

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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 5, 2021, 11:05 AM
CONTACT: pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov, (212) 788-2958

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

Brian Lehrer: It's the Brian Lehrer Show on WNYC. Good morning again, everyone. And now it's time for our Friday Ask The Mayor call in, my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio at 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0, 6-4-6-4-3-5-7-2-8-0. Or you can tweet a question, use the hashtag #AskTheMayor. We will watch our Twitter feed go by for good questions. And good morning, Mr. Mayor. Welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning, Brian. How are you doing?

Lehrer: I'm doing okay. Thank you. And let me start with a very practical question about vaccine distribution. You said the arrival of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine will allow you to go door-to-door to home-bound seniors. Where does that stand as of right now? And how can those seniors sign up?

Mayor: We're going to get the signup process out very shortly. What we're doing to begin Brian, is we are focused on Co-Op City in the Bronx, which is over 40,000-person community with a huge number of seniors, including home-bound seniors. So, we know there's a lot of people we can reach quickly there. We're also going to be in Brighton Beach right away. That's another place where we have a lot of buildings where we know we can reach people. And what we're doing is about to announce – we just have a few pieces we have to sort out, a sign-up process. What's great here is a number of parts of the City are working together, Department for the Aging helping to lead the way with the Health Department. And the Fire Department is actually providing the medical personnel who are going out, and this is literally, you have to go apartment by apartment, home by home and do this one-on-one. So, it is – it takes time, it's labor intensive. But now that we're starting to get the Johnson & Johnson doses, we're going to be able to do it. And very shortly, we'll be providing people a way to sign up all over the city.

Lehrer: And it's the lack of refrigeration requirements, like the Pfizer and Moderna, I know they are different from each other as well, but Johnson & Johnson is even less so, that allows you to do this as I understand it. When you say the medical personnel, are people going to hang around for 15 minutes in each case after somebody gets a shot? Because that's what people are doing when they go places to get their shots, they're supposed to stay there for 15 minutes to make sure they don't have an allergic reaction.

Mayor: Yeah, that is my understanding. And we'll certainly, as we talk to people about the signup process and how it's going to work, we'll address that. But that's certainly my

understanding. We want to make sure everything's safe, especially for home-bound seniors, who obviously are folks dealing with real health challenges. But you're right, what you said before Brian. Because Johnson & Johnson does not require the same rigorous level of refrigeration, you know, we can take it out into a community and use it effectively. The other thing that's really important for everyone to know, and this is why I'm going to get the Johnson & Johnson vaccine when my time comes. But particularly for home-bound seniors, the fact that it's one shot does the entire job means that you know it's done. Obviously, a home-bound senior cannot get out for a second shot. They would have to wait for someone to bring it to them. I really like the notion of anyone knowing that the first shot has taken care of the entire mission. And that's something we'll be talking about a lot. And we really – you know, again, it'll take us time to get to every home-bound senior, but that's what our goal is, is to reach everyone who needs it and wants to have it.

Lehrer: You know there's a, COVID variant now being called the New York variant because it was discovered here first. And it might be more transmissible, and we don't know yet if it evades the vaccines at all. But are you seeing case or hospitalization numbers that would indicate this variant is either a big deal or kind of media hype?

Mayor: Yeah. Right now, I – first of all, I talked to Dr. Chokshi about this yesterday. No one should prejudice. And he believes by not too far into next week, we'll have much more definitive information about it. But here's where we should avoid any possibility of hype or misunderstanding or alarm. Let's talk about our numbers for today. The city's overall positivity level today, seven-day average is 5.8 percent. It hasn't been that low in quite a while. And the hospitalization is 221. So, getting close again to our threshold of 200. It has been going down steadily. This is really interesting to see these numbers – the confirmed positivity level among our hospitalizations was under 40 percent. Again, we have not seen that in a while. I would say if we're looking at trend lines? No, we are seeing in fact an improved situation. But we're going to get a full report out to the public on what the Department of Health has learned as it's analyzed this new variant. The most important thing I can say, definitively, that across all the variants that have been out there, Britain and South Africa, et cetera, our Health team consistently says the vaccines are working against the variants and the single best defense is to go out and get vaccinated.

Lehrer: Jacob in Queens, you're on WNYC with Mayor de Blasio. Hi Jacob.

Question: Yeah. Hi. Hello, Mr. Mayor. I had my second Moderna shot yesterday. And my question was I travel abroad quite a bit. I have relatives in several countries and is there any way to get some kind of vaccine passport, something that can be – you can show some kind of foreign authority, hey look I'm kosher?

Mayor: Yeah. Thank you. Thank you, Jacob. This is something we're working on right now. You know, trying to determine the best way – we, of course want to really respect people's privacy. But you're right, there's situations, particularly with travel where it might be very helpful to have a clear certified example of the fact that you've been vaccinated. So, we're working on right now, the best way to address that. And we will have more to say on that, I think next week. We got to help people to be able to navigate what will be a much better world. I want to get five

million people vaccinated fully by June. I think we're well on track to do that. Last week, last Friday, we had our biggest vaccination day since it began. We got 76,000 people vaccinated in one day. So, as long as we get supply, this is going to take off. We still need more supply. But you're right, we got to have a way as more and more people get vaccinated for it to be confirmed in ways that people need. And we'll be working to work that out quickly.

Lehrer: Gary, in Manhattan, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Gary.

Question: Hi, Mr. Mayor. I have two teenage children who have not been in that public high schools in a year. Private schools are open. Gyms are open, now movie theaters are open. The toll on their lives in every way has been immeasurable. They are suffering. They are withdrawn. They are not in, they are not outside. They're not socializing. The CDC, the experts say, open the schools. Can you commit to a date when the high schools will be open? Thank you.

Mayor: Gary, thank you. Thank you. Thank you for the question. I feel your passion. And I'm a parent, I absolutely want to see kids back in school. We did have high school opened in October and part of November. But of course, we then had a huge uptick in the positivity and the disease. And we have to deal with that. We are going to bring back high schools. How and when, we're going to have an announcement next week on the details. And I am very hopeful that we are going to be able to continue to build up the number of kids coming back in the schools. Remember, we've got right now where the next – you know, we had middle school start last week, it's been very successful. I'm looking forward to high school. Then the question, can we bring even more kids back in, in the course of the school year? Which will depend on what happens with the disease and the vaccinations. And then September where I want literally every kid to be able to come back to every school. So, this has got to move aggressively. But, Gary, you're right. I mean, kids have gone through hell here and it's not healthy for kids to be out of school. That's the bottom line.

Lehrer: We have a question on Twitter from a listener who wants to – who says all families deserve info about the plan for September. What can you tell us specifically about that plan?

Mayor: Well, I just had a long meeting with our new Schools Chancellor Meisha Ross Porter and her team on this very question. And what I can tell you is we intend to be able to accommodate every single child, every family that wants their child back in school in September. It is our expectation we can accommodate everyone in-person, five days a week. The fact is a lot's going to happen because it's a long way from now from March to September. And a lot could happen – good or bad or mixed with the coronavirus. But my hope is that we have advanced so far by September that there's literally no one who wants to be remote anymore. I have to be honest that I think even if we have advanced a lot, there will be parents who still won't be ready, won't be comfortable. My expectation is we'll have to have a remote option. But we – I think there's only two realistic pieces here, a full five day a week calendar for kids in-person. And then a pure remote option for families that just won't be ready at that point. But I do not foresee blended being a part of the equation anymore. I think we've got to get kids in school maximum number, five days a week. That's the vision we're working on.

Lehrer: And here's more of that Twitter user's question. That's kind of a follow-up to what you just said. This person writes, what would he say to parents who are leaving New York City schools for private or other options, because we have no September plan and the two-case rule? So, what about the two-case rule in this scenario that you just laid out? Because I think it's something like if there are two cases close enough together in one school building, then everybody has to go from home for a while?

Mayor: Yeah. It's a little more complex than that. But what it means is if there's two cases that cannot be traced in such a fashion to a specific cause, that it might mean there's more widespread distribution of the coronavirus in the building. That's what causes a shutdown. That rule is being re-evaluated as we speak. Because we continue to see improvement in fighting the coronavirus, more and more people vaccinated. Well over, you know, we're over 2.1 million people vaccinated now. You know, there's a lot moving and changing and of course the schools have been just absolutely consistently safe throughout – extraordinarily low amount of coronavirus positivity in the schools. So, when you think about all of that, we're going to keep looking at that two-case rule and figuring out what we can do, but that's now. September is going to be a whole new ball game. So, I would say to your core question Brian, and I'm saying this as a parent. I would say to anyone, okay, if you believe in New York City public schools, if you want a great public school education for your child for free, here's what I'll tell you about September. And I know that our new Chancellor Meisha Ross Porter believes in this 110 percent. We will be fully open in September. There will be five day a week instruction for everyone, period. We of course will have to have health and safety rules depending on what's going on with the coronavirus. But there'll be an entire reset as we figure out where we stand. And we'll work with all the stakeholders, we'll work with our Health team especially, to determine what the ground rules need to be in that new environment in September. But I expect September to be a much, much improved environment compared to now. So, folks who are trying to judge September, according to today's reality are making a mistake. Public school will be available for all in-person in September. That's the plan.

Lehrer: I have another two-case rule question that comes from a story in Bklyner about whether it's too rigid? Like particularly there's a school called K280, pre-K in the Bishop Ford complex shared with two middle schools. It's a big campus compound in Windsor Terrace. And the pre-K kids are now shut out for ten days because there was one case there, but the other one in the middle school that they don't share air with at all, in a fairly distant wing of the building, from what I gather. Have you seen stories like that or have new thoughts about co-located schools where the two groups are very physically separated and the two-case rule?

Mayor: Yeah, I think that's an area that we're absolutely reevaluating. That needs to be reconsidered in light of what we're seeing, because that takes the underlying concept. And I think in some ways misses the point. The underlying concept was if there is spread in a school, if we can't rule it out, we have to be cautious. And, of course, that was a standard – to be fair to everyone, that was a standard built in August and September for a very different reality than what we're facing now. A time when we did not know if and when we would get the vaccine, for example. We're in a very different reality now. So, we're continuing to open up the schools. We're continuing to make changes. This is being reevaluated as we speak. We'll have more to say on it, but I do want to emphasize to people, don't presume. I mean, I want to be open and

honest. Don't presume where we are in the beginning of March is the same place we're going to be in April or May. And certainly not the same place we're going to be in September.

Lehrer: And here's a caller who hopes to be in high school next fall. Samuel in Brooklyn, an eighth grader. Samuel you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Thanks for calling in.

Question: Hi.

Lehrer: Hey there.

Mayor: Hi Samuel. How are you doing?

Question: I'm good. How are you?

Mayor: Good, good.

Question: So, I am calling because I'm a homeschooled eighth grader. I'm applying to public school for high school. And I just found out from the high school enrollment office three days after the applications were due, that my grades can't be entered into the system. So, I can't ever have a chance of being accepted into a screened high school that requires grades for entry. There are 10,000 homeschooled children who this affects, and it limits my choices by a hundred schools, over a hundred schools. And I believe that this is unacceptable and it's discriminatory against homeschool children. And I ask you, how is this fair?

Mayor: I appreciate the question, Samuel. This is the first, literally the first I've ever heard of this problem. Please give your information to WNYC. I'm sure there's some way to address this. And let's see if what you're giving us an example will help us find a solution. Because obviously I do not want to see anyone left out. So, give us your information and someone will follow up with you today. And then we'll figure out, you know, from your example, what we need to do in general.

Lehrer: Let me ask you about the Andrew Cuomo scandals. You've been criticizing the Governor, but what would cause you to join those calling for him to resign as the USA Today editorial board is the latest to do? What would your bottom line be?

Mayor: Well, let me start by the events – with the events in the last 24 hours. I mean, I watched the interview with Charlotte Bennett and it's just painful. It's so disturbing. I find her just 100 percent believable. And I feel, you know, empathy for what she went through and she speaks so clearly and powerfully, that that never should have happened. And I think it's just profoundly troubling that it did. Brian, to answer your question, look, I think evidence is mounting. And I think as more evidence comes in, if you know, I think it's just a matter of, we need all the facts. Whether the facts continue in this pattern, I don't see how he goes on. I think that's as simple as that.

Lehrer: Some people are saying he should temporarily step aside now because he can't govern properly while the sexual harassment investigation goes on. And I'm curious if you, as mayor,

think Cuomo remaining in office or stepping aside during an investigation would mean different things for New York City during this period. For example, the State budget has to be finalized this month, that always has implications for the city. Do you think that or anything else comes out differently for the city with a Cuomo in limbo, as opposed to Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul stepping in?

Mayor: I think there's a couple of points. The first is, you know, there's no one indispensable. Folks try to create the image of being indispensable. No, one's indispensable. The State of New York's going to continue on, no matter what. We have two very effective experienced legislative leaders in Carl Heastie and Andrea Stewart-Cousins. You know, even if the Governor stepped aside, the budget will happen on time, I don't have a doubt in my mind. I think the second question is trying to be objective about the reality the Governor's created because so often he's worked against the interest of the people of New York City and used his power, and his stranglehold on a lot of the process, to disadvantage our people. I can't tell you how many times I have had the experience in the Albany of the Governor believing he could take things from New York City because he thought he could get away with it politically. So, I don't think it's a given that it improves or worsens the process because I've seen a lot of things in the process that were really broken. I think Albany has been broken for a long time and the Governor has been governor for a decade. I mean, let's put two points go together. So, I'm not afraid at all of some disruption in that. And I think in terms of the pandemic, look, we're moving forward. This city is moving forward rapidly. We're recovering, the health care situation is getting better. The Biden administration is here. That's the real X-factor. The Biden administration is here and they're moving the vaccine supply. And the things that we need to happen are happening. But this Governor didn't give us the freedom to vaccinate. He literally stopped us from vaccinating senior citizens and first responders and teachers. That wasn't good government, that wasn't helpful. So, I'm quite certain we will all move forward together even if he does have to step aside.

Lehrer: And, you know, the State Legislature is rescinding some of the Governor's pandemic emergency powers. So, for example, as I understand it, he can still order the City to open or close schools or restaurants or whatever, or distribute vaccines in a certain order, but the public, and now you as mayor, get to express your opinion in a more formal way before he can make any such decree. If I'm understanding what I'm reading correctly. I'm curious if that's your understanding of what's changed. And if you think that's good, bad, or neutral for the city.

Mayor: I think your summary is pretty accurate. I would add, of course, the notion that it empowers localities to go back to the normal process of creating their own executive orders on issues that we have to deal with, but it's – look, it's a step in the right direction. I do appreciate the action the Legislature is taking. I think it will help us, but it is not full local control. It's not normal governance, and we need to get back to it as quickly as possible. We're not done with the pandemic, but we are rapidly coming out of it. And democracy is democracy. You know, our government system was set up to empower localities to manage the reality of our people's lives. And we need that restored, especially given the dysfunction in Albany and given the mistakes the Governor has made. I mean, that moment, again, where I had to fight for the freedom to vaccinate was very telling. We knew that the vaccination process was dysfunctional because we couldn't reach so many people who needed it, and we couldn't create a viable agile system if we were not allowed, for example, to vaccinate people over 65. It just didn't work. But that was a

long drawn out fight with Albany. If we had local control again, that would have been done instantly and a lot more would have been vaccinated earlier.

Lehrer: Sandra in Brooklyn, you're on WNYC with Mayor de Blasio. Hi, Sandra.

Question: Hi, there. I want to thank you for – I called you probably about two years ago about supporting motorcycles in the city, and you connected me with Chief Chan at that time. And we now have a motorcycle [inaudible] we're working on getting practice space for motorcyclists to address the increase in motorcycle fatalities, as well as there was an increase in car fatalities. But I wanted to mention something else. I see that you have a great initiative to increase bicycle parking and the local motorcycle dealers are finding that motorcycles are flying out of the shop, with people looking for alternative modes of transportation. So, I want to urge you to consider adding motorcycle parking. We're congestion reducing and have a very light footprint. So, with getting people to practice and educate, it's a really viable, alternative motor transportation. So, please consider adding motorcycle-only parking. We don't require that much. You can get about six motorcycles into the space of one car, if not more.

Mayor: Thank you. That's really helpful, Sandra. I appreciate that. I'm going to let our new Transportation Commissioner Hank Gutman know that this – who was the person who actually announced the 10,000 new parking spots for bikes. I'm going to let them know about this conversation. I think you're making a really valuable point. I think the more alternatives that we can support, the number one thing is to get people out of cars when it's one person, one car, that's the single worst thing for both the environment and for congestion. So, I appreciate what you're raising, and I please give your information again to WNYC, and I'd like to make sure the Commissioner and his team follow up with you.

Lehrer: Dale in the East Village you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Dale.

Question: Hi, good morning, Brian. And good morning, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Good morning. How are you doing today?

Question: Okay. I'm calling in because, with the Open Restaurants program, which you know, I think we all agree was it was a great idea to get restaurants and bars a chance to make it through the pandemic, but at the same time for people like me, and there's a lot throughout the neighborhood who live across the street or above the restaurants, the noise from diners and outdoor music has become a real problem where there was none until the program got created. So, with that in mind, just a couple of quick questions it seems that there were program guidelines, prohibiting outdoor music, but no one on my block is following them. So, are there guidelines and how can we get them enforced? Because calling 3-1-1 for music, you know, issues, I haven't gotten any results from that. And just, secondly you know, just the general noise from diners can get really loud too. And as the economy recovers and restaurants get back on their feet, is there any chance the City can reevaluate the permanent status of Open Streets? Because right now I kind of feel trapped by things and can't afford to move to get away from the noise.

Mayor: Yeah. Listen, thank you for raising this and we don't want anyone feeling what you're feeling. We want to make sure there's a balance struck. I'm going to ask our Nightlife Office to follow up with you. And if you please give your information to WNYC, they have – the Nightlife Office has a really good track record of mediating and coming up with solutions. Look, we do believe, I believe, a hundred percent in Open Restaurants and Open Streets. This is something we're making permanent. I believe it's a really valuable part of our future and we learned it in crisis, but it's something we will be able to use in much better times to make the city you know, a more vibrant place. But I hear you loud and clear. I totally understand, because I've experienced it too, over the years. You know, it's very alienating when you feel there's too much noise and it's not being addressed. And that's why our Nightlife Office was created to go in and mediate. If we have to bring enforcement, of course we will. But a lot of times, if we say to a restaurant or a diner, we say, look, you have a problem with your neighbors and you got to find a balance point, they'd get it. And they want to be good neighbors and they don't want the danger of penalties. So, let's see if we can resolve your case, but I want to affirm to everyone the future of New York City is continuing the Open Restaurants program and the Open Streets program. It is going to be part of what brings us back and we need a strong recovery. It's going to be a very important part of that recovery.

Lehrer: Does that require any specific additions to the noise code for these circumstances? Because I do get these calls fairly frequently from different parts of the city. People who didn't have this noise problem before understanding that we need Open Restaurants and Open Streets, especially in the pandemic, but having a noise problem that they didn't have in their apartments.

Mayor: I don't know of a specific change that there needs to be made in the noise code. I think this is about, and it's our obligation as a City government to keep moving with the changes, doing the right kind of education of the business owners, the right kind of mediation with the Nightlife Office, the right kind of enforcement, if that's what's needed. I really think we can do that. I think this is such a positive thing. And you know, right now we already know that Open Restaurants brought back about a hundred thousand jobs. It's just so important to the city and by the way, it's a beautiful thing. It's brought additional life and vibrancy. That's going to continue and be true well beyond the pandemic, but it has to be balanced like everything else in this beautiful crowded place. So, we have to keep perfecting our strategy. And if we have to add something to the law, we will. But I think right now we have the tools we need to address the problem.

Lehrer: Jack in Gowanus, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hi, Jack.

Question: Hi, Brian, and good morning, Mayor de Blasio. I'm a member of the community group, Voice of Gowanus. And I've got a question for you about affordable housing, which is such a crucial issue. And I know it's something you've been trying to address, but our group is very concerned about these shocking public comments made by Christos Tsiamis, the Environmental Protection Agency's lead engineer for the superfund site in Gowanus. At a recent public hearing, he validated the community's longstanding concerns about the dangerous levels of toxic pollution at a site known as Public Place, where private developers, your administration and Council Member Brad Lander, want to put up an affordable housing complex called Gowanus Green and put a school. Mr. Tsiamis, who has a master's degree in chemical

engineering and has studied this site for over a decade, said that the current remediation efforts are dangerously insufficient and could put future low-income residents and school children at risk. The toxic pollutants run over 150-feet deep at this site and have been linked to elevated rates of cancer and learning disabilities. And this location is also in a FEMA special flood hazard area that flooded during Hurricane Sandy. Now at a December 15th press conference you said, “We’re never going to let people be in a situation that’s unsafe,” in responding to a question about this. And what I want to ask you today is given the stakes, especially for low-income residents and kids and your administration’s mixed record on housing, health, and safety, will you commit today to inviting the EPA and FEMA to coauthor, supervise, and help execute any environmental impact study that includes this site? And I’d love to get a yes or no answer and an explanation of your reasoning.

Mayor: I appreciate the question. And it’s a complex question, is the honest truth. So, I don’t agree with you – I mean, I like to always be transparent – I don’t agree with you on the “mixed record.” I think we have – there’s been a very strong, consistent record on health and safety in housing. And we’ve been expanding on that and I’ll – bluntly, a lot of the past in the city, there were not particularly strong efforts on health and safety and housing. We’ve changed a lot of that, but in this case, look, it is a really important question. I know the site, I am concerned. I want to make sure we get it right. We’re going to work, of course, with the EPA and FEMA, but also want to be clear that they have a perspective. We want to understand their perspective, but ultimately a decision has to be made locally. We need affordable housing. We need to support folks in the city who cannot afford to stay here. That’s really important, but it has to be done safely. So, what I’d like you to do please, Jack, give your information to WNYC. I’m going to have someone senior from our team. Get back to you to talk this through. I want to make sure the team provides me with all the facts of what the individual from the EPA is saying. And we’ll certainly look at this, but I want to, at the same time say, I really have believed for a long time. There was a way to do development in the Gowanus area safely. And I think for so many people who need affordable housing they want to know, of course, that the foundation of it all will be safe, but they also rightfully are intolerant of endless delays, creating more affordable housing. And we’ve got to figure out how to balance that. We’re not going to do anything unsafe, but once we know it is safe, we should stop hesitating and we should create the housing.

Lehrer: Thank you for your call, Jack. We’ll take your contact information. Last thing, Mr. Mayor, then we’re out of time. Today, movie theaters in New York City can reopen at 25 percent capacity, as you know. You’ve been critical of the Texas plan to allow reopening of everything to a hundred percent capacity. And yet people are still debating New York too fast, too slow. Depends who you ask. There’s some skepticism about movie theaters coming back at 25 percent today, for example, in light of the variants. Would you feel safe going to the movies or sending your kids today?

Mayor: You know, let me – quick frame, I’ll be very fast. I think that this all needs to be done with the decisions of our health leadership, all based on data and science. And I worry anytime it’s anything other than that. And certainly, Texas is the poster child for doing it the wrong way. I have a wait-and-see approach on the question of how much things are being expanded. These are decisions made by the State, not by the City. We’re going to be watching very carefully. We’re obviously concerned about the variants. We’re going to be updating the public on them. So, the

jury's out on this to me of whether, you know, this is the right amount or where we go from here. Look, in the end, one thing I guarantee is once it's a State decision, it's our job to do our best to make it safe and to send out the health inspectors and others, to try and make it safe. So, I have confidence that our inspectors are doing their job and, on that level, I would participate out of confidence in them. But that doesn't mean that it's necessarily the right thing to do going forward, if the evidence proves otherwise.

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

Mayor: Take care, Brian.

###