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**RUSH TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO DELIVERS REMARKS AT THE FORD  
FOUNDATION'S NETGAIN CONFERENCE**

**Mayor Bill de Blasio:** Thank you. Thank you, everyone. I want to thank Darren for an incredibly kind and inspiring introduction. You made me feel good about myself this morning. Thank you. And Darren, I want to thank you. You've been speaking up, with the national voice that you have, on these issues and putting them squarely in the middle of the discussion of what our democracy should be, what an inclusive society should be – how we can't have economic fairness and equity if we don't address the issue of internet access. And I think this is a discussion that is just beginning to be fully felt in this country, that has to be front and center of all we think about as we address inequality. I think one of the reasons it is being felt more deeply is because of gatherings like this, but also because of the leadership of Darren Walker. Let's thank Darren for all he is doing.

[Applause]

Darren mentioned concepts of making sure our digital reality is as just as our analog reality. As I heard that, I of course said, that's right. But then I was immediately – I heard the voice that often is my voice of conscience, the voice of my wife, Chirlane, who would always accost me whenever I talked about the good old days, whenever I showed any hint of nostalgia about the past. My wife would always say, the good old days weren't so good for a lot of people. And I only would say, with respect and a positive rejoinder to Darren's comment, the analog age wasn't necessarily a time of great inclusion and equality and fairness. It's not necessarily the exemplar we want to hold ourselves up to. You're absolutely right – we can't do worse than that. We must do better than that. But I'm saying this with a real collegiality and respect. We saw, in the analog age, too many voices that didn't get heard. We saw, in the analog age, too much of a skew in the debate, depending on who had resources and who didn't. Our job is, in fact, to surpass the analog age in the digital age and create more fairness and more freedom than ever existed before. And that's why this conference is so important.

I want to thank, of course, Ford Foundation, all of the organizations that helped make today possible – Open Society, and Knight Foundation, Google, Robin Hood – all of you, for putting the energy and the focus on these issues that are going to frame, literally and fundamentally, the lives of our people for generations to come. And in our team at City Hall, this is front and center

in our deliberations. And we recognize that we can't honestly and effectively pursue an agenda to fight inequality and create opportunity without putting internet access front and center. I want to thank the members of our team who are here – Maya Wiley, my counsel.

[Applause]

And Maya has done a great job focusing our whole team on internet access and, in fact, extending those efforts to our national work with the Conference of Mayors. So thank you, Maya, for your leadership. I want to thank my senior advisor, Gabrielle Fialkoff, and my digital director, Jessie Singleton. They've all been key to our efforts to address these issues across our government. I don't know if some of you saw the article yesterday that talked about our technology team and how it is dominated by women and people of color, and we are very proud of that fact and we want to emphasize that part of how we create an attitude of inclusion is to ensure that a lot of people providing the leadership are thinking, first hand, about what an inclusive society looks like through the work they're doing on internet access. And we are very, very proud to have a team that exemplifies the work we're trying to do.

Now, as you think about your discussions today and where it's going to lead you, I think it's so important to put yourself in the lives of our people, and particularly our young people, for whom this discussion and the outcomes of this discussion and the policies made will literally determine their level of opportunity. And again, maybe we can say of the analog age, that there were many paths to opportunity and the society was, in some ways, a little more open in terms of opportunity. But now, we have an opportunity crisis. We have an inequality crisis that has not just met its previous historical comparison, which would have been the roaring 20s – we have now, sadly, surpassed the roaring 20s, in terms of the level of inequality, and it's growing. And so, I talked about this the other day, in terms of the city of New York and how people access economic opportunity here. It used to be, for generations – you grew up here or you came here, you can find an affordable place to live. There were jobs for folks, whether they happened to have a lot of education or not.

Now we see a narrowing that we have to address. In many places, it's harder and harder to afford the cost of living, to afford the cost of housing. Many opportunities now absolutely correlate to how much education you have and how much internet access you have. That is a fundamental societal change that most of our public policies have not caught up with. And if we think from the perspective of the average young person coming up and recognize that they literally don't get to be in the game if they don't have access to high-speed internet – that's what should drive us. I know I'm preaching to a lot of the converted here. But I just want to put it as pointedly as that. That's what should drive us – to recognize that literally, people don't even get to first base if we don't solve this problem. And we've tried to address inequality issues across the board. But the more we've done it, the more it keeps coming back to the recognition that this is the foundation – to get digital access right, opens up all the other doors.

Now, I agree with Darren – what Chair Wheeler did the other day was a clarion call for this whole country, and it made me very proud to see our national government acknowledging how important net neutrality was. Now, we know there's a long way to go in that fight. And I believe there's a lot of people in this room who have been engaged for a long time and will continue to

be. But that is the crux of this – ensuring the equality of opportunity and taking this new development and building upon it rapidly. I think there's a moment here, and a moment where a lot of people all over this country increasingly understand that net neutrality is not an abstraction, it's not something that doesn't involve them, it's, in fact, something that will quintessentially frame their futures. So we've got to strike while the iron is hot. The reality, of course, on broadband access is, it skews very much according to economic reality. And that's a topic we have to keep driving home.

I found, in a lot of conversations I've had, even with folks I thought were pretty aware – perhaps the fact that, in their lives, there was such total access, it was hard for them to consider the fact that all over this country more than a quarter of households don't have high-speed internet access. And in this city, it's even more and it correlates overwhelmingly to income dynamics. Now, again, tale of two cities – as I've talked about before – here in New York City today, with all of our strengths, with all of the wealth we see around you, we're finding a fundamental inequality reality. About 46 percent of our people are either at the poverty level or near the poverty level. Put in real terms, that means, in this city, almost half the people live on an income of \$40,000 dollars or less for a family of four – in a city that is one of the most expensive in the country. So you can imagine why, in the scheme of things, with rent and food and medicine and some of the other considerations that people are trying to somehow navigate, and trying to make ends meet – how for so many families, internet access is just out of reach. And therefore, for those families, a lot of economic opportunities is out of reach. For their children, a lot of educational possibilities are out of reach. You can see how one problem builds upon the next. Our job is to cut through it and to recognize that the concept of a digital divide is not just a vague concept of fairness or civil rights, it's something much more fundamental. It is about the difference between economic opportunity or the lack of it.

So, we in our city government, are trying to innovate, trying to push every button we have, use every tool we have. We take heart from the FCC's action. We know there's so much more the federal government should and could do. We're hopeful that day will come if we all push for it. We're trying to build that consensus with the work we're doing with mayors around the country through the U.S Conference of Mayors. There's a lot to do nationally and governmentally. There's a lot to do locally and if all governments used all their tools, it would add up to a lot, and help forge that national consensus. And one of the things I want to urge everyone to do, in addition to all the good work you do already, is push your local governments, your state governments to do what they can do.

But all that being said, the foundations, the philanthropies in this room have a crucial role to play because we know we're coming from behind on this issue. We're playing from behind. There's so much we have to catch up on. We know that you can fill in some of these gaps more effectively than any government or you can spark change more agilely than most governments ever could. And we need you to that.

We are trying to innovate – create changes here, in our city that will affect a lot of people quickly. We hope, as some of them work, that they can be good models for other parts of the country. We're trying always to look and see where others have models for us. But all of you can speed that process up, and improve that process, and raise the demand level, and support and

fund the innovations that are working and make them scalable and make them a consensus around the country.

But I want to give you a few examples of some of the things we're focused on. We're very proud of a new effort we've just begun to transform – what were payphones all over this city that fell into, in many cases, disuse – and turn them into free Wi-Fi hotspots all over the five boroughs – every neighborhood – ultimately reaching, potentially, millions of people. In the process, we're creating, literally, the world's fastest municipal Wi-Fi network. And to the great credit of our team –

[Applause]

Thank you. Talk about analog and digital – to the great credit of our team, they took something that had become outmoded – I personally miss the pay phones. There was a lot of romance. The phone booth – a lot of our culture surrounded it. But it's a nonissue in our society for so many people – taking what was part of yesterday and repurposing it, so cleverly, to reach so many people, knowing that this was an infrastructure that was already built but could be recreated for a better purpose.

This is something we're really excited about. We're excited that we're getting access to some of the places that need it most. We have over 400,000 residents of public housing here in New York City. A lot of our least advantaged New Yorkers live in public housing. Therefore, you know where you need to reach people and you've got a physical ability to reach a lot of people in one place. We've been getting high-speed internet access to our housing authority community centers, so residents know there is – at certainly one place in their life, where they can get plugged in fully.

We've been using our libraries. And this is something that's really promising – in October, we launched a pilot program to lend free Wi-Fi devices out of local libraries. Now, it's just begun – just 1,700 devices so far. We want to be at 10,000 by the end of the year. We want to push the federal government in this direction to support these initiatives. One of the most immediate and hands-on difference makers, particularly for our young people, but for anyone – go to your library, get the device, and suddenly your life is changing. It's tangible, it's doable, it's practical, it's immediate – in the scheme of things, a low-cost option. This is the kind of thing that we can do a lot more on, here and now. Again, if all of us in our localities, and all of us in our philanthropies, and all the different non-profits can keep innovating these pieces and push them towards a national model – we are firm believers in the notion that a lot of local actions add up to de facto national policy. A lot of times, our federal government, particularly in recent years, is slow to act and not responding to the times we're living in. Sometimes, the way to break through is to create so much demand from below, so much progress from below, that it becomes inexorable. It becomes a reality onto itself. That's what we're trying to do in our way here. That's what everyone in this room has the opportunity to do where you work and to add it together into a totality.

I'll just finish by offering an example because these ideas – one the one hand, they're very heady. It comes back to the core notions of democracy, and freedom of information, and what an

egalitarian society looks like. And on the other hand, they're very practical. For the people who do not yet have access, nothing could be more personal. For those who get access, nothing could be more personally transformative for them and their families.

I want to tell you a simple story – a young man named George Taveras – 24 years old, from the Bronx. George lived a reality that is so common in this country today, particularly for people of color – particularly for young men of color. He pursued an education with a lot of energy and a lot of focus, but it was just too much for him economically to keep up with the demand. So he started community college and he left after one semester. And this is, again, a phenomenon we see too much of – good, young people who fight all their way to that starting line, get started, and can't follow through because of economics. He left after one semester because he needed a job to help support his parents. And that could have been the end of a story. That could have been a very sad end of a story for a promising young man, for whom the unfair economics of our country just didn't add up.

So, he needed to support his parents. He needed to take whatever job he could get. He got a job at a restaurant as a bus boy, making a grand minimum wage of five dollars an hour because tips were supposed to make up the rest – to say the least, not taking him forward in any meaningful way. But he didn't lose his interest in trying to find a different path forward. And he had a great love of technology – he was interested in web development. And on the subway, to and from work, he would study books about programming on his own. He would self-educate. He needed a breakthrough and he found the New York City Web Development Fellowship online. This is part of something we're very proud of – our Tech Talent Pipeline, which is a \$10 million dollar effort to get public and private opportunities to train young people for the kinds of jobs in the tech sector of this city. So in this case, George finds something online that opens his mind to the possibility there may be another path. He got five months of intensive training through this program with the Flatiron School.

Well, you've probably guessed the outcome of this story. With that training, George was able to transform his life. He got a job at the XO Group as a web developer. Today, this community college dropout with limited prospects is making \$75,000 dollars a year in his tech job. That is one example of personal transformation, of transformation for a family – one example. There are so many others out there if we do what we all know how to do to create real access. And so, George's story shows us this is about everything we value. This is about, of course, freedom of expression, this is about access to information, this is about equality. It's also about an economy that's actually inclusive, regardless of who you are, where you come from – an economy that actually works for everyone. That economy cannot be achieved if we don't guarantee high-speed internet access for all at an affordable rate. It's as simple as that, and that is what I am convinced. All of the people here today have the ability to fundamentally further, as not just a goal, but a reality in our country. And I want to thank you for focusing on something of such great importance to people all over this nation and I wish you Godspeed. Thanks so much.

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