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NEW YORK, NY 10007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: February 24, 2021, 10:00 AM

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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO HOLDS MEDIA AVAILABILITY

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, everyone. Well, I am very excited that tomorrow our New York City public schools, our middle schools will be reopening. And once we reopen, we are going the distance and we're looking forward to September when all our kids are going to be back. This is really an important moment, bringing back our middle school kids, getting them in the classroom, giving them an opportunity to learn from talented, committed, passionate educators. People who really care about what they're doing. School staff that cares for them, looks out for them, looks out for their academic needs, looks out for their emotional needs as well. This is why it's so important to have kids back. So middle school kids come back tomorrow. And that's going to be great. And it's a reminder of why it is right to have kids in school. This is a discussion happening all over the country. Let me be as clear as I could be, kids need to be back in school as quickly as possible. And it is so good for them, for their health and wellbeing for families. Hey, remember the spring? Remember all of the dislocation, all the pain caused by school not being there? Remember how many families struggled, trying to make it work? Remember our educators trying somehow to put together a remote system, learning, distance learning. And again, God bless our educators and our school staff and everyone at the Department of Education, they did it in the spring. They came up with something that had never been done before. But no one thinks that compares to in-person learning. So, we're moving forward, bringing our middle school kids back tomorrow. And then we want to go farther and we want to get ready for a really, really great September when everyone's back.

And the reason this has worked is because we set the highest standards in this nation. A lot of cities didn't even dare to reopen their schools. We said, we're going to do it. It's the New York way. We're going to do great things. We're going to do what other people don't dare to do, but we're going to do it by setting the highest standards. So, we took the very best ideas from around the world, the highest health and safety standards, we created a single gold standard. And what's amazing is the New York City example is now being lauded all over the country as the way to open schools. In fact, so much so that the Centers for Disease Control, when they put out their school guidelines, they borrowed heavily from the New York City approach. And what we did here in New York City, what we proved here in New York City became the foundation for the national standards.

Let's go over those CDC guidelines to give you a sense of how they connect. Number one, here are the key strategies the CDC says all school systems in America should be doing. Number one, universal and correct use of masks, universal use of masks, kids and adults alike. Check, we did that. Number two, physical distancing in all elements of the school. We did that. Number three, hand washing and respiratory etiquette. We did that, hand sanitizer everywhere. We did that from the very beginning. We keep doing that. Number four, clean and well-ventilated spaces, constant cleanings, careful attention to ventilation. We did that. And number five, focus on contact tracing, when necessary using quarantining. We'd done that from the beginning with the

biggest Test and Trace Corps in America. That's been doing an amazing job. And with our situation room and thanks to everyone in the situation room for the incredible work you've done, making sure that there is an issue in a school, it's addressed right away. What we did became the gold standard for the entire United States of America. And we're very proud. I'm proud of all the people who did that work. Now, we got to keep going. And it means continuing to do testing at the highest level anywhere, weekly testing, all schools. Obviously, getting more and more folks in the schools vaccinated over time. But we have proven it works because New York City public schools are the safest places to be in New York City right now. And the numbers keep proving it.

Now, today we hit an important milestone and this commitment to testing, something a lot of other school systems didn't do. We said we would do testing constantly. Today, in our public schools, we'll get to the 500,000th test of a student or staff member. 500,000, half a million tests have been given in our New York City public schools since the beginning of the school year. That commitment to testing has been one of the reasons the schools have been so safe. And we believe in it and we know it makes a huge difference. I want to thank everyone who's been involved in the testing in the schools. I want to thank everyone who's helped us get it done. We worked closely with our union partners. We've educated and reached out to parents and we've gotten a great response. And so, testing is one of the reasons that gold standard works. And we're going to keep building on that. So, school coming back tomorrow, another step forward in this recovery. And remember, a recovery of New York City requires our public schools to come back strong. A recovery for all of us means our public schools are there for our kids in every community. That's why I am adamant our public schools need to be fully opened in September.

Okay. Let me give you an update obviously, on vaccines. We talk about it every day. This is the crucial piece of the equation. We still lack supply. It's the constant story, but I do believe things are starting to get better. And I'm really, really hopeful about what we're hearing about the Johnson and Johnson supply, which could make a huge difference for us even as early as the month of March. But let me give you an update on the numbers, as of today vaccinations given in New York City from day one, 1,578,362 doses. And again, we're ready to take that up to a much higher level quickly, so long as we get that supply. Now, when it comes to vaccination, we're focused on equity. We're focused on making sure that people who have been in the neighborhoods that suffered the most from COVID, get access to the vaccination, get the support they need the information they need, the answers they need, the outreach they need. 75 percent of our City-run vaccination sites are in the priority neighborhoods. The ones that bore the brunt of COVID, the ones where we saw the most death and devastation. That's where we're focusing. And we're seeing really good results. More and more people choosing to get vaccinated because the sites are right there in the community being run by people from the community, which gives people faith. It gives them trust in the process. We really focused on public housing and in NYCHA, we've had already, 19 vaccination sites. I was out at Red Hook Houses in Brooklyn on Sunday, great operation there. I saw really, really happy people. People were happy to be helping their neighbors, who were in that vaccination site, running it. And folks from Red Hook Houses, residents who came right there in their own community, got vaccinated, believed in it. Now they're going to tell their neighbors, their family, their friends, how important it is to get vaccinated. This is how we build up momentum. And all of the folks who have been vaccinated, we're going to be bringing them back for their second doses right there in the community, at those same sites. So, this is something I'm really excited about. It's making a big difference. We're adding more sites later this week, seven more sites in public housing later this week. And

we're going to continue expanding deeper and deeper into New York City public housing, reaching people who need help the most.

And I want to affirm, even though we had a setback last week from the weather, we can reach our goal, five million New Yorkers, fully vaccinated by June. We can reach that goal so long as we get the supply.

Now, New York City is coming back. New York City is coming back strong. There is no question about it. And we see all sorts of signs of the comeback. We see it really starting to take shape. Here's one I love, and this is breaking news, we've heard about just in the last day. And it really grabs at the heart of a lot of New Yorkers because some New York institutions, some New York icons are special to us. And one of them is the legendary department store Century 21. Century 21 bore the brunt of this, a pandemic like so many other retail stores, they were going through so much. And we mourned when we heard that Century 21 wouldn't be around. But now Century 21 is making a New York City come back. Century 21 is coming back. And I want to thank the Gindi family who have owned Century 21 for generations, who love this city who have created something so special for New Yorkers. This is really a part of life in this city. People love Century 21. They get great deals and not just New Yorkers. People come from all over the world. So, I love that when they announced that they're coming back, and it will take a while for it all to be put together. But when they announced that they were 100 percent coming back, they said something simple at Century 21. And we should all listen to this simple idea. They said, never count out a New Yorker, never count out a New Yorker. So, Century 21 was down, but got back up. And here to tell you about it, he's got a great New York story himself. Marc Benitez, I'm going to introduce him. He was born and raised in the Bronx. He went to work for Century 21 straight out of college, worked his way up through the ranks, loves the store, loves this city. He is now the President of Century 21 stores. And he's here to tell us about the good news, my pleasure to introduce Marc Benitez.

[...]

Mayor: Excellent. Thank you so much, Mark. Hey, Mark, we are just so happy for you and the Gindi family and everyone at Century 21. Thank you. Thank you for believing in New York City. Thank you for being New York strong and coming back no matter what. You know, there's going to be a lot of New Yorkers who can't wait to walk through the door of Century 21 again. And I have said to people, when we get past the immediate challenge of COVID, when we get 5 million people vaccinated by June, you're going to see a whole lot happening in this city. You're going to see an explosion of pent-up demand, New Yorkers going out all over the city, spending their money to help New York City come back. And then you're going to start to see visitors come back and you're going to see people wanting to be here and the life of this city coming back more and more in 2021. So, what good news. Thank you, Mark. And thank you, everyone at Century 21 for showing us that New York City is coming back strong.

All right, everyone, let's go over today's indicators. Number one, daily number – excuse me, daily number of people admitted to New York City hospitals for suspected COVID-19. Today's report, 275 patients with a confirmed positivity level of 64.83 percent. And the hospitalization rate, 4.10 per 100,000. Number two, new reported cases on a seven-day average – today's report, 3,241. Number three, percentage of people testing positive citywide for COVID-19 – today's report, on a seven-day rolling average, 7.15 percent.

A few words in Spanish – and I'm going to talk about where I started, middle schools reopening tomorrow.

[Mayor de Blasio speaks in Spanish]

With that, we're going to turn to our colleagues in the media. But before I do, a special salute – this'll be the last City Hall morning briefing that Rich Lamb will be participating in. Now, if I've got my facts straight here, Rich has had about a 50-year career, which is astounding unto itself – 50 years of letting New Yorkers know what's going on, telling them the truth, being a voice we could trust and a smart, decent voice at that. And his last day on the beat is this Friday, which it will be 43 years to the day of his first assignment for WCBS. And if I'm counting right, Rich, I think that was when Ed Koch was mayor. So, you've been through a lot of mayors now. You've seen New York City through some of its toughest moments, but you've also seen New York City come back every time. So, I know we're going to hear from you in a minute, but just, again, a very special career and a very special contribution to the people in New York City. And we are really going to miss you. With that, let's go to our colleagues and media. Let me know the name and outlet of each journalist.

Moderator: We'll now begin our Q-and-A. As a reminder, we're joined today by Chancellor Carranza, by Dr. Katz, by Dr. Long, by Jeff Thamkittikasem, the Director of the Mayor's Office of Operations, and by Senior Advisor Dr. Jay Varma. First question today goes to Rich Lamb from WCBS 880.

Question: Good morning, Mr. Mayor. And thank you for your overly generous words. I really appreciate them. It's – you know, I'm grateful for the ability to have questioned you, Mr. Mayor, and your predecessors Mike Bloomberg, and Rudy Giuliani, David Dinkins, Ed Koch – and yes, I go all the way back to Abe Beame. So, it's been a lot of work and a lot of fun and kind of a great run, you know?

Mayor: Definitely a great run, not kind of, Rich. It doesn't get better than that. And we really will miss you. But a lot of New Yorkers have really, you know, taken strength from your reporting and just knowing that someone was telling them what was really going on, it's been real good. So, we're going to miss you, my friend.

Question: Well, thanks. Look, so how many questions do I get today?

Mayor: You get 72 questions today. We should – no, we should do one for each year of your career. You get 50 questions.

Question: All right. Well, we aren't going to do that. But, listen, since this is my final question – or series of final questions to you, please do me a favor and make some news, okay? So, we all know that you know that 100 percent of your attention and focus now will be on your job as mayor. I'm looking after conquering COVID and the recovery of the city, but when January 1st comes, you will be unemployed. And I know there's a lot on your plate now, but you must've given that at least a passing thought. What are you going to do? Will you run for another office? What do you think about going to the private sector, make a ton of money?

Mayor: Okay. I can give you this much breaking news, I will not be going to the private sector and making a ton of money. I have never done that, never will. It's just not who I am. I'm a public servant. This is my life. Certainly, want to find some way to serve in the future. But where you started as is right, Rich, it's been all – all encompassing, all involving, the fight against COVID. And it's heartening that we can see the light at the end of the tunnel, it really is. But as I see that light at the end of the tunnel, it makes me ever more focused on the recovery and it has to be recovery for all of us. We just named our really great recovery czar, Lorraine Grillo. We're bringing back our schools. I can feel the future and the ability to bring this city back strong. This is going to be the greatest comeback story in the history of New York City. It really is. That's what I'm focused on. At some point, I'll have to figure out the future, but just not there yet. Go ahead.

Question: [Inaudible] Mr. Mayor, so what do you consider to have been your signal achievement as mayor, if you can talk to that.

Mayor: Look, the labor of love – everyone knows that my labor of love was the work we've done on early childhood education. Not just pre-K, remember 3-K too, which has really become big and I want to see it become fully universal. We were moving aggressively in that direction. The pandemic has slowed us down, but that day is coming soon when not just every four-year-old, but every three-year-old in New York City can have an excellent early child education for free, every child starting at the same starting line – not based on how much money their family has or what ZIP code they live in, every child getting the same great start in our public schools. That's still a dream that has to be realized. But the fact that we've come this far makes me very, very proud. There's a lot of things I could talk about for sure. But that one – Chirlane said to me the other day, and she was right, you know, the true impact of that, you know, in 15 or 20 years, I hope to have the opportunity to speak to some of the young people who benefited from Universal Pre-K and 3-K and see the good things happening in their lives. I think it's having an impact right now for New York families, but I think it's going to have a much greater impact on our future and that's exciting to me.

Let's give him a bonus round. Bonus round – Rich, you got anything else?

Question: Two more quick ones –

Mayor: You get them, Rich. You get them. I would say to all New York City journalists, if you're retiring, we'll give you extra questions. Go ahead.

Question: Why would anybody want the job you have now, is one. And has the media been fair to you?

Mayor: On the second one, I have learned just to not get lost in that. I think, you know, every – you have to call them like you see them each time. It depends on the individual moment. It depends on the individual issue. But I think it's a two-way street, I think I have to constantly work at doing the best job I can of communicating what we're doing and answering the real and honest and tough questions. I think that's what democracy is supposed to be about. And, you know, throughout this crisis, there been a lot of tough questions. But I've said, and I've really come to this realization more and more, a lot of the questions make our work better, a lot of the questions are earnest, honest questions about what needs to be done and what people – what

journalists are hearing from folks at the grassroots. And, you know, I've learned to be humble about the fact that we need to understand those questions, help us do a better job. And I've tried to give credit where credit is due to journalists who raised issues that, you know, we didn't have as much information on, or we were focused on something else and we needed to understand. So, I think it's helped throughout this current crisis to have those tough questions, have it be another good check and balance.

I went to your second question, I actually have now forgotten your first question. Go ahead, Rich.

Question: Well, let me then – I'll sneak one more in with this one. Okay. So, why would anybody want the job you have now? And what timeline do you think you have for reopening the high schools? So, I'm coming down from 30,000 feet now.

Mayor: I'm very hopeful about reopening the high schools. Obviously, we wanted to make sure everything was set for tomorrow with middle schools. But, you know, I hope to in the next few weeks having an announcement on high schools. Everything's lining up – the situation with COVID, even though we're very watchful, watching the data and watching the science, concerned about the variants, but, overall, we've certainly seen improvement; more vaccinations every day. Every day, depending on the day, you know, 25,000, 30,000, 35,000, 40,000, or more New Yorkers getting vaccinated, that number is going to jump up. That's going to make us safer. But, most importantly, we've proven how to open schools properly. High school comes with some additional complications, but I'm very hopeful we'll get it done.

This job is an amazing opportunity to serve. This is a job like no other in the country, no other on earth, because it's the greatest city in the world, it's the most amazing, energetic, passionate, diverse place on earth. It's an incredible honor to lead it. It's a really, really tough job. I'm not going to mince words. It's been called the second toughest job in America for a long time. So, for folks who want it – I say, God bless you, because we need great leadership, going forward. But I also think people have to be clear just how tough it is. It's not about, you know, slogans and, sort of, simple declarations. This takes an immense amount of work getting under the hood of government, understanding each issue, understanding how to make things work, listening to a lot of people, having intense discussions to figure out what will get the job done. It's non-stop. And that's the other thing I'd say – I don't know if folks running understand that the second you walk in this door, it is 110 percent your life until the day you walk out. You cannot stop thinking about it. If you're focused on it, if you're devoted to it, you can't stop thinking about. Wherever I've been, it's in the front of my mind. So, I'd say to folks, it's an amazing opportunity to do good, but get ready, because it's about as intense as anything you could imagine in this world.

Okay. Rich, thank you again, brother. Talk to you, I'm sure, before you go, but thank you for everything.

Question: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. It's been a pleasure. I admire your talent with words. And I also must apologize to my colleagues for hogging the mic.

Mayor: Well, everyone forgives you, and we'll still do the remaining seven questions. So, no harm done. And thank you, brother.

Moderator: Not only has everyone forgiven, Rich already, but they've expressed an interest in giving him a round of applause, and we're happy to honor that. So, we're going to unmute every line [inaudible] –

[Applause]

Mayor: It's not as good as in-person, but it'll do.

Moderator: With that, we'll go to Juliet from 1010 WINS.

Mayor: Juliet?

Question: Hello?

Mayor: Hey, how are you doing, Juliet?

Question: Oh, okay. I didn't hear that you came to me. I'm sorry about that. Thank you. Well, first of all, I wanted tip my hat and my microphone to Rich Lamb. We've covered City Hall together. We've gone to the Vatican in Rome to cover the Pope together in parades. And I just want to say he's been a great colleague and friends, and I just wanted to say, thank you, Rich.

Mayor: I love that. Juliet, I've never – I've never heard of tipping your microphone. Is that like a radio thing?

[Laughter]

Question: I guess so, I just made it up. But yes, thanks, again, Rich, for being there for everybody and for New Yorkers. So, now, I'd like to move on to my question. Yesterday, Mr. Mayor, the Health Department issued a report – about 59 cases of the U.K. variant strain and that the City is looking for an additional vendor to expand the City's capacity to sequence specimens. So, can you talk more about this rise in cases and your concerns?

Mayor: Yeah. Thank you, Juliet. And I'll turn to Dr. Varma, but let me just say at the outset, we're very concerned about the variants. We're talking about it all the time, focusing on it all the time here at City Hall. But the most important question is the strategy and the strategy remains the same – get people vaccinated. Everything we're seeing so far about the variants tells us that vaccination is still the best tool, the best – you know, the best defense is a good offense. The offense is vaccination. So, even though we see more of it, it does not change the approach to what will work. Go ahead, Jay.

Senior Advisor Dr. Jay Varma: Thank you very much for the question. Yeah, so, as we announced yesterday, we actually have built the capacity to monitor this threat. And that's really important news. We've been working on this very aggressively with different partners and we're continuing to expand that capacity so that we make sure that we have as much of a window into this problem as possible. As we've learned, we can only respond to a problem when we're tracking it accurately, and what we announced yesterday was that the current estimate is that about six percent of cases in the city are due to the B117 or UK variant, and it's important to note that that percentage of course is higher than we would like, but it has been stable for two straight

weeks. So, that gives us optimism, you know, cautious optimism that we can still outrun it with all of the prevention measures, and of course the most important prevention measure, which is vaccination. We do need to remain vigilant. We've seen in other countries such as Denmark that the rate of these infections can stay at a low level and then suddenly increase. So, of course we need to continue to track it, and that's why we will continue to issue these reports weekly and also build our capacity so that if the threat does grow, we can also measure it as accurately as possible.

Mayor: Go ahead, Juliet.

Question: Okay, thank you. So, a different topic. The other day, Susan Herman testified before a City Council committee hearing about the pilot program where mental health teams, rather than police, will respond to emergency mental health calls. So, who decides, or what mechanism is in place to decide who responds to a particular call?

Mayor: That's a great question, Juliet. The idea here, and this is why we had to make sure everyone was trained properly, and there was a lot of smart work to figure out the division of labor. But the notion here is, you know, when you call 9-1-1, the folks who handle those calls will be trained to understand exactly what to ask for, to determine if this is a situation where we can send out the civilian teams or whether there is any danger of particular violence. In which case, of course we want the NYPD to be present. So, everyone's being trained to understand which situation is which, and then once it's defined, the appropriate team goes out, and if at any point of course a civilian team goes out and determines they need NYPD backup, that's always available to them. So, that's part of what we've really wanted to refine and get right. I'm really hopeful – the crisis calls approach – I think this is going to revolutionize our approach to serving families in distress, to make sure the right team arrives. I think this pilot is going to show us a whole different way of doing things, and then I look forward to expanding it across the city this year, next year, and I think it's just going to create a better outcome for everyone involved. I really do. Go ahead.

Moderator: The next is Narmeen from PIX 11.

Question: Hi Mayor. How are you?

Mayor: Hey Narmeen, how you been?

Question: I'm well, want to wish Rich a happy retirement, I've listened to him practically all my life. So, wish him well. I do want to ask you first about what I've learned is a fairly new step, I believe in the Health + Hospital's site, when preregistering for COVID test, it requires a signing off of a waiver where a test taker will have to bear financial responsibility for the test. I'm summarizing the wording there, but are you worried that this once again is another deterrent for people. If people are asked to pay for a test that we understand to be free, and I can provide your team with the documentation or the screen grab that I received from someone who filled out this preregistration.

Mayor: Narmeen, thank you. As I said earlier, I appreciate when a journalist brings something to our attention that needs to be addressed and resolved. We had an issue, you know, a couple of weeks back about the way applications for vaccination were being presented for some sites to

suggest people needed health insurance when they don't. Obviously, vaccinations are available people, whether they have health insurance or not, and the same with testing and it's free. So, anything that might be misleading or confusing we have to address, I don't know about the specific situation you're talking to. I definitely want you to share it with our teams so we can address it. But I want to see if Dr. Mitch Katz has anything he wants to say about this.

President and CEO Mitchell Katz, NYC Health + Hospitals: Well, I very much appreciate you're raising it. I'm not aware of that, and I know as policy if someone has insurance, we do want to bill the insurance because that enables us to have more money to take care of people who don't have insurance, but we do not bill individuals for the COVID tests, and I'm sorry to hear that the screen itself is confusing. I would guess that what it was trying to say was if you have insurance, here is where you put in the insurance again, because we are trying to bill insurance, but we are not trying to bill people, but I'm happy to look at that screenshot. I appreciate it, and we'll resolve the issue.

Mayor: Yeah, that's really important, Narmeen. Where people have insurance, of course, we want the insurance plans to pay for whatever is possible. That's appropriate. That's the way to do it, but never in a way that would discourage anyone from getting a test, and anyone who does not have insurance is absolutely welcomed to get a test. They do not need insurance. They will not be charged, anyway you slice it, but let's, let's take your information and we'll work to fix that. Go ahead, Narmeen.

Question: Thank you. I'll make sure to get that to your office and appreciate the clarification. I'm sure a lot of other folks do as well. The next question is from my colleague Kala Rama. She's asking what is the rationale behind plans to hire 475 new school safety officers at an estimated cost of about \$20 million when there are so many students who deeply need emotional services, that would be more helpful through the addition of more social workers and therapy?

Mayor: Yeah, I appreciate the question. I mean, first of all, there has not been a final decision made on hiring for school safety agents. I want to – said that before this week, I want to say again, no final decision has been made. Second, we are adding, constantly, additional mental health supports into our schools. Remember one of the foundational concepts of Thrive NYC was to add mental health support to every single New York City public school and remember that that was not the case before this administration. When we came in, one of the things that my wife, Chirlane McCray, focused on was the fact that schools didn't know where to turn for mental health support in many cases. So, we started providing direct mental health services in schools, in all of our community schools, for example, and providing training to school teams, providing access to mental health professionals for any schools that didn't have them on staff. This revolutionized the approach, making mental health services and everyday reality in schools.

Then, we moved the social-emotional learning approach, and the Chancellor's on, I want to turn to him on this to really clarify what this has meant to people because we really leaned into social-emotional learning, not too long before the pandemic, and I think folks didn't get a chance to really understand how pervasive this strategy is and how much it's going to be a part of everything we do in our schools to focus on the emotional needs of kids.

Then, we announced a month or two ago that we're going to be doing mental health screening of all children in New York City public schools when they come back in September and we're adding additional social workers. So, we need all of these things, but we also do need kids to be safe, and school safety agents have done a remarkable job reducing violence, reducing crime in New York City public schools over recent years, and I can tell you as a parent and I've talked to so many parents, parents will say to you, we want both, we want mental health support for our kids, and we want our kids to be safe. We need both. So, we're going to be looking to balance all of that and make it work. But I do want the chancellor to speak to how important and pervasive the social-emotional learning approach has been, and Chancellor, I think just defining it for everyone again would be really helpful.

Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza: Sure, thank you, Mr. Mayor. So, I agree with everything you said wholeheartedly, and because we had invested already, prior the pandemic, in social-emotional supports, trauma-informed curriculum and training, we were well-positioned or as well-positioned as we could be, during this pandemic, to really start ramping up rather than start from scratch. But what that means is that just as a student – we have to know where students are academically so we know where to intervene, we also, and we've announced this as part of our Returning Strong in September plan, that we are also going to be screening students for any signs of the trauma or any signs that they may be in trouble, and that means that are they withdrawing, and are they not engaging with their fellow students, or with their teachers, or with their class? Are parents reporting that there are certain behaviors that they're engaging in? All of these are signs that a student may need some support, but it's important, and it's been a longstanding goal for you, Mr. Mayor and myself, that every student has a caring adult to go to in their school, whether that's in-person or remotely, and let me tell you, I've seen many examples where that caring individual is the school safety agent, that they built those relationships. So, it's important to us, and I just want to remind anyone that there are city resources available. You can just call 1-8-8-8-NYCWELL and get supports as well.

Mayor: Thank you, Chancellor. Go ahead.

Moderator: The next is Katie from the Wall Street Journal.

Question: Hey, good morning, and congratulations to you, Rich. Your City Hall pals, we have some nice surprises for you coming up, so something to look forward to. Thanks to everyone who was very generous in chipping in. But – so, Mayor de Blasio my question for you – you answered this yesterday, but I just wanted to maybe take another swing at it, and it's about the COVID cases in New York City which obviously there's been a drop around the country. But we're not seeing such a drop here within the city. We're just trying to figure out how or why, is it because we're testing more? I don't know if there's anything more you can share with us about this trend that is happening around the country, but not so much here within New York City?

Mayor: I'll start, and I'll turn to Dr. Varma. I think we're testing more, so we're portraying the full reality more accurately than a lot of places. We're one of the most densely populated places in the entire country, and that does facilitate the transmission of the disease, and we have a historic challenge of folks who have not had enough access to healthcare for generations and communities that have suffered from poverty and that exacerbates the vulnerability. So, those, I think are our realities that make us different, but it's why we have to fight that much harder,

maintain strict standards, constant testing, deepening vaccination, to overcome it. Go ahead, Dr. Varma.

Senior Advisor Varma: Thank you for the interest in this – yeah, thank you for the interest in this question. I think we have to keep in mind that we have actually had a pretty pronounced drop in the number of infections that we have. Despite us having, you know, one of the highest per-capita testing rates, anywhere in the world. We've seen, I think over 30, 35 percent drop in the number of cases on our seven-day average since the beginning of January we've also seen a progressive decline in our hospitalizations and deaths. One of the reasons possibly why the rate of decline may not be as steep as it is in other places has to do with the issues that the Mayor has just highlighted, this is an inherently more vulnerable place. We have people living in dense situations, a lot of crowding in houses. A lot of crowding, obviously in our communities combined with all of the historical forces of racism and poverty and injustice that continue to be reasons and explanations for why New York City was the hardest hit during the first wave. So, I think if there has been a less of a decline than other places, I would guess it largely has to do with the fact that once COVID gets entrenched here it does take a little bit longer to get out, and that's why our Test and Trace Corps is so essential, and why all of these prevention measures and vaccinations continue to be so important.

Mayor: And I want to emphasize that the testing has just constantly expanded. One of the unsung heroes of the New York City testing effort is on with us today, and I want to shout them out and thank them. Our Director of Operations, Jeff Thamkittikasem, who has really done remarkable work with his team, expanding testing constantly for the people in New York City and making it something you could get all over the city and for free, and obviously, Dr. Ted Long, Test and Trace Corps, they've done an amazing job. I mean, we've really gone the extra mile to get people testing, but it's going to show you the larger truth, and this is part of the things we've said. Some people have said our numbers appear to be more rigorous, more conservative, whatever, name you want to say. I like that our numbers show us a full truth. I like that we're being transparent about it. It keeps our guard up and it tells us how much we have to fight to make sure we get things done right. But, you know, as Dr. Varma said, we clearly see improvement. Now we got to sustain that improvement in the face of the variants. Go ahead, Katie.

Question: Thank you, and my second question is also about the testing. Can you speak a little bit about how the testing and tracing war room, I guess, for schools, how you've ramped that up to prepare for middle school, and then how much more needs to be done to facilitate the opening of high schools at whatever point within the next few weeks, whatever that decision is?

Mayor: Yeah, I'm going to turn to Jeff on this one, but with a preface to say that it's been remarkable, the systematic approach now being taken to the expansion of testing. The systematic approach being taken to the expansion of the situation room, and I want to thank Buildings Commissioner Melanie La Rocca, who's done an outstanding job with her team building out that situation room. That's something that is not typical around the country. It's a model, another thing that's being now emulated in other places. But we know that we have the testing capacity for middle school starting tomorrow, every school being tested weekly, and we will have the same for high school. I can confirm that to you now, Katie, that that capacity has been built and will be ready for when we reopen high school, and Jeff, why don't you give a flavor of how that's been done?

Director Jeff Thamkittikasem, Mayor's Office of Operations: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. I agree wholeheartedly with all that you've said. I think the big issue, the big point here is that it has been a whole city effort. Our effort to expand testing across the city has really enabled us to kind of grow what we can do in the schools. We've not only had the ability to create our own lab here in New York that can process tens and thousands of tests, but also, we have great partners with other labs. So, we've been able to expand the number of teams that can go to every location and with turnarounds that are within a day and a day and a half of return. Similarly, we've already increased the number of staff in our situation rooms to account for the expansion of our testing, and as the Mayor said, we have already planned out what we're going to do with high school on the testing side and are continuing to grow that so that we're ready. As the Mayor said, we will have the capacity for that. We have identified it. We just have to put in place.

Mayor: Thank you very much.

Moderator: The next is Dana from the New York Times.

Question: Hi, Mr. Mayor. I was wondering if you could sort of opine on first, whether the Governor should run for a fourth term, and whether given your reluctance to join the private sector you've given any thought to running for Governor.

Mayor: Thank you, Dana. I'm not going to opine on the Governor's choices. That's up to him. The people of New York State will look at everything and make their judgements in due time. Again, I have not made any plans yet for my next steps. At some point I'll sort it out, but right now it's just been absolutely all-involving the fight against COVID and the effort to bring back New York City. That's what I'm focused on. At some point, I'll figure out what the future may bring. Go ahead, Dana.

Question: Secondly as you may have seen your former Communications Director, Karen Hinton, had an op-ed today about what she described as "penis politics", and it focused on you and the Governor, and she described you as having a charming, easy going personality that gives way to a hectoring and flexible approach that bordered on sanctimony, and she said that you were particularly condescending to female staffers. I was curious if you wanted to respond.

Mayor: I have not seen the piece, Dana, I'll only talk about the history of this administration. From the beginning, literally from the very beginning, the leadership of this administration has been majority women and continues to be. My number one advisor, confidant, partner in everything, everyone knows, is Chirlane. My longest serving aide and the person I have depended on, worked so closely with now for over a decade or more, Emma Wolfe. And four out of six Deputy Mayors are women, and just throughout this history of this administration, it's been a female led administration in so many ways, and I have tremendous respect for the folks who have been a part of this team. And I listened to their voices and we make decisions, and these are really, really tough issues, but we all work together. We all have real conversations to get to a result, and that's been especially true during this crisis. The work that – and it's been heroic – Emma Wolfe has done, Melanie Hartzog, Laura Anglin. I mean, these have all been heroes of this fight. You know, let's be clear how important it is to find the right talent for the challenges that this city faces, and the talent I've found so often has been women leaders who I really believe in and now for our comeback, you know, the amazing work that our Deputy Mayor Vicki

Been has been doing, and the work that our new Recovery Czar, Lorraine Grillo will be doing, will really frame the future of this city. So, that's what my experience has been.

Moderator: The next is Stacey from FOX-5.

Question: Hi can you –

Mayor: Hey, Stacey, can you hear us? Stacey? One more time. Stacey, are you out there? Okay, we'll have to come back to Stacey.

Moderator: Stacey, we'll have to come back. We'll go to Nolan from The Post.

Mayor: Nolan, I don't hear anything.

Question: Oh, there it is –

Mayor: There we go. Good morning, Nolan.

Question: Good morning, everybody. How are you?

Mayor: Good, how you doing man?

Question: I'm all right. I just would like to send my best wishes to Rich. We, you know, spent a lot of time together over the recent years and haven't had a chance to see him in the last many months because of everything going on, but we will miss him terribly. I just like to start with following up on one of Richard's questions about reopening high schools, you've consistently said that vaccinations are a key to getting the city school system reopened and back to full strength by September, you have a figure for the number of teachers who have been vaccinated yet?

Mayor: We'll get that out. We have – that's an ever-growing figure. That's something we'll be reporting publicly, and I feel very good about that effort. We've been working closely with the unions but a reminder that long before we even had the vaccine available, we had proven the safety of New York City public schools because of the gold standard we've set and that remains true. So, we're going to keep bringing our schools back and keep vaccinating more and more people at the same time. Go ahead.

Question: All right, and, you know, you talked a little bit about how you won't opine on what you think the Governor should do. Do you think the state would be better off under different leadership than it is now?

Mayor: Look, again, I'm not here to get into a political discussion. I've obviously said there needs to be a full investigation of what happened with this nursing home scandal. It's again let's go to the most important factor, thousands of lives were lost. We don't yet have a full accounting of what happened. We need the truth, the families who lost their loved ones deserve the truth, and we have to make sure it never happens again in the State of New York. So, that's what I think is important here, but the fact is, to me it's not the season for politics right now. It's the focus I have is on getting this city to move forward, fostering a recovery. That's what I'm focused

on. And just, Nolan, I've been handed a note, we'll get you more exact figures, but so far, I'm told about 30,000 is the accurate number about, 30,000 educators have been vaccinated, but we'll get you a specific update on that.

Moderator: We'll have time for two more for today. The next is Andrew Siff from WNBC.

Question: Good morning, Mr. Mayor, everyone on the call, and I also would like to send my warm congratulations to Rich Lamb. He's been a mentor over the years and also a heck of a singer at the Inner Circle Show, which audiences were deprived of due to the pandemic, but hopefully post pandemic Rich will bring back one of his beloved characters and hilarious songs, and we can all celebrate there.

Mayor: I like that. Yes, we want – Rich needs to have a special opportunity in the next Inner Circle. He needs a big solo number.

Question: Well, as one of the writers of the show, one idea would be to have him play both you and Governor Cuomo battling it out musical style.

Mayor: You know, Andrew Siff, you missed your calling. I think there's like a screenwriter within there.

Question: So, let's do a comedic segue to the serious topic of vaccination. Unless I missed it, did you not mention the new mega sites opening today at your college and Medgar Evers College today? You may have mentioned it off the top, but I'm wondering how concerned you are that they're at last check, were still hundreds, if not thousands of appointments available at these sites and whether even though they're State and federally run, they could use a boost from the Mayor's office in terms of reminding folks in these communities to sign up for these slots.

Mayor: Yeah, I do not have the latest on the sign up levels. I have to tell you, Andrew, every time every time vaccinations have been available in this city for now several months, they get snapped up. So, I really don't believe there will be a lack of demand, but certainly I encourage folks in southeast Queens go to York College, sign up for appointments, obviously, but go to York College for vaccination and folks in Central Brooklyn, go to Medgar Evers College, I think that's great. We want to make sure that is bringing more vaccine into the city. The key concern I had was that the federal government was giving us more to do those and not, you know, just shifting resources around. But, no, definitely I encourage people to use those sites, every single bit helps. Go ahead, Andrew.

Question: My question has to do with what happens to folks after they've been fully vaccinated. There's been some speculation and discussion about whether people can still test positive weeks after being vaccinated a second time, and other questions about whether the key to reopening involves events where you show some type of proof you've been vaccinated. So, I'm wondering maybe Dr. Varma or Dr. Katz would want to weigh in on this, but do you think folks who have been fully vaccinated can bypass being tested, to go, for example, to a sporting event or a concert or a show?

Mayor: Let's go to Dr. Varma and Dr. Katz and get your views on that.

Senior Advisor Varma: Great. No, thank you very much for this question. I think it's actually really important for us to understand. One of the reasons we haven't changed our policy recommendations right now is we have to remember that the vast majority of the population is not yet vaccinated. So, it's not yet realistic to think that we could relax our requirements whether it goes – relates to testing or to masks until we have a larger number percentage of the population vaccinated, but you're absolutely correct. Once individuals are vaccinated and we have a large enough number of people vaccinated, it will be possible for us to change the procedures that people need to follow and the precautionary measures.

To get to some of the very specific scientific questions you're asking, we are confident that vaccination will reduce transmission and will reduce the likelihood that you get infected. What is the uncertainty right now is how much, and is that true in every single person? So, that's still an area of uncertainty that we need to resolve before we answer that question. The second issue is how effective are vaccines and that is a question that we actually know the answer to right now, and the most powerful data we have, including what's being presented right now in front of the FDA for Johnson and Johnson, is that vaccines prevent hospitalizations and prevent deaths, and they don't just do it a little bit. They do it a lot. So, I do think we're going to get to a world where we are going to change our recommendations for testing and masking. But it's once we get to a higher level of vaccination.

Mayor: Dr. Katz, do you want to add?

President Katz: I'll add more from the, how it affects individuals. So, I think Dr. Varma did very well on the population level. I think when it comes to individuals, people will make good decisions understanding the benefits of vaccination. So, I'm looking forward to this Saturday, my elderly parents will get to see my two older siblings, both of whom were over 65. They haven't been together for over a year because of COVID, but now all four of them who were over 65 have been vaccinated and they can be together, and they will be together, you know, without their masks so that they can really appreciate one another. That is though different than all of us going to Madison Square Garden. So, I think that, you know, as people are vaccinated and can be with other vaccinated people, medicine and public health never provide a 100 percent guarantees of anything, but overwhelmingly these are vaccines that prevent both disease and transmission, and I think people can start making sensible decisions to reconnect with other vaccinated people in the coming weeks. Thank you, sir.

Mayor: Thank you, and Mitch, I'm very happy for you and your family. That's a beautiful story and that's, you know, that just says it all about the power of vaccination to bring people back together and move us forward. Thank you for that. Okay, I think, do we have Stacey now?

Moderator: We should have Stacey back for our last question for today.

Question: Thank you, sorry about that. I, that's just when I stepped in the elevator. I want to also add my congratulations to Rich on a remarkable career. Mr. Mayor, in terms of the middle schools reopening tomorrow and the two-case rule, I know it's something you said would be revisited. A lot of parents say, well, just even if you're open middle schools, they're not even that competent their kids will have that much in-person learning at the schools will continue to close with two unrelated cases. So, will – is that something that will be revisited? What is the status?

Mayor: Yeah, it is being revisited for sure. We have an ever-changing situation. One thing we know Stacey about COVID from the first moment we ever heard of it until now, we constantly learn new things, constantly having changing dynamics. We got to move with the times and with information. So, clearly our schools have been safe, and I think the abundance of caution was a correct approach in the beginning, but now our kids need to be in school. We're seeing the need – our children needed emotionally, academically, for their health, for their mental health, we've seen suicides, which is so painful. Kids need to be back in school and we got to create a reality where we open up schools, keep them open, get them – more and more kids back, make it possible for schools to remain open, not be on open-end shuts so much. So, we're going to figure out the best way to do that, but I think from this moment on, and notwithstanding the fears and concerns we have about the variant, which is real, the goal is to constantly have schools open more and more and more, and then in September 100 percent full strength. Go ahead, Stacey.

Question: To follow up on that. Could you say at all that there's a chance that rule could be dropped soon, and also, could you give high school parents any assurance that their kids will have some kind of in-person learning before the end of this school year?

Mayor: So, on the rule, it's something we're working on right now to figure out the best way to handle that. I'm not going to say something until it's done. Clearly, we're reevaluating that, we want to find a way to handle things that focuses on health and safety first, but keeps kids in school more, and we'll have more to say on that soon. On high school, again, I expect the next few weeks to be able to give you a sense of the way forward. I am very hopeful, given everything we're seeing, that we can get high school back and get it back relatively soon. It's something I absolutely want to do in this school year we're in right now.

Okay, everybody, here's the bottom line. We see some real progress here. We see some progress fighting this disease every single day, tens of thousands more New Yorkers getting vaccinated, but the day's coming soon where it shouldn't just be tens of thousands of New Yorkers being vaccinated, we get the supply we need, it could be more like almost a 100,000 New Yorkers a day getting vaccinated. So, when we get that supply, it will be transcended, but anywhere you slice it, our recovery has already begun. Bringing back middle school tomorrow is another great sign, New York City's coming back, coming back strong. There is so much energy waiting to be unleashed. So, I know we're going to have a strong recovery. It's going to be a recovery for all of us, and tomorrow is going to be another one of those days, I look forward to being out there tomorrow morning greeting the middle school kids coming back, another step on our road back to the New York City, the strong vibrant New York City we all know and love. Thank you, everyone.

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