

THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
NEW YORK, NY 10007

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

TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. As we discussed before the break, the City Council is considering increasing the housing voucher amount, which could help more New Yorkers move out of City shelters. Meanwhile, Mayor de Blasio began today with a big announcement. Our city will not have a remote learning option for public schools in the fall because all students will be back in the classroom. The Mayor 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, Errol. How are you doing tonight?

Louis: Just fine, thanks. And I want to pick up where our last segment left off. The Council is debating whether to increase the housing voucher. In one case, say for a family of four, from \$1,500 to around \$2,200. This is something that you have opposed in the past. What was the source of your hesitation?

Mayor: Well, the concern here is just get the State and City on the same level playing field, really. What we want to make sure is that we maximize the ability to help homeless folks, but not inadvertently shift the responsibility and the costs from the State to the City. And we had good conversations with the Council, Speaker Johnson and I have talked about this quite a bit. Look, I think we can get this all pulled together, get the State to act, the City to act and get everything aligned and in the process help more homeless folks. That's what I am looking to do.

Louis: As a matter of market reality, do you support the idea of creating from whatever source, a voucher that more or less matches Section 8?

Mayor: I think it makes a lot of sense, if it's coordinated with the State to increase the amount we're putting into the vouchers and make them as usable as possible. What, again, I would always be cautious on is not creating an inadvertent unfunded mandate on ourselves. I think we just have to keep doing the work to get the State to come along. I think there's a good chance the State will come along because this is a very sensible approach.

Louis: On a related note. Are there plans to move the people who were housed in hotels back into congregate shelters? And if so, when will that happen?

Mayor: Yeah, I've said for months, that's the plan. The details are going to be coming out soon. But it's quite clear, we see, thank God, a plummeting COVID rate. I mean this is such good news Errol. Today, I announced, you know, it's the lowest now in eight months, the COVID rate in

New York City, getting better all the time, more and more vaccinations. Absolutely this is the environment in which it makes sense to bring people safely back into the shelters, which are built to be able to support homeless folks and help them move on to permanent housing. So, we'll have more to say on it soon, but that's always been the goal.

Louis: Okay. Let me switch topics to some of the attacks that we've seen in recent days in the Diamond District, in Borough Park. I believe there was an attack in, over in a Union Square. As far as you're concerned, is this purely a policing matter or are – is there a role for mediators or peacemakers?

Mayor: Oh, I think anytime you see hate in our communities, this is a problem we have dealt with before in our city, our nation, there's a role for education. There's a role for community leaders. There's a role for solidarity between communities to show unity. And then of course there's a role for police as well. And we've had police out in force to send a very powerful message protecting our Jewish community that's been through these kinds of things before. But I think Errol, it is so important to say, we will not accept anti-Semitism. We're going to fight it everywhere, but you need all of those tools.

Louis: To the extent that the immediate touch point that triggered some of the violence appears to be events overseas, do we need to make that part of the conversation as well? Or is this strictly a local law enforcement matter?

Mayor: Again, I think the issue of anti-Semitism – we saw some horrible acts of anti-Semitism a few years ago, the Tree of Life synagogue massacre in Pittsburgh, for example, that were not related to any particular incident overseas. Anti-Semitism is a horrible, pernicious reality in this country and in many Western countries. And it has to be fought every day. That's the bottom line to me. I mean, right now, I think we've got an immediate moment, thank God, there is a cease fire right now in the Middle East. But this work has to be done all the time. Look, white supremacy, which had quite a renaissance in the last few years, goes at people of color. It goes at Jewish people. It goes at immigrants. All of that negativity has been dredged up. We're going to have to work together to tamp it back down and ultimately end it.

Louis: When it comes to the anti-Asian attacks that we've seen, and there was just recently a terrible one in the subway. In multiple cases though, I have noticed the attack seems to be committed by a mentally or emotionally disturbed person. Are we missing the mark by talking about hate crimes when the actual problem may lie elsewhere?

Mayor: I think the hate crime reality is something we have to deal with and address and name, and never underestimate. Look over the years, I'm sure some hate crimes have been committed by people with mental health problems. We have seen some of that lately, for sure. But also a number of hate crimes have been committed by people who we don't see a particular diagnosed mental health problem. I think hatred runs very deep sadly in this country. As I said, it was given license by Donald Trump and by the far right in recent years. So, I think the more pertinent reality is why are so many people feeling that they are getting a message or an acceptance of hate? Well, that goes back to the recent political history of this country. Thank God, Joe Biden is president. Thank God, he is sending a message of unity. But you're not going to undo Trumpism

overnight. Nor have we been able to undo all the other, you know, racist or supremacist movements and nationalist movements over the years here and other countries. It takes real work. But ultimately the vast majority of people don't buy into that kind of exclusionary ideology. We've got work to do, again to just cut it off at the knees ultimately.

Louis: But I mean, Mr. Mayor, this is what I was getting at is – I mean, it's, that seems to – I mean, everything you said can be true, but it seems to be missing the mark when the suspect that people are looking for, or end up arresting turns out to be, you know, young, African-American, you know, a medical diagnosis and they're off their meds. That's not really related to the politics of the situation.

Mayor: If you say there's a mental health element sometimes, I agree with that. And we've been very aggressively addressing mental health, including sending teams out into subways and communities to address any acute mental health issues. But that is missing what I'm trying to say. Let me try and say it more clearly. Why suddenly this intense negativity towards our Asian-American brothers and sisters? Because for years, we had a president in the White House who said things like this was the Chinese, you know, flu. And put the origins of COVID on one people and one country. That was one of the precipitating events here. So, there's folks walking around with mental health challenges every day. It's about 20 percent of our population has one form or another of mental health challenge. But hatred coming out from folks with every kind of mental status, hatred coming out and being acted on often has a spark and something that organizes it and gives it permission. And I think if you took the last previous four years, and there was no Donald Trump, I, and there were not these white supremacist movements being given as much license and as much room to maneuver? I don't think you see some of the things we're seeing now, even in New York City.

Louis: Okay. Let me switch topics. When we hear – when you hear mayoral candidates talking about policing in particular, from your point of view do they speak from a level of knowledge of how to balance the ideas of reform with the crime prevention that most New Yorkers want to be central to law enforcement?

Mayor: There are a lot of different candidates. It's hard to generalize. I've certainly heard times where candidates said things that bore little resemblance to reality to me. I talked to New Yorkers all over the city and have for 20, 30 years now. And I understand that people want quality policing. They want quality of life issues and violence addressed. They also want respect. They want non-discriminatory policing. They want that balance. They want reform and they want safety. And I think some candidates get it more than others, but I've certainly heard statements that I'm sure certain candidates thought were politically appealing, but didn't represent what most working people are looking for, which is that balance.

Louis: Okay. Standby, Mr. Mayor, we're going to take a short break here. I'll have more with Mayor de Blasio in just a minute. Stay with us.

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Welcome back to Inside City Hall, and once again, joined by Mayor de Blasio, he joins us from the blue room, and Mr. Mayor, I want to talk about the reopening plan that you announced this morning. As of now, the plan is to bring all students in all grades back into the classroom in the fall. As far as you can tell, will there be any kind of distancing requirement that goes with that?

Mayor: Well, Errol, let me first say, this is a really big moment for this city and a very good day for this city. We're bringing back our school's full strength, all our kids into the classroom, where they can get the support that they need and they deserve, and once again, New York City is leading the nation when it comes to opening schools, and I think that's going to actually help create momentum to open schools everywhere. Right now, the distancing requirement is three feet. We're now – because COVID has reduced so much in the city, within the CDC current guidelines we could do every kid three feet apart, and we could make that work. But I fundamentally believe that not in May, today in May, but in the next three plus months before school opens that standard is going to be relaxed further. I think we're going to go into the school year with something very similar to pre-pandemic standards.

Louis: There is some time, of course, before all of this takes effect. Do you need state approval of your plan?

Mayor: What we have done now is again, within the current CDC guidance, within the current requirements from the state, if we had to do it within the three feet, we would do that. So, we're current, while we're saying we want to do in September is current with what we are approved to do right now. I fully expect the CDC to come back with guidelines that give us even more freedom, and of course the State of New York is not going to go in a different direction than the CDC, and this is part of why we're so confident. The numbers are clear, our healthcare team is very, very clear, the impact of almost 8 million individual vaccination doses so far in the city and regularly climbing, we're in a whole different situation than we've been at any other point in this crisis. So, I feel very good that we're going to have every child back in the classroom.

Louis: Of course, it is the job of parents to wonder and worry about what could go wrong, and so a number of things that I think will probably occur to a lot of our fellow parents, outbreaks and variants, right? Including foreign variants that are now being found in the US, are in some ways a set of unknowns. We don't know how much protection the vaccinations will provide for each specific variant, and we actually don't know how long our vaccinations will be effective, right?

Mayor: Well, I'd say a couple of things, Errol in terms of vaccine effectiveness we know that vaccines work and if it became apparent at any point that we needed to give a booster, which is something we have plenty of experience with, with other types of illnesses the supply of vaccine is clearly there. The apparatus to give the shots is there. We would go back and give boosters. The question of variants – we've seen a lot of continuity between the variants. That doesn't mean there couldn't be something new, but consistently our health care team after analyzing all the data from around the world keeps coming back and saying, they are, thank God, controlled by the vaccines overwhelmingly. You're right, something could change, but we sure haven't seen that something yet. I think the important thing to remember is this is a plan that we are ready to execute, every child back in school. I think the vast majority of parents are ready for that. They've gone through so much in the last year. They're ready for normalcy. They're ready to

have their kids back where they can learn best. If something really big were to change, we obviously could adapt. We've done it before, but I do not see that at this point. I see full steam ahead.

Louis: What are you able, or what are you likely to do to encourage or require vaccinations of students and staff, and I'm wondering if you've given any thought to offering vaccinations in the schools themselves.?

Mayor: We have given thought to that, and we're looking at the possibilities of doing that as hopefully sooner, rather than later. You know, the most efficient place to give the vaccination of course, is in the existing centers, and we've gotten a lot of parents who have wanted to bring their 12 to 15-year-olds to the current center. So, that's been the first effort, but I think schools make a lot of sense. We're not going to mandate vaccinations but we're going to make it, you know, consistently available right down to the grassroots, lots of incentives and look, the numbers keep coming back, Errol. Is it as great as it was once? No, but are the numbers of vaccinations still strong and allowing us to keep moving forward? Absolutely, and I have now learned from experience that what we thought was overwhelmingly a hesitancy problem is actually first and foremost, a problem of making access, easy, making it appealing, make it convenient. Yeah, there's a hesitancy problem for some other people as well, but we still got a huge swath of New Yorkers we can reach just by making vaccination easy and even a little bit fun because of all the incentives.

Louis: For whatever it's worth. I took my 15-year-old to get vaccinated at the Javits Center yesterday, and I guess you could call it convenient, although it's, you know, it's a bit of a hike from the subway, but other than that they, they kind of knew what they were doing and there were no lines. So, certainly some stuff is working out well. Let me ask you, Mr. Mayor, when it comes to this ending of the option of remote learning, do students get to keep their remote devices that they currently have?

Mayor: Yeah, we're looking at the details of how we're going to handle everything, but we want to remember one of the things we announced last year is we want to close the COVID achievement gap. We need to bring our kids back strong academically. We need address their emotional challenges as well. But one of the ways we closed that COVID achievement gap is by using digital education after-school hours to expand on the opportunity for each child in a very individualized manner. So, we want that individualized education, that means having a device I think overwhelmingly the best way to do that is have the kids who got them in that huge distribution is going to be almost half a million devices when everything is said and done that they continue to work with those devices and further education beyond the normal school day.

Louis: Okay, and then I guess finally families were given a choice just a few weeks ago to opt back into in-person learning, over 60 percent chose not to do that. You were doing borough town halls, but they haven't even been completed, and now we're kind of going in a different direction. How do you plan to, I guess, get buy-in from the parents now that we were we're going in a different direction?

Mayor: It's just an entirely different reality than even a few months ago when we were planning the opt-in period. This is the final battle against COVID, based on everything we know now. Again, Errol, could the world change. That's always a possibility, but the pattern has been extraordinarily clear all over the country. We are beating back COVID once and for all, because it's just an overwhelming number of vaccinations. That's what we needed all along. We have it, we need to start thinking beyond COVID. We need to start thinking of a world past COVID. I think parents are going to be ready for that. So, it doesn't resemble what we went through before. We're giving people lots of notice. It's four months from now, we're welcoming parents come see your child's school. If you haven't been there in a while, we're going to be doing open houses, now through the summer, into the fall, I think it's going to be such a different and better environment by fall. It's going to be very natural for families to just be comfortable with kids back to school.

Louis: Real quick, I mean, I know, you know, that there are a lot of families that have overseas ties. They have deep attachments, and in some cases, they have deep attachment to countries where health systems are collapsing. Deaths are mounting, systems are being overrun. Is there some prospect of New York offering some solidarity or even some actual help since it sounds like soon, we're going to be at a point where we have a surplus of vaccines here?

Mayor: Yeah. We're all in this together, and I'm very pleased the United States is offering that help. In fact, last week we said we were sending help to India, ventilators and BiPAP machines, which have been such a crucial need in India, and we're sending PPE. So, when we can we're going to step up and help, but I also want to make sure, Errol, that we're smart about keeping strong reserves for the future. It's one of the things we learned in this crisis, having a strategic reserve, we've built that up. We're going to keep that and going strong into September, which is just going to be absolutely crucial to our recovery. We're bringing back schools for our kids and families. It's going to supercharge our recovery to have this absolutely crucial piece of our city and our society back to normal.

Louis: Okay, we'll leave it there for now. Thanks very much. We will talk again real soon.

Mayor: Thank you, Errol.

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