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OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
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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 everyone. We begin as we usually do on Fridays with our weekly Ask the Mayor segment, my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio at 2-1-2-4-3-3-W-N-YC, 4-3-3-9-6-9-2. Or you can tweet a question, just use the hashtag #AskTheMayor. Good morning Mr. Mayor, welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good morning Brian and I just want to say upfront – the most important thing we could possibly talk about, please to all of your listeners, vote on Tuesday, remember to flip your ballot because there's three important ballot measures on the back of the ballot and I'm urging a strong yes vote on a three, particularly number one which will get big money out of politics in our local elections and replace it with grassroots donations and a lot of matching public funds. So couldn't be more important for New Yorkers to focus on the back of the ballot as well. Flip that ballot and please vote yes on all three questions.

Lehrer: And I am going to give you a little more of a chance in a minute to make that case. We will also have a debate on Monday's show between two members of City Council who have different views on the ballot questions. But before we even do that, because next Tuesday is Election Day and I agree this is the most important thing we could be talking about right now. In case anyone – well to make sure no one is actually disenfranchised, I'd like to invite you to clarify for people who haven't heard it that there was a mistake on a mailer about voting with respect to people on parole in New York. Will you explain the mistake and what the real situation is so nobody accidentally feels that they can't vote?

Mayor: Yes, I appreciate you raising that a lot Brian. So as I understand it the Campaign Finance Board sent out their traditional voter guide and somewhere in that it suggested that parolees can't vote. That is a mistake, apparently the CFB has corrected that online but the, you know that hard copy had already gone out. The honest answer is that some parolees are eligible to vote, others are not. Any individual who needs to know which status they are in can go online to voting.nyc.gov and they can figure out their specific status. And you know, meanwhile the good news is this is some news I want to tell you – that we have been reaching out to those who have been incarcerated in our city jails and we have 900 folks who registered to vote who were either in our corrections system or visiting others in the corrections system because now that we are focusing on enfranchising people across the board, we are finding a lot of people when given the opportunity to register to vote, are actually ready to do it and participate in

society and it's part of actually of reentering and getting people fully reengaged in society. So we want all parolees, anybody who has had experience with law enforcement to participate in the election process. Very few are excluded in the State of New York and again if anyone needs some clarification go to voting.nyc.

Lehrer: Good, now on these charter questions – some campaign advocates say the \$2,000 limit, I think I have that number right –

Mayor: That's for the city wide level, yes.

Lehrer: For the city wide level of campaign donations is still way too high because who but the economic elite can go around giving \$2,000 to a candidate and on the community boards – four of the five borough presidents oppose you, largely because they say they need experience not term limits on community boards because there are no term limits on real estate industry lawyers whose tricks the community board members have to learn over time to properly assess the development proposals for their neighborhoods. What's your response to either?

Mayor: My response – let me do this, let me do the second one first. Look, community boards play a really important role in this city in terms of decisions that really affect every day peoples' lives. They are a crucial part of our democracy. They also are the place where a lot of people first get involved in their community who later might be people who run for office. A few things we need to have in community boards that we don't have right now – we need representation, we need them to reflect all the communities of New York City, they don't. We need every kind of person to have opportunity including younger people who often feel shut out of community boards because so many seats are held for so long – by good people who are serving their community who care deeply but it is not consistent with our democracy to say that a group of people might get a seat, whether selected or appointed and just hold it, for you know a lifetime. That's not the idea of a vibrant an inclusive democracy and at this moment in history more and more people who have felt left out are coming forward – young people, women, people of color, people who are less economically advantaged, are coming forward, they are running for office, they are getting involved. How is it in New York City of all places that our community boards are not representative and the doors are not open? So term limits are a simple way to say after you've served eight years, all you have to do is take a two year break, let someone else have a chance. If you want to come back and serve again, you have the opportunity but in the absence of some kind of mechanism to allow for some turn over as we have with the City Council, as we have with mayor, as we have with so many offices, if you don't allow for some natural turnover, a lot of people are going to feel there is no chance for them to participate and that's not healthy in a democracy.

On the first point, I want everyone to understand and I use the Mayoral level as the example, the city wide level as the example. Right now a wealthy individual can give \$5,100, their spouse can give \$5,100, different family members can give \$5,100. We are more than cutting that in half. We are saying the new standard will be \$2,000, maximum. And much more importantly, Brian we are saying that contributions up to \$250 by everyday New Yorkers will be matched eight to one. So if you give \$25, \$200 match. If you give \$250, \$2,000 match – the person who gives \$250 has more impact than the big donor who can write that \$2,000 check. So what this does is allows a candidate to fully – this is an amazing figure, you can fund 75 percent of your election cost with matching funds under this vision. The rest you can fund with low dollar donations. You

literally will not need to ask a big donor for money anymore under this vision. Someone's devoted to just running with low dollar donations, Bernie Sanders is a great example or Beto O'Rourke right now in Texas, most of the money coming from low dollar donations. Under this new plan, question one, you can do that for the first time in New York City history. So that's why I say, look we cut it, because we cut it very substantially what a big donor could give – and there were legal considerations and other things that we had to navigate, that this was the right balance point but the essential point here is for the first time ever, a candidate will be able to run without needing big money anymore and that's very healthy for our democracy.

Lehrer: And again listeners we are going to have a debate on these ballot questions on Monday's show between two City Council Democrats with opposing points of view as most of you have not thought about these questions at all until now. You heard the Mayor's pitch. This is his City Charter Revision Commission and he's obviously for those questions. We will have a debate on Monday so you can further inform yourself before Tuesday's vote. Let's go to our first caller on Ask the Mayor today, Ben in Ridgewood, you are on WNYC with the Mayor, hello Ben.

Question: Good morning, Brian. Good morning Mr. Mayor.

Mayor: Good morning, Ben.

Question: So, on Wednesday the New York City Department of Education released their annual report on student discipline data, following the trend there are racial disparities but away from the trend in the past couple years there were decreases in total suspensions but this year there was a four percent rise in total suspensions. For context for the listeners there were 36,668 suspensions given to students last school year, for further context there are two kinds of suspensions. There's principle suspensions which are handled in school and they range from one to five days. Then there are superintendent suspensions and those range from six to 180 days. So for overall suspensions black students who make up 26 percent of student population accounted for 46 percent of all suspensions but when it comes to the superintendent's long term suspensions they accounted for 51.5 percent of superintendent suspensions. So basically double the amount of their representation in the population. Cities like Chicago have capped their long term suspensions at ten days, L.A. has capped theirs at 20 days, I wanted to ask two questions Mr. Mayor. Why have we not yet capped our suspensions from 180 days to something closer to 20 days when it's been recommended by your school climate leadership team in 2016 and then a few days ago the Progressive Caucus of the City Council recommended that in their letter as well, to cap suspensions at 20 days rather than 180 days. And then can we expect further investment in de-escalation training for our teachers to try and reduce those suspensions over all?

Lehrer: Ben, thank you Mr. Mayor?

Mayor: Yes, thank you Ben. And look I think we are all trying to get to the same place. So since this administration started suspensions are down 31 percent. You're right that there was a small uptick in the last year, that's not directional in my view, that's not policy. There will be variations because of what happens school by school. But the direction overall could not be clearer. 31 percent decrease in suspensions in four years, while simultaneously reducing crime and violence in schools. It very much mirrors what we are doing with neighborhood policing all over the city. Neighborhood policing has proven to work because we develop a better

relationship between police and community – more communication and we’ve actually had 100,000 fewer arrests last year than four years earlier and managed to bring down crime simultaneously. We are applying the neighborhood policing model now in the schools as well. In terms of school safety the emphasis will be going forward, on communication between school safety, educators, and students and parents to reduce tensions, to address problems upfront, to not get to the point where you are talking about suspensions or summons or anything like that, to maximize restorative justice initiatives. We’ve put a number in place, they’ve been very successful, we intend to do a lot more.

So to your question I want to say two points very simple – one, the suspension levels are going down, they will go down more. The disparity issues will be consistently addressed. We’ve only started this process, there are a whole set of additional steps that we plan to take. On the capping question, I need to come back and Brian, I will be happy to address that next week, because I need to talk to the Chancellor, but if you listen – everyone’s, I think on the good imprint already of Richard Carranza, his focus is on not only Equity and Excellence, improving schools across the board and bringing up all schools, but he believes that education is the path way to social justice. He’s very explicit about it and this is what his life’s work has been. So we are going to talk about a whole host of additional things we can do. I want to make sure that I have a conversation with him on the capping issue, because I’m not an expert on these specific timelines and what makes sense and what works. But there’s no question as a matter of philosophy, that our intention is to keep reducing suspension, keep reducing disparity and use many more of the restorative justice tools which have proven to work really well in our schools.

Lehrer: Alright Ben, thank you for that call and we will definitely follow up and see what reforms the Mayor and the Schools Chancellor implement or propose. I have an education question too. I would like to follow up on our conversation last week following the New York Times article about the Renewal Schools program to turn around some of the worst performing schools in the city. One of the points of the Times article was that families weren’t told right away when officials determined that certain schools their kids were in were not seen as likely to improve. So my question is what are families being told this year, about schools that are continuing this year to not improve for their students in the Renewal program? At what point in the school year are they told anything and what if any arrangements are made for those kids in schools you label as failing and not improving?

Mayor: Got it. First, reiterating that that article troubled me deeply because I think it was really inaccurate. I think a really good reporter wrote a really bad article. It did not reflect the larger reality. When you take some selective memos and viewpoints of individuals and portray them as the larger truth, that’s a mistake. So sometimes people feared that a school couldn’t turn around by they were not sure. If we were ever at the point where we were sure that’s when we started alerting parents and went through a formal process. There are a lot of indicators that we look for. We look at attendance, we look at grades, test scores, all sorts of things to see if a school is making progress and it’s not linear and it doesn’t always present itself clearly at first. Sometimes it does take time to get clear. But once we do know we act.

Now I will also say, self critically of the DOE and my administration, the more I’ve seen the less happy I am with how the follow through has been in having those conversations at the school and community level. I think we learned in several cases and one of them is the situation with Wadleigh Middle School in Harlem which I had been involved in as Public Advocate as well.

That I had been led to believe the communication with the parent body and the community was intensive and turned out not to be so intensive and it must be. So for this year, Chancellor Carranza has made very explicit to everyone the communication has to start early, it's going to be starting in this calendar year for what's going to happen next calendar year. And we really have to explain to people the challenges and the choices ahead. Look, our goal is to help every school succeed. If a school cannot succeed we want to have a real conversation with the community about what our options are and how to proceed.

There's also another phenomenon Brian, this is very important, which is some schools have gotten so small that they are no longer functional. The small schools movement which I think was very well intended, unfortunately I think you know, got sort of painted with a too broad of brush and schools were created that were small to begin with and really couldn't afford to lose many students and when they did lose students they became almost dysfunctionally small. Some of those are going to have to be consolidated or merged with other schools to get them to a level where they can provide a sufficient range of courses and have sufficient personal to serve children. So that's another piece of this.

But what I'll say the information is – we do need to communicate better, we are going to be starting that right now, looking into next year and I think look, a lot of schools that are still out there on the cusp have been showing some progress, we are hopeful a lot of those can move forward by the end of this academic year.

Lehrer: If there is a school and it's only been, I guess, a 25 percent rate of those schools that have sort of graduated from the Renewal Schools program and another 25 percent that have been closed or reorganized because they were deemed, you know, not headed in the right direction at all – for schools in that group now, at what point in the school year, it's now November 2nd, at what point will you say no, okay, this isn't working, we're going to close this school at the end of this year? Would you tell the parents and would they have an opportunity to switch their kids mid-year?

Mayor: Well, I would never advise – obviously as a public school parent, my kids went to public school pre-K to 12, the whole way through – never would advise a parent to switch mid-year unless there is an urgent situation.

The conversations are going to begin – I think in some places it may have already – but they'll begin this calendar year, so next few months. The decisions have to be made next year formally. And remember in some cases it may be starting to be clear that a school is going to “graduate” out of that status or in other cases it may be clear that a school isn't doing so well or needs to be merged.

But I think what you're going to see in a number of cases is we need the whole – or we need more of the academic year at least to make sense of the full reality. What I want to see – and I've said this to the Chancellor and I know he agrees – is that we start the conversation soon with parents to say here's what we're looking at and just level with them, you know, here are some of the issues in this school, here are some of the things that are working, here are some of the things that are not yet working, or here are the indicators we're waiting for more information on, and here's how we're going to make the decision to let people weigh in, to let them raise their concerns.

It's also very important to understand that one of the things we're doing that the previous administration did not do, and it was one of the biggest problems with their closure-heavy approach. Remember, the Bloomberg administration believed in closing a lot of schools, replacing them with charters, often leaving a lot of kids in the lurch, in the transition process. We believe that if a school is not doing so well, we need to give parents very specific guaranteed options for their kids. So, for example, if a school is going to be closed that there needs to be a clear replacement program coming in and other options in the community with guaranteed seats for their kids so parents and kids are not left out to sea and there's not discontinuity.

One of the things that really hurt in the past was kids in these schools that were transitioning out for years – everyone knew they were about to be closed but there was like a year or two of lead-out and kids got a really bad experience from that. We don't want that. We want quick, clear transitions when they're needed.

Lehrer: This is our weekly Ask the Mayor segment with Mayor Bill de Blasio on WNYC. Well, one person who has called in this morning for Ask the Mayor has identified herself to us as Nathylin Flowers Adesegun. I don't know if I'm saying that right. She goes by Flowers, she says, and is the woman who tried to ask you a question, Mr. Mayor, about homelessness policies while you were at the gym a few weeks ago and you rebuffed her in that context because she was recording video in a gym where people deserve their privacy, you said. But she has called in and we're going to take her call in this context. So, Flowers, in a Queens homeless shelter – as she has identified herself to our screener – you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Flowers.

Question: Hello, good morning. Can you hear me clearly?

Lehrer: I can hear you just fine.

Mayor: Yes, Flowers, go ahead.

Question: Good morning, Mayor, can you hear my clear [inaudible] –

Mayor: Yes, absolutely, Flowers. Yes.

Question: Okay. Your Honor, you know I'm one of the 62,000 people homeless in the city. I'm the 72-year-old woman who confronted you at the Y gym to ask for more housing for our homeless. You refused to talk to me and I [inaudible] from your office and hundreds of us marched to your house at Gracie Mansion with the same ask.

This week we packed the steps of City Hall to support a bill introduced by Council Member Salamanca that would require – yes, mandate developers to set aside 15 percent of housing, 15 percent of housing units for the homeless, the unhoused. Your response to this advocacy is to say your housing plan is for all New Yorkers.

Your housing plan – your affordable housing plan will create or preserve 300,000 units of affordable housing but only five percent of that is for homeless people despite our having the greatest need. We need help for the people who need it the most. You're subsidizing – not you, NYC subsidizes luxury housing while 62,000 people sleep in shelters every night.

We found that people across the city agree with us and now dozens of city officials including the Speaker, Corey Johnson, are agreeing with us that we need more housing. I want to know – I really want to know when are you going to get with us, do what’s right for homeless New Yorkers by doing the modest thing we’re asking to set aside only ten percent, 30,000 units of housing, from your affordable housing for homeless New Yorkers with 24,000 units of new construction to house the homeless more quickly? Winter is coming.

Lehrer: Mr. Mayor?

Mayor: Flowers, thank you for the question. Obviously, I’ve spent a lot of time throughout my life in public service trying to help folks who are homeless and want to make sure we serve everyone and serve all New Yorkers who need affordable housing.

The fact is – I’m going to tell you the things that we’re doing right now to reduce homelessness, to give people better options, to respect the fact that so many homeless folks, so many homeless families, so many working families who became homeless, experienced an economy that’s no longer working for them no matter how hard they try. And our job is to serve them and we’re doing it in a whole host of ways.

But we just disagree on this as a solution. I want to be straight forward and I’ve said this at town hall meetings and all sorts of other settings. People have asked me and you can keep asking, it’s a free society, but I’m going to keep giving you the same answer. I disagree that that is the right approach.

First of all, we do not – I also would ask everyone to try and be clear about their facts and some of what you said was factual like our affordable housing plan is creating and preserving 300,000 affordable apartments for New Yorkers but we are not, we are not ever subsidizing – “subsidizing” luxury housing. That is not part of our plan.

We are in fact getting homeless people in shelter into affordable housing on a level that’s never been done before. It’s over 90,000 folks who are in shelter in the last five years have gotten to affordable housing – 90,000. You keep talking about the different percentages, I respect that, but I’m telling you about facts that have already happened, not theory, not something in the future.

90,000 folks who were homeless have been given affordable housing in the last five years. We’ve also prevented many thousands of folks from ever becoming homeless because we’ve reduced evictions already by 27 percent. We’re going to reduce them a lot more because we’re providing free legal services to stop evictions because there’s much stronger anti-harassment laws thanks to the City Council.

And we’re doing a lot more enforcement against landlord harassment. We’re providing people with rental subsidies if they’re on the verge of homelessness to keep them in their apartments. So, our preventative efforts are the strongest the city has ever had. We’re also, in terms of street homelessness, we’ve gotten 2,000 people who are street homeless off the streets and into shelter and they have not gone back to the streets. We’ve never seen a number like that before.

So, I believe in a very imperfect situation that these are the right strategies. I've heard the suggestions from your organization and I just disagree with them.

Lehrer: But let me go beyond her organization, too. The bill that she cited from Councilman Salamanca from the Bronx, my understand is it would require that any housing project that is a rental that is getting subsidies, tax credits, abatements, etcetera, has to set aside 15 percent of its created or preserved units for people living in the City shelter system. That's how the Times described it. Fifteen percent. Is that a bill you would sign?

Mayor: No. I disagree with that. It's the – you know, again, Brian, respectfully, you've asked, people have asked this question if my memory serves on this show before today and I've said no. They've asked at town hall meetings. I've said no. They've asked at press conferences. I've said no.

I don't know how many times to say this. I don't believe that's the right policy approach. I believe the right policy approach is a broad affordable housing program that serves low-income people, that serves working class people, that serves middle class people. Folks who are low-income and struggling need affordable housing. Folks who have become homeless need affordable housing. But teachers and janitors and nurses need affordable housing too and our job is to create an economically diverse New York City where everyone has a right to stay here. That's what our vision is. But this is a conversation that would make a lot more sense if anyone would answer the question when I say 90,000 people who were in shelter we got to housing.

Isn't that more important than any theoretical policy? That we have actually done that and we intend to continue that, and it's working. But as a matter of structure, as a matter of what will actually serve the needs of the people of New York City as a whole, I believe our current approach makes more sense.

Lehrer: So, is there any percentage or should I assume from that answer that there is no percentage, there's no negotiation with City Council over if not 15 percent, five percent, or something like that?

Mayor: [Inaudible] first of all, in individual – in all sorts of individual affordable housing developments right now, there are set asides for homeless people. That is a common strategy right now but it's case by case and it depends on the specific funding, the specific non-profit involved, all sorts of other factors. Obviously, that's before we even talk about supportive housing. We have a plan for 15,000 apartments for supportive housing which is for folks who have been homeless and have mental health needs and other needs that need special services attached to the housing. It's the biggest the city has ever had as well. I don't hear my advocate friends talking about that much.

But no, what I would say to your question, Brian, is one – we do this already in a variety of manners which is part of why 90,000 folks have come out of shelter into affordable housing. We always negotiate with the Council in good faith. When they have an idea, we go back and forth and historically we've found common ground on something that makes sense. So, a piece of legislation being introduced, like in all legislative processes, that is one idea that is put on the table and then there's a lot of back and forth to figure out what actually makes sense.

But I'll always talk to the Council about what we're trying to achieve, I just don't think this is the best way to achieve it.

Lehrer: A question about Legionnaire's Disease and cooling towers on city buildings where the disease agent can accumulate and spread to people. Hundreds were sickened by it last year. At least one person is said to have died from legionella bacteria this year in Upper Manhattan. WNYC and Gothamist reported this week that a spate of mistakes resulted in the dismissal of nearly 90 percent of the cooling tower cases heard in 2017, roughly double the average rate for citations issued by other City agencies.

My question is, the Health Department says a technology issue led Health inspectors to make thousands of mistakes in issuing violations but can tablets really be blamed for giving violations to the right people or for citing the wrong laws? Does this actually come down to human error? Have you looked into it? Does it reveal a need for better training?

Mayor: Well, first of all, it's an unacceptable situation and I am not happy that the Health Department made this mistake and they need to fix it, and they have been ordered to fix it immediately. Look, I get – there are technology problems in life. We see it all the time. Sometimes everyone is trying to do the right thing and there's a technology glitch or there's some human error that goes uncaught. I understand that and I know everyone at the Health Department is working hard and cares about this stuff.

But that does not allow for the fact that this was a huge mistake. It should not have happened. I'm not happy it happened and the clear mandate I have given the Health Department is that all those inspections must be done immediately. And I have been assured they will all be completed in the next six or seven weeks, and will be on track again.

The good news, despite this very big mistake, is we have the toughest regulations in the country for these cooling towers, that we have very stringent timelines and inspection regimens, and there's real, clear penalties if a landlord does not comply. Bluntly, most of the country doesn't even have anything like that.

So, we have learned from some tough experiences that we need clear, tough laws and the Council has been great on this as well. But clearly we have to implement effectively and this was a mistake and it will be fixed.

Lehrer: Okay, we're just about out of time. Do you want to our last 30 seconds or so and just tell everybody, with all the horrible things that have been going on and people scared about violence in various contexts, what New York Marathon security is going to be like and any advice you're giving people going out to watch or to run?

Mayor: Marathon – it's obviously one of the great events every year in New York City and exemplifies why this place is a beacon to the world with every kind of person joined together in common cause. New Yorkers love it. It will be safe. There is no credible or specific threat directed at the marathon. The NYPD is in a very high state of readiness obviously given everything that's happened in recent weeks. But for every marathon, NYPD does one its most elaborate security procedures each year around the marathon.

You will see a lot of officers. You will see officers from our anti-terrorism units with the substantial equipment and they will be very vigilant. There are other measures you won't see but will be part of keeping people safe.

But I would say, come out, participate. The beautiful thing about this city is no matter what atmosphere is created in a nation that's grappling with hate too much right now, in this city people engage, they participate, they come together. Let's do it again for the marathon and I think the NYPD is going to be absolutely ready to keep everyone safe.

Lehrer: Hey, did you know that the marathon used to be earlier. I remember when it was in October and I think because it was too warm, too many years in a row, they moved it to the first Sunday in November. And the fringe benefit from that, the way I see it, is that it's the Sunday after we turn the clocks back on that Saturday night as we do this weekend. And so, before people run 26.2 miles, they get an extra hour of sleep.

Mayor: You know, you're taking the view there, Brian, bringing all the pieces together. But it's going to be great and I want to close out by reminding people one more time – vote this Tuesday. It is one of the most important elections of our lifetime, literally. Flip your ballot. Vote on the ballot questions and please vote yes, yes, yes on the three questions on the ballot.

Let's get big money out of politics. Let's strengthen our democracy.

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

Mayor: Thank you, Brian.

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