all that I can do to address this crisis, and I promised to hold these companies accountable. I promised to give them some semblance of justice.

I promised to do everything in my power and in my ability to turn the tide and to stop future destruction and pain. And these funds will go a long way in supporting those who need it most. I thank New York City for their cooperation. I thank them obviously for all of their support. And now, ladies and gentlemen, we'd like to hear from the mayor of the City of New York, Mayor Adams, who will continue to be a great partner in our efforts to turn the tide on this crisis, and most importantly, to heal New York. Mayor Eric Adams.

Mayor Eric Adams: Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you so much the Attorney General for this real encouragement. She just continues to respond to those things that are on the ground. And when she reached out and stated that this \$11 million is the first wave of the dollars that are coming in from her settlement, many people thought it was not possible. They thought we could not go after big pharma. She stated that we are going to do the best that we could possibly do to get the help on the ground. I just really want to personally thank you.

Mayor Adams: The number of overdoses that we have witnessed, the first quarter of 2021, we experienced roughly 1,200 overdoses. We don't know the final numbers coming in in 2022, but it's a real issue. It's a crisis. As the bar president, we had narcan training to assist people who loved ones, family members, law enforcement officers who arrived at a scene where there was an overdose in place. We handed out narcan and did the training throughout the entire borough. Many of our boroughs are ground zero for this issue, Staten Island and Brooklyn and others.

Mayor Adams: And so this is so important; to complement what volunteers and people are doing on the ground, the attorney general going after those who fed the overdose crisis. For far too long, they threw a rock, hid their hands, and no one realized that they were the feeder of the crisis. Several of my friends, one I could think of who had knee surgery, three years later, he was still taking painkillers. Think about that. And you are almost hooked on drugs. We focus on those who wear blue jeans on our street corners and steal crack cocaine, but it's time to look at the three piece suit pharmaceutical industries, of those who are the distributors of drugs in a legal way into households, giving children prescriptions, over-prescribing.

Mayor Adams: The attorney general zeroed in on that and just did her job and brought the money that's needed to complement the services that we need to really push back on this overdose crisis. And so all of my colleagues here in government, we want to just

truly say to the attorney general, thank you. Promise made, promise kept. And we are promising and committed to saving lives. Thank you.

Attorney General James: And now we'll hear from Commissioner Vasan.

Commissioner Vasan has dedicated his career to supporting and treating our most vulnerable communities. He has worked to address this crisis, understanding that we need to provide robust and multifaceted services for young people dealing with addiction. And that is exactly what these funds will be used for. Commissioner.

Commissioner Ashwin Vasan, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene: Good morning. We are in the midst of a five alarm public health fire that few are talking about because of the other pressing public health challenge we've been facing over the last two years. Every four hours, a person dies of an overdose in New York City. Just let that sink in for a minute. From the time you woke up, maybe got to your desk, had a cup of coffee till now, we've lost a New Yorker due to overdose. This means every four hours we're losing loved ones, family members, neighbors, thousands of New Yorkers, record numbers dying of overdose.

Commissioner Vasan: This crisis has been ongoing for years. A product of compounding despair, isolation, economic insecurity, untreated mental health challenges, and a host of other drivers, not least of which are the actions of those who sought to profit off of this despair. The trauma enforced isolation of the pandemic has only served to further exacerbate this crisis. And more recently, the increased presence of fentanyl, an extremely powerful and dangerous opioid, in our drug supply has accelerated the overdose epidemic here in New York and nationwide. And that's why it's crucial that we address this issue head on. That means reducing stigma, promoting understanding, supporting the lifesaving tools that we have available and innovating new approaches.

Commissioner Vasan: Mayor Adams, our administration, we focused on this issue. And he and I both know this crisis requires more attention, more work, and most critically, more investment. So I want to thank Attorney General James for ensuring that those who created many of the problems we're facing are now the ones paying the price. As the city's doctor, it's so important to know that the state's lawyer is fighting for health justice and to save lives and prevent suffering of all New Yorkers. Her work fighting for New Yorkers has given us all an opportunity to advance overdose prevention

programming across our city, an area in which New York has and will continue to lead. Thanks to these funds.

Commissioner Vasan: Overdose has touched the lives of many, many, too many New Yorkers. It's imperative that we continue to look for new bold solutions to this crisis, to ground those solutions in public health, mental health, and compassion, and to help more New Yorkers get connected to harm reduction, prevention, treatment services as they navigate the sometimes rocky shores of living with substance use disorder and efforts towards recovery. The investments we can make as a result of the opioid settlements will save lives for now and for years to come as we work together to end the opioid epidemic. Thank you.

Attorney General James: Next I'd like to invite the senior vice president and chief medical officer of New York City Health + Hospitals, Dr. Machel Allen. As a senior leader of our city's hospitals, Dr. Allen has helped to oversee many of the city's treatment programs like the one here at Bellevue. She has also been on the front lines guiding our city through the past two years, and we are deeply grateful for her public service. Doctor.

Dr. Machel Allen, Senior Vice President and Chief Medical Officer of NYC Health + Hospitals: Thank you Dr. Vasan, thank you Mayor Adams and Attorney General James. I also want to thank my Bellevue colleagues behind me. They are the opioid epidemic frontline heroes who we do not acknowledge often enough. Today is a great day for our patients who suffer from substance use disorder and need our help. As Ms. James said, I am Dr. Machel Allen, the Health + Hospitals chief medical officer. And by the way, an obstetrician gynecologist by training. I have devoted my entire career to providing prenatal care to substance using pregnant women. And I've witnessed firsthand the intergenerational families who have been torn apart by opiates and other substances. Some of those substances are legal and prescribed, and some of those substances are illegal.

Dr. Allen: In pregnancy there may be that crucial moment to engage a pregnant person in healthcare and get them into the vital substance use disorder services that they need. Often a pregnant person's first engagement with healthcare is when they become pregnant. Those of you who are familiar with photography may recall someone named Cartier Bresson, who spoke of the decisive moment. In pregnancy and in life, the

pregnancy might be that decisive moment for a woman who is addicted to get the services she needs.

Dr. Allen: At New York City Health + Hospitals, we pride ourselves on our substance use disorder and behavioral health services. And we know that this settlement will truly serve our patients. Health + Hospitals has a strong history of innovation in the delivery of patient centered substance use disorder services. We're working on a next step in that innovation, moving our services to a family-centered model. Parental addiction is one of the adverse childhood experiences which can have lifelong emotional and behavioral consequences to children. We will invest a portion of these dollars in the developmental programmatic family-centered models of prevention and care, initiated during pregnant and continuing throughout early childhood development.

Dr. Allen: When a woman is pregnant, that might be the only time she seeks medical care. And this particular time presents us with an opportunity which we should never, never miss. This is a moment in time when all women would agree that they want to do the best that they can for their baby, no matter race, no matter ethnicity, religion, or economic status, but some women have a harder road to travel. Some women may have hypertension, some women may have diabetes, and some women may be addicted to Oxycodone. All of these threaten the life and wellbeing of both the pregnant woman and her developing child.

Dr. Allen: But the care for this new family does not end with delivery of the child. As a new grandmother, I watch every single day in a young child's life the miracle of growth, the miracle of development, the miracle of expression, and the miracle of intelligence. Parenting requires focus, devotion, and constant vigilance. However, addiction deprives the parent of the ability to attend with focus, to attend with devotion, to attend with vigilance. I want to thank you, Dr. James, you've just got your honorary MD degree for advocating for our families. And thank you, Mayor Adams, for all that you're doing for the citizens of New York. Thank you.

Attorney General James: Next I'd like to introduce Dr. Rebecca Linn-Walton, who is a senior assistant vice president in the office of behavioral health at Health + Hospitals. And the reason why she's so critically important is, she's a person in recovery, after suffering from opioid addiction 20 years ago. But she took that experience and now heads this substance use services team at Health + Hospitals to those currently in recovery. We're lucky to have her here to talk about her work, but even luckier to have

her helping New Yorkers every day. Because if we are going to address the scourge of opioids and drug addiction, we have to overcome this stigma and we need to talk about it. Everyone knows someone, or everyone obviously has an experience, but we all need to talk about this issue. And so now we will hear from Dr. Linn-Walton.

Dr. Rebecca Linn-Walton, Senior Assistant Vice President of Behavioral Health at NYC Health + Hospitals: I feel truly honored to be here today. 20 years ago, I went into treatment for opioid addiction. I got lifesaving medication, excellent holistic care, and a chance at living a full life. I'm here because I believe in our patients. For too long access to care has been through a combination of luck and privilege. The opioid settlement is our chance to fund a system of care at this level, so that healing is accessible and equitable. Our workforce can welcome patients into bright and shiny rooms, get them their medication quickly and easily, and we can provide our workforce with the training to match their dedication and passion. Everything we need to provide cutting edge and evidence based care.

Dr. Linn-Walton: The pandemic has turned the opioid crisis into an emergency. Our neighbors are in pain, but there are clinicians ready to do this work every day. Ready to help New York heal. Thank you, on behalf of all those suffering. With this funding we can offer patients the same chance I got, and someday they can turn around and do the same for someone else. We've lost so much in recent years. Today you give us hope, and I thank you.

Attorney General James: And our last speaker is acting as a doctor on Twitter without a license.

[Laughter]

Manhattan Borough President Mark Levine: No.

Attorney General James: Yeah, that's him. He's become a leader of real and sensible solutions during the pandemic. I call him a very good friend. Ladies and gentlemen, the great Manhattan Borough President Mark Levine.

Borough President Levine: Thank you so much. Well, Dr. Allen just gave you an honorary degree. So Dr. Allen, can you help me out? Because apparently I'm violating a

number of regulations on Twitter. Seriously, thank you, madam attorney general, for continually having the courage to take on powerful people and corporations who have harmed New Yorkers, and winning in those fights. And you're doing it here again today. So grateful for you. Thank you, Mr. Mayor, I know how much you care about the opioid crisis and how committed your team is to addressing this. Grateful for you as well.

Borough President Levine: It's true that if it weren't for COVID, this would be the public health crisis we were talking about. This would be the press conferences we were holding regularly, because we are losing more people overdose in New York city than we lose from homicides, suicides, and car crashes combined. This is a fire alarm crisis, as the commissioner said. We've had opioids in this city and this society for a long time, for generations. But you can date the beginning of the current crisis to the moment when the pharmaceutical industry started to pump up use of these pills, pushing them out, downplaying the risks. And it ensnared a whole generation of New Yorkers into an addiction that we're still managing today.

Borough President Levine: Madame AG, I cannot tell you how much we need the resources that you have secured here. At every single stage of this addiction life cycle. We need resources to educate young people. We need resources for peer outreach in the community, empowering people who have overcome addiction. We need, obviously, money for treatment in places like Bellevue and other hospitals. Especially for emerging treatments, known as MATs, buprenorphine and others, which offer great new opportunities for people who are struggling with this addiction. We need resources to treat the overdoses that are occurring at an alarming pace, through narcan supplies and trainings.

Borough President Levine: And unfortunately we need to deal with end of life issues. And I'm so thrilled that OCME is here, and [inaudible], congrats on the new role. But we need to have social workers and other professionals present for families when they lose a loved one, which is happening at an alarming pace. To help prevent overdose amongst other family members, and to provide them services in their moment of grief. And we now have money on the table here because the attorney general sought accountability for the bad actors that needed to be held to account. So I am grateful for this action and this announcement, and grateful to you, and excited about what this will mean for our effort to take on this addiction in New York City. Thank you.

Attorney General James: Thank you so much.

Attorney General James: Thank you. And yesterday I was on Long Island and I was speaking to members of some unions, some presidents. And we were talking about opioids and the devastation it has caused on Long Island and the number of union members. These men with huge statues started to cry. They talked about their family members, and they talked about the impact that it had on Long Island. So I really want to thank the mayor, want to thank all of my colleagues, want to thank HHC for all that they are doing to address this issue, but we really need to talk about it. We need to remove the stigma, and we need to get medically assisted treatment as soon as possible on the ground. I also want to thank my fabulous team. My first deputy, Attorney General Jen Levy, my senior advisor and special counsel, Omar Khan, my senior enforcement council, John Elesky and Monica Hannah, and a host of others who worked on this settlement as well. And now we'll take questions.

Question: Can we get a little bit more detail on where the money exactly will be going? What kind of programs? And do you envision it going to something like overdose prevention centers, like we have here in Manhattan. Essentially [inaudible] opening up more of them across the state?

Attorney General James: I'm going to defer that question to HHC. Again, it's restricted funds for treatment, education, and prevention. I'm hoping that it will go to more beds. But again, the actual distribution and allocation of the funds will be subject to the mayor of the City of New York as well as HHC. And allow them to answer that question.

Dr. Linn-Walton: Hi. Yeah, I can speak to that. We're looking to... There's a lot of great work going on, and I think we're really looking to expand what's going on. We have substance use peer counselors that have been essential throughout the whole crisis in our hospital. Those are people with lived experience. We're looking at expanding our teams in the emergency department, inpatient medicine. We want to have behavioral health right then and there in primary care and women's health, and obstetrics and gynecology. We really want to meet patients wherever they're going to disclose what's going on because they have a relationship with doctors.

Question: Is it all through H+H, or is it going to nonprofits and others?

Commissioner Vasan: No, I think the Borough President said it well, it's a life cycle approach. There's quite a bit of work we do in partnership with our colleagues at H+H and my agency at the Health Department, in the community to provide harm reduction

services, to provide peer counseling services, to work on non-fatal overdose prevention. Because we know that if you've experienced a non-fatal overdose, your risk of having a fatal overdose in the future is increased by two to three times. So there's plenty of work before someone hits the front door of a building like this or a clinic that we need to do to actually advance harm reduction, advance prevention and, of course, lifesaving treatments.

Attorney General James: I'm confident that they will look at best practices. And obviously those organizations that engage in best practices and produce results will get funding. Yes, ma'am.

Question: Yeah, thank you. So the City Council put out its budget response, Mr. Mayor, to your budget, and they called on \$10 million to fund overdose prevention centers. Could this funding be applied to overdose prevention centers? And how do you balance criticism that opening more overdose prevention centers isn't getting to the root of the problem?

Mayor Adams: It's not going to the root of the problem-

Speaker 5: [Inaudible] that's the case.

Mayor Adams: And we're looking at the City Council's recommendation to come up with the right plan. Speaker Adams has been an amazing partner in this area and we want to examine that. Now, when you look at the overdose prevention centers, what we can't do is saturate just one community with them, like I'm seeing in Harlem. And we want to really examine that.

Mayor Adams: I think that we're dealing with, as I say over and over again, with these complicated problems. There are many rivers that feed the opioid overdose issue. We have to dam each river. And overdose prevention centers, that is one of the dams that we're going to use. And we're going to use this money as another way of damming. We're going to use those who are counselors in another way.

Mayor Adams: Sometimes we look at these complex problems and believe just one thing can resolve them. That is just not true. These problems are so complex and the goal is to properly define them and then do everything that's possible to deal with the barriers and the rivers that are feeding the crises.

Question: Mr. Mayor, quick follow up. So we currently have two overdose prevention centers in northern Manhattan. Housing Works is planning on opening up two more in Manhattan, so that's four in Manhattan and none in any other borough. Do you think that's important then to expedite that process by using some of this funding for the other boroughs?

Mayor Adams: Yes. And when I was running for office, I went up to 125th Street, met with residents, business leaders, and we walked the corridor. A month and a half ago I did the same thing with Congressman Espaillat and other civic and community leaders, so we can pinpoint.

Mayor Adams: Our goal is not to over saturate communities. Everyone should not travel to Harlem if they have drug treatment issues throughout the city. The goal is for these sites to be located in all of our communities so people get the help that they deserve.

Commissioner Vasan: Just to add a little bit of color on that statement. I think the mayor is exactly right. We don't want to see particular communities oversaturated with the work of OPCs, but we're incredibly proud of this work in just the four months that the two OPC sites have been open, they've been used over 14,000 times by more than 1,000 clients and averted nearly 250 overdoses in that time. And that's 250 people who wouldn't otherwise ... fatal overdoses. That's 250 people that wouldn't otherwise be here today were it not for their existence.

Commissioner Vasan: And so we're looking across this life cycle of substance use programming to ensure that we're making that accessible across the five boroughs. And these funds are going to be critical in doing that.

Question: Thanks. Mr. Mayor, you have released a blueprint to end gun violence. There's Vision Zero for traffic violence. Given the numbers that Mark Levine cited about the overall number of fatalities from addiction or overdoses, do you plan to release a blueprint to address this issue?

Mayor Adams: Yes. That's so important because we believe in the concept of blueprints. When you properly identify what are the feeders. Historically, we have this downstream mindset, you heard me talk about it all the time, we wait downstream, instead of looking upstream. What are the feeders? What are these rivers? And Dr.

Vasan is going to work with all of our team, as well as with Deputy Mayor William-Isom. What are the feeders that we need to really examine? And then the goal is to go out with city, state, federal resources to start damming the rivers that are feeding these crises. And we're going to do the same thing with opioid overdoses.

[Crosstalk]

Question: I wanted to ask you, did your office ever consider launching an investigation or did your office look into any of the concerns on Brian Benjamin and did your office at all interact with the Manhattan DA's office with the Southern district on that case?

Attorney General James: No. We read about it in the New York Times, the investigation into Brian Benjamin by the Southern district. And we're deeply concerned about the allegations. It erodes the public trust in a profession that I love, and that is public service. As public servants, all of us are tasked with the responsibility of holding ourselves to a very high standard. And it's unfortunate that in this particular situation that was violated.

Question: Right now, Governor Hochul is trying to figure out a way to get the former lieutenant off the ballot. She says that it should be up to the legislature to consider legislation. They've already shot that down. Another option could be he could move out of state. Should he move out of state? What should the governor be doing and how does this impact the democratic party going forward as they go into the election in November?

Attorney General James: That's a decision for the governor of the state of New York. My office is not involved in those determinations.

Question: [Inaudible] the third party that Jay Jacobs is trying to create to give democrats another line to run on. Do you think that's a good idea? That democrats should maybe be thinking of another line?

Attorney General James: I recognize fusion party lines. It's a process that has been used in the state of New York. As you know, I have run on the Working Families party in the past and on the Democratic party line in the past. And right now we are viewing our options as to whether or not we will take that third party line. As you know, we're on the

Democratic line. And well, assuming that we don't have a primary at this point in time, but I'll be on the Democratic party line as well as the Working Families party line. And there'll be a determination at a later point, whether or not I'll accept that third party.

Question: Question for Mayor Adams. Mayor Adams, Hi, Nina Pineda with Seven On Your Side. I'm just here to relay a request from this baseball team in Queens. Five teams have not been able to use the state of the fields built by the Parks Department for two years. They haven't had the right size pitching mound. Now they're being told they might have to sacrifice a third season. We have a supplier that's going to donate the freight to get the right size mounds in for these Queens teams, one is the city champion, in by this weekend. Can you cut—have them cut through the red tape so they can play this season and get on field and play ball?

Mayor Adams: Two years. Was it a renovation?

Question: It was.

Mayor Adams: Were they waiting for the mound for two years?

Question: [Inaudible].

Mayor Adams: That that makes no sense for that to happen. I'm going to look into that. Now, the supplier may state that he will waive the freight. The supplier should be a good hearted person and weigh the cost of the mound. This way we could get it here right away. I'll pay the freight if he pays the cost. So paying the cost of the mailing of the freight, that's not saying much. He should be more altruistic and you need to send him that picture and tell him, I'm sure his company's doing well. He needs to waive the cost of the mound. If he does that, that would get us out of the procurement rules because he's donating it for free.

Mayor Adams: But let me look at that. And it should not have taken two years to get a mound here and we're going to do everything that's possible for these children to be able to play. And let me look into that, and we'll get back to you this afternoon.

[Crosstalk]

Mayor Adams: Hold on. You know you guys, I don't do it this way. We can free up everybody. There's no more questions on the opioid, right? So why don't we free you up so you don't have to go through all of this abuse. All right. All right. AJ, thank you. Thank you. Let's take a few... Hold on. We are going to look at Fabian with that nice tie that he's wearing.

Question: Thank you. I can't replicate the tie. I'm sorry. On housing, the City Council, majority of the City Council wants to see spending on affordable housing greatly boosted. You promised 4 billion on the campaign trail. Your budget was 1.7 billion. Why is that?

Mayor Adams: We're still in conversation. We're still in the budget season. We're still in conversation. We have been having deep discussions with the City Council leadership, as I stated. The speaker and I, we say Adams and Adams law firm. We believe we are partners here. So it's still here. The process is not over. Let us go through the final process that we're going through now.

Question: And then on the encampments, have you seen any progress in terms of the number of homeless that are accepting city services? I know these sweeps are ongoing.

Mayor Adams: Right. And they're not sweeps. They are giving people the dignity to live in safe environments. And so what we are doing, and what's interesting here, as we're finding, many people see it as this is an opportunity to go back home to family members, find alternative ways of living, now that we're saying this is not dignified. And so we'll give you the exact numbers of how many people have went into our safe haven beds or have went into shelters. And I really encourage people to go visit our shelters. I think the narrative is not a proper narrative. Those shelters are far more safer than living on the streets.

Question: Any improvement or you just don't know offhand?

Mayor Adams: No. We'll get the exact numbers of how many people.

Question: Mr. Mayor, a federal judge today explicitly ordered Louis Molina to attend next week's status conference on Rikers after he missed several prior meetings with

federal prosecutors. What is your thought on the current value of the federal monitorship? Do you think it's providing value to Rikers?

Mayor Adams: Well, that's not my decision. I respect the law. If the judge makes a decision, we're going to abide by the judge. I have the utmost confidence in Commissioner Molina. And so it's whatever the judge say, we're going to abide by. We're going to follow the rule. I know, you know, those of you who have covered this, you know Rikers has been a mess, not for four months since Eric Adams has been the mayor. Rikers is a problem. The best chance to fixing this problem is Molina and Adams. We are the best chance to fix the problem. I'm also surprised a lot of people who are criticizing what's happening on Rikers. They were there. They were there for many years. And so if they're going to be honest, they should discuss how they dropped the ball. We have a chance to get it right. I put together the best commissioner to do so and his team. Federal judge wants us to do something differently, I'm going to respect whatever the federal judge states. But I'm asking him, give us a chance.

Question: Mayor Adams, I have a two parter for you as the city approaches this medium risk level when it comes to COVID cases.

Mayor Adams: Yes.

Question: How should New Yorkers be preparing? And also, I hear you all the time saying people should be heading back to their offices because it's good for the economy. Did you ever consider that for people who are eating out, spending money in their neighborhoods, working from home, that it's good for the more local economies in the outer boroughs perhaps too?

Mayor Adams: Yes. First, work is going to change. Pre-COVID and post-COVID is going to be different. And if you are starting patronizing your local community, we're building new business sectors. So there's a different environment out there. That's good. What I say to those who are staying home not participating in the ecosystem, that is hurting the US. If you're staying home, not going to the cleaners, not going to get your shoes shined, not going to the cafes, the restaurant, that hurts us. If you're doing it in your local community, I'm good with that. But we would rather see people get back and the cross pollination of working together.

Question: So it just needs to be Midtown.

Mayor Adams: No, it does not need to be Midtown. It just needs to be, let's get outdoors again and play a role in the overall economy that we need to prosper.

Commissioner Vasan: So as we have seen cases increase over the last days and weeks, the message to New Yorkers is the same that we've been giving for a couple of weeks which is take precautions, choose to mask yourself indoors, get tested frequently. And if you test positive, make use of the accessible treatment options that we have by calling your doctor to get evaluated or call 212 COVID-19. And obviously the continued best way to protect yourself against COVID is to get vaccinated if you haven't been, to get boosted if you're eligible and haven't been. So that's our recommendations to New Yorkers as we, whatever happens with the cases. But we're preparing to move into medium risk. It's not a fait accompli.

[Crosstalk]

Question: Several days ago, the rent guidelines board put out a report that seems to foreshadow a pretty big increase coming from stabilized rent controlled apartments. You've got a lot of people that eviction cases pending, you've got issues with people getting right to counsel lawyers. We're talking about opioid problems now, this is the type of thing that's going to stress people out a lot. What do you think about that? 9% was one of the numbers that I saw come out of that report. Do you want your appointees going for a rent increase like that at a time like this where people are really suffering?

Mayor Adams: I believe those were ranges. And one thing I do when I appoint someone to a board, I appoint them because I believe they're going to be fair and they're going to make the right decisions. So we must balance this, because this is sometimes lost in the conversation. We must balance those. We don't want to aggravate the eviction process, but we also got to look at small property owners. If you are a mom and pop that owns a 10 family unit and your electric bills are going up, your water bills are going up, this is your only source of income. And sometimes when we think about landlords, we think about the mega guys. We think about those who have thousands of units. But these small mom and pops have been decimated. They've been impacted by the COVID issue.

Mayor Adams: Some of them may lose their buildings. And what happens if they lose their buildings? The mega guys come in, buy the buildings and now we see the

gentrification that we all say we fear. So we must be fair here, allow tenants to be able to stay in their living arrangements. But we need to look after those small mom and pop owners. If you invested all your money into a 10 unit house and you cannot pay the bills, you can lose that. And that scares, when I sit down and I speak to those small property owners. So I think the rent guidelines board must look at this and be fair in how they find the right way to make sure those small property owners are protected and we don't lose our tenants from their living arrangements.

Question: So this murder in Queens, that people are calling the duffel bag murder, are there any developments on that case? I don't know if you've spoken about it, but can you react to that gruesome killing out in Queens that we've been watching the story unfold the last several days?

Mayor Adams: Horrific to murder someone, roll them in a duffel bag. My understanding, the son was home. It was a horrific incident. What I do know, we will find him. We will find the person responsible and they will be held accountable for their actions. This was a horrific murder from what I was told. The manner in which it was done was just really a horrific incident. We will find the person responsible. Our detectives are on the ground. The commissioner has been updating me every day and I believe we're going to apprehend a person.

Speaker 14: Mr. Mayor, do we have an update on the mask mandates for toddlers? I know you say you want to see kids smiling faces all the time. How does that look right now and if Dr. Vasan can help respond to that.

Mayor Adams: No, I got it because Dr. Vasan updates me every morning. We do our briefings. We have this surge, which I am really impressed with that many people don't talk about how well, when you look at our city in comparison to other cities, how well we are managing to surge through mask, we're managing it through boosters, we're managing it with advertisement. And so when we are at a comfortable place to shift, we're going to do so. We felt we were going to be there already, but then COVID has its own mind on what is going to do. We're not at that comfortable place yet, but we will. When we're at that comfortable place, we're going to shift, but we're not there yet.

Question: Are you worried about kids going away though to places on public transportation or planes for spring break and then coming back [inaudible]?

Mayor Adams: I'm happy to hear that the government is going to appeal the decision. We're happy to hear that Dr. Vasan shared with us when it came down that it was important to appeal that decision and I'm happy to hear that. And we're going to continue to do our advertisement, we're going to continue encourage people to wear their mask, to get vaccinated, to do the right thing. We're going to continue to do our job. And we have done a great job in this city with one of the most densely populated cities on the globe. Yet the way we have done this and coordinated with New Yorkers, it has been extremely successful.

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