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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO HOLDS MEDIA AVAILABILITY

President and CEO Mitchell Katz, NYC Health + Hospitals: Good morning, everyone. We're going to get started in this amazing historic moment. So happy to be here and especially happy to welcome the Mayor. And I want you all to know that during the darkest moments in March and April I was on the telephone with the Mayor, 10:00 pm, 11:00 pm, midnight 1:00 am, 2:00 am. And what his concern is, tell me about Elmhurst, how much equipment do they need? What is the ventilator situation? How many patients are there? And the work was all about how do we get them the staff they need? How do we get them the supplies they need? He very much felt the pain of Elmhurst. I know he was here a number of times during that period. And I want to thank him deeply for that effort, for that caring. And how great that now we could be here to make the pain go away, to be able to protect the heroes of Elmhurst. So, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Thank you. Thank you. I want to thank Dr. Mitch Katz, who really has seen through this whole crisis our extraordinary public hospital system, public clinic system. Health + Hospitals has borne the brunt of the coronavirus crisis. The men and women of H + H have done an amazing job fighting back this disease and deserve all the respect and appreciation in the world. And they had a great and persistent leader during it. So, Mitch, thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you did for this city during this crisis. We're here at Elmhurst Hospital, a heroic place, a heroic place. A place where something extraordinary happened. One of the toughest battles anywhere in the United States of America against the coronavirus happened right here. But Elmhurst Hospital held. Elmhurst Hospital held the line, the men and women who worked here, the health care heroes did an extraordinary job against all odds. That's the story of Elmhurst Hospital. There's a lot to be proud of. You can clap for that.

[Applause]

Elmhurst Hospital has a lot to be proud of. Queens has a lot to be proud of. It is a great pleasure to be here with the new Borough President of Queens Donovan Richards, congratulations.

[Applause]

And Donovan you chose a good time to become borough president.

[Laughter]

Because we're celebrating such an important moment here. The first ever vaccination at a New York City public hospital. And there's no more fitting place than here. This is the place where it should be because this is the heroic place. I really want to emphasize that this is the heroic place.

[Applause]

And I will tell you for the rest of my life, when I hear the words Elmhurst Hospital, I'm going to think of heroes. And I'm going to think of a battle that was fought and won. That's what I'm going to remember.

[Applause]

So, Elmhurst is part of what I can say with assurance is the leading public health care system in America, H + H. And this is the first time we can say that for sure, can't we?

[Applause]

And we're going to see the first vaccinations in an H + H facility. And the good news is you're going to be seeing more and more people every day getting vaccinated. In the last 48 hours since the vaccine arrived, over 1,600 health care workers have been vaccinated in New York City. That is a huge step forward.

[Applause]

Now, why are we here? We're here to honor our health care workers. We're here to honor Elmhurst Hospital. We're also here to talk about how important our public health care system has been in this year. I'll be blunt for a long time HHC, then Health + Hospitals were ignored in this city. They were too often put down, too often starved of funding. And a lot of folks, unfortunately thought of H + H as something that wasn't their business. And H + H struggled for years and years. Several years ago, before we ever heard the word coronavirus, we made a decision to invest in H + H. Billions of dollars to make sure our public health care system was strong. We made a decision that the future New York City depended on H + H. No, we did not have a crystal ball. We did not know there would be a pandemic. We knew people needed health care. And we knew it wouldn't happen without H + H. So, we spent billions of dollars. And let me tell you that is some of the best money we ever spent. Because we needed H + H more than we ever knew.

And when that moment came, when literally the city was on a razor's edge, H + H was there for thousands and tens of thousands of New Yorkers. H + H held the line, H + H, Health + Hospitals saved New York City.

[Applause]

And in this next battle, and this will be the last great battle against the coronavirus, I'm happy to tell you. This will be the last great battle against the coronavirus, because the vaccine is here. We will need H + H again, to help us fight back and defeat the second wave but also because this is the place where so many people will get vaccinated. This is the place where neighborhoods will turn and will trust to come get that vaccination. So, it's all going to be happening here. And that's why we're here today to celebrate this important step. This crucial, wonderful moment. Let me say a few quick words in Spanish before this historic moment occurs.

[Mayor de Blasio speaks in Spanish:]

Let's make this pandemic part of our past. Let's get rid of it once and for all. And with that, I will now tell you we are so pleased to be here with Veronica Delgado, who is a lead physician's assistant in the Emergency Department. And William Kelly, a service aid in the Environmental Services Department. And to assist them, Dr. Eric Wei and Dr. Dave Chokshi. Dr. Eric Wei of H + H, Dr. Dave Chokshi, our Health Commissioner have stepped forward. And yet you have office jobs now, but you still know how to doctor.

[Laughter]

So, get ready for the big moment, everyone.

[Commissioner Chokshi, Dr. Wei administer the first COVID vaccinations to H + H health care workers]

[Applause]

Mayor: Come on everyone, this is standing ovation, it doesn't get better than this.

[Applause]

Mayor: We're going to be here for all of your medical appointments. You all did a great job.

[Applause]

Moderator: [Inaudible] Q and A.

Mayor: All right, everyone. First of all, again, to William and Veronica, this is – it is not typical to have a hundred people in the room for your shot. So you both did an incredible job staying cool under pressure and thank you. Thank you. Not only for being an example to the whole city of the fact that this vaccine is so important and so safe, but thank you for being part of the Elmhurst family. This family of heroes has done so much. Let's thank them for all of them for all they do.

[Applause]

Mayor: All right. We're going to take some questions. Yes?

Question: Mayor, you talked about 1,600 health care workers vaccinated in the last two days. That means, and correct my math if I'm wrong, 800 a day, over the course of a month that would be 24,000. Don't you need to rapidly accelerate [inaudible] to make any kind of dent in the population, health care or otherwise?

Mayor: Yeah, Andrew, this was just day one, day two. Do not take that for a second as indication of where things are going. I'm going to have Dr. Chokshi speak to this, but you're going to see things expand very quickly. Our health care team had to obviously get to know this vaccine, get used to the details of how to handle it. But you're going to see a very, very rapid

expansion and as soon as vaccine comes in, it is going to get distributed. It's going to get used very quickly. Dr. Chokshi do you want to add?

Commissioner Dave Chokshi, Department of Health and Mental Hygiene: Thanks very much, Mr. Mayor. Yes, just to add briefly to it, remember 37 hospitals received their first deliveries yesterday. Amazing to see. Many of them actually began their vaccinations yesterday as well. Many others will begin them today. So we do expect that clip to pick up, but remember just as what we emphasize with the vaccine is that it is safe and effective. We want the vaccination process also to be safe and effective, and people are making sure that the way the vaccine is transported and stored and all of the protocols are very rigorous, particularly in these early days. We want people to emphasize that. So there's not a single vaccine that is wasted, but we do expect those numbers to pick up.

Question: Just a quick follow up. How high – what is the numbers you want to see in terms of their activity per day to begin making a difference?

Commissioner Chokshi: Well, we will start to think about those goals with respect to vaccinations per day. So much of it depends on the supply of the vaccine that we received to New York City. But our general principle, particularly when the supply is very limited in these early days, is to try to get it as quickly as possible into people's arms so that they can start to build immunity.

Mayor: Yeah, Andrew, I really do appreciate the question because I think it's important we show people how much impact is going to have, but I want to be clear, right now it is – it comes in, it goes out, you know, as soon as it comes in, turn around, get to hospitals, get people the vaccinations they need. It's really about making the movement of this as quick as possible, over time and when we see all the different vaccines as we're waiting for the final approval on Moderna, I think Johnson and Johnson is out there, we'll have a sense of what our actual daily supply will be. But for now it's like as soon as it comes in, it goes right back out. Yes?

Question: Can you talk about any side effects the first 1,600 people have had and – or maybe what you're hearing from around the country?

Commissioner Chokshi: Sure. well, the most important thing is that we have not heard of any serious adverse events, that means very serious side effects in New York City thus far. We are in contact with colleagues at the CDC, as well as other health departments around the country to make sure that we're understanding what they're seeing as well. Thankfully no serious adverse events have been reported thus far. The side effects that are being experienced are the ones that were also seen in the studies for the vaccine, particularly some pain at the injection site, you know, some fatigue, some muscle aches, generally those only lasts for the first 24 to 48 hours and are mostly mild side effects.

Mayor: Where we're watching – hold on one second – we're watching William and Veronica very closely now, any real side effects so far? You're doing good.

[Laughter]

They're both answering it looks good. Did you have a follow-up?

Question: I did. It was a follow-up to Andrew's question. Is there any plan to publish a dashboard so that the public can see how many people are getting vaccinated every day?

Mayor: Yes, and that will be done by our Command Center. So that's going to be coming out in the next few days as those numbers get clear. Go ahead, Katie.

Question: Perhaps could Dr. Katz talk about the distribution of the vaccine within the city's public health hospital system? Is it equitable to that of private hospitals? Are there limits? Just to see – I know we saw NYU and Northwell get it on Monday. I'm just curious if there's a distribution – if there's an inequity within that?

President Katz: Sure. Happy to answer. The very small number of hospitals, only about five, received it on Monday. The bulk of hospitals, including all the H + H hospitals, received it yesterday, and there are still a few that are receiving it today. So we were in the middle lodge tranche, and in terms of supply as the Mayor has said, ultimately, we need a much larger supply and we think that's going to come in in the next weeks, especially with the second vaccine likely to be approved. Right now, in terms of distribution, we're focusing on people in the highest risk areas, people who work in the emergency room or the ICU as these two great health care workers are, and they're also over 60, so that we're able to – which they may not be – but which –

[Laughter]

We want to get the highest risk people. I have to do two quick shout outs. Danielle DiBari has been – worked all weekend to set this up. She is our Chief Pharmacist, she put together protocols, all the sign-ins, and I can never pass Dr. Moshirpur is our Chief Medical Officer for 50 years at Elmhurst, 50 years.

[Applause]

Mayor: You've been working at Elmhurst for 50 years?

Jasmin Moshirpur, NYC Health + Hospitals: Yes.

Mayor: That's beautiful.

[Applause]

Go ahead, Katie.

Question: As a follow-up, can we have numbers, looking at Elmhurst specifically, how many health care workers here at Elmhurst will be vaccinated by the end of the day, by the end of the week, and so on?

President Katz: What I can tell you is that from looking at the numbers, I believe we're going to vaccinate the whole hospital in three weeks, everyone in, in every single unit, just starting at the highest risk units.

Mayor: Okay. Who else? Yeah?

Question: Mayor, I want to ask you since we are here at Elmhurst, and this was so much the epicenter of what we saw in the spring, how are we doing today as we see numbers slowly going up. Hospitalization rate here, particular capacity here, patient load, and just in general testing wise as well?

Mayor: Yeah. A couple of different things quickly. It's a mix for sure. The amount of testing is good news. You know, now we're going to have the capacity to be up to about 120,000 tests a day in New York City. We still need people to go get those tests. We have rigorous testing in the schools, obviously that's constant, but we need everyday New Yorkers to go get tested more. So that's an area where we can do better. Positivity levels too high. There's no question about it. I'll give you the update for the day with the indicators. Hold on. I may need that on another card, because I don't have indicators in front of you. We'll get that over one second, guys, just write out and hand over. But the point is today's indicators, the positivity levels too high. It's not going in the right direction. Hospitalizations are increasing. Our hospitals are doing a lot better, but, meaning they are better able to handle the coronavirus than they were obviously in the spring, but the hospitalizations keep increasing and I'm worried about that. So it's a reminder to all New Yorkers, we really need people to get tested. We need people to keep wearing the mask. We need people to not travel, keep gathering small, because there is increasing pressure on our hospitals.

And, you know, right now, as the Governor has said and I've said, if we don't see a turnaround, there will have to be deeper restrictions and it would potentially have to be a full pause. And if people want to avoid that, it's important to, like, really double down, get tested, wear a mask, don't travel, avoid the gatherings – that's the best way to fight back the virus, link up to the better times when we have the vaccine more fully distributed, and avoid any kind of shutdown.

That's the only way we're going to do it, is if people really step up. In terms of hospitals, how they're doing –

President Katz: I think the Mayor has covered the top lines. We have about a third capacity available, both the ICU and in the regular beds. So, we're in reasonable shape. Just to give people a sense of the numbers, all 11 hospitals together today have about 280 people with COVID. At our peak, we got to almost 4,000 last April. So, you know, 280 – you know, it still – it does strain the system. We haven't seen the huge drop in non-COVID patients that we saw in March and April, which we're happy about. We realize that there was tremendous care that was lost. People who were seriously sick stayed away from all hospitals in March and April, all the New York City hospitals experience the huge drop – that hasn't happened now. And so, we have to watch capacity closely. But we're being able to bring in additional nurses starting on Monday and we believe we'll be able to keep up with the increase in cases that the Mayor has spoken about.

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

Commissioner Chokshi: I'll just add briefly in terms of, you know, what we're seeing with respect to the city-wide phenomena. It really echoes what Dr. Katz just went through, which is, certainly, we're concerned for the reasons the Mayor has laid out in terms of the increase in cases and percent positivity, because we know that that does lead to an increase in hospitalizations.

But, thus far, hospitals are able to keep pace with that upsurge and it's up to us to blunt the curve further with respect to those key public health actions that will allow us to reduce the burden on our health care system.

Mayor: Okay. Who else? Yes?

Question: Speaking of testing, is COVID-19 testing is going to [inaudible] resume tomorrow at noon. Are you concerned about having to take the testing offline for almost a day, given the weather related [inaudible] –

Mayor: Look, obviously, I wish we didn't have to, but this is just a smart precaution. I think it's going offline at two o'clock today.

President Katz: That's correct.

Mayor: Two o'clock, back at noon tomorrow – it's under 24 hours. I don't think it'll make a huge difference, obviously. But this is when it gets complicated, right? A snow storm coming – we want people to be safe. We want people to take precautions, because they need to take the storm seriously. We, obviously, always want to get people tested, but I think when it's a brief window like this it should have a limited impact.
Go ahead.

Question: Yes. And more about your vaccine distribution, understanding – you commented yesterday that you're not expecting the snow to have any impact on the vaccine rollout across the city. And just wanted to follow up on that a little bit more. I think we also got the update around 41,000 doses of the vaccine were available yesterday. It sounds like more and more [inaudible] on this daily. Can you give us a better sense of how many shipments you are expecting today? Tomorrow? For the next 48 hours? And how can you say that the snow is not going to impact that district?

Mayor: Yeah. Fair questions all around. So, I want first frame it real quick – this vaccination effort is literally in its infancy. You know, we were not even sure until the end of Sunday, beginning of Monday, exactly when the arrivals would begin. So, we're just days into it. The hospitals are learning how to use the vaccine for the first time, as Dr. Katz and Dr. Chokshi had talked about – never had a vaccine like this before. You're going to see a constant ramping up. But, in the meantime, the question of the storm – what does it mean? Well, it's – you know, it's a storm, but it is a storm so far is still staying in a pretty limited range – that, kind of, eight inches to 12 inches range for a limited period of time this afternoon evening into early morning hours tomorrow. That doesn't change anything in a big way from what we're seeing. We expect to keep getting the deliveries and keeping able to turn around and get people vaccinate. Just, I think everyone, again, I never asked New Yorkers for patience, because we're not a patient people. I do ask people to recognize – there's no one with more motivation – literally, no one in New York City with more motivation to get these vaccinations to happen quickly than our health care workers and our health care leaders. They want to get this done. They're going to move this very, very aggressively. But the storm at this point does not present any meaningful change to our schedule.

Hey, real quick on the indicators, everyone. So, let me do this – hospitalizations for the day, the 195 new hospitalizations. COVID positivity, 56 percent among them. And then, the hospitalizations per 100,000 – that's at three now. So, that's gotten consistently higher. So, again, another example of why we do have a problem with these increasing hospitalizations and we've got to fight back against this. The new cases combined, confirming probable – excuse me, 2,785 – 2,785 – really big number, another cause for concern. Positivity on a seven-day average, 5.71 percent – so, higher than we want it to be. That number has not been shooting up, thank God, but it's definitely higher than we need it to be. Who has not gone yet from the media? Let me see if anyone hasn't gone just for a second. Go ahead.

Question: Hi. So, I just want to hear a little bit more about Veronica and William. You know, where [inaudible] what you're feeling [inaudible]

William Kelly: Well, right now, I feel good.

[Laughter]

Mayor: You look good –

[Laughter]

Mayor: You know, for someone over 60 –

[Laughter]

Question: What about your age –

[Laughter]

Unknown: You can lie –

[Laughter]

Question: [Inaudible]

Kelly: You want to know my age?

[Laughter]

Mayor: Who's asking?

[Laughter]

Question: What's your message to the community? What's your message to people who've been waiting for the vaccine?

Kelly: Well, I guess, everybody's been waiting for so long, so that's why I wanted to do this.

Veronicas Delgado: I'm 65 –

Mayor: You don't look it.

[Laughter]

Delgado: Yeah. I feel very privileged to be one of the first to get the vaccine. I know there are people that are more frontline and more deserving. So, my message is to the Mayor and everybody, I hope that everybody can be vaccinated quickly. And my message to non-health care providers is also, you have to do your own research and everybody has to make their own decisions, but not to be afraid of a vaccine and not to get information off of Facebook.

[Laughter]

[Applause]

Mayor: You win – you win quote of the day award right there. Okay. We've all learned a valuable lesson. Okay. Last call – anyone who has not ask a question from the media?

Okay. Final one –

Question: Going off what we were just talking about a little bit of what [inaudible] getting your vaccine, can you talk about that feeling [inaudible] –

Delgado: Quite frankly, I don't know a health care worker in this hospital who doesn't want the vaccine [inaudible]. So [inaudible] people to want. What it feels like to me – first thing on Sunday, in the morning, after a very long dark and frightening night.

Mayor: Nicely said –

Kelly: Well, to me, I want everybody to take the vaccine shot, you know? I mean, it's good to take it, things like that. So, I hope everybody takes the shot, you know, so we can all get back together. Any questions?

[Laughter]

Mayor: Thank you to Veronica and William. And, William, that last line is very powerful. Let everyone get the vaccine so we can all get back together. That's a beautiful thought – so we can all get back together. I also want you to know, William, Veronica, you've really done a great job today and we're going to reward you with a candy cane.

[Laughter]

This should become part of – hold up your candy cane so people know what I'm talking about. This should become part of the vaccine protocol. Okay? You get a candy cane with every vaccine, that will encourage people.

Everyone, congratulations. Elmhurst, well done.

[Applause]

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