

Speaker 1 ([00:04](#)):

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 ([00:26](#)):

Hello everyone. Thank you for listening. I'm Omar Bourne.

Allison Pennisi ([00:30](#)):

I'm Allison Pennisi and you are our listeners. And as always, we thank you for joining us. We want you to come back as often as you can. So feel free to listen to 'Prep Talk' on your favorite podcast provider. You can also follow us on social media, on our Twitter [@nycemergencymgt](#), Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and much more.

Omar Bourne ([00:49](#)):

Thank you very much, Allison. This episode, we're going to be discussing diversity and inclusion in the emergency management field. The COVID-19 pandemic and recent civil unrest throughout the country have brought to light the inequities that have long plagued our nation.

Allison Pennisi ([01:06](#)):

Our special guest today is a champion for diversity and inclusion in the emergency management field. Not only was he a staff member on the US House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security and was the senior special assistant to the Governor of Virginia in the Office of Commonwealth Preparedness. He is currently serving as the Director of Emergency Management for Virginia. Mr. Curtis Brown, welcome to 'Prep Talk.'

Curtis Brown ([01:30](#)):

Thank you for having me, Alison and Omar. Glad to be a part of the conversation today.

Omar Bourne ([01:35](#)):

Yes, definitely. Thank you for being here. So let's jump right into it. Curtis, the first question, what led you to a career in emergency management? Did you choose emergency management or did emergency management choose you?

Curtis Brown ([01:48](#)):

That's a good question. A little bit of both. I've always known that I wanted to be active in public service and really help people through public service. I originally had thought that my career would lead me in housing because in grad school I received a Housing Fellowship through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. I was able to work on a campaign for governor here in Virginia. And one of my mentors when I had opportunity to come into the administration, really encouraged me to look at emergency management, Homeland Security. It's a field that it was emerging in terms of post 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina at the time, clearly understood the need for a greater organization. And that's when, of course, all the academic programs started to grow as well. And he encouraged me to consider that

career path in terms of public administration and public service. And so, I did and have not turned back since, and I found that it's been very rewarding and impactful in terms of career choice.

Allison Pennisi ([03:04](#)):

So Curtis, over the last nine months, the murder of George Floyd and the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified inequities in our society. Back in 2018, you co-founded the Institute for Diversity and Inclusion in Emergency Management. Tell us and our listeners more about the work you are spearheading to diversify the field through this initiative.

Curtis Brown ([03:23](#)):

Yes. Institute for Diversity and Inclusion in Emergency Management or I-DIEM. We really look at it as two major goals. One is to increase the representation of underrepresented individuals in the field of emergency management, women and people of color specifically. Especially in positions of leadership, there's data and research that truly highlights the lack of diversity within the field of emergency management across the country. And we believe that diversity is beneficial, especially as you look at the disproportionate impacts on marginalized communities and data that indicates this portion impacts on our women and communities of color. As was mentioned by Omar. COVID-19 has highlighted that even more with our black, Hispanic, Latino, Latinx and indigenous populations. And so, we really want to partner with our historically black college universities, minority serving institutions, non-traditional emergency management organizations to diversify the field of emergency management.

Curtis Brown ([04:28](#)):

And there's a unique opportunity here over the next 10 years. There's data that clearly indicates that the field of emergency management will be increasing just because of how busy we've been. And so, there's a unique opportunity to build that emergency management table and bring some more chairs to that table with a more diverse group of individuals. And so, that's a major part of what we're trying to do. The other part is to integrate the understanding of equity into the field of emergency management. Equity is different than equality. Equity understands that everyone does not need the same thing, that some people need more. And if you look at the data and the research and the history, there's a reason why some people need more. There's been discrimination, systemic racism, structural biases that have created inequities in communities for whole communities or individuals. And so, as we tailor our emergency management programs, we should do so equitably and recognize and understand these issues and design our programs and support mechanisms to address those.

Curtis Brown ([05:41](#)):

We've done a lot of research with emergencies and we worked with academia. And if you look at disasters throughout the course of the 20th century and here in the 21st century, there is a common theme. That those who are marginalized, frontline communities will disproportionately suffer. So it really pushes us to hopefully change our approach to emergency management, especially as we face for frequent and impactful disasters.

Omar Bourne ([06:10](#)):

You brought up so much in your response, we're going to get to all of it. I want to start with the representation because I think that is important. How important is representation to ensuring equitable preparation and response to emergencies? And I asked that specifically, because I know that you recently testified before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. And you stated that

overwhelmingly the majority of emergency managers are white males, so there is a need for diversity. But when we talk about representation, how important is representation to ensuring the equitable preparation and response to emergencies?

Curtis Brown ([06:51](#)):

Yeah, that's a great question. I think the private sector, and there's a couple of really smart institutions have done research about how diversity impacts positively the bottom line of private sector companies. The more women and people of color truly impacts the bottom line because there are different perspectives brought to the table that would not have been at the table. And that group, that diverse group works more cohesively together to solve complex issues. And I think the same thing, it would be true in emergency management with more diversity. We're talking about disproportionate impacts, specifically to marginalized communities, communities of color, having individuals who come from those communities to provide the perspective on how to best engage, how to S-Empower those communities.

Curtis Brown ([07:47](#)):

And so, I believe that if we want to rise to the challenge of these complex disasters we're dealing with now, it would be beneficial in serving our mission to mitigate the loss of life and to enhance our preparedness by bringing these diverse voices and perspectives to the table. One way in which we've suggested doing that is looking outside of our typical areas of recruitment and start recruiting people from different disciplines. Disciplines that are more diverse in terms of representation of women and people of color and training them in emergency management. By leveraging their unique skill sets from other disciplines along with their diversity to positively impact the field of emergency management.

Allison Pennisi ([08:36](#)):

Curtis, you scratch the surface on this, but I want to dig a little deeper here. What changes can jurisdictions implement to make the field more accessible to women, black indigenous people of color, and even the LGBTQIA community?

Curtis Brown ([08:49](#)):

I think outreach. I'm thinking emergency management should be more visible in terms of our outreach to diverse communities participating in events and going out into the community and being visible. I think emergency management should be a leading discipline across all levels of government in engaging diverse communities. And so, the more outreach, the better. In terms of recruitment, the more targeted recruitment, the better and letting folks know about opportunities in our organizations. And saying that we need their representation, that we need their support building programs from the start that integrates these diverse groups and organizations. And so, in all of our communities, there are organizations and groups that are influential and active. We just need to reach out to them as a part of our COVID-19 response, for instance, we've been doing a lot of outreach to the LGBTQ community, black, Hispanic, Latino throughout the response and engaging in them in order to engage how we do outreach and plan. And also, truly critiquing how we're doing.

Curtis Brown ([10:04](#)):

That type of outreach and engagement is not easy, but it's so important and necessary. And I think it could be beneficial as we continue to build these relationships to help with recruitment as well.

Omar Bourne ([10:17](#)):

And when you look at building relationships, I'm glad you mentioned that because it seems that throughout the emergency management field, we're only really in the communities when there's a disaster. Allison could attest to this as well. Emergency Management, we've had mobile office hours here in New York City prior to the pandemic and we do community outreach now, obviously. It's a little different, but pre-pandemic, we would go out into the communities. And the first question we would get is, is there something bad happening or coming? Do you know something that we don't know? So let's talk a little bit about the proactive need to be in the communities before there is an emergency in the blue sky time so that you can really build that trust with them.

Curtis Brown ([11:10](#)):

Mm-hmm(affirmative). Yes. That is very much true. And I do think that New York City Emergency Management program does some innovative and creative things that quite honestly, I've used here in Virginia in terms of outreach and diversity. But I think emergency management has focused a lot attention, and clearly, we understand why [inaudible 00:11:33] response, activating the EOC. And of course, trying to prevent the loss of life when something bad has happened. I think we need to focus a lot more attention on preparedness and mitigation and those community relationships and those human impacts of disasters before they occur. So what do we do on the blue sky day? And so, when I look at emergency management and how we need to innovate and evolve to deal with what we're dealing with now and what we expect to continue to deal with. The impacts of climate change, more frequent, impactful disasters, pandemics, which we've seen here in 2020, this won't be our last pandemic, unfortunately.

Curtis Brown ([12:13](#)):

We need to create and design positions that aren't even created yet. We need community. And within some organizations, I know some emergency management programs have this, but far too many do not. These community liaisons who are actively engaged with our nonprofit and faith based organizations, supporting their development or planning, engaging the community so they know who we are. And how we can support during the preparedness and mitigation phase and what they can do to enhance their preparedness, how we can truly engage and identify our most at risk populations and try to support them well in advance of a disaster. But yes, I think we need to focus more attention on that, response is very important. Of course, recovery is very dynamic and takes the longest time, but if we could put more resources and time. And again, this is where we could create positions where we have these community liaison who are truly embedded, building trust in communities that have very legitimate lack of trust in government. And we can do that in a very creative and ongoing, engaging way in the preparedness and mitigation phase.

Allison Pennisi ([13:31](#)):

It goes back to something that I know in New York City we've emphasized this, is it's whole community preparedness. And we mean the whole community, we mean the faith-based organizations, NGOs, and nonprofits working alongside government, even the private sector. And you touched upon something really important here that the disaster cycle, there are inequities in every single component and emergency plans may not be representative of the populations that they serve. So how can we alter the planning process to address and eliminate institutional and structural issues that can create inequities rather than imposing Band-Aid solutions to make things better temporarily? What are the permanent solutions that we should be looking at?

Curtis Brown ([14:15](#)):

That's a great question. To your point, and I believe your former administrator Fugate has said this before, "We can't plan for easy, right? We got to plan for the complex and the difficult." And I think integrating these diverse voices into the development of our plans and leveraging data, quantitative and qualitative and empowering these stakeholders, especially those who provide services to those who are most at risk. To guide and frame the development of our plans, we can help to hopefully minimize the potential for bias or not fully representing their needs and capabilities. Again, I think emergency management does maybe need to be more community-based and focused and engaging. And again, I know that requires for a lot of emergency management offices more resources. One of the challenges we face here in Virginia, and I know certain other state and local offices have over half of our local emergency management are one-person offices.

Curtis Brown ([15:29](#)):

And my thing is you can't run a fire department or a police station with one person. With what emergency management is facing, you can't conduct preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery with one person. We need to really look at how do we resource in order to meet these challenges and in an equitable fashion. So that's one of the things I'm looking at here in Virginia. When we talk about equity, we're also looking at our limited resource communities who would love to apply for building a resilience and infrastructure and communities grant, the new grant outlined with FEMA, but they don't have the time. They don't have the resources or capabilities.

Curtis Brown ([16:13](#)):

And so, who are we going to be? What communities are going to get mitigated? They're going to be the most resourced and, unfortunately, you're going to have communities left behind. So as we look at innovating in emergency management, we really need to look at the resourcing and the equity for some of our low resourced, urban and rural communities that have been left behind.

Omar Bourne ([16:37](#)):

Man, that is such an important point that you've made, because it's so true. When you look at it, there are emergency management departments, as you said, with one person, it can't work. It's not going to, especially with the challenges that we're facing and that we're going to face. So when we look at emergency management over the next year to three years, what are your hopes for the field? And you touched on some of that, but how important is it for the next administrator to really have diversity and inclusion at the forefront of their plans?

Curtis Brown ([17:15](#)):

I think is essential to being able to continue the ongoing response and move into the recovery of COVID-19 to learn from the lessons of this historic and present event. The disproportionate impact of the disaster on our marginalized communities, black, indigenous, and Hispanic, Latino, Latinx populations. The disproportionate impact on women, I think it's going to be essential to take the lessons of this year and integrate those into how we conduct ourselves in emergency management, leveraging diversity, equity inclusion as assets to deal with any type of future disasters. FEMA has a lot of influence in emergency management, of course, through policy and funding. And as we look at the emergency management enterprise where they're public sector, private, nonprofit, we all need to step up and fully embrace diversity, equity, inclusion.

Curtis Brown ([18:26](#)):

We can't be on the outside of this very important discussion. These inequities that communities face have been intertwined over the course of many, many years, hundreds of years in many cases. And so, as we look to address this emergency management, as in many cases, consequence managers, we show up when bad things happen. I think we need to embrace the challenge of looking at ourselves, critiquing ourselves, being honest about the lack of diversity, the need to be more equitable in terms of our development of plans and policies, and truly rise to the occasion.

Curtis Brown ([19:10](#)):

So FEMA and the new FEMA administrator can serve as a great leaders and example in this effort, incentivize the focus on diversity, equity, inclusion. Recognizing that we need mitigation plans and emergency operation plans that prioritizes those who are most at risk, that are funding programs such as the BRIC grant that I mentioned. One of the goals I would like to see with that tremendous opportunity is over half of that, the vast majority of that going to our most vulnerable and at risk communities to mitigate the impacts of disasters and climate change. And so, with disaster, there also is a unique opportunity to change and address these issues. And I think with the greater awakening and focus on racial equity and equity and diversity, inclusion this year, it provides a great opportunity for emergency management to lead in this space. And I'm hopeful that that will occur.

Omar Bourne ([20:19](#)):

Well said.

Allison Pennisi ([20:20](#)):

Curtis, where can people go to learn more about how they can provide equity, diversity and inclusion to their jurisdiction?

Curtis Brown ([20:30](#)):

Well, that's a great question. And I am happy to see a lot of jurisdictions that are developing positions for chief diversity and inclusion officers. They're in the mayor's office or the county manager office. And here in Virginia, we're very proud that we have the first Governor Cabinet level position dedicated for a Chief Diversity Officer, Dr. Underwood. Janice Underwood is our first Chief Diversity Officer. And as a part of our ongoing COVID-19 response, I've been working very closely with her through our health equity task force, which is a part of our unified commanders. The first time we have a health equity task force embedded on unified command for reporting directly to the unified command leadership in guiding our decisions for everything that we do for plans, for resource allocations, for public messaging and outreach. They are a part of our leadership and guide our actions through an equity lens.

Curtis Brown ([21:36](#)):

And so, I would first encourage everyone to identify those individuals and partners within your jurisdiction who have the expertise. Because again, this is a new skill and new knowledge set. There's a whole way of thinking. And so, I am very cautious when people just say, "Oh, I'm just going to start being equitable in terms of my desires of programs." You have to study what equity means and what it looks like and how to develop a program that doesn't meet the need of the organization. It meets the need of those who are most at risk, the risks and understanding of their needs. And so, I would say first partner

with them as an organization, I-DIEM. We have some training that we're providing and resources that we provide on our website, i-diem.org.

Curtis Brown ([22:31](#)):

We work very closely with higher education institutions and researchers. There's some great research coming out related to diversity, equity, inclusion, emergency management. Again, I know we're very busy in emergency management, so it's kind of hard maybe to read some of these very detailed reports. But we've been trying to find ways to package them in ways that can help have impact within emergency management field. For instance, there was some research that came out about how the recovery programs are not equitable and in an increased wealth inequality in communities of color. That really should help to guide creating more equitable recovery programs on the federal state at local level to close that gap. So just to summarize, to answer your question, partner with those subject matter experts within diverse, equity, inclusion within your jurisdiction in a formal, consistent way. We were going to actually have an MOU, a memorandum of understanding with the Virginia Department of Health Office of Health Equity.

Curtis Brown ([23:43](#)):

And they're going to help to guide our efforts within emergency management. Within my agency, we have plans on developing a new office of diversity, equity, inclusion within our emergency management agency. And to do that, we're going to do that through the partnerships that I mentioned. And then again, for those who are in the field of emergency management, our goal is to continue to provide training and resources to assist the field for growing their expertise in this space.

Omar Bourne ([24:12](#)):

Thank you for that. And you mentioned the trainings and I want to ask one last question and switch gears a little bit more to the internal work environment. When we think about the work environment, what procedures can organizations implement to ensure that people are being culturally sensitive when discussing their views about social issues? And I asked because we've seen what occurred with George Floyd, other civil unrest over the last few months.

Omar Bourne ([24:46](#)):

And people come to work, black people come to work and say they hear culturally insensitive things and they have to bite their tongue, kind of hold it back. So what can people do to be culturally sensitive when we see social issues and social unrest arise in our communities?

Curtis Brown ([25:05](#)):

Yeah, I think that's a great point and perspective. There's been a couple of articles written over the course of the year that describes this stressful situation. That in many cases African-Americans have been in throughout the course of the year with these multiple incidents of... Such as George Floyd's murder and the pain and stress that is born into the workplace. And to your point, and I've dealt with this, the lack of cultural competence and understanding when there's that water cooler talk and how that makes you feel. It is not an inclusive environment.

Curtis Brown ([25:49](#)):

And that's why I think when people talk about diversity, equity, inclusion, inclusion is so important because we want to create workplaces of belonging of inclusion, especially for those who are underrepresented in our workplaces. In many cases are people of color, LGBTQ community, women, disproportion and public safety. And so, we need to have cultural competence. There's a book that really framed my belief on how we improve in emergency management is from a former professor of mine. She's actually the dean of the public administration school here at Virginia Commonwealth University. And her book is called "Race and Social Policy," excuse me, "Race and Social Equity in Uncomfortable Area in Government." And it's very uncomfortable because we have to grapple with the reality of the inequities of our policies or our societies, of things that have occurred in our communities. Family members who are not inclusive or bias or racist, and these are tough conversations to have, but I think that they can be done in a culturally inclusive way.

Curtis Brown ([27:08](#)):

And we need to be honest about the history and legacy of these inequities too. I've been surprised at... Well, not surprised. I think as a core part of some of this diversity, equity, inclusion work is that a lot of people do not know history in terms of what has actually occurred to create the inequities. I had a conversation not too long ago with a colleague who served in the military, and we had actually done a project actually with some graduate students at VCU to look at diversity, equity, inclusion. And one of the things they brought up was how the GI Bill, which was an incentive, some direct support to folks in the military after World War II was provided and created, the wealth inequality we see today. And it was because that GI Bill was not provided to the million African-Americans and other people of color who fought in World War II.

Curtis Brown ([28:21](#)):

So all of our suburban areas, and those areas have gained wealth over the last several decades. And you can tie that directly to the wealth inequality that we see today. So he was not aware of that history. He definitely viewed positively, which I think anyone would the GI Bill because it's a good incentive for those who serve, but the inequity was built into that policy. And so, you see that time and time again, across different disciplines and different policies and laws, and that explains why. So a lot of times we have these conversations in the office, there's a certain level of lack of knowledge that exists. And so, that's why this training, these facilitated conversations, working and empowering folks from the community who actually have the knowledge of the history is important. And that's what I think a lot of our offices workplaces need to better educate ourselves on, on why these inequities exist.

Allison Pennisi ([29:28](#)):

Speaking with Curtis Brown, Director of Emergency Management for the State of Virginia. Anything else you would like to add before we go to rapid response?

Curtis Brown ([29:38](#)):

No. I'm really appreciative that you all allowed me be a part of this conversation and there's interest in diversity, equity, inclusion, emergency management. I think this is a very important time within emergency management that we need to really focus on this issue and truly have impact. And I think the more we talk about it, the more we commit to take an action, the better we'll be able to face the challenges that lies ahead.

Allison Pennisi ([30:04](#)):

Absolutely. And for our listeners, if you want to learn more about how to incorporate diversity and inclusion in the field of emergency management, visit i-diem.org. It is rapid response time. And if you are a first time listener, it's simple. Omar and I will ask questions and our guests will give the first answer that comes to mind. But first here is a message from New York City Emergency Management and the Ad Council.

Speaker 5 ([30:32](#)):

Your daughter doesn't want to talk about why her room is a horrible mess. Your son doesn't want to talk about why he's wearing mismatching socks. Your spouse doesn't want to talk about their bad haircut. Families don't have to talk about everything, but they should talk to plan for an emergency, pack basic supplies in a go-bag, water, canned food, flashlights, batteries, medical supplies, IDs, and some cash. Talk about where you'll meet in case you lose one another. And of course, don't forget to pack the dog treats. Talk to your family and make an emergency plan. Go to NYC.gov/readyny or call 311 to make your family's emergency plan. Brought to you by New York City Emergency Management and the Ad Council.

Speaker 6 ([31:33](#)):

It's time for 'Prep Talk' rapid response.

Allison Pennisi ([31:39](#)):

Okay. First question in rapid response. Curtis, what is the one emergency item that you can not live without?

Curtis Brown ([31:49](#)):

Good question. I guess a flashlight.

Omar Bourne ([31:54](#)):

Yeah, that's a good answer. Very good answer. Second question. What is one important emergency tip people should remember?

Curtis Brown ([32:02](#)):

Emergencies can happen any time at any place. And so, you need to be prepared.

Omar Bourne ([32:08](#)):

Beautifully said, I couldn't have said it any differently or any better. Lightening the mood a little here. Do you have a favorite disaster theme movie or a TV show? And if so, what is it?

Curtis Brown ([32:21](#)):

Yeah, I think probably all my movies have some level of disaster in it. And again, most of my guesses are more of the human cost terrorism threat, but "Die Hard," which I believe is a great Christmas season movie-

Omar Bourne ([32:47](#)):

It's so funny.

Curtis Brown ([32:47](#)):

...is definitely one of them. And that's the whole series there.

Omar Bourne ([32:53](#)):

Now, were you're being facetious with that? Because I know there's been a lot of talk on the internet about that. [crosstalk 00:32:59].

Curtis Brown ([33:03](#)):

I think it's a beautiful Christmas movie. Personally, I put it up there with "Wonderful Life." I love "Wonderful Life," but I watched "Die Hard" too during this time of the year as well.

Omar Bourne ([33:15](#)):

Okay. There's going to be a lot of people who are going to disagree with you, but you heard it here first. Curtis Brown says, "Die Hard" is a Christmas movie.

Allison Pennisi ([33:24](#)):

Last but not least, sum up the work you do in one word?

Curtis Brown ([33:28](#)):

Complex.

Allison Pennisi ([33:32](#)):

I think that's a first, usually we get a multi word answer here, Omar.

Curtis Brown ([33:37](#)):

I try to comply.

Omar Bourne ([33:42](#)):

We appreciate that.

Allison Pennisi ([33:44](#)):

It's refreshingly honest.

Omar Bourne ([33:45](#)):

Yeah. Yeah, because emergency management is, I mean, is complex. You hit the nail right on the head. So good answer.

Curtis Brown ([33:53](#)):

Every day is different and every disaster is different.

Allison Pennisi ([33:57](#)):

Well, Curtis Brown, thank you so much for joining 'Prep Talk.' For our listeners, it's important that we all work together in the field of emergency management. The field has evolved, but we still have work to

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do. Be sure to have seats at the table for everyone in your community and for our listeners, again, [i-diem.org](#) for additional resources. We'll see you next time.

Speaker 1 ([34:25](#)):

That's this episode of 'Prep Talk.' If you like what you heard, you can listen any time online or through your favorite RSS feed until next time, stay safe and prepared.