

Announcement ([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.

Christina Farrell ([00:24](#)):

Hello everyone. Thank you for listening. I'm Christina Farrell.

Allison Pennisi ([00:29](#)):

And 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 at @nycemergencymgt, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and much more.

Christina Farrell ([00:49](#)):

Today, we are happy to be joined by someone who has been making history in the emergency management field.

Allison Pennisi ([00:55](#)):

That's right, Christina, Deanne Criswell is the first commissioner of New York City Emergency Management who is a woman. And she is now the first woman to be nominated as the federal emergency management agency or FEMA administrator. President Biden has nominated her. Commissioner, welcome back to the show.

Deanne Criswell ([01:12](#)):

Thank you so much Allison and Christina for bringing me back. And I mean, it's truly been an incredible honor to be nominated by President Biden to serve as the next FEMA administrator. Throughout my career, I have dedicated myself to helping people that have been impacted by disasters, as well as helping communities increase their own resilience to future threats. And, I really look forward to the incredible opportunity to help evolve and advance the role of emergency management even further across the nation, and to lead the nation's efforts to be better prepared for the foreseeable and unknown threats that we face ahead.

Allison Pennisi ([01:50](#)):

Very exciting times. As we mentioned in the introduction, you are no stranger to being the first woman to lead an agency, as is a testament to your role here at New York City Emergency Management as commissioner. And, it's been quite a time; you've led responses to a blackout, heat emergencies, a tropical storm, snow storms, and you continue to lead during the COVID-19 pandemic. So, talk to us about some of the challenges you have faced with these emergencies.

Deanne Criswell ([02:16](#)):

Oh, thanks Allison, it's been quite an opportunity since I've been here in New York City, and I've seen firsthand through many of these responses, the disproportionate impact that is felt by our underserved communities, including the devastation and the inequities that we saw across the city during the COVID-

19 pandemic. And as part of our COVID-19 response here in New York City, what we did was we helped to map out our most vulnerable neighborhoods, and this gave us an opportunity to identify gaps in our testing and vaccine distribution, and helped inform where we would put new sites as we were standing them up. And then, to even reach out further to these communities, we also provided transportation to help increase our outreach, and help more vulnerable populations get the services that they needed. Our response here required a strong collaboration, leadership and coordination across all levels of government, federal, state and local to make sure that we had the right resources to meet our needs.

Deanne Criswell ([03:18](#)):

And, leading this coordination was really essential to our success in flattening the curve last spring. Some of our major lines of effort that we put in place to support this were expanding our fatality management operations, supporting hotel operations for our healthcare workers, supplying food for vulnerable populations, creating alternate care facilities, and then scaling up vaccine distribution efforts.

Christina Farrell ([03:45](#)):

Yeah, it's been quite a year. I think every part of the disaster cycle and every operation that could be put in place. So as we talk about the pandemic, one thing that really touched all the workers here across the City is the changes in how we respond to emergencies. We all went virtual pretty much overnight and that brought up our own challenges in this environment. And we continue, even as things start to open back up a little bit, we continue to work in a virtual environment.

Christina Farrell ([04:18](#)):

So, how has the pandemic changed the way response operations are handled in the emergency management field?

Deanne Criswell ([04:24](#)):

It's a great question. And, what we've learned is that remote work has proven to actually be very effective. I think that nothing can actually ever replace the face-to-face communications that's needed during extreme crisis response, but we have been able to really take advantage of the remote work and the technology that we have to expand our capabilities. And the pandemic was our first virtual EOC experience, and this virtual model has worked well for operations throughout the year to include the ongoing response to COVID, to tropical storms that we had during the summer and to our heat waves. And so I think there's an opportunity for us to continue to use this new tool, to help us do our jobs in different and better ways.

Deanne Criswell ([05:12](#)):

And part of that, and the success of that is really because of technology, which has been critical to our ability to create a shared situational awareness for our city partners, city agencies, and others across the city. And with the majority of our staff that have been working remotely, we successfully created what I call, or what we call, a daily senior leadership brief that really provides a comprehensive picture of the ongoing COVID response and was a tool that was used to really help inform decision-making. And that's one of the critical roles of emergency management is to create this shared situational awareness, and this senior leadership brief was really the only comprehensive picture of what was happening across the city for the leaders in, in all agencies, as well as the city hall offices, you know, to help drive decision making as we continued to respond to now recover from COVID-19.

Allison Pennisi ([06:17](#)):

I think it is safe to say that we have all learned a great deal responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. I also think it's safe to say that it has shown emergency managers everywhere that we are facing an ever evolving threat landscape. So what sort of strategic changes could be made to make us more ready and resilient for the future?

Deanne Criswell ([06:37](#)):

You're right, Alison, we just have to look back to last year and we are seeing more frequent and more severe natural disasters happen every year with last year, having the most named storms in history, as well as a record breaking wildfire season. And so I think some of the things that we need to do is we need to be able to build capacity and resilience so we can reduce the risk and reduce the physical impacts that we are seeing from the changing climate. And we need to address the risks that our changing climate is causing, and we need to understand that this is really a long-term investment and we need to start planning for and mitigating against the risks for the future instead of really basing it on historical risks, which is a lot of what we have done in the past.

Deanne Criswell ([07:29](#)):

And in order to really make this withstand, we need to make sure that we're institutionalizing climate change dynamics into our policies, into our planning efforts. And so it's a deliberate action and a deliberate thought about how we're preparing for future threats. And I think from emergency managers in general, they need to start to put together the right resources to address these emerging threats. You know, our cyber risk could be our next pandemic, the threat that we haven't faced yet that could crumble our entire infrastructure. These are the things that I worry about and the things that keep me up at night, it's that new novel threat that we must make sure that we are ready for.

Christina Farrell ([08:12](#)):

So one thing with the pandemic is it has highlighted the racial inequities that exist in our nation. As we look into the emergency management field, we know when we see that there's still a lot of work to be done to diversify the field. I know when you were starting in emergency management and you know, when I started 18 years about diversifying the field, I think just meant adding some women into your operation.

Christina Farrell ([08:38](#)):

Luckily at New York City Emergency Management, I can't speak across the country, but I think that women are well-represented clearly starting with the commissioner and going all the way through the executive and senior staff, but just adding some females is not diversity in 2021, for sure. So, and we've talked about this on the podcast, you had a lot of work in this area, but diversity equity and inclusion has definitely been a top priority of your time here and specifically over the last year, what are some practices that you have implemented and, as you think about your potential new role, how might some of these be adopted in other jurisdictions or other areas of emergency management?

Deanne Criswell ([09:21](#)):

Yeah, it's a great question, and I think that we all have a responsibility to ensure that there is equity across all emergency management operations, both internally on how we organize and we recruit and we promote as well as externally and how we deliver our programs. Especially as I mentioned, there's

underserved communities that often are the ones that are most disproportionately impacted, and we had a lot of discussions last year after some of the civil unrest that we saw and I listened to the staff and some of the ideas that they had and in one of the recommendations that they came up with was creating a diversity, equity, and inclusion council. And so that's what we did here at New York City Emergency Management. And I think this is something that other jurisdictions could benefit from as well. The whole purpose of the council is it's intended to help foster representation in our workforce across all of those dimensions of social and cultural identity. As you mentioned Christina, and then to practice equity and inclusion and how we work with one another, as well as deliver our emergency management programs. One of their first actions was holding unconscious bias workshops for all of our employees here at New York City Emergency Management to help bring awareness to the impact that systemic racism has had on our employees. And really give us an opportunity to have frank conversations and dialogue. And just to be heard

Allison Pennisi ([10:48](#)):

Building on this discussion on diversity, equity and inclusion commissioner, what advice would you give to women and men who may be interested in pursuing a career in the emergency management field or in public safety in general?

Deanne Criswell ([11:01](#)):

You know, I think it is such a great time to be in the field of emergency management right now. I am so passionate about the discipline of emergency management. And I think that there's so much opportunity to continue to advance it going forward. I have spent the majority of my life in public service and there is nothing more rewarding than being able to help people before, during and after disasters. It can be very challenging at times, but it is also extremely meaningful, very exciting, and this growing profession, I think is one that, that we should promote more and get more young adults interested in pursuing for their future.

Christina Farrell ([11:45](#)):

So as it appears that your time here at the helm of Emergency Management in New York City is drawing to a close. When you think back on the past two years, what are you most proud of when you think about your time leading our agency?

Deanne Criswell ([11:59](#)):

Thanks so much for asking that Christina. First I think leading New York City through the COVID-19 response was one of the biggest challenges of my career and a response that I am the most proud of. We had a number of successes as we went through the last year, leading the coordination across the federal state and local levels ensuring that the right resources were in the right place and at the right time, taking care of our people here, making sure that we provided for their personal and mental health needs during these trying times. And then we took an equity lens from the very beginning of our response from testing sites to even installing air conditioners last summer. So we can help protect those that are most vulnerable to COVID-19 as well as summer heat. And now we're providing for equitable vaccination sites, and I think that this response I have learned personally so much from our response here in New York City and I'm hoping that I can take a lot of these lessons learned with me into my future role.

Allison Pennisi ([13:05](#)):

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Speaking with Deanne Criswell, New York City Emergency Management commissioner and FEMA administrator. Any final thoughts before we go into rapid response?

Deanne Criswell ([13:14](#)):

You know, I just wanted to, to one, thank you both for having me on again, it has been such a privilege to serve as the commissioner here at New York City Emergency Management for the last nearly two years, the people of New York City emergency management are some of the most talented I have ever worked with, and I'm very excited to see where their futures are and look forward to working with everybody in the future.

Allison Pennisi ([13:40](#)):

Wonderful. It is rapid response time. And if you are a first time listener, it's simple, Christina, and I will ask questions and our guests 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.

Advertisement ([13:57](#)):

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, it's 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.

Announcement ([14:57](#)):

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

Christina Farrell ([15:04](#)):

Okay. We're back. And we're doing rapid response with Deanne Criswell, New York City Emergency Management commissioner. What is one emergency item that you can not live without?

Deanne Criswell ([15:15](#)):

You know, Christina? I guess I'd just have to say my Go Bag, which has all of the critical things I need to take with me in a hurry if I need to leave the house.

Christina Farrell ([15:26](#)):

For sure. And one thing I'll say is that Go Bags have been updated over the past year, right? People have masks and hand sanitizer and all kinds of things in their go bag that may not have been usual, but we changed with the time.

Allison Pennisi ([15:41](#)):

Commissioner, do you have a favorite food or dessert?

Deanne Criswell ([15:44](#)):

Oh, my favorite dessert without question is vanilla ice cream.

Christina Farrell ([15:49](#)):

And I know, I know you're a runner and you know, you hike from time to time, activities when you may be listening to music. What's your favorite song or artist that you listen to when doing these things?

Deanne Criswell ([16:02](#)):

I would say right now over the last year, I've been listening to the song "Rise Up." I can't remember who the artist is, but it's been a really inspiring song as we have faced these challenges of COVID-19 over the last year.

Allison Pennisi ([16:17](#)):

Good answer. I know you have a really adorable dog named Wilson. He may be part of this question, but what is your go-to to unwind?

Deanne Criswell ([16:26](#)):

He is my go-to to unwind without a doubt. Wilson is my therapy and I love to just take him on long walks.

Allison Pennisi ([16:33](#)):

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

Deanne Criswell ([16:39](#)):

Meaningful.

Allison Pennisi ([16:41](#)):

Great answers. Speaking to Deanne Criswell, New York City Emergency Management Commissioner and senate-nominated FEMA administrator. Thank you for your leadership and your time speaking with us on 'Prep Talk.'

Deanne Criswell ([16:52](#)):

Thank you both very much.

Christina Farrell ([16:55](#)):

So the last thing I wanted to say, I don't know if you saw this, but I think we mentioned this on the first episode you were on back in July of 2019, the good news for my fellow "Survivor" fan is that "Survivor" has started taping again, and so sometime in 2021, if you find time in your busy schedule, it seems like there will be a new, I think it's season 41. Yeah, but that will be a new "Survivor" season for all the "Survivor" fans to watch. So I will leave you with that, and I want to thank you for your leadership and for coming on the show several times to help us prepare New Yorkers.

Deanne Criswell ([17:31](#)):

I'm excited season 41. That's great news.

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Christina Farrell ([17:36](#)):

We like to end a 'Prep Talk' on an up-note. So thank you.

Announcement ([17:47](#)):

That's this episode 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.