

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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 1, 2020, 5:05 PM
CONTACT: pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov, (212) 788-2958

TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON CNN'S THE SITUATION ROOM WITH WOLF BLITZER

Wolf Blitzer: Let's stay in New York. The Mayor, Bill de Blasio, is joining us right now. Mayor de Blasio, thank you so much for joining us. I know you guys are incredibly busy right now. Does the emergency use authorization for this drug Remdesivir give you some hope that effective treatments – it's not a vaccine – treatments could potentially manage future outbreaks of the virus and potentially allow you to loosen some of your restrictions?

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Wolf, look, we all have to hope and pray that's true. Now, the way we're going to find out is through real evidence. You know, an emergency use authorization means something was put into play quickly because of an urgent situation. Now we have to find out, and we'll certainly use it in our public hospitals for example, to see what impact really happens. If it's a game changer, thank God, if not, we are going to continue on with all the strategies we have now. But I think this one has to be a kind of, you know, trust-but-verify situation. We don't know what it fully means yet unless we see it in real life.

Blitzer: It still needs some more testing, obviously. A new report from the CDC, Mayor, says international travel, the lack of testing capacity, allowed the coronavirus to take hold early here in the United States. Do you believe those were the major factors that allowed the virus to spread, for example, so rapidly in New York City?

Mayor: Yeah, Wolf, we don't have all the facts, but I think what we have seen is that we got hit from two directions in terms of the travel dynamic from both Asia and Europe. And obviously we're an international hub, but I think the testing is the central issue here. January 24th was the first day I called for the federal government to set up testing in New York City. They didn't do it for, obviously, quite a long time and still not sufficient. So, I think the fact is, had we had the testing when we needed it – and we had months, obviously, this nation got months of warning from what was going on in China – we would have been in a position to stop it and contain it. And that's what we're trying to get back to now, ironically, Wolf. We're trying to get back to the point where we knock this disease down enough to then test everyone who needs a test and find out everyone they've had close contact with, trace them, quarantine them. That's what we were actually doing in the beginning. But it turns out that by the time we got the test, it was already weeks and weeks too late. But I'm hoping and praying that the federal government now recognizes that if they actually could master the testing situation, that is actually a really verifiable way for us to get out of this because we've seen it work in other countries.

Blitzer: There is some dire word from this new study – I don't know if you've seen it, Mayor – from the University of Minnesota saying that the coronavirus pandemic could actually last up to

two years here in the United States. Are you taking that possibility into consideration as you plan to gradually reopen the city?

Mayor: Absolutely, Wolf. We need to think about the long term reality. We have to play the long game here. We know right now we're not out of the woods in New York City. Thousands of cases new in the last 24 hours, almost 300 deaths. I mean, it's still very much a raging battle, but we also see real progress happening. But we got to be smart and careful about how we open up just to make sure to begin with this disease doesn't boomerang back on us, which has happened in other parts of the world, which I fear might happen in other states in the country. We've got to be smart now, but we also have to recognize until it's fully defeated with a vaccine and/or a cure, it's out there. And in fact, we're anticipating next year the coronavirus still being around and potentially a very heavy flu season at the same time. That's a big one to punch we have to get ahead of and make sure people get their flu shots among other things. So, yeah, we're playing the long game here, but I'll tell you, Wolf, my concern is we need the testing from the federal government and we need direct support through the stimulus or we are not going to be in the position to even think about getting back on our feet. I mean the two big missing links from Washington are still missing – the testing and the financial support to get back on our feet and restart our economy.

Blitzer: Well, speaking of that stimulus, Mayor, how much money does New York City need right now to avoid, shall we say, bankruptcy?

Mayor: Right now, I have a gap of \$7.4 billion in my budget as we speak. That number inevitably will get worse as we lose more revenue. And I have to be honest Wolf, mayors all over the country are coming to grips with this, we have to start thinking, if we don't get the help from Washington we need in the next few weeks, a lot of mayors, Republican and Democrat both, are thinking unfortunately about furloughing public employees or even layoffs. And I'm talking about first responders, police, fire, sanitation, health care workers, educators. I mean these – this is the backbone of our cities and our country. All of that is on the line right now, all over the country. And so, when you think about it, right now, I'm in the hole \$7.4 billion. If my state doesn't get help, they're going to have to start cutting aid to localities by billions more. So, it's a very slippery slope. I am hoping and praying that folks in the House and Senate realize if they don't get aid to the frontline quickly, cities really will be facing horrible choices, horrible furloughs and layoffs and some literal bankruptcy.

Blitzer: The rising death toll from the coronavirus is clearly putting a serious strain on New York's ability to safely and respectfully handle dead bodies. On Wednesday, there were these awful pictures – authorities found, Mayor, dozens of decomposing bodies stored inside two trucks next to a Brooklyn funeral home. What steps are you taking to prevent this from happening again?

Mayor: Yeah, Wolf. It's such a sad situation and so disrespectful to the families. I have to say, I've come down very hard on that funeral home. That was an avoidable situation. We in the city, the NYPD, there were lots of ways that the funeral home could have turned to us for help, and, of course, we would have helped them, but they stayed silent. That's a rarity. Overwhelmingly, even with the horrible strain and the emotional strain, the funeral homes have really stood by the families in the city and served them. We've been working with them. I don't want to ever see

something like that happen again. I feel horrible for those families and it just should not have happened. But look, the way to not have it happen also is to keep beating back this disease. And that means people continuing to stick with the social distancing, staying home to the maximum extent possible. And then again, with that testing, if we can get that testing, Wolf, I know we can beat it back because you start squeezing the disease more and more with that testing and finding the people who need quarantine and then knocking it down more and more. That's where we have to get to so we never have to have horrible situations like that again.

Blitzer: On April 11th, I think, Mayor, you suggested that the schools in New York City, the largest school district in the country, should be closed, at least for the rest of this academic year. The Governor, Andrew Cuomo, he announced today that initially he was saying that was his decision, today he made a decision. He agrees with you. Schools are going to be closed through the rest of this academic year. When do you think kids in New York will be able to go back to school? Will there be summer school are they going to have to wait until the fall?

Mayor: Wolf, the plan is September – and again we're being careful and cautious here because we're not going to let this disease boomerang, we're just not going to let that happen. So, the plan is to make sure we start strong in September. We're going to need to have an extraordinary school year, probably the strongest school year we've ever had to bring kids back up to speed and we're going to deal with a lot of kids in school communities that are going through a lot of pain and trauma after what's happened here. So, September, with the understanding that over the summer we're going to still keep that distance learning, that online learning going very intensely, to give kids a running start into the year. Look, if the situation gets suddenly better, we would consider other options. But I think this one is a sort of slow and steady approach to make sure we get to what we really need, which is that new school year to start on time and start safely.

Blitzer: Before I let you go, I just want to give you a chance to respond to the criticism, Mayor, you receive for tweeting that message, singling out New York's Jewish community this week for that huge crowd of Hasidic men who showed up at a funeral of a rabbi. I want you to explain what you were thinking at the time. You were clearly angry that all of these people were there. They were violating the social distancing regulations. What has gone on since then because there are still, as you know, Jewish leaders who say it was unfair to single out all the Jews when it was just this one group of Hasidic Jews that were violating the rules.

Mayor: Yeah. Wolf, I've made very clear, very publicly, I did not mean in any way to single out a whole community. I have a very close, deep relationship with the Jewish community. I've tried to protect the community, defend it against so many challenges, but in the Hasidic community, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn this was the latest of a series of really bad situations where social distancing was being violated to the tune of hundreds or even thousands of people gathered at once. It was endangering lives of people in that community and beyond. It was endangering the lives of our police officers who went there to try and deal with it. And it made me very angry and very frustrated because we had warned people so many times, and I said very clearly, we're not going to allow this anymore. We're not going to tolerate it. I did not mean in any way to be disrespectful. And I've said it really was a bad choice of words, but it was out of actually love and passion, love for the community and frustration and passion that we could not let things like this happen. Wolf, I saw with my own eyes, thousands of people gathered close together, many of them without face coverings. I mean, it was horrifying to think about the fact that people will

ultimately die because that gathering happened, a gathering to honor a fallen rabbi. And I understand the power of mourning, but that rabbi, I'm sure, would never want to see more people die because of trying to honor him. So, I was very frustrated. But no, I have a deep appreciation for the Jewish community and we're all in this together. But we must – we must observe social distancing and we will not tolerate. The NYPD will not tolerate [inaudible] –

Blitzer: Do you think [inaudible] Hasidic community in Brooklyn going to listen to everyone and stop doing what they were doing?

Mayor: I think there's evidence in the last 48 hours, a number of community leaders have come forward. Some even who were involved on Tuesday night have apologized and made very clear, including some of the highest religious authorities. They're telling their community never let that happen again. And they understand the NYPD will very aggressively enforce. I hope it doesn't come to that, but we're ready to if needed.

Blitzer: I think you're right. I think the rabbi who had just died would not have wanted people to be risking their lives to pay their respects to the rabbi in that kind of way. Mayor de Blasio, thank you so much for joining us. We'll continue this conversation down the road. Good luck to everybody in New York.

Mayor: Thank you, Wolf.

###