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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. The city marked the one-year anniversary of the coronavirus pandemic and remembered the thousands of New Yorkers who lost their lives to the virus in the last year. There was a memorial ceremony last night. That comes as our city continues its vaccination efforts and begins to see a drop in hospitalizations. Although the seven-day average positivity rate still hovers above six percent. Here now, to talk about that and much more is Mayor de Blasio, joining us as usual from the Blue Room inside City Hall. Welcome Mr. Mayor, good to see you.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good to be with you Errol. How are you doing?

Louis: Just fine. Thank you. I wanted to just jump right in and ask you a question that's been bothering me for a while. Vaccinations are up. They seem to be proceeding at a pace that is impressive, but the positivity rate remains higher than it was last fall. Have your health advisors told you when or if we're going to see that rate come down?

Mayor: Yeah, Erol. I mean, they've said it this way and I think this makes all the sense in the world. The thing that matters most to them is to see the level of hospitalizations improving, the number of people in the hospital and we had for the first time in a long time, the number of people going into the hospital, the most recent day below the threshold that we hold. That's really good news. Deaths have gone down, thank God. This is what they care about the most. The reasoning about why we see still slowness in the movement in cases is one, the presence of the variants. And two, because we test so much, we really test proportionally much more than almost any place in the country. And that does bring out more cases per se. But there's a lot of optimism now. We're almost to three million vaccinations. And more people, more vaccinations, more doses in this city so far than the entire population of Chicago. And we're just getting started. When we get more supply, we're going to be able to do a hell of a lot more. So, you know, our, our health care team's feeling more confident with each passing day.

Louis: The President has called for vaccinations to be open to all by May 1st or so. Are we on track to make that goal? And can we handle that kind of additional load?

Mayor: Yeah, look, I think President Biden's doing the right thing. I mean, this is – what a week he had last week with the stimulus and the further actions to move the anti-COVID agenda. I mean, he really deserves a lot of respect for that. I agree with him. May 1st is a perfectly reasonable time to open it to all adults. And I'll tell you, it will make life easier when everyone knows that they're ready to go. I think we're going to have an issue with younger adults being

hesitant or not thinking they need it. But in terms of capacity, I am absolutely convinced we are well beyond half a million a day capacity, right – at half-a-million week, I'm sorry, capacity right now. And if we had the kind of supply we needed, we would be just absolutely reaching so many people. Demand is very high right now. You can see it, lots of folks wanting to be vaccinated, more than the supply we have. But by May 1st, I feel pretty confident that that supply number is going to go up substantially.

Louis: So, it's too soon, I guess, to be certain because the science is still evolving a little bit, but it seems as if, even if you get the vaccine, you can still get COVID-19. It just won't wreck you. It won't send you to the hospital. It won't kill you in the kind of numbers that it used to. Very much like the flu vaccine doesn't stop you from getting the flu, but it makes it a lot milder, which is of course a good thing. But at what point do we start dialing back some of the restrictions on distancing, masking and so forth?

Mayor: Certainly not for the first half of the year. We, you know, I've been talking with our health team about this for a while. We've said it publicly. I'm going to keep saying it publicly. Through minimum, June, expect to follow all of the precautions we've been giving. Why? Because, you know, June's the goal I've set for five million New Yorkers being fully vaccinated. That's a number where we can start to think about making some changes. But before then, especially with the presence of the variant, it would be premature. And look you know, the famous New York City saying, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Right now, people are doing the right thing and it's helping us beat back this disease. So, let's hunker down. Let's get to June, we'll reevaluate as we come up to that point. But, right now, I'd say to all New Yorkers, look, that mask – who knew Errol, in the beginning and we've learned through, you know experience, the mask is making a huge difference, stick with it.

Louis: Well, let's talk a little bit about the crisis in government surrounding Governor Cuomo. You and others have very vocally called for him to step down. He has insisted he's not going to do that. I'm wondering what that has done to the ability for government to function properly? Especially when it comes to vaccines, given that the former secretary to the Governor, Larry Schwartz, the vaccine czar, apparently was making phone calls that at least a couple of people have filed ethics complaints around, suggesting that they were more political in nature and not related to vaccines.

Mayor: Yeah. Look, if Larry Schwartz or anyone tries to deprive the people of New York City of the vaccine they need we will say it from the highest mountain top. We will let the world know immediately if there's any effort to subvert our vaccine supply for Governor Cuomo's political needs. Everyone knows where I stand but we need to get every single dose we deserve. In fact, before the scandals, before this latest set of developments, we weren't getting our fair share. Because, you know it Errol, we are vaccinating New York City residents, suburban residents, Connecticut, and New Jersey residents at a lot of our hospitals. We deserve a higher percentage of the state's vaccine to cover all those bases. We'll keep fighting for that. But if we see any effort to deprive us, we will blow that sky high.

Louis: It was never a smooth relationship, but it can't have gotten any better now that you, and most of the congressional delegation and the U.S. senators and the state senators and on and on

and on are all saying they do not wish to work with Governor Cuomo. On a day-to-day basis, how do things get done?

Mayor: It's not about a personal relationship. I do understand we're human beings. We think about personalities and personal relationships, but the fact is now that the leadership of the Democratic party in this state and some of the most respected people in this state, like Senator Schumer and Majority Leaders Stewart-Cousins, Speaker Heastie, everyone's saying the same thing. They do not have faith in the Governor anymore. They did not believe him when he speaks. He cannot do the job any longer. We'll continue doing our work regardless of what the State does. Look, I had Donald Trump at Andrew Cuomo simultaneously. For God's sakes, I learned a long time ago that New York City has to do its own thing and protect our people, you know, do all the things in our power, even when dealing with arbitrary leaders or leaders who are doing the wrong thing. But I also think that the day-to-day work of government continues regardless of political scandals. The folks who are, you know, the long-term civil servants and the subject experts all keep talking to each other. The health care folks in the city are talking to the health care folks at the State, no matter what. We'll keep going but Governor Cuomo should do everyone a favor and get the hell out of the way, because it's just not going to make it any better for him to stick around.

Louis: Yeah. It's interesting. You raise the fact that Donald Trump was somebody who was, I guess, impeached twice, right? People were certainly trying to sort of a signal to him that it was time to move on and he never did. The Governor of course, says something similar to what you just said. He says, look, I'm just doing my job. I'm holding availabilities. I'm opening up vaccination sites. It's the people who elected me. We saw a poll today, suggesting depending on how you read the numbers there's a sizable number of New Yorkers who want them to stay in place. There is in fact, an election next year. It looks in some ways like we may have to just kind of tough this out between now and next year.

Mayor: I wouldn't predict that. I think it's possible. I think you're going to see the poll numbers change quite a bit in the weeks ahead as more and more information comes out. The investigations, you know, the full investigation needed of why so many senior citizens died in those nursing homes, why the information was covered up? These cases of sexual harassment and molestation, those investigations results are going to come out. There's a whole question now around the Tappan Zee Bridge. There's a question around the efforts to withhold vaccine for political reasons. There's so much here that I predict Errol, a lot of information comes out, public opinion changes. But in the meantime, I think what's going to happen is that, you know, people are not blind. Even if he's clinging to power, it won't be the same thing. And when Donald Trump continued to do things that were destructive and unfair and were hurting people, the public saw it and his power was diminished by it. So, I think you're going to see some of the same here.

Louis: Okay. Stand by, Mr. Mayor. We're going to take a short break. I've got more to talk about with Mayor de Blasio. We'll do that after this short break, stay with us.

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Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. I'm once again joined by Mayor de Blasio, joining us from the Blue Room inside City Hall. Mr. Mayor, now that you've had about a week or so to look at some of the particulars of the stimulus bill that has been signed into law, do you have any insight or anything you can tell us about whether or not we can avoid layoffs of City workers?

Mayor: Yeah, Errol. I feel very good that we can put the layoffs behind us now. This is an extraordinary stimulus. I talked to Senator Schumer about it a couple of days ago and said, you know not only thank you, but, you know, this is unquestionably the greatest single action by the federal government to create opportunity and to spur forward our society since the great – since the New Deal. And when you think about the sheer magnitude here, yes, it gives us, finally, the stability we needed. We lost almost \$10 billion in revenue over several years. This now makes us whole enough that we can take layoffs off the table. Thank God. Because it was the last thing I wanted to do. We have a strong, stable public workforce now. That's going to allow us to recover, keep people in their jobs, keep families whole, but also allow us to recover. So, that's one of the biggest takeaways already.

Louis: Okay. You just made a lot of City workers very happy. My understanding is that there's \$2.5 billion, I think it was the number I heard, that's specifically targeted for rental assistance. Is that going to cover the back rents that have been accumulating that people have been so worried about? And if so, what will be the method by which you would help people avoid the eviction crisis that's looming?

Mayor: Yeah, this is still a very real issue. Look, in terms of how those mechanics go, I want to make sure I get all the details and bring those back to you, but right now I'd say this, any aid directly to people, including those direct payments, the \$1,400, that's all going to help. But the magnitude of that rental crisis is really hard to even imagine that folks lost incomes, hundreds of thousands of families simultaneously to the point that they literally could not pay rent. And that was a year ago. I think the magnitude of the crisis is huge. It's not going to change overnight, even with some aid because people don't have their jobs back in many cases yet. That's going to take, certainly, the next six to nine months minimum for a lot of folks, for others even longer. But in terms of the eviction crisis, what we need to make sure is that those moratoriums, the efforts to protect against eviction, are kept in place until we're absolutely certain that people have really gotten their work back, their livelihoods back. And I still think we need another law in Albany, I've called for it a bunch of times, to create a payment plan method that's universal and legal and consistent so that folks who want to pay, but just don't have an income can defer that to when they do have an income and landlords know the money will be coming, but there's absolute guarantee that people can stay in their apartments in the meantime.

Louis: Okay. Another industry where people are hurting and in need of relief, of course involves the medallion taxis. And the plan that was unveiled by the City was roundly criticized by drivers advocates. And I think I understand what they're complaining about, which is that if somebody is a couple of hundred thousand dollars underwater and unable to pay the debt, offering them a zero percent loan really just increases the debt. It doesn't really do much to help them out of the hole that they're in. Is there a possibility of reworking this since there may not be very many takers for what's been offered?

Mayor: Oh, I think there will be a lot of takers. I think it – look, there's a certain group of advocates who wanted a different approach, but in fact, a lot of people praised the plan and said it was a very productive step forward. I said, you know, as soon as we had stimulus, we could finally get into an approach that could work, a practical approach. That's what we have now. \$65 million is a serious investment. It's going to allow people to protect themselves. It's going to allow them to have payment plans they can live with and protect their families. And I think this'll be ready in a few weeks for drivers to take advantage of. I think you're going to see a lot of drivers take this up because it's much better than what they're experiencing now.

Louis: One driver who we spoke to owes something on the order of \$300,000, I think it was about \$290,000. The hedge fund, who's holding that paper and insisting that he pay back all of that money that he can't pay, is saying, you know, take a \$20,000 loan on top of all of that, and then, you know, pay it to us. And then we'll talk about restructuring your loan. Shouldn't the creditors also be, you know, part of this solution. I mean, why do they get first crack at these federal dollars?

Mayor: Look, this obviously is the City making a decision with resources that will be ours now. And what we're going to do is make sure that families can be a hell of a lot more stable. You know what I think about the hedge fund world, I'm not a fan, but what we are doing here is working with responsible lenders to come up with an approach that is actually manageable. And these families have been in such a tough situation. I've talked a lot as drivers. I feel for them. This was based on, you know, a reality before all the changes that happen in our society and the new technology and folks were doing very well for a period of time. And then things changed very abruptly, and they're left in a tough spot. But this is an actual practical plan that says, okay, there's debt but this is going to allow you to have a much more manageable approach and get back on your feet. And the City is going to work with the lenders and the drivers to make sure it works for people and it's going to be up and running in a matter of weeks. Again, I think you're going to see a lot of drivers say, hey, that's better than what I've got now, I'm going to do that.

Louis: So, you have been critical in other contexts of hedge funds. You're not opposed in principle to telling some of the creditors look, you're going to have to give some of these folks a break or you run the risk of getting nothing at all.

Mayor: Again, I would, in every case say that I think a lot of lenders, when you go back to the original sin here in this entire crisis, it was rapacious lenders that were a big part of it. Now, I wish the City had control of that. That was federal and State regulation, not City. But there's a lot of people who were present at the creation of this problem in the private sector. I wish they would all be generous in helping to solve the problem. But what we're going to do is push for the fairest possible deal for these drivers and something that is practical and sustainable. You know, everyone's offered different visions. We're offering one that we absolutely believe will work today and years from now to get these drivers out of this crisis.

Louis: Okay, in our last couple of minutes, let me ask you about the new reform plan for the NYPD. I watched the press conference with Commissioner Shea and the folks that he worked with in order to create this. I guess my main question is one about method, which is it's a perfectly good idea to go out and have a lot of town hall meetings, surface a lot of longstanding

problems, and then come up with a plan to address them. But there isn't necessarily hard science behind them. And just to pick one as an example, the idea of getting more New Yorkers, you know changing the admissions standards to the NYPD so that you're more likely to get hired if you're a New York city resident. There's no particular proven connection between that, say, and like a lower incidents of abuse or complaints or lawsuits or misuse of force.

Mayor: I think you have an objective point for sure, Errol. And you know, a lot about this, obviously your dad was a cop, and you know that it's very much about the individual officer and the training they received and the supervision they received. But I got to tell you something, I've heard this in neighborhoods all over the city, and I believe it, when you have a higher proportion of New York City residents more and more people do understand life in our city, the culture and the reality in our neighborhoods and can connect with people. One of the guys on my police detail said something really powerful to me a few weeks ago. He said, you know, if you know how to talk to people, you can solve a lot of problems when you're an officer. And I think having folks from our neighborhoods who have grown up with both the joys and the sorrows of life in our city, understand how to relate. Certainly, folks who represent all the communities, all the, you know, ethnicities and backgrounds of the city that helps a lot and speaking all the languages, people speak. I think that's pretty consistent. So, I'm excited. This is one of the things I feel most passionately about, about this reform package is providing that preference, those additional points, doubling the number of points that New York City residents will get when they apply to become a police officer. I think that's going to have a positive and lasting impact.

Louis: Okay. I'm just here to be, you know, a little bit of the guy saying, you know, you've got cities like New Orleans and Chicago, some of these other places where they've had like crazy scandals over the years and, you know, they have – many of those officers are, in fact, from this – you know, Daniel Pantaleo was from Staten Island. Right, I mean, like that was, you know, case in point –

Mayor: Listen, I appreciate the question but I'm going to say very simply, I don't think we should judge the world by individual instances or the most prominent cases. I think we should say something else here which is, what do we know about who can connect with the people of our city, because neighborhood policing, requires connection, requires communication, it requires listening. Of course, someone could be born in the suburbs or another state even, and they could do that as an individual, but the chances are greater that you can relate to people in a neighborhood if you have some shared lived experience. I think that's pretty scientific. And certainly, in terms of what's worked on the ground to get that community dialogue going, we've seen great results when people know there's someone who looks like them, who's experienced what they've experienced, they can go to, they can confide in. We want folks being willing to go to their officer in their neighborhood and talk to them about what's going on. I do think it helps if people see more and more people they can directly and personally relate to.

Louis: Okay. Before I let you go, I understand your YMCA is back open. Do you have any plans to visit?

Mayor: At some point, for sure. I mean, it's not time yet. I got a lot of other things going on, but one day I will be reunited with them.

Louis: Okay. All right. Thanks very much. We will see you next week, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Thanks, Errol.

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