

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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 29, 2021, 7:20 PM
CONTACT: pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov, (212) 788-2958

TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO APPEARS ON INSIDE CITY HALL

Errol Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. New Yorkers 30 years old and older will be able to get the COVID-19 vaccine, starting tomorrow. Those who are 16 years and up will become eligible next week. Here now to talk about that and more is Mayor de Blasio. He's joining us from the Blue Room inside City Hall. Welcome, Mr. Mayor, good to see you.

Mayor Bill de Blasio: Good to see you, Errol. How are you doing?

Louis: Just fine, thanks. I'm wondering what you think about this new round of eligibility, this threshold being lowered. We are guaranteed to have bottlenecks at a minimum, right?

Mayor: There's going to be a lot of demand. There has been a huge amount of demand. And one thing I do want to note, kind of, to recognize the improvement that's been made is we used to talk a lot about vaccine hesitancy – it's still a real issue, but we've seen real improvement in terms of people being willing to get the vaccine. So, that's a good thing overall. Yeah, I mean, look, there'll be a lot more demand. We still don't have all the supply we need. I'm hopeful in the next few weeks we are going to see a much bigger supply, but we'll roll with this. I mean, last week we did almost half-a-million vaccinations in one week. We can be doing more. So, we will keep meeting the demand wherever it is. So long as we get that supply from the federal government, we'll keep meeting the demand.

Louis: I've got to ask you about the appointment system. This is the first time I actually have ventured into trying to actually get my own appointment. And I was absolutely thwarted, defeated. You know, I'm looking at this list and it shows that for Brooklyn, there are 538 sites where no appointments are available. You know, and I've got a little bit of time and a considerable amount of technology, and I'm thinking – can't we do better than this?

Mayor: Well, Errol, look, we've continued to improve the approach. It is a lot of different health care systems and providers working together. It's not a single entity, I wish it was, but we don't have a national health care service here like in some other countries. So, it is a lot of different organizations. But here's the good news – you know, 3.8 million doses have been given since this started. Clearly, a lot of people are getting through. It is working for more and more people. Once they get there, I consistently hear people say they have a very good experience at the vaccination sites. But we're going to keep working to make the signup process smoother, and the more supply we get, the easier it's going to be to give people appointments quickly. That's really what we want to see happen.

Louis: The most frustrating part of it, especially with the pharmacy stores, is you have to put in your name, and your age, and your address, and your eligibility, and all of this stuff, you know,

because it said that there was a slot, and by the time you've put all of that in, there's no slot, and then you have to do it over again, and again, and again, and again. Since we're getting to the point where everybody over 16, there's really only one question that would be asked – is there a way to just, like, sort of sweep away all of this stuff, all of these screens, since that's where we're going to end up in the next few weeks?

Mayor: Well, that's what our team's going to get to work on now. I mean, it's a whole different reality if you have a universal system. There's still information you'd need, because, remember, some of that is also pre-screening people on a bunch of issues that would come up that don't need to be asked at the vaccine site, and that's a good thing. But, yeah, I do think it's going to open the door for further simplification and what we've done with the City websites is try to get people to not have to repeat all that information the way you said, and just do a quicker job of showing people where there's availability. But I do think the plus here is that a universal system at least will take away some of the mystery. It will add a lot of demand, no question. And I am concerned that we keep our focus on seniors and folks with pre-existing conditions who are the most vulnerable, but there will definitely be plus sides here too.

Louis: You announced new walk-in sites for New Yorkers who were 75 and older, how will that work?

Mayor: Well, that's going to be a pilot project. We're going to do that in a few sites to test if it works. Look, again, we're very focused on those oldest New Yorkers – we're talking about folks 75 and older – who are the single most vulnerable group. We want to make sure even as more and more people get qualified, that the folks who are still in the greatest danger still get priority. So, we're testing to see if a walk-up site where they're the only ones who can walk up might make it easier for some people, might incentivize some older seniors to come over and get vaccinated. We're going to try that, see how it goes, and decide if we want to take it further.

Louis: I understand New York is one of 22 States that have seen a more than 10 percent increase in the number of new cases week over week. At the same time, we're bringing back – or you're planning to bring back tens of thousands of City office workers, and you're not requiring that they be vaccinated. I'm wondering if there's going to be a problem when the inevitable outbreaks start to occur among the City workforce?

Mayor: Well, what we've learned is when you put all the health and safety measures in place, it inhibits those outbreaks. And we're talking about City workplaces where there's going to be constant cleaning, a focus on the right ventilation, social distancing, mask wearing. I mean, the doctors have been over this with us time and time again. It's why the schools have been so extraordinarily safe. Our problem is not when people are in highly controlled settings with lots of supervision and lots of health and safety measures. That's not where our problem is. Our problem is where people don't have masks on in close quarters and there's not those health and safety measures in place. So, everything's been done with our medical leadership. We're confident we can bring our City workforce back to offices safely, carefully. But, you're right, we've got a lot of other work to do to keep fighting back. And the number-one thing is just vaccinate the most people as quickly as possible.

Louis: There was a question that came up after the City Council passed it's a package of reform bills for the NYPD, if I can switch topics here. Critics are saying that the reforms that have

passed are somewhat superficial, especially around the core issue of qualified immunity. So, officers won't be personally financially responsible for being sued, they're City employees, the City will cover that, but the City Law Department itself uses qualified immunity to defend the NYPD as a whole, right?

Mayor: Look, what we did here with the legislation, Errol, was align it to the national legislation – the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act. This is legislation that passed the House of Representatives – we're hoping and praying it can pass the Senate – that changes the whole approach to qualified immunity. We wanted the City's approach to align to that. Yes, there are not the individual penalties for officers. I think that would have been a huge mistake. I think that would have discouraged a lot of people from joining the police force, including people of color, who we want to see more and more representation on the police force from. But, clearly, at the same time, the legislation does make it clear if something inappropriate happened, it makes very clear the path for holding the City and the NYPD legally accountable.

Louis: Has there ever been any thought on your part of making some connection between the millions that the City pays out for police misconduct cases and the NYPD budget itself?

Mayor: Look, one of the things that we talked about in this whole reform process, which went on for months, and almost a hundred hearings and meetings with different stakeholders, it was an extraordinarily detailed process, and it does get at identifying officers who may be showing some of the wrong habits and behavior, identifying them early, getting those behaviors corrected, getting them off patrol, if it need be, or even off the police force entirely. That's one of the crucial elements of the reforms, it has a much stronger risk-assessment approach, stronger penalties and follow-through. I think that's one of the examples of something that we need to do better for all the right reasons in terms of treating the public properly and restoring as much possible faith in public safety as possible, but it also has ramifications for whether we're going to see those lawsuits.

Louis: You know, I got another law enforcement question. The City, the news site, has a story about cops taking phones from kids when they're being detained or arrested. And, of course, you know, phones are not what they used to be. It's not just a way to place a phone call, it's what you use to get on the subway, it's where you keep vital information, it's how you can be tracked by your parents so that they know where you are and so forth. And so, we see – we see in this report, the NYPD have seized over 55,000 phones in 2020, and returned about 60 percent of them, but that still leaves tens of thousands of people deprived of their phones. I'm wondering if it's time to update the patrol guide, as far as taking away what has become a very different and vital lifeline?

Mayor: I haven't seen the article. I haven't been able to confirm its specific validity, but the point you're raising is a very fair one. A phone means so much to folks nowadays, and the goal here should not be to penalize, you know, without going through the full justice system. So, I take that seriously. We'll review that, because I don't want to see a kid's property, a family's property withheld from them inappropriately. So, we'll go over that carefully and come back with more information.

Louis: Okay. Well, let's take a short break. Standby, Mr. Mayor, we'll be back with Mayor de Blasio in just a minute. Stay with us.

[...]

Louis: Welcome back to Inside City Hall. I'm once again joined by Mayor de Blasio, he's in the Blue Room inside City Hall. And Mr. Mayor, I want to talk to you about marijuana, but before I do that, there's some breaking news here and I wanted to get your reaction. A State judge has ruled that the State must immediately begin offering vaccinations to people who are incarcerated. That includes the State prisons, and I think that's primarily what they were aiming at, but it also includes jails. So, that would include the stuff under your jurisdiction, Rikers Island, of course, as well as the other houses of detention. And I'm wondering what has been the policy from the City and would it be affected by this ruling?

Mayor: I haven't seen the ruling, but it sounds like we would be. Listen, for a long time, I've been saying we need the freedom to vaccinate, and that meant being able to reach those who were incarcerated and were in particular danger. We did get a certain number we were authorized to vaccinate earlier on. But there's been other inmates that we would have vaccinated if we were given that authorization. So, now if that is the decision, that that is cleared up, obviously these other rules as well, that are coming across, I want to see as many folks in our correction system vaccinated as quickly as possible. Look, this is really important to the health and safety of everyone in the jail system, including our officers and our employees. So, this will, it sounds like, give us a much better ability to do that.

Louis: Okay. So, this is not you being forced to do it, if it's a requirement, this is something you've been wanting to do?

Mayor: Correct.

Louis: Let's talk about weed. We have this agreement. We have this law that's imminent as well as the follow-through. It's the follow-through that I wanted to ask you about. Do you have any concerns about the health impacts as well as the questions of – that have been raised by law enforcement, among others, about how to detect impairment, that we don't necessarily want somebody, you know, smoking for four or five hours and then, you know, going to run a subway train or flying a plane and so forth, and it's not clear how all of that is supposed to be worked out. What's your sense of all that?

Mayor: I think it's a real issue. Now, I would say right now we obviously know marijuana use is widespread. So, the notion of it being illegal, but widespread simultaneously is, you know, yet another kind of 'don't ask, don't tell' that doesn't make sense. It is much saner to legalize with smart standards in terms of encouraging health and safety. So, look, I think the legislation in Albany – I give the Legislature a lot of credit, I think they're taking an historic stand here. It's going to move this state forward. It's going to, you know, end a lot of injustice because let's face it the drug laws led to a lot of people being imprisoned, a lot of people suffering, tremendous racial disparity. So, it's absolutely right to change the legal status, but, hey, you know, there are health and safety issues to be addressed. And one of the things that – I put out a report with my team December 2018, and, you know, one of the things we talked about is not letting this become a huge, corporatized industry that tries to hook people the way the tobacco industry did or the opioid industry did, but hopefully using the power of the State government to make it much more of a small scale, more communal, more small business kind of industry. That will be

important because if there's massive advertising budgets, trying to get a whole generation of particularly young people hooked on it, that's where the health and safety issues get more real –

Louis: Well, I mean, I got some bad news for you on that score, Mr. Mayor. I mean, there are, you know, I could – there are at least a dozen publicly traded corporations that are already in this space. I mean, they are – you know, they're practically creating ETFs. They're practically creating, you know, stock indexes of the companies. There's so many of them that are doing business in dozens of states. They've been foaming at the mouth waiting to get into New York. You know, you know, this hypothetical mom-and-pop store that's going to operate in the inner city is I think, in some ways, a fiction.

Mayor: Well, I don't think it has to be, Errol. I mean, first of all, my understanding of the legislation is there are some safeguards put into avoid corporations controlling too many stages of the process. You know, efforts to avoid the kind of fully integrated multinational corporation dominating the industry. Second, there's a whole regulatory process that has to play out. And I'm told that's going to be at least another year where there's an opportunity to put some additional standards and safeguards in place. You know, look, we would be fools to allow a new tobacco industry or a new opioid industry. We have a chance to get it right, but there's a lot more to play out here. And to the credit of – historically New York State, New York State is pretty muscular about regulation. And if we find in doing this that something's not strong enough, I mean, you see a lot more willingness nowadays to question the corporate orthodoxy. You're certainly seeing that in terms of the big tech companies, for example. I think we have a chance here to keep working on this to get it right.

Louis: Well, as far as the actual health impacts, you know, there's been a lot of a lot of research and some of it is quite troubling about when you have developing brains, meaning young people, who are becoming heavy users. It's not clear how they're going to be impacted by all of this. I'm not sure a whole lot of research was even done about it as far as how to make sure this doesn't become a whole new set of social problems that we're going to be turning to government to try and solve.

Mayor: But again, this brings it out in the open, which I think is productive. I mean, do we have the illusion that there aren't, you know, a huge percentage of young people already using marijuana, of course they are. And that's something that, you know, has real ramifications that has to be addressed. Families need to have honest conversations about it, but too much of this is happening without it being out in the open. This will force a different kind of conversation, and I hope to normalize the discussion rather than being something where, you know, young people just sneak away and do what they do. So, you know, if this was – if we were saying, we're going to introduce marijuana into our society for the first time, it's never existed, I think the point you're raising would be even more powerful. But for God sakes is pretty ubiquitous right now, even though it's “illegal.”

Louis: Well, yeah, I mean, I guess the concern is you know, some of the research suggests that it is addictive. Some of it suggests that there are these developmental issues. There's this impairment question. The DAs are raising issues around, you know, if you can have some for personal use, how much or under what conditions would there be suspicion of exceeding that amount that would enable warrants and cops coming to your door and all kinds of thorny questions. In other words, you know, you go through each one of these things and I start to think

maybe this legislation isn't fully baked, isn't it – maybe this legislation isn't ready to go, but the entire impetus all along has been let's legalize first, and then figure out the downsides later, which it strikes me as a really less than optimal way to make this kind of a big social change.

Mayor: I don't think that's fair to the Legislature, Errol. I really don't. First of all, you know, look at truly addictive substances that are legal, you know, cigarettes, alcohol, you know, the fact that they are in one status and then marijuana is in another status, illegal at this moment and yet all of them are being used too much in our society and by young people. I think there's a more intrinsic question we have to ask here, which is how to do the right kind of public health education, how to provide the right support if people end up having an addiction problem. We're not going to make these substances magically disappear. And I think the problem of them being illegal has come with a host of other problems, the impact it's had on people being involved with the criminal justice system, often in a very draconian manner. You know, I think the notion that says there's a lot of people, adults in particular, obviously who can legitimately carefully use this in a legal setting rather than having to sneak around, bring it out in the open, comes with a lot of advantages. I think all of that has been worked through. And as I said, there's going to be a period of time to build out the regulations over the next year or more. I don't think it's going too fast, I think it's long overdue, but I think you're right, we need to have a very serious conversation and serious action on each of the ramifications, whether you're talking about health and safety issues, whether you're talking about the things I'm concerned also about not allowing a monster new corporate sector to emerge and harm people. All of this needs more work, but you have to start with the act of legalization.

Louis: Will you be part of that conversation? Will the Health Department, I guess in the few months that you have left, be part of that conversation?

Mayor: Absolutely. I mean, look, this is an area where I'm going to continue to ask our colleagues in Albany to remember that localities have to do the enforcement, have to do the, you know, the careful work of addressing the health and safety issues. And I do hope there'll be a real cognizance of giving localities some of the right power in this process. But any way you slice it we're going to make sure our voices are heard.

Louis: Okay. We're going to leave it there for now. Thanks very much, Mr. Mayor. We'll talk again next week.

Mayor: Thank you, Errol.

###