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CONTACT: pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov, (212) 788-2958

**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON
THE BRIAN LEHRER SHOW**

Brian Lehrer: Brian Lehrer on WNYC. And now as usual on Fridays, it's our weekly Ask the Mayor segment, my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio at 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0 or you can tweet a question, just use the hashtag, #askthemayor. It's only 12 of your 280 characters. And good morning, Mr. Mayor. Welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, Brian. Happy Lunar New Year.

Lehrer: And same to you. Do you have a favorite dish that you eat for Lunar New Year?

Mayor: I don't have a favorite dish, but I had a really wonderful experience at a Szechuan restaurant in Chinatown a few days ago as part of celebrating Lunar New Year. And I urge all your listeners to get out there and help out our neighborhood restaurants and celebrate by ordering from them or going to them and help them keep going.

Lehrer: Absolutely, by the way, I don't know if you heard the end of our last segment on introverts and extroverts coping with the pandemic lifestyle, but do you think you have to be a big extrovert in order to be a politician and run for office and shake everybody's hands in normal times and stuff like that?

Mayor: There's definitely been some introverts who turned out to be great leaders, but I would say – I'm going to put a little twist on it. I think this is a little cheesy perhaps, but it's true. You have to love people. You have to want to be with people. I was out at Elmhurst Hospital in Queens this morning, and we were doing a Lunar New Year food drive, giving out food to folks from Queens communities who needed food at this time of year. And there was a joy, everyone helping each other out and folks from Elmhurst, you know, helping out the surrounding community. And I love being in that kind of situation where you're surrounded by folks in this, sort of, common cause, everyone in it for the right reasons. You got to love that kind of stuff to some extent. You got to love being out there with the people, if you really want to hear them. And I think that's the most important part. It's not just shaking hands and winning votes. If you're going to understand how to govern, you actually have to experience what people are going through and hear them. And if you're too much of an introvert, that's hard to do.

Lehrer: And I want to ask you about, kind of, the most serious possible side of people's different abilities to cope with this kind of lifestyle. And I know you've been talking about this already. It's

the heartbreaking stat in the news this week, that five New York City public school students have committed suicide this year. That's more than all of last school year when the number was four. And it's only February now with four more months of the school year to go. I know you want to talk about this. What would you like to say?

Mayor: Yeah, it's – so I'm a parent and I, you know, I'm just thinking what a child must be going through, how much pain, how much confusion, how much fear leads to that moment, how many things that they need to express that aren't being expressed because there's no outlet, how much isolation that a child is feeling, how horrible and painful that is, and what it means in this moment, because kids have been cut off from what they need, what allows them to cope and have hope. And so, what we're recognizing more and more is we got to reopen schools. You know, we have middle schools coming back Thursday. I want to see high schools come back. I want to see more kids coming back to school. We have to come back full in September, but here's the thing we also have to do that we've never done in our history before. And this is one of the concepts we take from Thrive NYC. We're going to do mental health screening for all the kids in New York City public schools when they come back in September. We need every child to get the kind of screening that says if the trauma they've gone through – and for most kids, it has been trauma, for some, thank God, less – but a lot of kids have been through nothing short of trauma. They will need more support. Some of them will need a lot of support, will need to be, you know, have an opportunity to go into therapy, if that's what's right for them. And we have a plan to provide that for children who need it. But we got to be honest that this crisis should totally change our understanding of mental health because it now has to be brought out in the open. It has to be clear. Kids have been put through so much, but haven't had a place to turn for help because the vast majority haven't been in a school with loving, caring professionals who can notice the problems and address them. We've got to change that, starting now, but especially when we do universal mental health screening in September.

Lehrer: What about now? Because universal mental health screening in September is that far away. And while there's still so much remote learning that increases anxiety and depression and the Wall Street Journal article on this this week also mentioned obsessive compulsive disorders being seen as on the rise. And as we discussed even suicide risk, what is the City doing to provide extra counseling or other prevention efforts, especially for kids whose families can't afford outside therapists?

Mayor: Very important. Anyone who needs help, we will get them all the help we can for free. You know, we have guaranteed health care in New York City. Remember that we have NYC Care and that includes mental health services. This is something, Brian, that has never gotten the attention it deserves. But I really want people to understand in this city, anyone who could not afford health insurance, we will get them either an insurance plan or we'll give them the NYC card – NYC Care card so they can get direct health care, including mental health services. And anyone who feels right now that they don't know where to turn and they need to be connected to mental health services can call 888-NYC-WELL. Right this minute, 24 hours a day, multiple languages, 888-NYC-WELL. And get a trained counselor who then will determine with you, whether it's for you or for a loved one, the next step, and ensure that you get that connection, you get that appointment to connect you to the services. So, in the schools we provided mental health services for every school in New York City. I know teachers, social workers, we've added a lot

of social workers, we're going to add a lot more September. They're trying now to reach kids, but they're hindered because it all has to be done remotely. And a lot of kids and families are not responding because it's all remote. So, we're trying to reach everyone we can. But I'm going to say to all your listeners, if you know a child in crisis and you don't know where to turn for mental health services, we can get that child help for free through 888-NYC-WELL.

Lehrer: Ophere in the Bronx, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Ophere.

Question: Hi. How are you? I'm the PTA president of P. S. 108. And I have a question regarding the extension of the school. So, just before COVID hit us there was a plan approved to expand to build more classes in school and [inaudible] demand a need for a middle school in Morris Park in the Bronx, and we have an annex. We gathered more than a thousand signatures and I attended many community meetings as well as talked to Councilman Gjonaj, who was supporting us. And we are not sure what to do next. So, we need guidance. How can we influence to extend our school from K-to-five to K-to-eight?

Mayor: So, Ophere, thank you very, very much for the question. Please give your information to WNYC. I want to make sure that someone senior from the School Construction Authority speaks to you today to see where we are in the planning to address the issues in Morris park. We've been building new classrooms, new school buildings, new seats constantly. And even though COVID did slow us down a bit, we're putting that plan back on track because there's a lot of communities that really are experiencing historically, a lot of overcrowding. Now again, when you have everyone dealing with a different reality this year, but in September, I want school back full strength. And so, we need to keep adding school seats in the places where there's the most demand. We'll have them follow up with you and figure out what the plan is to get more help to your community.

Lehrer: Dionne in Brooklyn. You're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Dionne.

Question: Hi, Brian, Mayor de Blasio. Not sure if you've noticed, but it's pretty frigid out there. I'm a regular listener to this segment, so I know how frequently residents call in to complain about insufficient heat in their building. I suffer from inconsistent heat as well. But my call isn't about, or for myself, it's to uncover why this is a perpetual problem winter after winter for so many New Yorkers. Explain to us please, why landlords or management companies are allowed to get away with little or no, or inconsistent heating, winter after winter? Why isn't the penalty for heating violations punitive enough to discourage this behavior? Thank you.

Mayor: That's a great question. Truly great question, Dionne. Thank you. I agree with you. I for – I used to be public advocate and back then I started the worst landlords watch list. And what was clear in that process was a lot of landlords were getting away with things they shouldn't get away with. And the penalty structure wasn't strong enough, the way the law works, a lot of that does need to be approved by the State. I think there should be much tougher penalties for landlords who don't provide heat and basic services. I think you're exactly right. The penalty structure should be such that it forces the right behavior, the legal behavior. In the meantime, what the City of New York does is if anyone in the private building isn't getting heat, our Housing Department goes in, does the inspection, demands the landlord fixes it. If the landlord

doesn't fix it, we bring our own contractors. We fix it and we make the landlord pay the bill. So, at least people have somewhere to turn to get the immediate issues addressed. But I think you're right. I think the penalty structure is not strong enough and is something we need to fix with State law.

Lehrer: With State law. There's no more that you could do at the City level?

Mayor: I will check again to see if there's something more we can do. But what I remember vividly going back now many years to when I was public advocate is the real, the real high impact changes – the real, you know, so much of regulation of landlords is State. Obviously, rent regulations, rent control, rent stabilization, a lot of that is done at the State level. My memory is that's where you could really have the high impact penalties. But we'll look again to see if there's anything else that can be done at the City level. I would welcome it.

Lehrer: Another schools question from listener Medina on Twitter. It says – oh, sorry. No, you know what? I think I clicked on the wrong – that's not actually a question. All right, I'm going to come back to the one I was looking for –

Mayor: This is live radio, isn't Brian?

Lehrer: This is live radio. I apologize. You know, and we get a lot of Twitter messages coming in through the show and sometimes you click on one and it turns out to be the one next to it. Valene in Park Slope, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Valene.

Question: Hi. Thank you so much. Mr. Mayor, I would love to know if you have any plans to expand the Open Storefronts program to something similar to the Open Restaurants program, allowing service spaces to build permanent outdoor structures on the street? I am the owner of Private Picasso's, a kids' art studio in Park Slope, Brooklyn. And we would really benefit from a safe, outdoor option to operate our program. This would not only create a safe environment for our customers, but also for our staff.

Mayor: Valene, thank you very much for that question. Look, I think Open Storefronts is a very good idea. We've only had it for a brief period of time. And there hasn't been a lot of uptake yet, but obviously it's also been the colder month. We are looking at how to best use that going forward. I'm certainly very open to something permanent there. But we need to figure out, you know the right way to do it. I love the notion of New Yorkers using our public space differently. We've had a, like truly revelatory experience with Open Restaurants and Open Streets. And particularly the combination of the two has been amazing. And you may have seen like Fifth Avenue, parts of Fifth Avenue in Park Slope during the summer were just unbelievable. And it's the kind of thing that needs some work. I am very hopeful we can – oh, go ahead. Go ahead.

Question: I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cut you off. Sorry. No, my studio is on Fifth Avenue and we definitely took advantage as much as we could of the Open Streets program. But the problem with that is, you know, that would literally require my business and my staff to bring our art studio outside and bring it back inside each day. That is very time consuming and we have limited staff right now. So, I think what restaurants have been allowed to do has been

phenomenal. And I think there's so many of us who need in-person interaction with our customers to really have our business survive this pandemic. You know, and operating limited indoors and even the Open Streets doesn't really help us. And the Open Storefront program, I know it's just the beginning of it. But it's very strict requirements. I know where I am on Fifth and Carroll, my sidewalk is barely eight feet door to the street. So, I can't even apply for that program, even if I wanted to, even if I wanted to take on the extra added like responsibility, of bringing everything outdoors each day and bringing it back indoors each night.

Mayor: That's really helpful, truly very helpful feedback on what you experienced. Valene, would you give your information please to WNYC? I'd like folks from our team to – if you'd be kind enough, you know, use your experience as something to learn from as we think about the next steps here. But I would say I really appreciate the call because I do think it's time we think – if we learned a lot positive from Open Restaurants and Open Streets, where do we go next? And we've been talking about more car-free streets, more pedestrian plazas, lots of things I think are the future of the city. And, that I've learned from experience, really work even beyond our wildest dreams. And I think there's a lot more we can do with small business and Open Storefronts. So, please give your information and we want to learn from what you experienced to make sure we do this right going forward.

Lehrer: Here's that tweet I thought I was clicking on before. The question is, will there be more opportunities to opt-in for public school blended option? When the school year started, we were told there would be multiple opportunities to opt-in. And then told in November, in November, there would be just one opportunity. Anything you can tell that parent?

Mayor: Yeah. And Brian simply, and again, I've had my kids in public school the whole way through, so I can remember exactly what it felt like to deal with all of the challenges. We saw a really challenging reality for our kids, because a lot of people were holding seats and not using them. And that meant a lot of kids could not be in school as many days as they needed to be. And that's why we changed the rule to be very clear that there was one chance for folks to get in, but then you had to actually use your child's seat. And we still have a problem with some folks not sending their kid to school, but wanting to hold a seat. That's just not something we're going to do. So, what we want is every seat is used – if someone has opted-in, in the past, all those opt-ins back from November will be honored at the middle school and high school level. Obviously, grade school and the elementary school as well. But you got to send your child to school regularly. If you're not sending your child's school regularly, you really should be in remote. And then we can take that seat and use it to give other children more days in school. Which is really the fair thing to do. But Brian, as to where we go from here? So middle school opens Thursday. Next step will be to find a way to open high school. That's going to take some real work, but I believe we can do it. And then as the health care situation, I hope and believe improves, I do see the possibility of another opt-in. But it will require a really, substantial improvement in the health care situation. We're still dealing with the challenge of the variants. We still are not getting the vaccine supply we need. I mean, we've now done over 1.4 million vaccinations. That's the good news. But we could have done a hell of a lot more if we had sufficient supply. So, for us – excuse me – for us to know that we've turned a bigger corner so we can do a new opt-in and approach schools differently, that's going to take some serious progress before we get to that point.

Lehrer: On the vaccine rollout, I know supply is the biggest issue, but for the supply we have, why can't there be a unified sign-up system? To set this up Let me play part of a phone call we got earlier in the week from a listener named Jack in Long Island City talking about his experience. He's in – he's 90 years old.

Question: So, I start with a locator and then I fill out a form and then I look at the sites and they say, you know, this place is two miles away, of course there's no appointments. When I see an appointment, by the time I get filled out and everything else, I'm behind. I'm like the woman who you spoke of when you started the show. It it's just –

Lehrer: *It's a mess –*

Question: It's just a shell game.

Lehrer: *A shell game, and so Jack suggested a plan.*

Question: I just want to get a place in line and wait and be registered and not play dodge ball with these people. It's the design of the system. I'd appreciate some help, but the main thing is my grandson could design a system that would take care of what my problem is, instead of go playing these games and losing out and, you know, not being lucky on the tongue – just get me a number and I'll wait until it comes up.

Lehrer: Mr. Mayor, your reaction, why can't there be a centralized system where Jack and everybody else can just take a number and wait until it comes up?

Mayor: Well, first of all, I really feel – I mean, you could hear in Jack's voice he is in pain and fearful and worried, and I feel for him and we don't want that. We want him to have a much better experience and look, there's been 1.4 million vaccinations without even the supply we needed, if we had had the supply again, it would be much, much more. I was at Elmhurst Hospital this morning and folks were coming up to me, seniors from the Elmhurst community, telling me they had gotten vaccinated successfully saying how good the process had been for them. So, clearly there are a lot of people making appointments and getting through. We're also going out door to door now in public housing, in the city in the communities hit hardest by COVID and we're literally signing people up at their door, on an iPad, just making it real simple for anyone who is having challenges on navigating. But look, in the end, Jack has a point. I'm not for a moment negating his point and I'm going to go back and see is there some way, but I think what I'm going to find is this fundamental problem. We do not have a universal health care system. I'm someone who believes in universal health care. We created guaranteed health care in New York City for people that need it, which is good, which is better than any other city in America, but it's not universal health care where we have a single unified approach as a nation.

So, the problem I have, Brian, is I got different hospitals, all with their own systems of medical records. I've got pharmacies, I've got urgent cares, and then I've got the public health system, everyone has different systems, I cannot legally require them to all to use the same system. That is just not something in the city's power. So, we created nyc.gov/vaccinefinder so at least people

could find out where there were appointments and then click onto those systems. We have a new approach that we've done now with a lot of the publicly supported sites, even when private providers join us in setting up those sites, they now have to do a unified system with us. So, that's nyc.gov/vax4nyc, V-A-X-number four-NYC. That system now is one-stop shopping, meaning you can go in and have a unified approach to a much larger universe of sites. Anyone who can't do online well enough can go to 877-VAX-4NYC and do this over the phone. But what I agree with everyone who's saying, could we have a single, absolutely unified website that was accurate and consistent? I would love nothing more. That would mean having a single health care system that was unified and consistent. The waiting list idea though is very interesting to me, whether that's another way to go about this, and is there some way we could do that, that unifies the different systems? I'm going to look into that and I appreciate that suggestion.

Lehrer: By the way, our wonderful listeners after Jack called in earlier in the week, somebody called in and volunteered to help him get an appointment, and they did, I am told, so I wish we could do that for everybody, but he happened to get on the air and then a lot of people were concerned about Jack, in particular in Long Island City, and somebody was able to help him get an appointment. Listeners, I thought you would like to know that. Follow up question from a health desk, are you worried about ramping up vaccine sites too fast? If the supply doesn't show up, it may lead to confusion and frustration, and if a supply does come as a slow trickle, do you have any thoughts on how to keep people motivated towards seeking the vaccine? And I'll add that maybe this relates – you tell me – to Mount Sinai having to cancel a lot of first dose appointments that were scheduled for this week because they said the city had redirected those doses to other places.

Mayor: Yeah, well, no. What happened – that's not the whole story – what happened was there was a huge mega storm all over the United States of America which knocked down shipments and supply for this week for New York City. We've been talking about this all week. We were expecting, you know, over a 100,000 doses earlier in the week and we still haven't gotten everything we expect and everything's been disrupted by the storm, but I'll tell you why it is very good to have as many sites as we have because of we're going to get people vaccinated, particularly those who are hesitant, if we're going to fight the disparities and reach the communities hardest hit by COVID, communities of color all over the city, you need the most decentralized, localized grassroots approach possible. So, having a lot of sites is very good for connecting to people where they are. The fact is the day's coming soon where the Johnson and Johnson vaccine will arrive, single dose, totally different, better reality, needs a lot less refrigeration. The supply is going to pick up in March. I think it's going to particularly jump up in April. I think it's right to have the sites up and running.

The goal, Brian, we're absolutely ready to do half a million vaccinations a week. So, all of the infrastructure is there. We can crank it. We can pick a lot of places 24/7. If we have the supply, we could do amazing things, get five million people vaccinated by June in this city. But here's what it's going to take, the federal government has to push the pharmaceutical industry harder, they're not doing enough there. The pharmaceutical industry is not doing enough, only three companies involved, many more should be involved here. The State government has to stop interfering in so many of the day-to-day details of how we do vaccination. It has slowed us down repeatedly. We need to be able to use the second doses now because we know a lot more supply

is coming. We still have, you know, tens of thousands of doses we can't use every single day because of State rules and federal approaches that are keeping us from vaccinating people. So, I want to have a lot of capacity. I want a lot more freedom to vaccinate and I guarantee you, we can reach a lot more people quickly.

Lehrer: All right, we have about a minute left. I see you spoke yesterday about Governor Cuomo's nursing home deaths cover-up scandal and his alleged bullying of Assemblyman Ron Kim, do you agree with him and some of his colleagues that the Governor is guilty of obstruction of justice as defined by federal law?

Mayor: Look, I believe Ron Kim when he talks about what he experienced and I believe that has to be a really full investigation here because something happened that potentially means folks who lost their lives, family members were lost who could have been saved, and there has not been a reckoning and we – the State of New York hasn't even acknowledged what they need to do differently and we're still in this crisis. So, there needs to be a full investigation and then there needs to be real action.

Lehrer: Should the Governor be impeached or resigned – or resign over obstruction of justice?

Mayor: Again, I am not the investigators. I'm not the Justice Department. Let them determine through a real investigation what happened. Let the Legislature determine what needs to change in the way the State has governed. Certainly, the emergency powers need to be revoked so we can get back to normal democratic governance in this State, and I guarantee you, again, that would help us to vaccinate a lot more people if we actually could get back the control of how we protect our own people.

Lehrer: Thanks, as always, Mr. Mayor, talk to you next week.

Mayor: Thank you, Brian.

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