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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON INSIDE CITY HALL**

**Errol Louis:** Good evening, I'm Errol Louis. This week is predicted to be the point of maximum hospitalizations here in New York in a way that could strain our health care system in very serious ways. All of this comes as the city wrestles with the difficult question of what to do with over 2,000 people who have died of the coronavirus. Joining me now from inside City Hall in the Blue Room to talk about this and much, much more is Mayor Bill de Blasio. Good evening, Mr. Mayor.

**Mayor Bill de Blasio:** Good evening, Errol.

**Louis:** I wanted to start Mr. Mayor with this this grim question about burials and where bodies will be before they're prepared for burial. There were –just to squash rumors or conspiracy theories, there was talk about there being temporary burials inside public parks. Can you clear up whether or not that's being considered?

**Mayor:** No, that is false. Totally false. First of all, as we can discuss this evening, we're actually seeing some promising signs in the data we're receiving the last few days. It's too early to draw, you know, very firm conclusions in terms of where this crisis is going. But there are some things that I'm seeing, the city is seeing, I know the Governor is seeing at the State level that suggests the beginning of some improvement. So, that's the most important thing, the ability to save more lives and start to reduce the number of people who are afflicted and the number of people end up in hospitals. We'll have more to say on that in the coming days as the numbers firm up.

Second, so much of what has been said on this topic is insensitive and unfair to families. Meaning the issue, what happens when we lose our loved ones, when people pass away? I'm going to appeal to all New Yorkers, I'm going to appeal to the media to please think about the human reality of what you're talking here. This is a very, very painful topic for the families that have already lost their loved ones. It's a painful topic for families that have loved ones who are sick or they fear will be sick with the coronavirus. Is this really what we're going to put so much energy into talking about this painful possibility that people will need to be buried. This is – we need to focus on saving lives right now.

So, let me just make it real clear and I've said I'm not going into a lot of detail on this topic ever. First of all, we've been – we have the very, very effective Office of the Medical Examiner. They have a lot of capacity to address this horrible crisis. We've asked the federal government for an immense amount of support and capacity, they have provided, it's here in New York City. God forbid that we don't turn the corner quickly on this crisis. We have the ability to deal with even a

more challenging situation. But so many things have been said are false. There will never, ever be anything like “mass graves” or “mass internment” in New York City ever. If God forbid, we ever had to get to the point of a temporary burial, it would be individual by individual so that families could reclaim their loved ones when the crisis was over. But we're nowhere near that now.

If there was ever going to need to be a place for burial, it would be Hart Island where burials are already done. And then there was a question of whether inmates from Rikers Island would be used, the answer's categorically, no. I've said that previously. So, those are the facts. There's really no reason for anyone to talk about this issue anymore. It's being addressed. But much more importantly, hopefully we never get near any of those eventualities and we can focus all of our energies on saving lives.

**Louis:** In the same vein, there are, again, you know, these things of float around and hopefully we can sort of put it to rest, the notion of skating rinks being used as temporary morgue facilities?

**Mayor:** No, nothing – no one's even mentioned that to me of the people who have responsibility to deal with this very, very serious issue. No one's mentioned that to me. So again, I will happily on any issue related to the fight against coronavirus answer questions. But on this topic, I just am beseeching everyone to stop focusing on something so painful to people. Let's focus on saving lives. Let's focus on what we can do to help our health care workers and our first responders. Just at a certain point, Errol, I'm going to have no choice but to just put out a very clear statement of the truth, the facts, and stop taking these questions because it's really not fair to the people this city.

**Louis:** Well, let me ask you about a different but also painful question, which is whether or not COVID tests are being administered to people who die of respiratory illness, for example, at home. There's some frontline first responders who were saying not everybody's being – the full dimensions of the disease are not being captured. If you're not testing people, they may have appeared to have died of one cause when fact the underlying cause was the virus.

**Mayor:** Errol, I can't speak to the exact protocol. I can say no one's underestimating the magnitude of this disease. We can speak to in the coming days our understanding of what's happening to those we're losing at home. But I'm very comfortable saying and against this horrible, painful backdrop that, you know, we're never going to underestimate what we're seeing. A lot of us have certainly been trying to sound the alarm. I have, the Governor has, we've been trying to make clear just how bad it could be if things don't change. Dr. Fauci has been very honest about it. So, I don't think that that really tells us a whole lot because we've already told people what could be here. However, again, for the first time, Errol, I would say the city's seeing this, the State is seeing this, the beginning of some evidence that something's changing.

I'm going to be scrupulously clear with New Yorkers that I'm not going to tell you I know there's a change until we see a real body of evidence over many days. But just in the last 24 hours since I last briefed the media, even the situation related to the number of ICU beds and ventilators has appeared to change meaningfully. We got a supply of ventilators in from the State. That was very

helpful. I'm very appreciative to the State of New York but on top of that, we saw today a beginning of a drop in the number of new the cases in which people needed ICU care and ventilators. Meaning the growth that we had seen day by day seem to be constantly going up, seem to be sustaining at a high level, now we've actually seen it start – to begin to pause and start the other way again. We'll need a series of days to be able to see if we really have a trend here, but something has started to change and it means that our ventilator situation now is much better for this week. We can certainly get to the end of the week safely, hopefully even farther than that.

**Louis:** Mr. Mayor, have you or Dr. Katz asked Governor Cuomo for ventilators that were not received? There seemed to be some discrepancy between the number you were requesting or expecting and what the State was aware of.

**Mayor:** I'm not familiar with what you're saying, but I can tell you the State gave us a shipment. I believe it was 500 ventilators and, again, that is now going to see us through pretty much the end of the week. Again, we'll update as we get exact details. But that's definitely giving us, certainly at least a few more days of ability to deal with this crisis.

**Louis:** Well, I was referring to I think it was a statement from your office that there were 2,800 ventilators in the State stockpile, which the Governor's folks did not seem to be aware of.

**Mayor:** We, as I understood – I'm sorry, I misunderstood. As I understand that, Errol, that was something we took from either a publication by the State or a statement by a State official. That's where we got it originally. But if we all know things are evolving, the State and the City are working together closely and, again, we got a shipment from the State now. That's been very, very helpful.

**Louis:** Got it. We've reported that earlier today there was a protest outside of Harlem Hospital. The Brooklyn Eagle reporting that there's going to be a protest at shift change at the Brooklyn VA Hospital. In all cases, these are nurses saying that they don't have the protective equipment and the other resources that they need to do the tremendous job that being asked of them.

**Mayor:** I've spoken to gatherings by phone, tele-town halls of tens of thousands of nurses and other health care workers and professionals. Members of New York State Nurses Association members of 1199 SEIU to let all of them know that we're going to continue to get the PPEs to the hospitals in time across the board. And as of this moment, all the hospitals in New York City have the PPEs they need for this week. The only area where we're still short is surgical gowns. We're still working to get an order in to get what we need for this week. Fallback options are being put together also. But the real issue here, and I had a very good conversation with the Executive Director of NYSNA is the standard that's being held right now is not the ideal standard. I want to be transparent about that. There's a standard that you use in peacetime, if you will, a higher level of PPE than is possible to attain at this point. Literally they're not available in the numbers we need and the types we need. We are working with what the CDC calls a crisis standard, by that standard, we do have the PPEs across the board again with the exception still of surgical gowns which we're working on. That's the fact for this week.

**Louis:** So, I mean the question at the Brooklyn VA Hospital in particular, my understanding is that they are being asked, the ICU nurses, to take care of five patients when the normal standard is two, and apparently the protest was decided upon when one particular nurse was asked to take on a sixth patient. And so, I see reports like that and we hear about these protests at the same time as we hear that there are, you know, a thousand-plus beds at, at Javits. Is there a sort of a logistical issue with making sure the system as a whole is being used effectively?

**Mayor:** The VA is an unusual part of this situation, Errol, and I'm not familiar with if the nurses there are represented by one of those two unions. We'll certainly look into that one immediately. What we are dealing with – obviously the VA is supplied by the federal government, so I need to get more information about what's happening there at that hospital. But the overall situation, yes, many, many health professionals are being asked to do things on different ratios than normal. There are obvious limits to that. Dr. Katz, the CEO of our Health + Hospitals has been clear and he said this to our public hospitals and he said it to the private hospitals too, we're all going to have to be on a battlefield kind of footing here where choices are made to address the needs of the patients working with standards that are much tougher because of the realities of this crisis.

But there's still, of course, have to be standards of how much any health care professional can handle. So, there's always a balance there. There's always a limit. I don't know about the VA situation, I will find out about and be able to answer that going forward. But the overall situation is that folks are being given very clear standards. As I understand, I've heard this consistently of what you do in what is effectively a wartime dynamic that's different than what you would do in a peacetime dynamic to maximally save lives. That's what everyone is focused on.

**Louis:** Okay. Stand by Mr. Mayor. We're going to take a short break here. I'll be back with more from Mayor de Blasio Inside City Hall in just a minute.

[...]

**Louis:** Welcome back to my conversation with Mayor Bill de Blasio. He's coming to us live from the Blue Room inside City Hall. Mr. Mayor, what's the deal with teachers being expected to work on days they would normally have off? I'm thinking of Passover and Good Friday in particular.

**Mayor:** Well, the unions came to an agreement with the city and it mirrored what the State was doing – the State government was doing because the central concern is we need our young people to shelter in place. We need them inside, not outside, not congregating, and one of the ways to encourage them to shelter in place in the midst of a pandemic, is to keep giving them that distance learning – distance learning, that online learning. All of the organizations involved, city, state, obviously our DOE, the two main unions representing educators, all agreed – formal agreement. And obviously if someone has a religious obligation, someone's devoutly religious and needs to take some period of time, they have that right to do it. But in terms of serving our children in the midst of a crisis, it was a decision this – the crisis situation called for it and we're doing it.

**Louis:** On a related question. At some point, when do you, I mean, you've – look, you've been clear from the beginning that you don't necessarily think there's going to be a return to school buildings before the end of the year. At what point should you just declare that to allow parents, students and teachers to better shape the remainder of the year?

**Mayor:** Well, it's a good question. Errol, I think everyone's heard very clearly that there's a very real chance that the distance learning will be all we have for remainder of this school year. We're very sensitive to the point about the high school seniors and trying to make sure they can graduate on time and there may be some special work that could be done with them, if this crisis starts to lift. We might focus on them in a particular way to help them through. But I think the moment we have a little bit clearer sense of the timeline of this crisis and to see if there's any chance we can get back, we'll do so. Originally, we said the first opportunity is April 20th. The state just confirmed they were continuing the pause, I think is still April 29, so obviously that immediately changes the timeline. But we've got to make a decision fairly soon. If we think there's a window still to come back, and what that would be.

**Louis:** Have you and the Chancellor discussed what happens, for example, with summer learning or with efforts to help the students who will inevitably have fallen behind because of this extraordinary situation?

**Mayor:** That's a great question. Right now, I think it's very hard to envision summer programming the traditional way. It's not impossible, but it's hard to envision. I think for everything that we're used to in the summer, there's going to be a question about whether any of it will be safe to do. Remember the crisis starting to reduce is not the same thing as when we change the standards to protect people's health and wellbeing. We have to be really smart about how we handle that going forward and we also have to really make sure that if we think the crisis is ending, that it, we have a sustained period of time that happens. We do not want a situation where it, you know, we unfortunately moved too quickly and then it starts to reassert itself. So there's a lot to work through. I start with the assumption that anything for summer is a real question mark right now. We might be able to do distance learning as you know, a good alternative. But anything in person is a real question mark right now.

**Louis:** Okay. I've got some viewer questions. This is from Michael. "Ask him why," ask the Mayor why, "he continues to be driven to Prospect Park for his walks when he has a huge yard at Gracie Mansion and a park adjacent to the property that would serve the purpose."

**Mayor:** Yeah, Errol, I just think this is not something that really is what people should be focused on in the middle of this crisis. I go get my exercise like everyone else, I go to my home neighborhood. It's part of what helps me just continue to work nonstop on this. I'm on conference calls pretty much the whole time. This is just something we shouldn't focus on. There's much better things to talk about.

**Louis:** I assume you know most of our viewers to drive 12 miles and take a walk in the apartment next to your house or something?

**Mayor:** Errol, [inaudible] a thousand times. It's, my situation is particular and I'm here serving people. I assure you every single day and I'm just doing something I think will help me to be the most effective. I have an obligation to everyone. I'm going to do what I think is right to be most effective. Period.

**Louis:** Here's a got a question from Jessica in the Bronx. "The volunteer systems for doctors seems broken. People can't complete the process. People sign up and are never called. Is there a plan to fix this?"

**Mayor:** I'm concerned hearing that and I'll act on that right away. We've gotten a lot of people who've come forward to volunteer. This is the first time I've actually heard someone say that they're having a problem with that system, but I want to make sure it's tight because we need it to work. So again, for anyone who wants to volunteer to help us with health care, and when I say volunteer, it means a health care professional comes forward. We will compensate them, but we need them obviously assigned to one of the places where we need help, that kind of help. Anyone who has donations of surgical masks or other supplies we need. Anyone who wants to donate food to feed hospital workers or money to pay for their support, I can go to [nyc.gov/helpnow](https://nyc.gov/helpnow) or can call 8-3-3-NYC-0-0-4-0. So please help out if you can, but I will follow up for sure, Errol, to make sure if there's anything going on with the doctor signups that we fix that right away.

**Louis:** Okay. In our last minute, I believe we've had the first fatality of somebody who was being detained at Rikers Island. And it raises the question once again about whether or not those serving short sentences and other categories, especially those vulnerable and at risk or older should simply be released before things get any worse.

**Mayor:** It's an important question, Errol. So, as of today, somewhere around 1,100 inmates have been released to address the coronavirus situation. That's versus about 5,000 we started with, you know, a month or more ago. There's still a substantial number of inmates who are being reviewed by the DA's and/or by the State of New York. The ones that I had control over were the folks who were given those short sentences, as you said, except for folks who had specific offenses related to domestic violence or sexual offenses. We released all the people that I had the ability to act on directly, but I really want to see the district attorneys and the state finish their process for anyone else that's outstanding. Because you know, anyone who has those vulnerabilities, health-wise, should be released at this point, and Correctional Health which is run by Health + Hospitals has looked at individual inmates, given an assessment. The state has that, the DA's have that. For those who have the serious health problems and are vulnerable, they should be released unless there's a very important extenuating circumstance that mitigates against it. For those who are released, remember if they're awaiting trial, for example, the second the crisis is over, they come back to jail to continue awaiting trial. This is not a blank check. So, I think it's really important that any of those outstanding cases be determined really quickly.

**Louis:** Okay. We're going to leave it there for now. As I said at the top, this is supposed to be one of the worst weeks. We're going to wish you and your staff have the best of luck in getting us through it and we'll talk again next week. Thanks, Mr. Mayor.

**Mayor:** Thank you, Errol.

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