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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. As we told you at the top of the show, concerns are growing about public safety across the five boroughs, especially after the weekend shooting in Times Square. Mayor de Blasio joins me now from the Blue Room inside City Hall to talk about that and much more. Welcome, Mr. Mayor. Good to see you.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good to see you as well, Errol. How are you doing tonight?

Louis: Just fine, thanks. I'm wondering if you have for us any kind of an update on the shooting in Times Square? A suspect picture has been put out there. Has there been an arrest, any further progress in the case?

Mayor: NYPD has a high level of confidence that there's going to be an arrest. And that's all I'll say at this moment. But clearly, we know who did it, and it's just a matter of time at this point.

Louis: You said earlier today, I was surprised in your press conference that the shooting of innocent bystanders, the mayhem that we saw in Times Square is not necessarily going to hurt tourism. I'm wondering if you've had a chance to see some of the, I guess the fallout, so to speak? I mean, I noticed CNN has a story on it. It's up on their website. It's news that spreads worldwide.

Mayor: Errol. It's a horrible situation. But it's an aberrant situation. It does not come close to defining who we are in New York City. All the reasons people want to be here, all the things that draw people to this city. In the end we're still the safest big city in America by so many measures. And people want to be here. And we see, as I said earlier today, tourism coming back even faster than we even could have imagined. We've had ups and downs in the past, but people still want to be here. And we're going to keep fighting to make it the safest place. But I just don't accept that, you know, one bad thing happens and then all sorts of people don't want to come to New York City. That's never been the history. The history is people believe in this place. They care about it. They want to be a part of it. And they haven't been able to for the last year for so many people. I think folks are going to come flocking back to New York City.

Louis: You remember long ago the tragic killing of Brian Watkins, who was part of a family that was here and they were tourists. And it was a mugging that went bad and he ended up dying. And it came to symbolize kind of an out-of-control situation. It's not like the one incident means that the city isn't safe, but it does I guess, speak to a level of concern that people have. That things are going in the wrong direction, especially in that part of town?

Mayor: I remember that situation from many years ago in a time when unfortunately, the city wasn't safe. But the difference is now it is. We're dealing with a challenge because of COVID. There's no question. But you can't miss what's happened for years and years as this city got safer and safer, became the safest big city in America. The NYPD has done an outstanding job. There's no question about what the larger reality has been, and we're going to return to it. Because now the economy's coming back, life is coming back to normal. That's been missing link. We didn't have jobs. We didn't have schools. We didn't have houses of worship. All of that is now coming back into place. So, no I don't accept that one incident is going to define this city to people. I think people have deep, deep connections to New York City, deep desire to be here. We're going to show them it's a great place. And the more we reopen, the safer we're going to be. That's just a given to me.

Louis: As far as the response, there's been talk, I believe at least one of the candidates for mayor has talked about the idea of reinstituting some version of the NYPD plain clothes anti-crime units. Is that part of your thinking? What is the response?

Mayor: The response to this situation is to do what the NYPD has done and done very effectively for years. Precision policing, put officers where they're needed most, by the way, we've gotten reinforcements just in the last week. We had graduation ceremonies on Thursday and Friday – 850 new officers on the street right now. We've had tremendous success in the last week. You saw the takedown, a major anti-gang operation in Brooklyn, including getting and bringing to justice the person who killed Davell Gardner Jr last year. And this is the first of other takedowns to happen in the months ahead. A lot of the things that have always worked are going to work again. And the relationship between police and community is coming back. It will take time. Last year was incredibly tough, just painful year and a year that will live in history as like no other year. But what we do see all over the city is police and community reconnecting more deeply. And that's going to make the difference. I was at Wagner Houses with Commissioner Shea and neighborhood activists, Cure Violence movement members in that East Harlem community on Friday, celebrating a new basketball court, an investment in the community. People want to get it right together and that's going to be the real change in this city is that we're going to be able to come together and do what we did so well for years and years. I think history just shows that.

Louis: Okay. The president of New York City Transit Sarah Feinberg has been asking for more cops in the subway system. She made a statement today that I want to play for you and get your response. Let's listen to this.

Interim President Sarah Feinberg, New York City Transit Authority: You know, the Mayor has said he doesn't think additional policing is necessary. And the vast majority of our customers, and certainly our leadership and certainly our customers who we hear from are saying they absolutely want a more significant police presence, a uniformed presence, and mental health resources.

Louis: So, Mr. Mayor, what do you say to Ms. Feinberg's request?

Mayor: I think this has become laughable, Errol. I mean she's playing out a political strategy, dictated by the Governor for his own political needs in this moment of crisis. Let's get back to the people in New York City. I was on the subway on Friday in the Bronx, talking to Bronxites, riding the subway, talking about how they do have confidence in the subway. I'm out there with regular people hearing all the time. We're going about our lives. We're bringing back New York City. Now, do people want to see cops in the subway? Of course, which is why we added 600 more cops. We added them. We left them there the whole time. We never changed it. The MTA rhetoric suggested we changed something when we never did change something. The MTA was supposed to get us more cops. They didn't do that. I mean, it's just become a political football. It's not the truth. So, the truth is we added hundreds more cops on top of the 2,500 we already had and additional mental health resources. We've been talking, you and I for the whole last year about all the outreach efforts to help the homeless in the subway, get them to shelter, that have succeeded. We talked about just in the executive budget just weeks ago, the new mental health teams are going out. The crisis teams will be going out on the streets, in the subway. All of these things are actually happening. But what leaders need to do is say, we're doing things to address this issue and the city's coming back, which everyone can see before their eyes. And more and more people are taking the subways, which is a fact. And this is going to add up to something good. Instead, the MTA leadership spends all day denigrating their own system, which makes no sense to me.

Louis: Okay. Well, let me ask you this. At the same time that you're saying things are improving and the city is safe, the Wall Street Journal's reporting that City employees, the 80,000 people that you ordered back to work, are being offered commuting buddy systems, the way you sort of pair up for those who want to travel by train together. I didn't understand – if everything is fine, why should people be buddying up?

Mayor: That question is a very fair question because people weren't given the truth about what that was. And I think it should have been made clear from the beginning. That was in response to a small number of employees, but I think an earnest group of employees, who were concerned because they happened to be Asian-American about some of the bias incidents. And it was an effort to honestly say to them, if it would be more comfortable for you, we'll pair you up with someone because of what's happened over these last weeks. And I respect anyone who's feeling that concern. I think thankfully, a lot of great effort by the NYPD, by everyday New Yorkers, by Asian-American organizations is helping to fight back that awful hatred we've seen and those attacks we've seen. And we're going to bring to justice, everyone who commits those attacks. But that was meant to be a very specific offer to folks who wanted a little more reassurance. Look, again, people are taking the subways. Let's just talk to real New Yorkers. They're taking the subways more and more because they want to get back to life in this city. And this city is defined by our subways. And people are coming back and they're going to make it safe because they're coming back. It's actually the presence of the people in addition to the police that make the subway safe for everyone.

Louis: I mean, I got to tell you, I mean, just personally, I've taken the subway. I, you know, I screwed up something and had to travel a little more than I usually would today. So, I've ridden the subway a few times today. I didn't see any cops. I didn't feel unsafe, but I didn't see any cops. I did see a lot of what I think might be happening, Mr. Mayor is the same people who are in

mental distress or have some other kind of a crisis going on in their life, they're still on the subways. It's just that there's so many fewer regular riders that they stand out more and it makes it look really awful. I mean, if you would – you know, back in the pre pandemic days, you'd see at least one person on almost every car on almost every ride. But that person is still there except now there's like, you know, a hundred fewer people on the car. And so, it looks and feels like the system is falling apart?

Mayor: Yeah. Well, again, it's not falling apart, obviously. And you know, the subway is run by the State of New York, but I'll defend energetically that the subway system is crucial to everything about New York City and it's working. And in fact, you're right Errol. I think the perception has been different because we went through the perfect storm of COVID. We went through a global pandemic. I think people have seen something different than what they saw before, but not because of reality, because of perception. But what has also changed, which is a good thing, is that the outreach efforts to get people out of the subways who have mental health challenges have been more successful than we've ever seen before. And we're seeing more and more people into shelter and staying in shelter. And we're going to double down on those efforts. So, the outreach is there. It's going to be increasing in fact. You're right, you are not going to see a cop every single train you're on, but you are going to see increased presence. And all of it's going to add up, but ultimately what New Yorkers want is to bring our city back. And not to be afraid, New Yorkers don't scare easily. They just don't. I've always found there to be a huge disconnect between a lot of the public discourse and what every day New Yorkers experience. We just go about our lives. And that's what makes the city great ultimately.

Louis: I mean, I got to take a break, but what would be the harm in sending another thousand cops into the system? I mean, you know, they're on salary. You know, they're there and available to be deployed. Did the Commissioner tell you that that would be a bad idea?

Mayor: No, Errol it's about sending cops where the need is greatest. We've got more than one challenge and we're going to use the cops where we can best protect people. And look right now, the issue we're fighting against, which also got unleashed by COVID, is gun violence. That's job one. And that's where I want to see cops applied the most. And I think we saw last week, the impact of that, seeing a whole gang taken down because of that focused policing. That's what we're going to do more of.

Louis: Okay. Let's take a short break. I'll be back with more with the Mayor in just a minute. Stay with us.

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Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. It's Mondays with the Mayor and we are talking with Bill de Blasio. The Mayor is joining us from the Blue Room. And Mr. Mayor, I wanted to follow up on something that you touched on, which is that The City reported today, the news website, reported that your administration spent a hundred million dollars on so-called diversion centers, where people in mental distress should be brought instead of to a hospital or to a jail cell. They're reporting \$52 million spent on a center in the Bronx that has not been used and it was supposed to open to 2019, \$51 million on a site in East Harlem that has seen 45 occupants. Although there

are hundreds of cases in their respective precincts on a monthly basis. I was wondering if you had anything you could tell us about that program. Is it over, are you trying a different strategy? What's going on there?

Mayor: Errol, we're going to have more to say on this next few days, this is something that got clearly disrupted by COVID. The goal, the idea underlying this effort is the right idea, but we couldn't do what we were intending to do because so much got disrupted. There were so many other places that needed to be focused on, but as we're coming out of COVID and obviously tremendous good news today that the positivity level in this city is down to the lowest it's been in six months, we're going to reset and come back to that effort. So, we'll have an update on that in the next few days.

Louis: Okay. When it comes to COVID the State is reporting a drop of 41 percent in vaccination rates over the last month. What do you think is the source of the slowdown?

Mayor: I think the number one factor was the confusion created by the federal government's actions with Johnson & Johnson. I understand it was an honest effort to address an issue. But as we know, this was something that came up in a very, very small handful of cases compared to millions of doses. And I think that just really undercut the momentum. Now that said we don't have as much demand as we had, but we still have steady demand. We're – typical days, whether it's 50,000, 60,000, 70,000 doses being given, that's still a hell of a lot of doses. And it's continuing to have an impact. I mean, this direct constant decrease in the level of COVID in this city continues. And I think the fact that people keep coming in for vaccination is a cause and effect here, but we got to be more creative. So, today we talked about more incentives, more mobile vaccination efforts, you know, more efforts to go, just find people and say, hey, are you ready right this minute? We've got a place you can get vaccinated right here, right now. I think people respond to that. And more efforts by doctors and pediatricians talking to their patients and encouraging them, which is the ultimate trusted voice. All of that I think is going to keep demand steady to help us keep moving toward our goal.

Louis: Yeah. You know, I noticed that, you know, you're unveiling these new incentives, free tickets to iconic attractions and so forth, to convince people to take the vaccine, any excuse to talk about it is probably a good thing. So, you know, there's no complaint there of course, but if people's hesitancy is linked to health concerns no amount of free tickets is necessarily going to change that right?

Mayor: I don't think that's the central issue we're facing right now. I do think there's a group of people who just don't want the vaccine ideologically. Okay, put that aside for a moment. You got a group of people that have serious questions they want answered. That's where I think the doctors and the pediatricians become crucial. We've gotten, you know, hundreds of thousands, more kids who are now going to be able to take the vaccine literally this week, it looks like, and you've got doctors and pediatricians who can answer questions and give people peace. I think, Errol, the number one group of people is not the hesitant or not the folks who have an ideological problem, the number one group of people is folks who are open to it, it hasn't been convenient, hasn't been something that really got their attention. Their lives are busy. I mean, we're the busiest place on the planet. You know, folks who are dealing with so many other challenges. But

if you make it really easy, you make it appealing, maybe you make it kind of fun, I think a lot of people come in and we think that's potentially a hundreds of thousands of people in that category.

Louis: Do you like the idea of offering the vaccine in the subways?

Mayor: Sure. I think any place, any place where people are – work sites, houses of worship, which we've been doing, public housing complexes, you know, community centers, senior centers, any of those approaches. I think subway's a great option.

Louis: The public libraries are reopening. This is part of what I think people are very concerned about as well. Is that going to be all branches? And if not, when will we see all branches reopening?

Mayor: From the latest I've heard, it's going to be all branches. I know some of them were working with us on vaccination efforts and other pieces, but the goal is to very quickly get everyone up and running. And this is a great moment. It's another step in our rebirth and folk – this is the number one thing I hear from New Yorkers, folks are ready to get our lives back. And, you know, today we talked about also the fact that we've gone past seven million doses given from the beginning. So, I really want to put in perspective that huge numbers of New Yorkers have gone out, gotten vaccinated to help everyone else get our lives back. Things like libraries reopening, it's another step on bringing us back to where I want to get us certainly by July 1st.

Louis: So, we've got libraries set to reopen. You've said that the public schools will reopen in the fall, come hell or high water. You've ordered 80,000 City workers back to work. So, you're moving on the things that you have the most control over. When it comes to places like CUNY and frankly, the rest of the City departments, where there might be some employee hesitancy, what's that going to look like? Who do you have to negotiate with to make sure we get higher levels of vaccination?

Mayor: Look with the City agencies, Errol, I mean, we've had a really successful week last week. I know there was all sorts of naysayers, but you know what, in the end folks came back. The vast majority of people were really happy to be back. I think the Daily News was right yesterday, their – a story on the front page about the relief a lot of folks felt coming back to work. It went smoothly. It went successfully. The health and safety measures were in place. So, City agencies are not a question. CUNY, of course, is ultimately run by the State. But I think the template is the same as we've done in our City agencies, we've done in the schools. Put those multiple health and safety measures in place and it works, and people are ready to be back together. Again, we're New Yorkers for God's sakes. We're, like, used to being together. I think it's – you're going to see this go a lot better than some of the naysayers suggested.

Louis: Okay. And finally, before I let you go, you are now 60 years young. What did you do to celebrate the momentous occasion?

Mayor: Yeah, I was with Chirlane and my kids, and it was just lovely. Just hanging out and, you know, especially at a moment where it feels like everything's coming back to life. And you

know, I'm counting my blessings. I have the most wonderful family, and this has been an amazing journey serving people in New York City. So, I'm – I had a wonderful weekend at Gracie Mansion and really felt very, very blessed.

Louis: And keeping with your new status as one of the political elders of New York, what's your advice to the candidates who will be debating for the first time this week on our show?

Mayor: I'm going to – I'm going to not dignify your characterization – as a young whippersnappers here. Look, I think in a debate folks can really make an impression if they're real. So, it's about authenticity and specificity, you know, say something that people can actually wrap their minds around. You know, I was blessed, in the debates when I ran for mayor, I think I was able to get my points across and here I am. I think people have to be bold enough to say exactly what they're going to do and how they're going to make it work.

Louis: Okay. Free advice for those who are going to be debating. Thanks very much Mr. Mayor. Good to see you. We'll see you again next week.

Mayor: Thank you, Errol.

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