

Speaker 1: [00:07](#) Hello everyone, welcome to "Prep Talk," the emergency management podcast. Find out what you need to know about preparedness. Get all the latest tips from experts in the field and learn what to do before the next disaster strikes. From the Emergency Management Department in the city that never sleeps, here are your hosts, Omar Bourne and Allison Pennisi.

Omar Bourne: [00:27](#) Hello everyone. Thank you for listening. I'm Omar Bourne.

Allison Pennisi: [00:30](#) And I'm Allison Pennisi. Thank you for joining us. We want you to come back as often as you can, so feel free to add "Prep Talk" to your favorite RSS feed. You can also follow us on social media.

Omar Bourne: [00:40](#) This episode, we're talking about how preparing, responding and recovering from an emergency requires the whole community to be included and involved.

Allison Pennisi: [00:49](#) That's right, Omar. We have three distinguished guests who play key roles in increasing accessibility for New Yorkers, especially when an emergency happens. Please welcome to our show, Victor Calise, commissioner of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. Jonathan Novick, outreach manager for the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. And lastly, we have Walei Sabry, the city's digital accessibility coordinator. Welcome to "Prep Talk."

Victor Calise: [01:14](#) Thank you so much for having us.

Walei Sabry: [01:15](#) Thank you.

Jonathan Novick: [01:16](#) Always a pleasure to be here.

Omar Bourne: [01:18](#) Commissioner Calise, like the "Game of Thrones," which I have to admit I have not seen. We're going to start with you. Now nearly one million people in New York City self-identify as living with one or more disabilities. How does the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities work to make New York City the most accessible city in the world?

Victor Calise: [01:39](#) Well, thanks Omar, I appreciate it. In all cases, it's all about accessibility. And as we work to make New York City the most accessible city in the world, we have to be cognizant of the diversity that we have in disability. People with cognitive disabilities, people with hearing disabilities, people with visual disabilities and people with mobility disabilities. So we really have to prepare for that.

- Victor Calise: [02:02](#) And we do that with Accessible NYC. That is our roadmap to making New York City the most accessible city in the world. It focuses on transportation, how we get people with disabilities around with our existing infrastructure. Education, ensuring that people with disabilities are being educated properly and transitioned from high school into the workplace or into college. We want to ensure that people with disabilities get jobs through our NYC work initiative because people with disabilities live in poverty and we need to employ people with disabilities.
- Victor Calise: [02:34](#) We need to make sure that health care, we have access to healthcare, access to being healthy within our parks and recreation department. Also making sure that people are connected to housing with our Housing Connect Program and the mayor's initiative to increase 300,000 units of affordable housing. And that has the accessible housing involved in that as well and access to everything the city has to offer, such as theater, such as access to storefronts and of course, access to emergency management.
- Victor Calise: [03:05](#) And our last one we focus on is financial empowerment. And how do we ensure that people with disabilities know how to be financially empowered.
- Omar Bourne: [03:14](#) Wonderful.
- Allison Pennisi: [03:15](#) Great. Now people may not know this, but New York City Emergency Management and the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities work very closely with each other on a number of initiatives, especially emergency preparedness. Commissioner, can you share with our listeners how we prepare the public and nonprofit organizations for disasters?
- Victor Calise: [03:32](#) It's really important to have everyone involved. I mean, Omar mentioned it before, the whole community, and getting organizations together, setting up meetings with our resiliency teams, making sure that they know information that's being pumped out, coordinating efforts in every step of the way. So, there's lots of different ways that we do that through meetings, through outreach with emergency management because we can't do this without you guys.
- Walei Sabry: [03:59](#) I think emergency management and preparing the community can kind of come in waves when you think about it because the emergency happens but before it happens, how do we prepare people? So, making sure that, first of all, any kind of communication that goes out to the general community needs

to be accessible. It needs to contain information that is specific to people with disabilities. So, how do people who have physical disabilities know where to go? How can they rely on accessible forms of transportation to get to shelters, to get to maybe just out of the city in general, maybe just stay with a relative or a family member who is elsewhere in an emergency.

Walei Sabry: [04:42](#)

So thinking about how folks, including people with disabilities can prepare for an emergency. Then when an emergency happens, you know, let's say there's a storm, you know, obviously Hurricane Sandy or, it wasn't, it was Superstorm Sandy, I'm sorry hit New York City, shelters in place and response go in place. So how can we ensure people with disabilities are part of that process, making sure that shelters are accessible, making sure that shelters have proper signage, making sure that the staffs inside the shelter are properly trained to work with people with disabilities.

Walei Sabry: [05:18](#)

Transportation, making sure that they're accessible transportation options. Going back to communication, making sure that everyone knows this and that includes everyone, and that sounds silly to say, but you know, for folks who let's say are deaf or hard of hearing, they may have difficulty with access to communication. For folks who are blind or low vision, they may have difficulty accessing information on websites or in traditional means of dissemination for emergencies. So ensuring that while this is happening, information that goes out can be interpreted and understood by everyone.

Jonathan Novick: [05:54](#)

It's also important to make sure that the disability community is involved in the process. Finding out what's there because we hear a lot of things that go on today that doesn't involve people with disabilities. Decisions are being made without them. We can't have that. Making sure that we're reaching out to our independent living centers, making sure we reach out to our nonprofit organizations and saying, hey, what's going on, what are we missing, how do we ensure that we're included in everything?

Allison Pennisi: [06:22](#)

Absolutely. One of the great things that I think that we partner on is not only working on outreach as you both mentioned through our Ready New York program, which helps prepare all New Yorkers for emergencies, but also even working on things like the Access and Functional Needs Symposium that we host each year to talk about ways that we can help different communities be prepared for emergencies as well. It's really great that we have this cohesive partnership in place. And like

you said, making sure that everybody's involved with the process.

Allison Pennisi: [06:51](#) Now, Jonathan, I want to go back to this because you struck up a really good point. You and Walei have done a great deal of work making technology accessible, particularly multimedia content and it's incredibly impressive with what you've been able to do. I would love it if you both can share your achievements and how emergency managers in particular can learn from some of the achievements you've had in terms of making content accessible. Walei, let's start with you.

Walei Sabry: [07:17](#) So, Jon talked about disseminating information and making sure that folks are getting information in an accessible format. So, as the digital accessibility coordinator, my job is to help all the City agencies make their digital content accessible. That includes our websites, our mobile apps, our web apps, our electronic documents, our social media, our videos, and anything else digital. In the capacity that I do work with Emergency Management, I've worked on improving accessibility for the website. I've also worked with Emergency Management, ensuring the Advance Warning System website -- which is a new website that launched this year -- was fully accessible on the first day of launch.

Walei Sabry: [08:08](#) I also work with them on their mobile apps such as Notify NYC and we're working on improving the accessibility of that as well as the Advance Warning System, a mobile app, which is coming out soon. Things like maps as well.

Jonathan Novick: [08:26](#) Walei, actually, can I jump in for a second? I think it might be interesting I think to get, because you're saying accessible a lot and there's a lot of things that have been done, but maybe juxtaposing what an inaccessible website or app would be and then how do you bring it into accessibility. Like what are the barriers that people with disabilities face when obtaining information and then how do you break those? How do you make sure that those are no longer in the way?

Walei Sabry: [08:54](#) Sure. I'm going to try to not get too technical. Just to take a few steps back, in 2016 we did pass a local Law 26 of 2016 which requires city agencies to make their websites accessible and also adopt standards. So we have adopted the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 AA standards. And that's an international, standard that has been adopted internationally by many organizations. What that sort of entails is, we focus on disabilities that affect the eyes, ears, hands and brain. And so,

people with disabilities, not all of them, but a lot of them do use assistive technology such as magnification software or screen readers. And if we don't set up our websites in a way to be compatible with technology, then that would make them inaccessible.

Walei Sabry: [09:54](#) For instance, if you have images on your website, a blind person won't be able to see them. But if you include something called alt text which is a text description of the photo or image, then that information is now accessible. Same with the colors that we use. We need to use colors that have high contrast. Things like font as well. There are fonts that are harder to read than others.

Walei Sabry: [10:20](#) Keyboard access, making sure that folks who can't use the mouse can also use the keyboard to accomplish everything that people with the mouse can accomplish as well. So, those are just some of the basics that we look for, but it goes beyond that. It also goes to like plain language. How do we write our messaging on our websites? How do we write the language in our website in a way where it can be understood by a broad population, whether it's just people with disabilities or people with cognitive disabilities, but also we're in New York City where a lot of folks do not speak English as a first language.

Omar Bourne: [11:03](#) You mentioned a great point, Walei, about color contrast. For our listeners, can you give some examples of some of those colors that are more accessible?

Walei Sabry: [11:15](#) Well, to put it very starkly, white on black is pretty good contrast or black on white is pretty good contrast too. So you want colors that stand out from each other. There isn't necessarily specific combination. It's more about the ratio. So we use testing tools to make sure that the ratio between let's say the color of the text and the color of the background stand out so that the text is easier to read and people aren't straining their eyes or folks who have low vision are able to read it.

Omar Bourne: [11:49](#) Wonderful.

Victor Calise: [11:50](#) And when we're looking at digital accessibility as well, we have to ensure, and this is something that Walei's been working on, to ensure that everything in the request for proposal processes, including people with disabilities, not a simple tagline that says you must include accessibility codes and standards, but it needs to be specific about websites and the designs that need to be there. And that's really important because as we move towards

an accessible smart city, we hear about all this smart city technology, but we want accessible smart cities. And we've done a lot of work to include accessible smart cities, like LinkNYC for instance has a lot of accessibility features that are built into it.

- Victor Calise: [12:29](#) In conjunction with that, we are working to include "text to 911" that will be easy for people who are deaf and hard of hearing to be able to coordinate their emergencies, and not only that, but people would speech disabilities and people with domestic violence issues as well. So that's something that we really are cognizant about, about making sure that we have that holistic approach in accessibility in the digital space because it really is the wave of the future and people with disabilities need to be able to access that and access that quickly.
- Omar Bourne: [13:06](#) Great points, Commissioner Calise.
- Walei Sabry: [13:07](#) Can I add one more thing that we've worked on that I think is pretty cool in my opinion. Something that we worked on a long time ago with Emergency Management, maybe two years now, Jon.
- Jonathan Novick: [13:21](#) I'm not sure what [crosstalk 00:13:22] so maybe.
- Walei Sabry: [13:24](#) We worked with the video team here to teach them audio description. They have started putting out videos that are audio described because Emergency Management puts out a lot of like Ready New York videos to help folks get their Go Bag ready or have an emergency plan or know what to do when they're in the shelters and things like that. They've been making an active effort to also make audio-described versions so that folks who are blind can get a description of what's happening on the screen, like introducing the characters or introducing where it's taking place or important events and actions that happen in the video that you wouldn't be able to know unless you were able to see the video.
- Jonathan Novick: [14:14](#) So I think an interesting brief example of audio description is possibly claiming something that our viewers might not know, which is that actually all of us from the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities have disabilities. But you might not know that just by listening to our voices. I myself am a little person. I have Acondroplasic dwarfism. Victor?
- Victor Calise: [14:37](#) I am a person that is sitting in a wheelchair.

Walei Sabry: [14:41](#) And I'm blind.

Jonathan Novick: [14:43](#) Audio description at work. Just that simple. One of the other things that we've, that Emergency Management has included that's pretty impressive is your sign language interpreters that are on every emergency that you put out now and being able to see that and see how far that we have come since Sandy. It's extraordinary.

Omar Bourne: [15:06](#) We work really closely with our vendors to ensure that with [inaudible 00:15:10] emergencies in particular, we have a sign language interpreter that is there to make sure that the disability community is getting the message as well.

Jonathan Novick: [15:21](#) Yeah, that's really cool, that like Notify NYC message that comes out, there's a video accompanying it of the same message in ASL. That's really impressive, I think.

Allison Pennisi: [15:31](#) It's been a really great initiative to have that and to incorporate. The Notify NYC program -- for our listeners -- is the City's emergency communications program and it's made some significant strides. As Walei mentioned, they have an app. The program also has messages available in multiple languages and now the sign language videos feature subtitles, voiceover and a sign language interpreter to disseminate the message or crucial information to its subscribers. So we really have been making efforts to make our content more accessible and it's thanks to the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities on giving us the steps in the right direction to make all of this happen.

Victor Calise: [16:09](#) That's what collaboration is all about.

Omar Bourne: [16:11](#) As they say, teamwork makes the dream work. Commissioner Calise, this one is for you. Now how is the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities involved in emergency planning efforts along with our department here in New York City Emergency Management?

Victor Calise: [16:25](#) Well, we're involved with planning related task forces and working groups. It's really about that. These include disability community advisory panels, Advance Warning System/AWS, with that planning, disaster resilience and resource network. We attend accessibility facility working group meetings and we have been involved throughout the process of developing and implementing the high rise evacuation plan. So these are all types of ways that we are involved, we are also involved in shelter management to make sure that shelters are accessible

and that is worked across lots of different agencies but it's all about that collaboration which I mentioned earlier.

- Allison Pennisi: [17:06](#) Now just to follow up. So when incidents like large fires or coastal storms hit New York City, how does the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities get involved in those operations?
- Victor Calise: [17:17](#) Well, there's a lot of things, right? First, we want to be able to make sure that we get messages out. That's important. We staff the Emergency Operations Center. We ensure that we have a direct line of communication with every agency. We're on the ground. We actually go places and work with every agency that's affected. One of the great things that we've been doing is we've instituted disability service facilitators across every agency. By having those disability service facilitators in those agencies, we're able to work effectively with them to give them the tools that they need to do to succeed in making sure their agency is addressing the emergency needs that are there.
- Omar Bourne: [17:58](#) Now we've talked a lot about preparedness and response. Can you give us an example of how the whole community approach works into recovery phase of an emergency?
- Victor Calise: [18:07](#) Recovery is important and we want to make sure that people have the right tools to succeed. One of the recent ways that we've done this is actually setting up family centers. For Puerto Rico when it happened, we set a center up in Harlem. We were out there together with Emergency Management, A - making sure that every little bit of accessibility was met. Can we get into the place? Can we ensure that the bathrooms are accessible?
- Victor Calise: [18:32](#) And once we have that center, is checked by us with Emergency Management, we're ready to go. That means staffing the center and making sure that we have human resource administration on our disability service facilitator that's with human resources there. We want to make sure that if it's a building's department issue, that we have a person in the buildings department that's our disability service facilitator. Making sure that MOPD is staffed there. Making sure that we have real time captioning, making sure that we have American Sign Language interpreters. So that is really the whole community approach that we have, and making sure that agencies have the right people, making sure that we're staffed there, making sure that emergency management and MOPD are consistently talking to deliver the appropriate services for the appropriate time

Walei Sabry: [19:24](#) And on top of that, we make sure that the materials that we bring when we're staffing there are accessible, one, and two, for Puerto Rico, we had them translated into Spanish as well

Victor Calise: [19:34](#) And those documents consist of Braille, they consist of color contrast.

Walei Sabry: [19:41](#) Yeah. So we make sure that first of all, like the standard documents are readable, they have good contrast. We also make sure that we have a larger version for folks who are low vision. So be 18-point font, something that's much easier to read. And then also Braille. But in addition to that, we want to make sure that there's a digital electronic copy available for those as well. So for somebody who is blind using a screen reader or maybe for somebody who has a learning disability has trouble reading and would prefer the document be read to them could use a screen reader. So all of these kinds of pieces of information are attainable.

Victor Calise: [20:14](#) And one other thing that's important is to make sure that agencies understand accessibility and disability etiquette. Human Resource Administration has done a lot to really train their staff on what that is. So that's really helpful. And we're starting to do that around all City agencies to make sure that people understand what disability is, what disability etiquette is and how to address the community as a whole.

Omar Bourne: [20:41](#) And the etiquette part is really important because I think we train people on how to interact with people with disabilities because it's more [than] about just making content accessible, it's the human interaction that is key as well. And so, these are important points and important tips that individuals need to know and understand when interacting with the disability community.

Allison Pennisi: [21:05](#) I agree. I think that people that work in the emergency management field are really taking a closer look and doing a better analysis in my opinion of what they're doing and to say, okay, what can we do to make sure that we're reaching all communities no matter what their needs may be? And I think that New York City has really taken a great step in the right direction in order to do that.

Omar Bourne: [21:26](#) And talking about taking a step in the right direction, every year, New York City hosts the Disability Pride Parade. Commissioner Calise, I'm going to let you jump in here and tell our listeners a little about what that entails.

Victor Calise: [21:42](#) So, people with disabilities are a big community. And sometimes what happens in the community is we all work to fix our one community. So, blind working for blind, deaf working for deaf, wheelchair for wheelchair, cognitive for cognitive. And we forget that we are one big community and we have one big voice. If we look at movements like the LGBTQ movement, that has been phenomenal in making sure from marriage equality came together as one group. Now, I want to ensure that people with disabilities come together as that one group. We're 11 percent of the population here in New York City. That's like close what you said earlier Omar, close to a million people. 928,000 people to be exact. And those are people that have disclosed. We know the number is a lot bigger. So the Disability Pride Parade is to really bring everyone together to speak at one voice, to show that we are loud and proud to be disabled and lead with our disabilities. And say, hey, we're here, we're not going to agree to sub-par standards. We want everything that everyone else has because we're just a person. And that's what's great about the parade. Everyone comes out, shows their pride, agencies march, nonprofit organizations, independent living centers. And everybody's just there to say I'm disabled, I'm proud, let's get what we deserve. Emergency Management always comes through big and loud and proud. And Commissioner Esposito is there. Him and I have a little dance contest. Last year it was about me raising my foot and we had something that was actually portrayed in our promotions for this year's per parade.

Victor Calise: [23:26](#) And we encourage everyone to come out. The first year we had about 3000 people. The second year we had 5,000 people. Last year we had 7,500 people. And in 2018, we're going for 8,500 to ...

Jonathan Novick: [23:40](#) 10,000.

Victor Calise: [23:41](#) There we go, Jon, 10,000. We like big and round numbers though.

Jonathan Novick: [23:46](#) I thought you were going to say 80,000.

Omar Bourne: [23:47](#) That works as well.

Jonathan Novick: [23:50](#) Yeah, we'll set them all in Union Square. It'll be a great time.

Walei Sabry: [23:54](#) I personally don't work a lot on the parade and planning, but I'm proud of the amount of work that we do put in as an agency to

make it accessible. Maybe Jon, you want to mention a few things?

- Jonathan Novick: [24:08](#) Yeah, sure. I mean the parade is accessible and what does that mean? It means that the route is fully accessible, where you're going to have, we have obviously restrooms but accessible restroom. We have music which is great but we also have like music specific, like entertainment-based ASL interpreters who were trained to sign specifically to music. So it kind of conveys the expression in a way that traditional ASL wouldn't. We have CART which is like live captioning and this year we have audio description. Walei has been spearheading this but making sure that the entertainment is going to be audio-described. We're working with partners at DOE [Department of Education] actually.
- Walei Sabry: [24:50](#) They're going to provide us with the devices and [inaudible 00:24:53] are going to provide us with a professional audio describer and we're going to have live audio description for the performances.
- Victor Calise: [25:00](#) One of the things that Walei has been working on lately is to make sure that we have Braille maps.
- Walei Sabry: [25:05](#) Yep. We have actually tactile maps, so they're actually graphics. They're drawn out and we have the parade route where the same kind of information that's on the map where the bathrooms and the fountains are and what the lineup formation is. So we're excited about that. That's our first time also having these Braille maps as well as the audio description.
- Allison Pennisi: [25:29](#) For our listeners, July is Disability Pride Month. Is there anything you'd like to add?
- Walei Sabry: [25:36](#) I know that there are City agencies that are celebrating in their own way. Some are having public-facing events and some are having events internally. Department of Finance is organizing a conference on digital accessibility for its employees. The Commission on Human Rights is going to have, is having an event on the 23rd, 24th and they're releasing a big document on legal guidance for people with disabilities experiencing discrimination. And as well as the Department of Information, Telecommunication and Technology is going to be putting out some messaging on the anniversary of the ADA for its employees.

Victor Calise: [26:20](#) Ant just because it's July and it's Disability Pride Month, doesn't mean that you shouldn't be proud about your disabilities. You should be proud about your disability all the time, lead with your disability, realize that your disability brings a significant part of who you are and what you can do and what it does to enlighten people that we are part of society. So, be loud and proud.

Allison Pennisi: [26:44](#) Fantastic points by everybody. Thank you all for being here. For those interested in learning more about the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities and how they make New York City accessible, you can visit NYC.gov/mopd or call 311. That's this edition of "Prep Talk." If you like what you heard, you can listen anytime online or through your favorite RSS feed. Until next time, stay safe and prepared.