

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 ([00:27](#)):

Hello, everyone. Thank you for listening. I am Omar Bourne.

Allison Pennisi ([00:31](#)):

I'm Alison 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 ([00:51](#)):

In honor of Black History Month, we are going to be joined by Dr. Torian Easterling, who is the first deputy commissioner and chief equity officer at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

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

That's right, Omar. Dr. Easterling is one of the leading officials ensuring an equitable delivery of the COVID-19 vaccine to underserved communities here in New York City. So Dr. Easterling, welcome to 'Prep Talk.'

Torian Easterling ([01:19](#)):

Thank you for having me, Allison and Omar. Glad to be joining you both.

Allison Pennisi ([01:23](#)):

Wonderful. We're happy to have you. So let's get right into it. Was it your dream your entire life to become a medical doctor?

Torian Easterling ([01:31](#)):

That's a great question. I will say that the dream started at the young age of nine or ten, so nearly my whole life, something that I saw examples of, my own pediatrician and it was something that I shared with my mother. She really supported me even at a young age and I think that was really important at that age to have someone who encouraged the journey.

Omar Bourne ([02:04](#)):

Now, February is observed as Black History Month. So what does this month mean to you and how important is it for us to celebrate the contributions of Black people to American history?

Torian Easterling ([02:18](#)):

I always reflect on this question as it comes around each year; one, because it is a moment to take a second to remember the contributions, as you said, to reflect on the struggle, but also, to reaffirm on the principles. But the thing that also strikes me is the struggle just to be acknowledged, to validate one's existence and, specifically, talking about the African-American experience in this country. This was a fight starting with the arrival of enslaved Africans on this country and on the shores, but, specifically, for just this month and going back in history to just trying to get a week, Carter G. Woodson wasn't even acknowledged in early 1900s.

Torian Easterling ([03:15](#)):

So, to know that we now have the month also just signifies how much of a struggle it was, and still is, to be acknowledged in our human experience is validated. So the important part is making sure that we continue to communicate, to share our stories, to lift up the struggles, the history of resistance, but also to know that the contributions of this country extend beyond just one month and we need to tell our stories 365 days a year because without the experience and the contributions of the knowledge of Black folks in this country, then what America do we have, that this existence as a country is tied to the experience of African people?

Allison Pennisi ([04:19](#)):

That's wonderfully said. Our country has come a long way, but we still have a long way to go, so thank you. When you look at your life and experience, Dr. Easterling, is there a Civil Rights activist or an African-American that you consider an influence or an inspiration? Do you have a favorite inspirational quote or a saying that comes from that individual that you would share with us?

Torian Easterling ([04:42](#)):

Yeah. There's so many people, so many quotes that have been inspiring and so I think that certainly my mother, Lucille Easterling, and my father George Easterling, contributed to my existence. So there are so many people who are going to be unnamed and not go in history books and so I'm always thankful and lift up my parents and grandparents, folks who have poured into me. I think they have been and continues to be inspirations because I stand on their shoulders and I continue to feed off their wisdom and experience. So I think that's always important, and certainly I've had the opportunity because throughout school and the unique pleasure, which I know is not always a shared experience that from the very young age that I've always had a teacher that looks like me and that was able to talk about my history.

Torian Easterling ([05:45](#)):

I think that's also something that I can be proud of having gone through elementary school and high school and even graduating from a historically Black College like Morehouse College, which is important because then the authenticity of that culture of our experience is validated as I am learning. So it's very easy to talk about Dr. King and everyone goes to the quotes and you can talk about Tubman, so many people, but I think the quote in the phrase that sticks out in my mind right now where we are in this moment in history is the cries of our people during the summer after the murder of George Floyd because we do not want to see another Black body die. So the phrase that we will win, right, that we are more than our chains. I think that that phrase continues to stick into my mind, even at this moment as we're trying to get out of this pandemic, that we continue to fight for racial and social justice in this country.

Omar Bourne ([06:57](#)):

I like what you said earlier about acknowledging Black history, not just in February, but throughout the entire year because that's important to understand in the African-American's place and role in American history. You mentioned the pandemic and I want to switch gears to that. COVID-19 has magnified the inequities in our society, so I'd like for you to tell our listeners more about your work that you're spearheading with the health department as chief equity officer.

Torian Easterling ([07:34](#)):

I'm thankful and it's an honor to be working at the New York City Health Department. It's been the focus of our agency for the better part of this administration in advancing health equity, addressing structural racism and really eliminating health inequities. So when we say that, we're talking about undoing long-standing inequities that have been rooted in racist policies and practices that also have to look at, internally, the ways in which organizations, government and structures are set up, but then, to assure and ensure that the communities that are experiencing these long-standing health inequities are able to really be able to access critical resources and achieve the outcomes that they need. So the department under the leadership, first under Dr. Mary Bassett, then Dr. Barbot and now, under our current commissioner, Dr. Dave Chokshi, has continued to be really on the forefront of declaring racism as a public health issue.

Torian Easterling ([08:43](#)):

Although we're saying that clearly now, we have been saying that since the beginning of this administration. The way that we have set that up is assuring that we had an internal structure, which we called Race to Justice, looking at three pillars: how we are normalizing conversations around structural racism and racism in general; how we are organizing ourselves within our agency; and how do we operationalize this work so that it is embedded into our programmatic, our planning and ultimately, the research and we'll get to the outcomes. So under Dr. Bassett, we have a division that was formed called the Center for Health Equity. The Center for Health Equity, looked at the ways in which we talked about sexual racism, the ways that once we set up our collaborations with communities and using collective impact principles, but also having worked in neighborhoods that have had long-standing inequities.

Torian Easterling ([09:50](#)):

That was led by the founder of the center, Dr. Aletha Maybank, who I certainly worked under and had the pleasure of working directly with and continue to and. So then under Dr. Chokshi, Commissioner Chokshi, stepping in as the first deputy commissioner chief equity officer, my role is to advance our internal work as well as our external work. So we still have the Center of Health Equity. We still have our Race to Justice Management Team. So how are we aligning our internal strategies with our external strategies to assure externally New Yorkers, residents, our audience, policy makers, that we're thinking about ways that we are uprooting structural racism and advancing equity, but also that we're embedding this work into our day-to-day operations. So even though our priorities right now are mitigating the resurgence and addressing the second wave of this pandemic, as well as during that, we are adequately rolling out our vaccine distribution plan, we need to also think about the ways in which we still have public health priorities and public health goals that we need to achieve.

Torian Easterling ([11:04](#)):

Whether we're talking about addressing behavioral health and the inequities that exist around criminal justice and over criminalizing individuals who are faced with behavioral health issues; whether we're

talking about the intersection of chronic disease like hypertension, asthma, diabetes, connected to housing and food sovereignty, or we're talking about our environmental health concerns as well and so that work does not stop. So also continuing to advance our day-to-day work, working with healthcare systems to ensure that respectful care, we're addressing birth inequities as well. So under this role, it's continuing to support our priorities which include aligning our equity work.

Allison Pennisi ([11:58](#)):

In talking about equitable access to healthcare services beyond the pandemic, can we also talk about the comprehensive strategies that the health department is using to ensure underserved New Yorkers are getting these services? Also, what is the health department doing to ensure equitable access to COVID-19 testing and also the COVID-19 vaccine?

Torian Easterling ([12:20](#)):

Yeah, certainly. I think we have to start off by how important it was to use data to really illuminate the issue and to amplify how structural racism plays into these inequities. So it wasn't enough for us to just so that we were seeing Black and Brown communities experience higher rates of death. They were doubled in other communities, White communities in New York City. That is one point, but you have to put it into context and this is where inequities really get, we can be clear about the context of why we're talking about inequities and not just disparities, because when you're saying disparities, you're talking about a difference when you're talking about an equities or rooting this in the context of the environment of racism, structural racism. So we know that Black and Brown communities were experiencing higher rates of exposure to COVID-19, not by choice, but because they were more likely to be working in frontline essential roles in that lead to higher rates of exposure.

Torian Easterling ([13:33](#)):

We also knew that we see higher rates of overcrowding in Black and Brown communities. We know that families are living in multi-generational homes and many of those folks were living in multi-generational homes are also serving in those frontline essential workers' roles from nursing to grocery store workers. So how can you ensure that you're protecting those who are most vulnerable or are in conditions that are putting them in or putting them at risk? So our data is really important, really, to be able to contextualize those challenges and then to come up with those solutions. So testing was really important.

Torian Easterling ([14:16](#)):

So we were using our data to be able to identify where we're seeing higher rates of cases, where we're seeing higher rates of hospitalizations and move our resources into those neighborhoods so that we can do more testing, but the partnership is also important and so our partnerships with houses of worship, with community based organizations is also part of that strategy of being equitable because then you're ensuring that you're using trusted messengers, trusted voices to connect those resources, to ensure that individuals who are most vulnerable, individuals who may not be as connected to care, are getting tested.

Torian Easterling ([14:56](#)):

We're using and expanding that same strategy into our vaccine rollout, using our data to identify where the gaps are, where we need to get to the individuals who are most vulnerable, certainly, working with our Task Force for Racial Inclusion and Equity to ensure that we're partnering with organizations, houses

of worship, to serve as trusted messengers, speaking about the science, the facts around the vaccine, but also helping individuals match to appointments. Most of our sites across New York City are in neighborhoods that have experienced long-standing inequities, but also have been experiencing disproportionate impact to COVID-19 and those are the intentional ways.

Torian Easterling ([15:42](#)):

Access is important, but to ensure that individuals know that those access points are for them that live in that community is also making sure that you're partnering with those communities and the community-based organizations and community leaders to ensure that you're getting folks to those access points. So those are the different ways, but certainly we understand that there is confidence or lack of confidence, both in the system, as well as in the vaccine. So addressing those issues has to be our work as government to ensure that we're earning the trust of New Yorkers and everyday people that they know that this vaccine is for them and that we're really trying to wrap our arms around them to make sure that they're getting the vaccine.

Omar Bourne ([16:26](#)):

I'm glad that you mentioned trust and working with community organizations and houses of worship because when we think about the Black community, there has been a lot of skepticism about taking the vaccine. So it is integral that we work with trusted networks within communities to build that trust so that we can get people vaccinated.

Torian Easterling ([16:52](#)):

Absolutely.

Omar Bourne ([16:53](#)):

When we look at language access, and that's another key component of equity, as we know in New York City, is diverse. So can you tell our listeners about some of the procedures that are in place to provide equitable language access for those who need it?

Torian Easterling ([17:09](#)):

Yeah, and I think that this also can connect to the other point that you were making about the hesitancy and I think this also can connect to language access, so just sort of take a moment to unpack this, because I think with the hesitancy, what we've always tried to shift this to is how we need to build confidence; building confidence in the vaccine and building competence in the structures and systems that are helping us get vaccines out to the people who need them and, ultimately, to everyone, because right now we do not have vast supply for the vaccine so we have to be able to prioritize those were most vulnerable. Those who have been most impacted by COVID-19, get them the vaccine as quickly as possible, because we also know that there are barriers that are out there. So we do not want individuals who have been highly exposed or who have been most impacted to be reinfected.

Torian Easterling ([18:08](#)):

We do not want individuals who are in the conditions that we increase the risk of exposure to get infected as well. So we want to get to them first as and then, ultimately, get to the wider public. So I will say that when I say that it is on the government to really work to ensure that we are supporting communities, I think the important part is one, validating the concerns that are coming up and that's

across communities. That's not only speaking about the Tuskegee Experiment or even talking about the atrocities done to enslaved Africans through gynecological procedures done by Dr. Marion Sims, it's also talking about the experimentations that have happened in the Latin communities and also in tribal communities, it's messaging and validating these concerns that we know have happened in the past and to say that this is not what's happening now here's how I can show you.

Torian Easterling ([19:15](#)):

We have to say it in the languages in which people can understand. So in sharing information and talking about the vaccines, we are interpreting the slides that we're doing, the fact sheets that we're doing, in the languages for the community. Our animations are in the top 13 languages from Haitian Creole to Spanish to Arabic, as well as English. The videos that we're doing, we're also interpreting and also have translated into other languages. In addition, the access points, I worked at a pod, we have two people on site, sometimes one, but mostly, often it's two people on site, our language access and disability access support coordinator is there to identify if someone needs interpretation. If we have it onsite, we provided immediately, if not, we'll use that language line, we're also supporting seniors were coming in, how we're supporting them or anyone that has disability needs.

Torian Easterling ([20:26](#)):

So really being able to ensure that individuals who are showing up that we're accommodating them as they are arriving receive their vaccine. So we have to make sure that New Yorkers are feeling represented when they are coming to our sites and when they're calling or when they're signing for an appointment. In addition, it's being able to also see folks who look like you getting vaccinated. Also, the reason why, as one of the top health officials, I have gotten back to me because I trust the science. I know that it's safe. I know that it's effective, the vaccines and the vaccines save lives and so that's also an important as well. I think it's the verbal communication, but there's also the non-verbal that has been really, really powerful as we're seeing New Yorkers get vaccinated and sign up for appointments and really work with us to ensure that others are connecting to the vaccine as well.

Allison Pennisi ([21:30](#)):

Wonderfully said, and it goes back to what we say often on 'Prep Talk' is that in order for inequities to be resolved or to even bridge the gap, it requires us to work with our communities. It can't just be one piece of the puzzle; everybody has to be involved to ensure that our communities are healthy and they're safe. So thank you, Dr. Easterling. One final question before we go to Rapid Response time. When we look at the pandemic, we talked about social injustices in this country, especially even over the last year. Do you have any advice that you would give to communities to inspire them and give them hope and encouragement?

Omar Bourne ([22:10](#)):

Yeah. I would say that the communities have already given me hope and I think that the way in which communities have organized over the past year, supporting individuals through this pandemic, then getting through, we would say, one of the most important elections that we have experienced in decades, and now, preparing ourselves to receive this vaccine and hopefully get to the end of this pandemic. I think I would say that the tools, the knowledge, the wisdom is already within us.

Omar Bourne ([22:47](#)):

We can do this together, but we have to do this in a way that we are communicating, supporting, sharing the right information so that we can continue to get to a point where folks are getting the vaccine once supply is more available, but until then getting to communities and residents that are most vulnerable. So how do we support that? We share facts. We share how people can get connected to appointments. I know that there are many community partners that are already standing up, stepping up to really work with their residents and their clients to do that. I think that has been inspiring to me to continue to see this throughout New York City.

Allison Pennisi ([23:34](#)):

Speaking with Dr. Easterling from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, it is Rapid Response time and if you are a first-time listener, it's simple. Omar, and I will ask questions and our guest will give the first answer that comes to mind. But before Rapid Response, here is a message from New York City Emergency Management and the Ad Council.

Speaker 5 ([23:54](#)):

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 3-1-1 to make your family's emergency plan. Brought to you by New York City Emergency Management and the Ad Council.

Speaker 6 ([24:55](#)):

It's time for 'Prep Talk' Rapid Response.

Omar Bourne ([25:02](#)):

Dr. Easterling, what is the one emergency item that you cannot live without?

Torian Easterling ([25:08](#)):

My First Aid kit.

Allison Pennisi ([25:09](#)):

Spoken like a true medical professional. Dr. Easterling, what is the best leadership advice you have ever received?

Torian Easterling ([25:17](#)):

Always be prepared to take the next challenge, even when you're not prepared.

Allison Pennisi ([25:22](#)):

I like that very much and on the lighter side, do you have a favorite food?

Torian Easterling ([25:29](#)):

Oh man, lots of food. I'm going to say my mother's eggplant.

Omar Bourne ([25:33](#)):

Can't go wrong with mama's cooking. Not at all. I'm going to get even lighter here. Knicks or Nets. Be careful.

Torian Easterling ([25:45](#)):

I know. I'm a Lakers fan. I got to say that.

Omar Bourne ([25:48](#)):

Oh my goodness. This is over.

Torian Easterling ([25:50](#)):

I know. I know. I know. But I live in Brooklyn, so I'm going with the Nets and the Nets used to be in Jersey, so I have to go with the Nets.

Omar Bourne ([26:04](#)):

We'll take that, but what is the Lakers about? Is it Kobe? I [crosstalk 00:26:08].

Torian Easterling ([26:08](#)):

I don't know. I've been the Lakers fan since the '80s, when Magic, Kareem, Michael, I guess not Michael [crosstalk 00:26:16] I'm thinking of Michael Thompson and Michael Cooper, but ...

Omar Bourne ([26:19](#)):

All right. No, it's fine. You know what? We'll accept it. That's okay. We'll give you a pass this time.

Allison Pennisi ([26:26](#)):

Last but not least. Sum up the work you do in one word.

Omar Bourne ([26:32](#)):

One word, change.

Allison Pennisi ([26:37](#)):

That's a great one. I don't think we've ever had change as a, 'the work you do in one word,' Omar.

Omar Bourne ([26:43](#)):

No, that's a first, but I like it because it-

Allison Pennisi ([26:45](#)):

I like it.

Omar Bourne ([26:47](#)):

... it speaks really to the times that we're in and working towards equity, so I'm here for it. I like it.

Allison Pennisi ([26:57](#)):

This transcript was exported on Mar 24, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

So speaking with Dr. Torian Easterling first deputy commissioner and chief equity officer of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. If you want to learn more about how New York City is taking steps to ensure equity in health, you can visit [NYC.gov/health](https://nyc.gov/health) or contact 3-1-1.

Speaker 1 ([27:15](#)):

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.