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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: September 14, 2020, 7:00 PM

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TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. There's one week to go. City students will be heading back to their classrooms starting next Monday for the start of online learning later this week. The City is hiring 2,000 teachers, but there remain concerns that that won't be enough. Joining me now to talk about that and much more from the Blue Room inside City Hall is Mayor de Blasio. Good evening, Mr. Mayor.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Hey, Errol. How are you doing?

Louis: Just fine, thanks. I wanted to start with the report that something like 16 teachers out of over 15,000 I believe, have tested positive for coronavirus. My question is under the guidelines that you'd issued earlier, that might be enough to trigger the closing of classrooms or even a whole school. Is it conceivable that there'll be some classes or even whole schools that shut down almost immediately after the kids come back next week?

Mayor: So let me give you the frame there really quick Errol. So it's 55 staff, educators, and other school staff tested positive over the last week or so, out of about 17,000 tested. That's a positivity rate of 0.32 percent. So that's a very big sample that we've now taken. We have a sense of where things are going. Look, let's be clear, we're still battling the coronavirus in this city. We take the coronavirus very seriously. And if someone gets sick, it can be a real challenge, but thank God for most people it is something that has a minimal impact. And so, yeah, we are ready to see and, you know, we don't like it, but it's true. We will see some people unfortunately test positive and they'll be out, you know, for about two weeks and then come back. We will see some classrooms shut down, of course. And as to whole schools, it's too soon to tell. You could see that. We had one in this preparation period in the whole city out of 1,600 schools, we had one that shut down. So you could see that from time to time, but remember we've set up a pod system so that we believe if there's a case, generally we will be able to contain within a pod. If it's more than one case in the school, more than one pod, then we're ready to shut down the school for a period of time to do an investigation. We have a new situation room that'll be analyzing all of this, all day long, nonstop to make sure we make very quick moves. But we're ready. If sometimes there is a case we're ready to make the adjustments we have to.

Louis: Okay. In the same vein, when it comes to the number of teachers you said today that something like 2,000 have already been hired. And I understand that's partly finding people who are already on the administrative staff who have a teaching credential and so forth. But the number to aim for, I was first told, was something closer to 6,000. How do we make up that gap?

Mayor: We've been getting more and more information as we go along Errol. And so what we're finding is, as we get the latest information about which teachers will be present, which students will be present, we've been able to find a better take on the number. And we think that 2,000 is going to go a long way to filling any gap that exists. We have a number of schools that have said, they're now set. We have some others that say they need some more help. So the 2,000 we think is going to address most of that. If we've got to do something additional, we stand ready to. But right now I think this will take care of the essential problem.

Louis: There was at least one report, I believe it was in the New York Post that some educators, some principals were complaining that the protective equipment that they got included non-working thermometers with instructions in Chinese and stuff. That was, they said, this disinfectant that was smelly and didn't have enough alcohol in it and so forth. Where's the sort of a quality control centralized as far as what protective equipment the teachers and the staff are going to receive?

Mayor: Yeah. Look, the operations team at the Department of Education, they've been working intensely on this for the last few months. I've been in schools seeing the quality and the quantity that exists now that have been laid in, in schools. Look in any operation this big it's not shocking if someplace, you know, the wrong product showed up. We have to replace it quickly. But what we have now is the ability to immediately resupply any school with a problem. So if there's a thermometer that's not working, we got to get them new thermometers. If the instructions are in the wrong language, we got to get them something better. So we take that very seriously. But I believe given the amount that's already been purchased and sent to schools, we shouldn't see too many of those problems. If there is, principals know they have a hotline number they can call, they can get immediate resupply.

Louis: We had a report tonight that furthers the conversation about homeless New Yorkers who have been moved to certain neighborhoods temporarily. DHS now trying to move them, Department of Homeless Services to other places. And that in turn creating a sort of a chain reaction. How the neighborhoods have reacted has been very different depending on the area that you're talking about. Where do things stand now? The freeze on moving people kind of leaves things right where they are. But I thought we had agreed that where things are right now is not going to be acceptable?

Mayor: Well, where things are right now is not what we aspire to. Because when we went into those emergency hotel spaces at the height of the crisis, the goal was never to stay there. The goal was to get people back over time into shelter settings, where they can get a lot more services and support in places that are meant to be there to support the homeless. Not hotels were, you know, not outfitted for it and we spend a huge amount of money for. That was never the goal. What we're going to do is look at the whole picture now. Our Corporation Counsel Jim Johnson is deeply involved in part because now it's a litigation matter. Our Social Services Commissioner Steve Banks, they're going to work together. Look at literally you're right – there's one thing affects the other. So they're going to look at the whole picture. But staying true to the plan we actually laid out three years ago. To get out of overall in this city we want to be out of every hotel where we pay by the night for homeless folks. That's not what we should be doing long term. We should be in specific shelters with support, give people the mental health support, give people the support who deal with substance problems. Get them back on their feet, get them to affordable housing. The day I'm looking forward to is the day when New York City has no more hotels, no more cluster sites, but we're going to make sense of the immediate circumstance and decide how all the pieces fit before taking any other immediate action.

Louis: Okay, let me switch topics here. The City reports that no parking placards have been officially revoked from any City worker. And that the unit, the Interagency Placard Enforcement unit is being disbanded due to budget cuts. So there was a viewer who tweeted this question that I think summarized it perfectly. Why did the Mayor cut the funding for the placard abuse unit when with enough revenue from tickets, it would have paid for itself? And why were no placards revoked in the short time the unit did exist?

Mayor: Yeah, I'll get the analysis from the team. It's a good question, Errol. But I think we've got to be clear that if you've got to make priorities, you've got to make choices in a very tough budget circumstance. You know, there's so many people looking at the situation the City is dealing with and some of the time folks say, Oh, there's nothing wrong. I keep saying, we've had to make a lot of tough cuts that have real impact. And it's going to keep that way until we get either a stimulus from Washington or the support we need from Albany in the form of long-term borrowing. So placard abuse is a real issue, but when you compare it to the things we've been focused on -- food, shelter, health care, safety. I mean, think how elemental we've had to be in going at the most dire problems. We couldn't focus on placard abuse. But I'll be happy to get you more on how it was costed out and revenue issues and all, I'll get you that update.

Louis: Well, it sounds like even before the pandemic, it wasn't something that was doing very much. There's, you know, you look at the data and in most precincts, not even one citation per day was issued. And again, no revocations at all.

Mayor: Well, I don't -- can't quote that actually. I'll tell you honestly, because again, there's been so many issues we've been dealing with these last six months of this crisis. That placard abuse has not been on the top of my list. But clearly look, what I said from the beginning is anyone who misuses the placard, they shouldn't have it and they should pay a penalty. I certainly want to see that going forward. And next year, when we're going to have the technology in place to basically have our agents go down a street and be able to instantly, you know, in a computerized fashion, know who's violating the placard rules and penalize them instantly. I think that's going to be the big step forward we've been looking for. So that is still coming. We want to stop placard abuse, and I think that's when we're going to see the breakthrough we've been waiting for.

Louis: Okay. Stand by Mr. Mayor. We're going to take a quick break here. I'll have more with Mayor de Blasio in just a minute. Stay with us.

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Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. I'm once again joined by Mayor de Blasio from inside City Hall. And Mr. Mayor, I wanted -- I have a bunch of concerns that are -- you could lump together under quality of life. And I wanted to start with the New York Post, which reported that they looked at a bunch of the neighborhoods in Manhattan in particular where the census return rate is especially low. And it turns out it's the Upper East Side and the Upper West Side and it's SoHo. And by their estimate, if the response rate remains as low as it has been so far, it could cost the city something on the order of \$300 million per year in federal assistance, which over a decade is \$3 billion, which is real money at that point. Is there some way to sort of step in and turn that around?

Mayor: Yeah, well, we've got a couple of weeks left and we are trying to fire on all cylinders in all the neighborhoods that are coming in lower than they should. If it's, in part, because people have moved temporarily to other areas, we got to do our damndest to find them and get the word out to them. But there's a really extensive effort right now, Errol, and it is bearing fruit, an extraordinary grassroots effort, lots of community organizations involved, and, you know, phone banking, texting, you name it. We are seeing the numbers move up, but some of those neighborhoods we're going to have to really dig deep over these next couple of weeks.

Louis: Now, do we have any sense of whether some of the non-responsive people who -- are in the early stages of deciding they're not coming back to the city?

Mayor: It could be. It could be simply, that people have temporarily gone elsewhere. They're not getting the same information flow and not focused on it. Look, the census, this has been a problem in every kind of community. I think last time, 2010, the strongest community in all of New York City in terms of response rate was Washington Heights. So, for folks who might assume that census response tracks, according to certain demographic realities of privilege, in fact, we saw the Washington Heights community really responded with incredible energy, obviously a heavily immigrant community, community of color. And people really went to bat for the census. So, we're going to work in every community, but if we find any place where there's a gap, we got to just do everything we can to close it. And I do think the focus levels are increasing every day. People are recognizing the census is real. It takes 10 minutes to fill out. It's a big deal, as you indicated. We just got to keep pounding away and get people focused on it.

Louis: And I raised that in part because the issue of the letter you received from over 160 business leaders, where they're saying, you know, essentially they're asking you to pay more attention to certain quality of life issues. And I believe your response this morning was you would welcome their help in trying to get additional funding for the City to make those services possible. But surely there's more that they can do than help you lobby down in Washington and Albany, right?

Mayor: There's a lot. I mean, today I'm wearing a pin right now from an event I was at this morning, One Vanderbilt. This is an example of the corporate sector working with the City, the private sector, really working in partnership. It's a huge new building next to Grand Central station. And as a result of that partnership, we got \$220 million worth of repairs to that subway system right around Grand Central. That's a huge benefit for the city. This is a company -- one of the companies involved the SL Green, bringing back their employees. Now all their employees are back in the office in Midtown. I mean, there's great examples of companies going to bat for New York City, and we want to work with all of them, but I truly believe if you're talking about some of the most basic quality of life issues like sanitation, we didn't want to make any cuts to sanitation, but our budget situation is strained. We lost \$9 billion in revenue. We need to fill that gap. So, the business community helping us get long-term borrowing in Albany is crucial. And then we can bridge to when there is a federal stimulus, which right now, Errol, doesn't look like it's happening before the election, probably only happens if there's a new president. But at least if we can get some long-term borrowing to help us to that point, we can do enough to keep this city as strong as it should be.

Louis: Well, you know, just, like, as if you were asking for a commercial loan or even a home mortgage, the lender's going to ask you what you've done to handle as much of the burden on your own before you come to them for the borrowed dollars, right? So, by analogy, in this case, both the folks in Albany -- let's put Washington aside for a minute -- as well as the business community that you're asking to stand by your side and press for some of the financing and other changes that you need, they're going to want to see what the City is doing by way of belt tightening efficiencies, quality of life, and other issues, right?

Mayor: Sure. And that's why we cut \$7 billion from our budget between February when the budget was proposed and June when it is adopted. We reduced it by \$7 billion. That's a lot of belt tightening right there. We've clearly effectively, efficiently navigated this crisis. We came back from being the epicenter to being one of the healthiest places in America. We're opening our school system, which a lot of business leaders care about a lot. They think it's crucial for their workforce. We're the only major school system in America that's opening up. I mean, a lot is happening where New York City is stretching our dollars and is making a big impact. But you know what? It's always about money to some extent. If you don't have money, you can't do everything you need to do. So, I would argue, we're showing a lot of impact for the dollars we're spending. The bond rating agencies have believed in New York City strongly. In fact, we got a rating upgrade last year. That's how strong we've been. So, I don't think there's any further evidence needed for the business community to see that this modest amount of borrowing – Errol, right now, I've got an \$88 billion budget. I'm asking for \$5 billion that will stretch over multiple years, that we will repay over a 30-year term. A lot of business leaders I've spoken to actually say, 'well, if I was in your shoes, I'd be doing the same thing'. Interest rates are low, this is the right time to borrow, and bridge until the point that your revenue starts to come back or you get a stimulus. I think that's basic business sense right there.

Louis: Well, one of the things that Stephen Green of SL Green suggested today – and I don't know if he signed that letter, I don't believe he did, actually – but he did suggest that maybe you follow suit of what he has already done and invite far more, closer to 100 percent of the City workforce to come back into offices. Is that a possibility?

Mayor: Sure. Look, we've up to now been going through a very methodical process, out of the worst of the crisis through phases one, two, three, four on time. We're able to hold them, no backsliding, onto bringing back the economy more and opening schools. That's been the sequence very rapidly over just a few months. I think as soon as we see the school reopening and are able to confirm that we are able to keep pushing back this disease, you know, the schools, the indoor dining, all these things happening, we're still able to keep fighting back to disease and lowering the infection rate, that is the time to then start to ramp up other pieces of our economy. And that would include bringing back more of our public employees. So, we're going to put together a plan to progressively get more folks back into their offices.

Louis: Okay. And then finally we have a special – the beginning of a series on what's going on in Brownsville in the 7-3 Precinct, where a lot of the concerns that many people have – legitimate concerns, I'm not talking about sort of the political opportunists, but legitimate concerns of actual New Yorkers about the safety on the streets, have really been something that we're going to be focusing on for the next few days. What can you tell people who are worried about the uptick in shootings, the increase in street violence, the problems that make it impossible to do any of the things that we've just been talking about?

Mayor: Well, I don't think it makes it impossible, but I think it's something we must address. And look, this city has come back from upticks and violence before. The NYPD has fought back upticks before effectively working with communities. 7-3 Precinct is a place where there was a real community concern. Elected officials concerned about the precinct commander. Commissioner Shea made a change there, actually chose someone who grew up in Brownsville to take over that command. I know that there's been serious moves to send more officers in from different parts of the NYPD to support the efforts in that precinct, including members of the Strategic Response Group, to really beef up the amount of resources that precinct commander has available to him. So, the situation in Brownsville we're focused on it, we will fight it back. We've all been dealing with this perfect storm of everything being closed and tremendous frustration and pain in our communities, but we are starting to get better and we will contain this violence problem and fight it back. But Brownsville is going to be a crucial location. So, whatever moves we need to make, whatever adjustments we're going to make it, and we have new leadership on the ground there to help make sure that happens.

Louis: Okay, that's going to do it for now. Thanks very much for joining us, Mr. Mayor, we will see you next week.

Mayor: Thank you, Errol.

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