

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.

Christina Farrell ([00:27](#)):

Welcome back to "Prep Talk," the Emergency Management podcast. We've been away for the past couple of months as we were consumed with the response to COVID-19 here in New York City, but we wanted to come back online and share some of our experiences. I'm Christina Farrell, deputy commissioner for external affairs here at New York City Emergency Management, and I'm standing in for Allison Pennisi and Omar Bourne.

Christina Farrell ([00:51](#)):

Allison and Omar are fine. They're working remotely these days and are planning some additional podcasts in the coming weeks, so stay tuned. Today we are going to be hearing from Deanne Criswell, commissioner here at New York City Emergency Management. We first had Deanne on the podcast last July when she was brand new to our agency, and we are very happy she is making the time to talk to us again.

Christina Farrell ([01:13](#)):

So commissioner, a lot has happened since you last joined the podcast. For today, we will focus on our agency's preparations and response to COVID, as well as what else the agency is focusing on as we move into May and the summer months. Thanks for joining us.

Christina Farrell ([01:29](#)):

When did you and your team become aware of COVID-19 and how did New York City Emergency Management begin to wrap its arms around this new threat?

Deanne Criswell ([01:37](#)):

Thank you Christina. Thanks for having me on again today. It's my pleasure to be here.

Deanne Criswell ([01:42](#)):

We became aware of what was then known as a novel coronavirus, back in early January when we received information from the City and state health departments as well as the US Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization. We sent this information to all of our staff sharing what was known at the time. I also started to talk frequently with Commissioner Barbot at the health department. Dr. Katz, our CEO of New York City's Health and Hospitals, and our City Hall representatives.

Deanne Criswell ([02:14](#)):

We held our first COVID-19 interagency coordination call on January 15. On January 24th, while our agency was still very much involved in assisting the residents of Puerto Rico after the serious earthquake there in early January, and we were still concerned about winter weather, we held a tabletop exercise here at our Emergency Management Situation Room. Several agencies were present and through the

leadership of the City's health department, we talked through different scenarios and how the city was preparing to address them.

Deanne Criswell ([02:45](#)):

The mayor himself also joined this tabletop exercise to make sure that the City was working together collectively to make sure that we were prepared for what this coronavirus could evolve to.

Christina Farrell ([02:56](#)):

How did Emergency Management's operations change as the threat began to move closer to New York City?

Deanne Criswell ([03:01](#)):

New York City Emergency Management began to activate our Emergency Operation Center on February 1st. We knew that we would soon see cases in the city, so preparations ramped up quickly. Over the month of February, we worked to put protocols in place to include our citywide Continuity of Operations Plan so we could maintain the City's essential services while reducing and slowing the transmission of COVID-19. Most of these plans were originally built on the primary premise of relocating to alternate sites or short-term workforce impacts, so we worked very closely with our City partners to adjust these COOP plans and facilitate a longer term wide social distancing strategies, widespread telework, staggered schedules for positions that could not be accomplished remotely, as well as what positions could be reassigned.

Deanne Criswell ([03:52](#)):

On March 1st New York City reported the first confirmed case and shortly thereafter more aggressive measures were implemented to protect new Yorkers. Longstanding events such as the St. Patrick's Day Parade were canceled. 1.1 million school children, their families, teachers, and administrators transitioned to remote learning, and restaurants moved to takeout and delivery only.

Deanne Criswell ([04:14](#)):

New York is a very social, outgoing type of city and this was a huge culture shift that New Yorkers were subjected to virtually overnight. Our agency also supported whatever cascading impacts would arise. We quickly stood up a texting shortcode system so people could receive important COVID related information in both English and Spanish, as well as via our Chinese Twitter site. We worked with the state, FEMA, Department of Defense, hospitals and other partners to transform the Javits Center into an alternate care facility, and we also facilitated the buildout of the Billy Jean King Tennis Center and the Brooklyn Cruise Terminal into makeshift hospitals.

Deanne Criswell ([04:53](#)):

We worked with the City social service agencies to start delivering food to our city's most vulnerable residents, and quickly recruited thousands of nurses, doctors, and other healthcare workers to come to New York City to surge into our hospitals and other facilities to supplement our existing workforce. We then worked with the city's hotel industry to provide rooms for these out-of-town healthcare workers, as well as city residents and congregate care settings who needed a place to quarantine or isolate safely. As you can see, we have been very busy since that first discussion in January and our work continues.

Christina Farrell ([05:26](#)):

So now the weather's getting nicer, the indicators, as the mayor reports every day, are starting to look a little more promising, but we're certainly still in the thick of things. But as we look to May and potentially entering a new phase, what are your priorities?

Deanne Criswell ([05:39](#)):

While these key indicators are declining, we know that we have to stay cautious and not let any of the gains that we have made through the hard work and the excellent social distancing of city residents slip away. We have been able to release some assets such as the Comfort on April 30th and the Javits Center, which has released of its patients. But we are keeping other support mechanisms in place so we can see what May brings.

Deanne Criswell ([06:02](#)):

We want to continue to maximize the safety of the city's residents while we increase testing, contact tracing and the needed isolation so we can move away from widespread community transmission. New York City Emergency Management continues to track different operations around the city and lend support as needed. We continue to message New Yorkers, and also know that we need to support our healthcare workers and our first responders as they deal with all they have seen and experienced these past weeks. We will continue to work with our military partners and other resources to make sure a support mechanisms are in place for our heroes.

Christina Farrell ([06:37](#)):

So as the weather gets nicer, I think emergency managers might enjoy one or two days of spring and then they start thinking, "Uh-oh, heat." And then on the East Coast, we start thinking, "Uh-oh, hurricanes." It's just how we are.

Deanne Criswell ([06:49](#)):

It is how we roll.

Christina Farrell ([06:50](#)):

Yes. As we do start to move into the warmer weather, how are you looking to balance the response to COVID-19 which is obviously ongoing with these other hazards, heat, hurricane, potentially power outages?

Deanne Criswell ([07:03](#)):

I think I'm already in the "uh-oh," mode and have been thinking of heat and coastal storms for several weeks now, and New York City Emergency Management along with our partners have been incredibly focused on how the City is going to offer support to residents as we transition to summer and potentially severe heat.

Deanne Criswell ([07:21](#)):

We know that our usual solutions have cooling centers in our senior centers, in our libraries or in our community centers may not be possible this year, especially if the heat comes early. So we're looking at ways to achieve social distancing in cooling centers, allowing residents to stay cool in their homes and use alternate facilities that can allow for more social distancing. We really need and want people to be able to stay safe while they stay cool.

Deanne Criswell ([07:48](#)):

But as you also mentioned, hurricanes aren't going to stop forming just because COVID is here, and while New York City is most at risk for hurricanes starting August 1st and through the late summer and early fall, we are adjusting our plans now. This week marks Hurricane Awareness Week across the nation, and New York City Emergency Management has already posted the updated 2020 hurricane guide and evacuation map on our website. As in years past, people can log in or call 311 and find out if they live in an evacuation zone, and if so, where their closest evacuation center is.

Deanne Criswell ([08:21](#)):

My external affairs team is also happy to attend tele-town halls, conference calls or other virtual meetings to discuss our preparations and how city residents can build their emergency plans while taking social distancing into account. We're also going to create videos for both heat and hurricane seasons in 10 languages plus American Sign Language. And our Watch Command and citywide incident coordinators are on duty 24/7, 365, or three 66 this year. They monitor all weather, radios, situations around the world and respond across the five boroughs to any incident that may need a coordinated agency response. For the months of March and April, in addition to all of the COVID related messaging and operations they have been involved in, they also monitored over a thousand incidents across the five boroughs, sent out over 500 notified New York City messages and deployed to over a hundred incidents.

Christina Farrell ([09:13](#)):

Thank you. That's an excellent point. As a reminder, if people would like to access these resources, you can visit us online at NYC.gov/emergencymanagement. You can call 311 or visit us on social media. And one thing I wanted to note because this has really been new for us, a lot of what you mentioned about the monitoring the incidents sending out the Notify NYCs, we've actually had our Watch Command in large part working remotely, which having operation centers work remotely really wasn't in our plans-

Deanne Criswell ([09:45](#)):

Part of the plan.

Christina Farrell ([09:45](#)):

No. So it's pretty amazing that they continue to do all this work, and I think actually the last wireless emergency alert that was sent out to all the millions of cell phones across the city also happened from someone's home.

Deanne Criswell ([09:58](#)):

I think we've learned a lot about what we can and can't do remotely, and it's going to really change the way of how we and everybody operates in the future.

Christina Farrell ([10:07](#)):

Yes, for sure. So that's a good segue to our next question. So what have you personally learned from this experience? And as you mentioned, how do you think this is going to transform the way that Emergency Management and really the City of New York operates?

Deanne Criswell ([10:20](#)):

Like every emergency that I have ever worked on, there are always unforeseen circumstances and surprises. And I have to say the COVID response has truly been unique in that I can't remember another emergency happening to all cities and States in the nation at the same time, not to mention across the world. The Emergency Management Assistance Compact or EMAC is one of the valuable tools that cities and States often use to surge for emergencies. For example, after Hurricane Sandy, teams from Maine, California, Philadelphia and other areas came to New York City to assist us during the response and recovery phase. And likewise, New York City Emergency Management has sent staff to places like Houston, Miami and Puerto Rico to assist after hurricanes, and out West to assist with the response to wildfires.

Deanne Criswell ([11:08](#)):

Obviously, when you have something like a pandemic hitting or potentially hitting all places, it is not possible or feasible for emergency managers or other operational staff to leave their jurisdiction to help out in another area, and so learning how to use resources outside of the typical mechanisms that we have through EMAC is a really important lesson learned.

Deanne Criswell ([11:28](#)):

We've also addressed this by temporarily reassigning staff to essential functions as needed. We're using volunteers such as our fabulous New York City CERT volunteers, who have logged over 350 shifts and 1200 volunteer hours since this response began, in helping with food distribution, doing virtual buddy checks on their neighbors and other tasks. We have also brought back former staff members and detailed staff from several agencies help with these key operations.

Deanne Criswell ([11:54](#)):

We've also learned what Zoom and other video conferencing systems are and how to effectively do our work from remote locations. The whole premise of an Emergency Operation Center is that you put all of the relevant players in a big room together so they can work out issues face to face. And while we still have staff physically in our EOC, we have moved the majority of the positions to remote work and employed social distancing strategies. Virtually overnight, at least 50% of our agency staff moved to working from home, and I think the realization of how much work can be done remotely is going to have wide ranging implications in the future as we re-imagine the workplace after COVID.

Deanne Criswell ([12:31](#)):

And one thing that wasn't necessarily surprising but very heartwarming is the thousands of healthcare workers from around the country that answered our call and came to New York City to work alongside our healthcare workers as well as the hundreds of military personnel that came to assist as well. We can't say it enough, we are truly grateful and we'll never forget your role in helping New York City face the COVID response.

Christina Farrell ([12:54](#)):

As you well know, as we know, New York City Emergency Management staff have been working night and day. They also, like all New Yorkers have experienced personal losses due to the COVID virus. So how is Emergency Management encouraging self-care among its employees? And for you at the helm, what do you do for your own self-care?

Deanne Criswell ([13:12](#)):

Like all organizations, New York City Emergency Management is a microcosm of the city that we serve. We have employees with all different backgrounds. We have employees with disabilities and functional needs. We have employees balancing demanding work with caring for infants and school-aged children, all the way up to caring for their elderly parents. And like all organizations in the city, we have suffered losses. Several of our staff members have lost family members or other loved ones to COVID, and tragically one of our very own FDNY Emergency Medical Technician, Gregory Hodge, who had been assigned to our Watch Command for several years, succumbed to this virus as well.

Deanne Criswell ([13:50](#)):

All across our agency, we have been sure to check in with all of our staff via email, video chat, virtual support groups and other methods. The City of New York has put exercise classes, meditation sessions and other resources online for all employees to access so they can take some time for themselves.

Deanne Criswell ([14:09](#)):

I have talked to my leadership team about continuing to check in with their staff, even when they are remote to make sure that they are feeling okay, have whatever resources they need and that they realize it is okay and really essential to take some time for themselves, whether that means taking a run, watching a movie, connecting with their friends online or just reading a good book. Emergency Management is a team discipline and we all pitch in to help others and accept that help in return. And for me personally, nothing is better therapy than coming home and spending some time with my English golden retriever, Wilson. I also connect with my sons and their families whenever possible and there's nothing that warms one's heart more, that gives hope in the future than spending a few minutes with your grandchildren. So a big shout out to Riker, Scarlet and Stella.

Christina Farrell ([14:58](#)):

I think, and like you mentioned before, a lot of times emergencies might be more sharp, short term, certainly not so all encompassing and going on for months and months. We always say it's a marathon, not a sprint, but people really have to remember that and take that into account because everybody is so dedicated, and you really have to learn how to balance. So I'm glad that we have been able to achieve that. Thank you for your leadership in reminding everyone that.

Christina Farrell ([15:22](#)):

So we won't take up any more of your time. I just wanted to ask you if there's anything else that you'd like to add before we close.

Deanne Criswell ([15:28](#)):

I would just like to say thank you. Thank you to all of our healthcare workers, to all of our essential workers, to the great team at New York City Emergency Management and to all New Yorkers. We have asked so much of you in these past few months, we have all changed the vast majority of our daily habits and lifestyles on the drop of a dime. We have adjusted to new guidance. We have homeschooled our children. We have changed the way we grocery shop, the way we mark occasions like birthdays, anniversaries, and yes, unfortunately funerals. And as we begin to think about the next phase of this emergency and how this will continue to impact all of us, but especially the most vulnerable among us, I know that our residents will continue to rise to the occasion, will continue to look out for and assist those who need it most and continue to show their intrepid support for New York.

Christina Farrell ([16:18](#)):

Great. Well we thank you and we'll be checking back in with you again soon.

Deanne Criswell ([16:21](#)):

Thanks, Christina.

Speaker 1 ([16:26](#)):

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.