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**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS LIVE ON
THE BRIAN LEHRER SHOW**

Brian Lehrer: It's the Brian Lehrer Show on WNYC. Good morning, everyone. And as we do every Friday at this time, it's time for Ask the Mayor – my questions and yours for Mayor Bill de Blasio at 646-435-7280, 646-435-7280, or tweet a question @BrianLehrer. And good morning – just use the hashtag, I forgot about the hashtag. Use the hashtag, #AskTheMayor, and we'll see it even quicker. Good morning, Mr. Mayor, welcome back to WNYC.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Thank you very much, Brian. And I have two quick breaking news items for you, I think you will enjoy. One, very positive for all New Yorkers, today, positivity levels for COVID in New York City, 1.78 percent, the lowest in almost seven months. And second, as New York City always does, we're a compassionate city, we're going to help the people of India who have been going through hell with COVID. It's been tragic and horrible and painful to watch. The City of New York is sending over four million test kits and almost 5,000 ventilators and BiPAP machines to help save lives in India, a country that is suffering, a country we feel a very strong tie to in the city, so many Indian-Americans here. So, New York City is going to step up and help the people of India through this crisis.

Lehrer: Is that something the city is doing on its own, or is it coordinated through the federal government?

Mayor: We're definitely working with the federal government, but what's clear is that the level of need is overwhelming and any way that any source of help can come is welcomed. We've been obviously working with the Indian government as well. But let me tell you, Brian, when we developed the ventilators in the height of COVID last spring, the City of New York developed its own ventilators because we literally could not get them from the federal government or the State government or on the open market. And at the time, when we came through the crisis, we said these ventilators will be able to help other people in the future. And these very same ventilators built here in New York City, in the midst of crisis, will now be there to help the people of India.

Lehrer: Did you watch the debate last night among those who would like to succeed you?

Mayor: There was a very, very erudite, thoughtful questioner I watched. I liked –

Lehrer: Oh, it was Errol –

Mayor: – your headset and everything there, Brian. Yes, of course, I watched it. It is an acquired taste, watching a Zoom debate though.

Lehrer: Yeah. Well, any comment on any of the content, either about, you know, what anybody said about you or the way any of them came off or characterized each other?

Mayor: I thought it was not an overly eventful debate. It felt sort of like a warm-up debate a bit. I assume the ones coming up might be a little more illuminating. Look, I am proud that a lot of the progressive initiatives we have created have found their way into people's verbiage. Many, many of the things candidates called for we're actually already doing in New York City. And I'm proud of that and we're going to keep doing that, but I think in terms of what we need to see from candidates, I think the people of the city need a hell of a lot more information before they can make an informed decision and do, you know, rankings under the new system.

Lehrer: I told a caller to our previous segment that I would ask for your reaction to one of the questions that I asked in the debate. It was a show of hands question on whether, once the vaccines are approved beyond emergency use authorization, when they're in full regular use for whatever age groups, whether the children in the New York City public schools of those ages should be required to get vaccinated. Five of the eight candidates said yes, but then when I followed up and asked, should the teachers be required to get vaccinated? Zero of the candidates said yes to that. What's your own position and your reaction to that?

Mayor: That was a little striking. My position is that no one should be required for our schools for the clearest of reasons, Brian. We created a gold standard of health and safety measures. We made our schools the safest places in New York City. The comeback of the New York City schools, biggest school system in the nation, the fact that we reopened our schools when so many other cities didn't even dare to try and that was before anyone was vaccinated, and now we've got a huge number of people vaccinated and young people will definitely be vaccinated. I mean, we're seeing a great response already. You know, literally yesterday was the first day we could vaccinate 12 to 15 year olds, just in the course of yesterday almost 2,500 kids were vaccinated. There's 6,000 appointments booked already. We're going to see a lot of young people vaccinated for sure. And we're really excited about that. But, no, clearly, we kept our schools safe without requiring vaccination. And I want everybody back in school in September, everybody. And even if that means there are some people not ready to get vaccinated. That's fine. I want everybody back.

Lehrer: Jane in Manhattan, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Jane.

Question: Hi, there. Mr. Mayor, thank you very much for taking my call. I am very concerned about the way that mental health is treated in New York City. I will give you one example. A close friend of mine, she came into the VA hospital because she's a veteran. She went into the VA hospital looking to get some therapy. During the course of a talk between her and a doctor at the VA hospital she wound up telling them that she was experiencing some suicidal thoughts. She was not at all violent towards herself or anyone else, not even in speech. And at first, they started off trying to give her different program options and things like that. And then they turned it around on her and said, you know what, actually, you're not leaving for a week. We're committing you. And she said, no, that's not right, I don't want to be here. And they said, well, you don't really have a choice, you have to sign this paper that says that you're committing

yourself voluntarily, even though she was not, and she said [inaudible]. And then after that, she was put into a ward with ten other male patients and six male staff, no other women were there. And you are literally our last hope for getting any sort of answers [inaudible] because we are very scared. If this is something that happens to people when they are honest about their mental health and seek help, and they are institutionalized and stripped of their items and of routine, stripped of everything and basically forced to comply, it makes people feel even more hopeless and helpless. So, I'm wondering if you can maybe extend some help in this direction to my friend personally.

Mayor: Absolutely, Jane. This is a painful story. I'm so glad you called because this is exactly the kind of thing we have to avoid. Jane, please give you information to WNYC. We'll have someone follow-up with you immediately after the call. Look this is – this really pains me, and I don't understand, of all places, the Veterans Administration, where there's been so many veterans dealing with mental health challenges, it should be an entirely more supportive, constructive environment. But let me tell you the bigger point here of if anyone is feeling suicidal, if anyone doesn't know where to turn, I want to make a bigger point to all New Yorkers. Anybody, if it's you, yourself, or anybody in your life, 24 hours a day, you can call 888-NYC-WELL, get a trained counselor, obviously for free, any and all languages are spoken.

Anyone who is feeling that or anyone you know who's feeling it, you can call on their behalf and get guidance. We want to embrace people who are going through that pain and get them to help. And if someone's saying I need therapy, we have therapy through our City public health system. If someone feels that they can't afford it, we will give it to them for free. We are making mental health available for everyone in New York City, because we have guaranteed health care. If you don't have health insurance in New York City, we'll give you an NYC Care Card so you can get mental health and physical health care for free. If you need a place to turn, we will find you an appointment. You can go through 888-NYC-WELL. So, no one in this city should feel they are alone. And I really appreciate you, Jane, for stepping up for your friend. It shouldn't have to take that, but I'm really appreciative that you did that, but the message is no one should feel alone. This is a city where we want to ensure that there's mental health for all, and we actually have the ability to reach people. So, please, it just pains me, anyone, anyone who knows anyone who's feeling this, make that call immediately.

Lehrer: Jane, hang on, we will take your contact information off the air for the Mayor's Office. And relevant to Jane's call, Mr. Mayor, I mean, you've made fighting mental health – fighting mental illness, obviously I should say, a focus of your administration. But I see on the news organization, The City, that a hundred million dollars in diversion centers where people in a mental health crisis were – just sounds like exactly what Jane was calling about – were supposed to be able to go rather than a conventional hospital or jail. In some cases, they're basically empty. What happened?

Mayor: COVID happened. We have many, many elements to our mental health strategy, and we announced in the last few weeks a variety of additional mental health initiatives. We're going to be providing a mental health check-in at all City-run vaccination centers to see if anyone needs additional help after COVID. Obviously, a major initiative, that when there are calls, people in crisis with a mental health challenge, as long as there's no indication of violence, we're going to

be sending out medical personnel, civilians to address that citywide now. There's a host of additional efforts that we're making to address mental health needs. The diversion centers were about to get going right as COVID hit. We had to reset, but now we're going to be able to move forward with that. But I really want to emphasize because we have guaranteed health care, because no one will be turned away from health care in the city, and because we have a universal approach for mental health for all, if anyone needs help, we will find them an appropriate setting. Not the horrible experience Jane just described. We'll find them an appropriate setting. Anyone who needs help can 888-NYC-WELL. So, the diversion centers will be coming back now, but we have other options to get people to if they're in a moment of crisis.

Lehrer: John Michael in Manhattan, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, John Michael.

Question: Hi, how are you? Brian, thank you so much for taking my call and thank you for being America's primary therapist. That is incredible how you handled the call earlier with Remi. It was really amazing. There's some really great news coming out of Boston from the Fire Department where they have approved fuel cell [inaudible] vehicles for operation on the bridges and tunnels. California has over 48 stations with a hundred on the way, but New York has failed [inaudible] a serious look over the last six years, even though there are stations in places like Hempstead that have been sitting idle for five years. And fuel cell electric vehicles can power anything from a forklift to a heavy-duty class-a big rig. And for a passenger vehicle, it's a three to five minutes [inaudible]. So, the same experience as – excuse me, a gasoline vehicle, a little nervous. And for every fuel cell vehicle that you put on the road, you take the equivalent of two to two and a half fossil fuel vehicles off the road. And, you know, for, you know – I know we want people to take public transportation, but there are cars here. And for folks living in apartments, it's a really great way to centralize [inaudible] –

Lehrer: We don't have time to get too deeply into it, but is this different than electric vehicles, which is, I think, what the City and the nation are trying to transition to away from gasoline?

Question: So, a fuel cell vehicle is an electric vehicle. It's just, you're not getting your electricity from the battery. You're getting it from hydrogen.

Lehrer: I see. Mr. Mayor, is this something you're familiar with?

Mayor: I'm familiar enough to say it – there is some promise here and the City is looking certainly at what we can do to support different renewable options. I – look, the climate crisis is so profound we need to literally try everything. So, one of the things I'm focusing on is getting us off fossil fuels first. We have a plan to end all fossil fuels connections in the coming years. Obviously, we have the strongest building retrofit law in the whole country. Our big buildings are being made to become efficient, stop creating so much greenhouse gas emission. But my bottom line here, in answer to John Michael, is we're going to push every button to get more and more transportation to become electric. We just rolled out our electric school buses, our City fleet's going all electric. Hydrogen as a piece of the equation is, I think, real and important, but I have to figure out what more the City can do. Obviously, a lot has to be done on the national level, but everything where I think we all need to get to is we cannot continue with fossil fuels. It

literally has to be an attitude of stranding fossil fuels in the ground and moving very aggressively, urgently to a whole variety of renewable options.

Lehrer: If I had time last night in the debate for one more question, the next one in line that round up on the cutting room floor, unfortunately for time, was to ask if all the candidates would commit to the policy that I think is currently in place to, by 2030, stop all natural gas hookups which would mean, I guess, moving toward electric heat in buildings across the city for any new construction. Do you want to give that policy a boost and give a message to your successor, whoever it turns out to be?

Mayor: Yeah, I said in our State of the City at the beginning of this year, we need to just – we literally need to break our dependence on fossil fuels. It's a matter of survival. So, you should ask that question in whatever venue you have with the candidates. The only acceptable answer from my point of view is to entirely divorce ourselves from fossil fuels at the first available moment. I believe that by the end of this decade, we can literally have no more natural gas, no more oil, no more fossil fuel hookups, anywhere in New York City. We can end it for anything new that's created and then get off it entirely in the years after. I do think people have to declare themselves. Anyone who says, Oh, you know, natural gas is sort of a gateway, transitional fuel is missing the point. We need to radically move to renewables. And the renewable technology gets better all the time. And this is striking Brian, a lot of it's been with government investment. And we're finally going to have the United States of America, because of President Biden doubling down on renewable investment. But the private sector has gotten wise and they're shifting more in that direction as well. The technology is moving rapidly. But it, you got to – it's a little bit of if you build it, they will come. If you cut off fossil fuels, if you determine that we are literally going to leave this behind, then it moves a whole host of actions in real time. And that's where we have to be as a matter of life and death at this point.

Lehrer: So, no more natural gas hookups after 2030 is your policy, right?

Mayor: Period. Yes, and we're going to make that law.

Lehrer: Sarah in the Bronx, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Sarah, are you there? Sarah in the Bronx?

Question: Yes, I am. Good morning, everyone. Hi, my name is Sarah Wilson. I'm calling to ask the Mayor – I've experienced homelessness and unsuccessfully tried to find housing with the CITYFEPS voucher. Data from your own agency shows that CITYFEPS in its current state is not working with only two percent of people able to find housing. If you're committed to ending a tale of two cities, will you commit to increase the CITYFEPS voucher in this year's budget? And pass Intro 146, a bill that would raise the voucher to fair market rate? Something that you have opposed for a long time, but would have helped my family and countless others. And also, will you agree not to send homeless individuals back to congregate shelter, which is proven ineffective and inhumane, as I've heard you say recently, even though FEMA is reimbursing 100 percent of the funds?

Mayor: Sarah, thank you for the questions. And obviously I want to see everyone who's suffered through homelessness, get to permanent affordable housing. And that's what we've done with about 150,000 people in the last seven years. So, there's definitely an issue with the vouchers, but I don't want anyone to misunderstand the larger reality. We've had extraordinary ability to get people out of shelter, to permanent affordable housing. Now I disagree on two points though. On the question of folks who were temporarily placed in hotels because of COVID and now we are, thank God coming out of COVID. No, they should not remain in those hotels. The reason we have shelters built specifically to support homeless people on their transition out of homelessness with social services, employment, support, etcetera, is that that is where we specialize that support. It was never meant to be done in a bunch of stray hotels. So, in the coming days, we'll be talking about, as the situation gets healthier and healthier, moving people back to shelter, but we don't want people in shelter for long. We want to get them back on their feet, into permanent affordable housing. On the second question with the vouchers, the problem is the State and the City are not aligned. If the City takes actions what's going to happen is a bunch of other vouchers will no longer have sufficient value. We'll end up paying a huge amount of money without achieving much. So, I do not believe that's the right approach. What I think is the right approach is to get the City and State aligned. Definitely, we're willing to go to a higher level, but we've got to do it in coordination with the State the way or else we are just robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Lehrer: Sarah, thank you for your call. I hope that's helpful. Mr. Mayor, I see you have a new Correction Commissioner, Vincent Schiraldi from the Columbia University Justice Lab and a former probation official. Who I know is a reformer because coincidentally, he was just on the show a few weeks ago to talk about –

Mayor: I think there's a connection there, Brian. You know, people go on your show and they get elevated shortly thereafter.

Lehrer: That's right. They get on your radar. No, he was – I know, am I remembering it right? Probation official or parole official?

Mayor: He was Probation Commissioner in the previous administration.

Lehrer: Thank you. And he came to us through a prison reform advocacy group that's very serious about reform. So, that's a credential for him as a reformer, for sure. What are you hoping he changes?

Mayor: Well, first of all, Vincent Schiraldi has just extraordinary history. He has served as a senior advisor in my team as we built the plan to get off Rikers permanently. And I really want to say to him, all the people, Liz Glazer, Cynthia Brann, everyone who played a leading role, certainly our First Deputy Mayor Dean Fuleihan, these folks were visionaries in saying after 85 years, we were going to shut down Rikers altogether. Go to a humane modern community-based jails. Vinny Schiraldi was a key player in that. Obviously, made a lot of reforms previously as Probation Commissioner. I think it's clear, he's going to take the work that Cynthia Brann was doing to end punitive segregation, make it come to life. We're ending solitary confinement. I want all your listeners to understand that. Something that has been done almost nowhere else in the country, we are ending solitary confinement, period. The horrible, painful story of Kalief

Browder will never happen again because it will not exist anymore in New York City. Vinny Schiraldi knows how to get this done. Obviously, continuing the effort to build the community-based jails, get off Rikers once and for all. There's a lot of work to be done. It's a very tough environment in Correction, especially after all the disruption of COVID. But we wanted someone who was really experienced but is also committed to constantly creating a more humane and redemption oriented atmosphere. One of the things we did that he's going to help build upon is everyone that comes out of Rikers who qualifies, gets a transitional job provided by the City so they can get back on their feet. They get education training every weekday in our Correction system to get ready to come out and not come back to incarceration. These are exactly the kinds of things that Vinny Schiraldi believes in and can deepen.

Lehrer: The news organization The City notes about the outgoing Commissioner Cynthia Brann, that her tenure in New York has been plagued by a steady increase in the number of use of force cases by officers against inmates, according to multiple reports by a federal monitor overseeing the department. Why have uses of force against inmates at Rikers risen on your watch?

Mayor: Well, I'd say that same monitor report gave her a lot of credit for making a host of reforms. And Cynthia Brann is one of the key architects of getting off Rikers, of ending solitary confinement. She was one of the key architects of figuring out how to get 1,600 inmates out during COVID, so that we could reduce the jail population, get people to safety. So, there's a lot there. But it's been a tough environment and some of the reforms work better than others. And the use of force issue is something we just have to do better on. But it is a very challenging environment made worse by all the disruption of COVID. What is clear though, is the big, big changes can and will work. And ultimately what's going to be great for the city is in just a few years, there will no longer be a Rikers Island facility. And I think that's really the thing that's been holding us back the most.

Lehrer: Do you have confidence that the candidates to succeed you will follow through on closing Rikers? From some of what I've read, I haven't gotten to ask them about this myself – pretty much all of them, all of them, or almost all of them do agree with closing Rikers. But it's been harder to pin them down on whether they'll follow through with the particular sites for the four borough jails. And you can't really close Rikers if you don't have those borough jails open. Although I know some people say we should just de-incarcerate so much, we don't need additional space, but that doesn't seem to be the current reality. But they're not committing to individual locations.

Mayor: It's a real issue. I'm glad you're raising it. Brian. First of all, look, mass incarceration was a massive failure and harmed a huge number of people in this city and this country. We have in a really extreme way, in a great way, in a radical way, reduced mass incarceration in this city very successfully. So, the truth is we can have very few people incarcerated, but we still do need community-based jails. There will always be a need for some, at least at this moment in history. And anyone who says I want to get off Rikers, but I don't want to have an alternative, is trying to fool the public or is reckless. There's only these places – years went into getting the agreement with the City Council, with communities, community benefit packages, to make sure these community-based jails would work so we could get out of the horror of 85 years of Rikers

Island. Any candidate who says, Oh, I want to get off Rikers, but I'm not going to affirm the current timeline and the current locations is being disingenuous and people should press them on it. Because if we – if they don't act and more and more people are kept on Rikers years after they should, that's a stain on this city.

Lehrer: Thank you, just advanced a campaign story. Question from Jim on Twitter. We've heard stories of relatives falling for conspiracy theories, such as QAnon. Given its size, there are some members of the NYPD that's subscribe to online conspiracies, which is a danger to the public. What is the NYPD doing to defend the ranks from dangerous conspiracies like QAnon?

Mayor: Yeah, it's a real issue. I thank Jim for this question. There's very careful work being done to look for any instance in which we see officers espousing any attitude that's either racist or opposed to the democratic system in any way. Now I will tell you, we have not seen actionable examples of this. But where we just – a couple of cases, we've obviously seen officers who have said things that are absolutely unacceptable in terms of race. But we have not seen to the best of my knowledge, examples, vis-a-vis QAnon. But we are actively looking, the Internal Affairs Bureau is actively looking. We will not accept anyone as a police officer who opposes our democratic institutions. They should not be on the police force.

Lehrer: Dave in Crotona, you're on WNYC with the Mayor. Hello, Dave. Not the mayor of Crotona, the mayor of New York City.

Question: Hey, Mr. Mayor and Brian. Thank you very much. I wrote this down so I can be efficient and not waste your time. We're facing a statewide challenge that has a uniquely New York City solution. With legal recreational, with the legalization of recreational cannabis, we're on the cusp of a period of social change. And I agree with legalization. However, I request that we not solve one social injustice by inciting a new one. Cannabis will soon be legal, ubiquitous, and normalized, and the kids who will be living through this transition need alternatives and support in the form of recreational opportunities. New York City New Department of Environmental Protection controls all of the land that surrounds the New York City watershed reservoir system. Right now, that's all off limits except for fishermen. And the justification for keeping that land feral is less valid as it used to be. If that land were opened up to mountain bikes and trails were built throughout on that property, it would provide alternative recreational opportunities for kids. Kids would be able to, you know, get their endorphins from biking and not necessarily from getting high.

Lehrer: And Dave, I'm going to leave it there because we're just about out of time in the segment. But Mr. Mayor, do you want to address his question?

Mayor: Well, I really appreciate that Dave is saying, Hey, you know, there's a new issue that we have to address. And I think that's fair and there's got to be a lot of education. I would say the first instinct I have is, you know, let's remember marijuana usage is still not going to be legal for kids like it is now. It's still not, you know, the same reality now will exist going forward for young people. But in terms of providing recreation, providing alternatives, I always am looking to do that. Whether that should happen in the watershed, that's a little sensitive to me because our watershed is our lifeline. And I think it's being protected carefully for millions and millions of

people's future. And I want it to stay that way. So, I'll look at it, but I would say protecting our water supply comes first.

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

Mayor: Take care, Brian.

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