

THE CITY OF NEW YORK
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NEW YORK, NY 10007

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: February 9, 2021, 10:30 AM
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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO HOLDS MEDIA AVAILABILITY

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, everybody. So, a Recovery for All of Us, what does that mean? That means the recovery from the grassroots up, it means getting every neighborhood represented in the recovery, it means reaching people who need to be protected with the vaccine. Of course, the challenge for us constantly is the lack of vaccine supply, but nonetheless New York City keeps moving forward. So, I'll give you the latest update since the beginning of the vaccination effort. As of now in New York City, we have provided 1,032,158 vaccinations, again 1,032,158 vaccinations. Look, this is a really good sign of what we can do in this city, but we could be doing so much more. We're literally not able to do hundreds of thousands of vaccinations each week right now for lack of supply. So, I'll keep saying it and we need to see the pharmaceutical companies step up in a way they're not right now, there's only two companies and a third coming. We need to see the rest of the pharmaceutical industry step up and help speed up this vaccination production. We need to see the freedom to vaccinate, the ability to use the second doses now. We can be reaching so many more people right this moment. But we've surpassed a million vaccinations from day one, and if we get that supply, we're going to do a lot more, a lot quicker.

Now, when we talk about a Recovery for All of Us, what's more important than where people live, our neighborhoods and the places that people call home, the fact that people need a place to live that they can afford. And boy has this crisis put a point on that – folks fearing for the last year that they might lose their home. The threat of eviction looming all the time. This has been a crisis within the crisis. The pain that folks have felt losing their jobs, losing their incomes, and then worrying they're going to lose their homes. We've been working intensely to keep people in their homes, but we have to do the bigger work of creating more affordable housing in New York City. This is part of our recovery. This is part of our comeback. Now here's the good news in 2020, even with all the challenges of coronavirus, even with all the roadblocks, the City of New York reached its second highest one-year total for the creation of affordable housing ever, second highest ever in New York City history. In 2020, this city created an extraordinary number of housing units. Over 30,000 housing units, 30,000 affordable apartments for people in need. That's something amazing. And we intend to keep that progress going. Our goal and the plan that we announced way back in 2014, and then we added two in 2017, is to create 300,000 affordable homes by the year 2026. That plan remains on track. There's nothing else like it happening anywhere else in the country. New York City is leading the way, and this is part of how we keep moving, keep rebuilding, keep recovering. Here to tell you about this extraordinary progress – I really want to express my thanks to everyone who's been a part of this, the whole team folks at HPD, HDC, EDC, all the wonderful City agencies who make this work happen all the time, and Deputy Mayor Vicki Been and her team, everyone who has been working so hard to create this extraordinary level of affordable housing. Here to tell you about it, a strong leader who has been

keeping it going no matter what's thrown at her, our Commissioner for the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, Louise Carroll.

Commissioner Louise Carroll, Department of Housing Preservation and Development:

Thank you, Mayor de Blasio. So, 2020 was quite a year. At the start of the year, HPD was ready to once again respond to the tremendous need for affordable housing by making significant progress towards your administration's goal to achieve 300,000 affordable homes by 2026. And since 2014, we've been shattering production records to serve more of the city's most vulnerable residents, our seniors, the homeless, and New Yorkers barely getting by. Then March hit, and New Yorkers were asked to stay at home to keep safe. And we knew that our work to provide safe, quality, affordable housing for New Yorkers to learn, to live, and work was more urgent than ever.

Despite the pandemic and its challenges under Your Home NYC – this administration's comprehensive approach to helping New Yorkers get, afford, and keep housing – HPD and HDC found a way to continue production to end 2020 with the second highest total affordable housing production for a calendar year. It's not just the amount of housing, but also the type of housing as we continue to sharpen our focus to help the most vulnerable New Yorkers and on achieving greater racial equity and inclusion. We financed nearly 30,000 affordable homes in 2020, and as promised in last year's State of the City, more than 65 percent of the newly constructed homes will serve families, earning less – families of three, by the way – earning less than \$52,000. These developments will provide security to our hardest hit families and communities and create jobs that will aid in our city's recovery.

To date, we financed almost 178,000 affordable homes, enough to serve 445,000 New Yorkers. And through our new and improved Housing Connect Lottery System, we're continuing to work on all fronts to move New Yorkers as quickly as possible into safe, permanent, affordable housing that they can live in. I'm proud to work for an administration that knows the importance of affordable housing and has not wavered in that commitment. Working with you, Mayor, we will make the city stronger, more affordable, and more equitable for all New Yorkers in 2021. Thank you.

Mayor: Thank you very much, Commissioner. And thank you. You've got a good fighting spirit. Not let the coronavirus stand in your way. And in 2021, you're going to see amazing things from our housing team. So, even with the roadblocks, they are going to keep pushing by them in 2021. The goal in 2021 to create at least 25,000 more affordable homes, to create tens of thousands of construction jobs to help move this city forward through the creation of affordable housing. Now, we can tell you about the goals we can tell you about the records that have been sent. We could tell you about the statistics but there's so much more, there's the human reality. There's what it means when a family gets affordable housing, a family like so many working New Yorkers that struggled for years and years to make ends meet. We all know so many New Yorkers pay a really disproportionate amount of their income for rent. We know how much people suffer because of that. That's why when we create affordable housing, it changes lives. It changes a whole family's life for years, for decades ahead. And I want you to hear a wonderful example of this, a real New York City story. Harona Fall is someone who epitomizes the New York City dream, the American dream, came here to create a better life, and now has affordable

housing to make his life and his family's life so much better. I want you to hear his story. Harona, what a joy to have you here with us, and please tell everyone about your experience.

[...]

Thank you so much. Harona, I love hearing that story and I'm so happy for you and your family that you now have affordable housing you can depend on, and it's going to mean a much better future for you and your family. And listen, through generations and generations, we have turned to New York City cab drivers for wisdom, and Harona has given us some wisdom here. This is why it makes such an important difference in people's lives. This is why we invest in affordable housing and we're not stopping just because of COVID. We're going to keep investing. This year, 2021, we're going to create tens of thousands more apartments and get a lot of people jobs in the process of building those apartments. This is really good news for New York City.

Okay, now, another thing we got to talk about – when we talk about Recovery For All of Us, it means addressing inequities, addressing disparities, addressing things that were not discussed out in the open the way they should have been in the past and environmental injustice, environmental injustice unfortunately, there's a long history of that in New York City. And we have to identify the injustices and overcome them. One of the things I talked about in the State of the City is that we've got to now, for the first time, have an environmental justice for all report card. We've got to look at exactly what is going on and what we need to do to address it. So, we're going to look at the fact that many of the choices of the past burdened communities of color unfairly, and we have to do very different things in the future. By taking stock of what has been, it will allow us to lay the groundwork for a city-wide environmental justice plan. This is the kind of change we want to make in our city because when everyone knows they're being treated fairly, that's what a sustainable city looks like. Not just sustainable in the environmental sense, sustainable in the human sense, a place that people want to be a place that people feel belonging. That's what we need to create.

So, we're starting by going to the grassroots. There's going to be a 90-day public comment period. We want to hear from the public on questions of environmental justice. And the first act in this outreach effort will be a virtual town hall starting. This first one will be on February 25th, six o'clock. We want people to be a part of it, offer your analysis, offer your observations, offer your suggestions. We need it all. And anyone who wants to follow up can go to nyc.gov/EJstudy. Look, we talked about in the State of the City, the biggest challenge we face, the challenge that we're going to be talking about for years and years to come long after we stop having to focus on the coronavirus, we're going to be talking about climate change. We're going to be talking about global warming, the threat posed to all of us. As we address that threat, New York City has to lead the way in this country. We have to do it from a place of justice. And this new approach will help us ensure that that's exactly what happened.

Okay, let me go over the indicators for the day. Number one, daily number of people admitted to New York City hospitals for suspected COVID-19, today's report, 251 patients, with a confirmed positivity level of 72.31 percent. Hospitalization rate 5.18 per 100,000. Number two, new reported cases on a seven-day average, today 3,587 cases. Number three, percentage of people testing positive citywide for COVID-19, today's report on a seven-day rolling average, 8.09 percent. A few words now in Spanish, and I'm going back to the topic of affordable housing –

[Mayor de Blasio speaks in Spanish]

Okay. Before we turn to our colleagues and the media just want to give a media update that today there's going to be an important hearing at the City council on the topic of press credentials. There's been a lot of concern about how to handle the credentialing of members of the media going forward. It's a very important process, it has to be done the right way. I believe it is the right time to move that function from the NYPD to the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment. I think the very orientation of that office, MOME as we call it, is a place that could best handle journalists, make sure they get the support they need, make sure the process goes smoothly and quickly because it's important as new journalists come on the scene that they get those credentials quickly and we do it the right way. So, given that the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment has experienced, of course, dealing with the media and dealing with permitting on many levels, it's the right home and we'll be talking to the City Council about that and working together to make a change going forward on how we credential the media. Okay, with that, let's turn to our colleagues in the media and please let me know the name and outlet of each journalist.

Moderator: Hi all, we'll now begin our Q and A with us today's HPD Commissioner Louise Carroll, Deputy Mayor Vicki Been, Chief Climate Advisor Dan Zarrilli, Adriana Espinoza, Climate Justice Advisor, Senior Health Advisor Dr. Jay Varma, Health Commissioner Dr. Dave Chokshi. With that, we'll go to Juliet from 1010 WINS.

Question: Hey, good morning, Mr. Mayor, how are you?

Mayor: Good, Juliet. How you been?

Question: Okay. Thank you. So, my first question involves testing. You were talking about the city's pandemic lab increasing testing capacity. Is the city developing rapid testing at all? Do you think that would help in opening venues and business?

Mayor: Yeah, look, I'll turn to Dr. Varma and Dr. Chokshi, we're working on all fronts, Juliet. There's definitely a place for rapid testing but we have to make sure we have quality tests and that they're sufficiently available, but we want to bring this city back strong and rapid testing is definitely part of how we do that. So, to give you some detail, Dr. Varma, then Dr. Chokshi.

Senior Advisor Jay Varma: Great. Thank you very much for the question. You know, as we've all discussed from the beginning of this epidemic testing is absolutely one of the most important pillars, and we, you know, we strongly advise people to continue to get tested regularly. To get to your question, we are absolutely committed to making testing available so that it is frequent, fast, and affordable to everybody. We have right now already offering rapid testing at almost all of our outpatient testing sites that we have, they include both the sort of antigen tests that people know about as well as PCR tests. In addition to that, there is also a request for applications that came through Commissioner - Deputy Mayor Been is on the call, can talk a little bit about this if necessary. We're also looking to develop even more tests and get them more rapidly available to people around the city. So, I think you're going to continue to see already, you know, we have this expansion, you can see it even expand even further as time goes on because the combination of testing, vaccinations, and all the measures are doing is really the path to reopening.

Mayor: Thank you, Dr. Chokshi.

Commissioner Dave Chokshi, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene: Yes, thank you. Just to elaborate a bit on what Dr. Varma has said, I want to make it clear that rapid testing already exists in New York City at one of the largest scales across the entire country. That's both rapid PCR testing, which we offer at many of the tests and trace sites already and at Health Department clinics, as well as rapid antigen testing. And we do expect in the coming weeks and months as that technology continues to mature and improve, that there will be more and more rapid testing options that are available which will help with the reopening that we hope to get to particularly as vaccination ramps up as well.

Mayor: Thank you. Go ahead, Julia.

Question: Okay, and my second question involves the Steinway Tower. It's under construction on West 57th and 58th Streets. There have been at least four incidents since late October where debris has been falling from the building onto the street and the sidewalk just missing pedestrians, but damaging cars and restaurant outdoor dining locations, and in December a window fell from the 53rd floor. The street has been closed since December 24th for ongoing inspection there. And recently shards of ice have been falling from some of the high-rise buildings in the area. So, do you think these high rises are a danger to the public and the businesses around them?

Mayor: You know, I appreciate the question Juliet, and that's obviously an area of real concern this particular site. We have obviously high-rise buildings all over New York City where we don't have those problems, but this particular site, if we've had that consistent a set of problems, we've got to look at it very carefully and obviously emphasize health and safety first. I will get an update on the specific actions being taken. I just want to see if by chance Deputy Mayor Been or Commissioner Carroll have anything they'd like to say about this.

Commissioner Carroll: Actually Mr. Mayor, we'll have to get back to the press on that, unless Deputy Mayor Been –

Mayor: And we can also get the - obviously, Department of Buildings needs to be a part of that discussion. So, Juliet, we'll get you an answer back on the specific site, but I'm concerned whenever I see a pattern of health and safety problems, if we're having it at that site, we're obviously going to have to do something very specific to address it. We'll get you an update later today.

Moderator: As a programming note, we're also joined by Eric Enderlin president of the New York City Housing Development Corporation. Next, we'll go to Emma from the New York Times.

Question: Hi, good morning, Mayor. First, I have a question from my colleague. So, in a tweet this weekend you said that you were going to hire an independent auditor to look into all the non-profit homeless shelter operators to ensure they're following the rules following our investigation in the Times. I wanted to know what the probe will entail, when it will start, and whether it will look at your own administration's handling of problematic shelter providers.

Mayor: The focus here, thank you for the question, Emma, and thank you for the investigation you did because it has given us further information that's really important for us to follow up on. And obviously very importantly, the individual who was the highlight of the investigation that has been fired in that is a very important step. We have a certain number of shelter providers where we're going to be looking at their practices to make sure that if there's any outstanding issues that they're getting a full independent review. We'll have the details on that in the coming days, but what's really important in this case is when, when any kind of allocation is brought forward, it cannot just be sent back to the organization involved. It requires an independent investigation, whether that's our own Department Investigation or an outside entity. So, we will get to the update on the next steps we're taking very soon, but again, I'm appreciative that these facts were brought forward so we could act, go ahead.

Question: Thanks, and last night I was watching mayoral forum about the candidates Albany agendas and Shaun Donovan brought up the need for property tax reform, and it reminded me that you made a big announcement on that about a year ago. You didn't mention it in your State of the City this year, is it something that you're no longer planning to tackle in your last year in office? And is it something you hope that I guess the next mayor will?

Mayor: It's a really important question and there's a lot of things that I'm very unhappy about that were derailed by COVID, and the effort at property tax reform, we had put out an initial report from a really wonderful panel that had gotten together to come up with a brand-new approach to focus on equity, to address longstanding problems. The initial framework I thought was very, very promising, and more work was going to be done with the hope of action this year in Albany, a lot of that obviously got derailed by the focus on the coronavirus. I still want to see any progress we can get done on property tax reform, because a lot of work has been done already, more than it has been done in decades, honestly, and the direction that our task force was taking I think has exactly what's needed. So, we'll certainly be looking for anything else that can get done this year and everything we've done, you know, we want to make part of the public discussion of what happens going forward because we definitely need property tax reform in this city. Go ahead.

Moderator: Next, we'll go to Andrew from WNBC.

Question: Hey, good morning, Mr. Mayor, and everyone on the call. The question has to do with vaccination. Yesterday Governor Cuomo said, in order to accommodate the New Yorkers with comorbidities starting next Monday he's going to reallocate vaccines which are currently at hospitals, including at some of the New York City Health + Hospitals, because the Governor believes that the - basically we've maxed out on the people in 1-A who are going to accept the vaccine. So, do you accept that premise? And can you quantify at all how many doses are at city hospitals that could then go into that broader group?

Mayor: I'm going to – look, let me frame it and then turn to Dr. Chokshi. I think there is truth in the fact that the 1-A category has been, you know, the longest category that a lot of people were offered the opportunity to be vaccinated who are health care workers, and many of them have chosen not to do it yet. We still want them vaccinated. They have not been vaccinated yet. And

I'm obviously concerned also about the crucial role hospitals play in vaccinating community members, particularly our Health + Hospitals hospitals, so there's a balance has to be struck. I want as many doses as possible out to the community sites, but I also know with Health + Hospitals and certainly with some of the independent hospitals serving communities hard hit by COVID, that their work also is deep into the community. So, you know, this is a tough balance to strike, but it's something I am concerned about. Dr. Chokshi?

Commissioner Chokshi: Thank you, Mr. Mayor, and I really agree with you. You know, I want to underline the point that for hospitals, but particularly for New York City Health + Hospitals which serves low-income, working class New Yorkers across the five boroughs, including in communities of color. When we talk about the vaccination that's happening at H + H, it's not just for hospital and health care workers, although that's a very important part of what they have done to date. It's also their own patients including people who are uninsured and who come to Health + Hospitals because they have so much trust in it as a health care provider. So, although I do think that we will see a shift in terms of the specific types of people who are getting vaccinated as eligibility continues to expand, that still does mean that for places like Health + Hospitals, but also for other community-based clinics other sites that are already trusted providers in communities that they will remain very important points of access for vaccination going forward.

Mayor: Thank you. Go ahead, Andrew.

Question: The second question has to do with, how did we go from running out of supply almost every week to not warning New Yorkers that we're about to run out? I understand that the amount increased by 16 or 17 or 20 percent, but so did the people who are eligible including food service workers, Taxi and Limousine, and you've got Citi Field tomorrow. So, can you explain how it is we went from running out of vaccine to expanding based on what's really a modest increase in supply?

Mayor: Yeah, we've got to keep reaching people at the community level. We've got to address the disparities we talked about over a week ago. The sites we're putting up now are going to help us do that. The site in the Bronx, working with the State, we took a dedicated supply of vaccine and focused it on residents of the Bronx. I was up there at Yankee Stadium, I saw an incredibly diverse group of people getting vaccinated, exactly what we hope to see. The site that we're going to have starting tomorrow in Queens, Citi Field, is focused on Queens residents. No one bore the brunt more than Queens residents, Elmhurst and other neighborhoods. And the focus on food service workers and TLC licensed drivers. We do need to making moves that will encourage equity and address disparity, but it's all against the backdrop of fundamental lack of supply, and Andrew look, New Yorkers are smart and New Yorkers can count, we're being starved of supply. We could be doing three times as many vaccinations per week right now, but with the limits we have, we still have to do the best possible to reach people at the grassroots and address disparity and that's what we're doing.

Moderator: Next is Katie from the Wall Street Journal.

Question: Hey, good morning, Mayor de Blasio. Thanks for calling me because I actually wanted to follow up with what you just said. So, you announced the opening of the Citi Field vaccination site yesterday, it's opening tomorrow. It's my understanding though that there's only 800 doses and it runs through I believe Sunday. I'm curious, given what you just said about the borough bearing the brunt of the coronavirus in the spring, it's the second most populous of New York City. When do you expect to get more vaccine doses? Do you expect more vaccine doses? And if not, how is this fair considering you have many, many more doses of the vaccine at Yankee Stadium?

Mayor: That specific plan for Yankee Stadium was one developed with the State. I want to see more vaccine shifted of course to the Citi Field site, and that will happen in the days ahead. Look, that site to me has to become a 24/7 site. It's not going to be that yet. It's only going to be certain days, but the goal over the next few weeks is to get to 24/7. We're clearly going to see more vaccine coming in the next few weeks for a variety of reasons, the actions that the Biden administration has taken already, the fact that Johnson and Johnson is coming and maybe here even this month, certainly next month. We're going to keep expanding, but the goal is to target the efforts where there's particular need and there's a particular need in Queens and we'll keep moving vaccine in that direction as we get it. Go ahead.

Question: Just to follow up, you know, you said that the Bronx location, there's more vaccines there, I guess it's a partnership with the State. So, does this speak negatively of the efficacy of New York City's efforts and vaccinations, if a State-run joint venture gets – it sounds like it's quadruple the amount of vaccines in the Bronx compared to Queens, which I think is a borough that really also needs the vaccines. I mean, when will they be getting these vaccines? Will it shut down on Sunday, what is the plan?

Mayor: Again, couldn't be clearer about the fact that right now, this month, we'll be at a rate of half a million vaccines per week, that's the capacity, but the amount of vaccine we're getting is so far below that and we just have to make choices within it. The State still controls the vaccine distribution. It's, you know, we're dealing as we have throughout this crisis with federal decisions, federal red tape, State decision, State red tape. We're a city of 8.5 million people, we would be the 12th largest state in the country by population if we were our own state. It would sure be better if we had a consistent and reliable supply of vaccine, but I do have hope Katie, that we're going to see a lot more vaccine in the coming weeks, and that's going to allow us to do what we want to do, which is to go right to the grassroots, to address the disparities, to do vaccinations on a much higher level. But again, we can't do everything we want to do right now, unless we get help from the federal government, and the state government. If right this minute, the federal government and state government would say “you have the freedom to use second doses, as you see fit,” I could be moving a lot more vaccine to the Citi Field site and other sites to reach deep into the grassroots and to the communities that need it most.

Moderator: Next is Kayla from FOX 5.

Question: Hi, Mayor de Blasio. Can you hear me?

Mayor: Yes, but I want to make sure – we keep changing your name. It is Kayla, right?

Question: It's Kayla, yes, yes.

Mayor: Go ahead, how are you doing, Kayla?

Question: I'm well, thank you. My first question is about indoor fitness classes. Gyms in the city are operating at 33 percent capacity safely based on testing. So, why can't similar rules apply to indoor workout classes?

Mayor: Well, this is another example, Kayla, of a decision in the State of New York makes. We want everything decided by the data and the science. As the doctors have said, there's a particular sensitivity around those sites, and I'll let Dr. Chokshi speak to that. But look, in the end, what – the balance we always want to strike, Kayla – I want to see life continue to improve for the people of the city. I want to see more and more things open – reopen. I want to see businesses survive and their employees have jobs, but job one is the health and safety of all New Yorkers and those sites do come with a special sensitivity. Dr. Chokshi.

Commissioner Chokshi: Thank you, sir, and that's exactly right. You know, in our focus on health and safety and particularly on the highest risk settings, the reason that we do have a particular concern for indoor fitness classes relates to the fact that there are settings in which it is difficult to remain wearing one's mask or face covering, and also, it's one where it's more likely for the mask or face covering to become wet or moist, which also makes them less effective. So, all things considered, you know, this is something that we will continue to evaluate over time. But, because of those risk considerations, it is an area where we intend to tread cautiously, and carefully.

Mayor: Thank you. Go ahead, Kayla.

Question: All right. My second question is, you'll likely also say, is directed to the state, but it's about the Governor's announcement a couple of weeks back about wedding receptions being able to return on March 15th at a 50 percent capacity, or maximum 150 people. So, so far he said that local health departments, meaning New York City in this case, will have to approve the venue ahead of time, and guests will have to provide proof of a negative COVID test result, but he hasn't really given any more specifics. I'm just wondering if your office, or you have spoken to the Governor about these upcoming new guidelines and if so, can you give us a sense of how it'll work?

Mayor: Yeah. We're working on that now. I'll turn to Dr. Chokshi again, but Kayla, look. again, it's – we know a lot of people have been waiting to get married and, you know, we want people to be able to enjoy this amazing moment in their lives, and we know there's a lot of jobs at banquet halls. I mean, there's a lot of things we want to see move forward, but we also know that these kinds of settings have been a real problem in the past. So, we're focused on health and safety, first. We're concerned about the variants out there. There's still a lot of open questions. So, Health Department will be front and center in determining how to do this the right way and to make sure that, you know, we really are careful as we apply a new approach in the middle of the challenges we're facing. Dr. Chokshi.

Commissioner Chokshi: Thank you, sir, and yes, we are actively working with our counterparts at the New York State Department of Health about the formal guidance related to weddings. What we know thus far is as was mentioned it would go into effect on March 15th. It would involve testing for all wedding attendees, and the actual event would have to be 50 percent capacity, up to 150 people. I would just underline one of the things that the Mayor said, which is we have to really be vigilant and watch what's happening with cases, and particularly with the new variants of between now and the middle of March. This is something that we have to take not just on a week-by-week basis, but on a day-by-day basis. We have seen during the pandemic that we have to remain disciplined and vigilant in this way because things can change relatively quickly. So, while we all do want to celebrate these happy events, of course we all, we at the same time do not want that celebration to lead to more cases and more spread.

Mayor: Go ahead.

Moderator: Next is Nolan from the Post.

Question: Hi everybody. How are you?

Mayor: Good, Nolan. How've you been?

Question: I'm alright. On Friday, you told Marcia Kramer that, you know, you wanted to talk about the facts and encourage people to understand facts, or, to create fear for the sake of fear, I guess, accusing the press of exacerbating fears of riding the subway. There've been four slashings in the last five days, and stats from the New York City Police Department show that murders were up year over year, that rapes were up year over year, and that assaults and robberies were also flat or up considering subway ridership has plunged by 70 plus percent. So, why should people feel confident getting on the subways, and what are you doing to make them safe with kids about the return to middle school?

Mayor: Look, there's no question, if you look at the efforts made over the last seven years, and you look at the subways now, compared to what they were like not that long ago in this city, they are much, much safer. We have work to do always, and that's why NYPD has added additional personnel to the subways, for sure. But we've got to be clear about the fact that the subways over years and years and years have gotten safer. They are a place that people can depend on as more and more people come back. I'm very, very confident that our subways are going to work for everyone in every sense, including safety, and we'll keep making adjustments, we'll keep adding personnel as needed, which is what the NYPD does. That's what precision policing is all about. Go ahead. Can you hear me, Nolan?

Question: I guess I was still a little – I'm sorry, I heard you, I'm just a little confused by your answer. So, your point is because the subways are safer now than they were in the early 1990s, when people put their wallets in their front pocket instead of their back pocket, that we should expect the doubling in murders year over year, or—

Mayor: No, of course not. Nolan, obviously not. Look, again, I can tell you about six years where we had steady decrease in crime, where the city got safer and safer. In fact, we literally had a point not long ago, where there was one crime, one index crime per million subway riders, per day. So, there's no question. It's not about a comparison to even the 90s, it's a comparison to even more recent years. The subways have gotten safer and safer. We had an incredible and total disruption in 2020, our entire lives are turned upside down, a global pandemic, a perfect storm, and we are in the process of overcoming that, and there's no question we're going to come back strong in 2021, but I am convinced that we can make sure the subways are safe and that more and more people are going to come back to the subways, and if we need to shift NYPD personnel more to the subways, we absolutely will.

Moderator: Next is Marcia from WCBS.

Question: Good morning, Mr. Mayor, how are you doing today?

Mayor: Good, Marcia. How are you?

Question: Good. My question has to do with teachers and middle school. Teachers say that the school is not ready to reopen middle schools. They claim that COVID-19 test results have been delayed as much as eight days, some with positive results, and testing and tracing have not improved. Many teachers have not been able to get access to the vaccines. The teachers want to know what the City is going to do to fix these issues and to prioritize their safety?

Mayor: Well, I care a lot about our teachers and our, all our educators, all our school staff. My kids went to New York City public schools. I have the really personal deep feeling for the people who do this work and we're going to keep them safe and I can prove it because we have been keeping them safe from the beginning of school, coming back in-person, back in September. The facts keep speaking for themselves. The – we've been able to keep the positivity level in the schools down very, very low amongst the safest places in New York City. I've talked to plenty of teachers too, who are enthusiastic about being in the classroom right now and teachers who want to get back to the classroom. So, I'm sure you've talked to some teachers. I got plenty of examples of teachers who see how safe things are and want to be there. But, what we're going to always do is continue to build out all of our efforts. There'll be a priority vaccination effort during the school vacation week for our educators and staff test and trace has been very effective in the schools. Sometimes there's a late test result. That's absolutely true. That's not acceptable to me. I want it to be on time every time, but overwhelmingly test results have come in in a very prompt manner, Test and Trace has been effective. Situation room has been effective. We've kept the schools safe and everyone in them, and we will continue to. Go ahead. Marcia.

Question: My second question is sort of a follow-up to what Nolan was asking. You know, much of the transit crime is being done by mentally disturbed people who are not being treated for their illnesses. So, I'm wondering what the city is going to do to help the growing number of mentally ill and homeless New Yorkers, particularly those that are still taking shelter on the subways?

Mayor: Well, again, we want to get people in. That's why we have the Journey Home plan, and what we've seen is that's the right approach, very, very intensive outreach, even if our outreach workers – and they're incredible people, they're outreach workers who go out and engage folks who are street homeless, folks who unfortunately, you know, something went wrong in their life, they ended up on the street, mental health problem or a substance misuse problem, or both. These outreach workers go out and they really do the Lord's work. They work to get people to come in, go into a Safe Haven, get the support they need, ultimately get to affordable housing permanently. That approach works, and we want to apply it even more deeply going forward. So, that's what we're going to focus on and continuing to make sure that folks who have mental health challenges get connected to services. That's the key: reaching people as early as possible so they never end up homeless is what we want to do first and foremost. That's the whole concept of making mental health services available more broadly, and the incredible outreach efforts through Journey Home to get people off the streets once and for all. That's what we're going to focus on.

Moderator: For our last question, we'll go to Kristin from the Staten Island Advance.

Question: Good morning, Mr. Mayor, how are you?

Mayor: Good Kristin. How you doing?

Question: I'm good, I'm good. Just a comment before my question, I will add that my daughter got tested at school yesterday and I had her results in my email inbox this morning. So, very impressed.

Mayor: Alright, that's – Kristin, we like hearing when the system is working. So, thank you for that update. I appreciate that a lot.

Question: Yeah, you're welcome. So, you know, yesterday, the Governor said he is going to leave the decision to local governments about when to start scheduling appointments for people with comorbidities, as well as what validation those people might need to show. Have you decided when appointments can begin and what validation those residents will need, or are you going to go with his recommendations of February 14 and a doctor's note or other medical credentials?

Mayor: Yeah, I'll turn to Dr. Chokshi for details, but look, I'm someone who believes it's very important to reach everyone in need. There are so many people who have those pre-existing conditions who are just scared to death right now, and again, even a first vaccination is going to mean so much to them. I keep coming back to the point, we need the freedom to vaccinate. That means the federal government, state government giving us the ability to use second doses as first doses. So, we can reach a lot more people and we clearly need a hell of a lot more supply because right now so many people want and need the vaccination and we could be doing that for them, if we would just get the supply we need. So, that's just a bigger frame, but in terms of the approach we're going to take, the verification of people's situation, which has to be done the right way. I'm a big believer in making sure verification is effective out of fairness to everyone. Dr. Chokshi, you want to speak to that?

Commissioner Chokshi: Yes, sir. Thank you, and I'm also heartened that so many people with underlying health conditions will get this additional layer of protection as well. Appointments for them will start on February 15th. So, that's next Monday, and with respect to the verification, there are a few different means by which that eligibility verification will happen. Number one is if they have a piece of medical documentation that lays out exactly what that underlying health condition is, number two could be a letter or a note from one's physician, and number three is an attestation specifically designating that that person has one of the underlying health conditions that makes them eligible. So, we both want to make sure that people are indeed eligible when they do get the vaccination. But we also want to give them some options with respect to demonstrating that eligibility.

Mayor: Thank you. Go ahead, Kristin.

Question: Thank you, and you know, I hate to play the “Forgotten Borough” card, but Yankee stadium is open, Citi Field is opening this week. What about Empire Outlets?

Mayor: Yes, we're going to be announcing the schedule there. It's the same underlying problem. We would have been up and running already if we had supply and it's really distressing. But I want to get Empire Outlets going. I want to get it to 24/7 basis. I want to get an ample supply – people of Staten Island need it, and we'll have an announcement on that very soon.

Everyone, look, as we conclude today, you're hearing the building blocks of how we recover. We talked about creating more affordable housing, making sure people could continue to live in the city with the housing they deserve – quality, affordable housing. Creating jobs in the process of building that affordable housing in 2021. We talked about how to make this a city that's going to be clean and safe environmentally, as well as all the other ways that we have to make this city work for everyone. We talked about how to make this a city where people can feel there's fairness and justice. This is the vision of recovery for all of us. This'll be the work in 2021, and you're going to see before your eyes, this city coming back strong and people not only staying here, people coming here from other places as they have for generations, because there's no place like New York City. We're going to prove it again in 2021. Thank you, everybody.

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