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):

And 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, and much more.

Omar Bourne (00:50):

Allison, 2020 has been a year packed full of emergencies, especially here in New York City. One thing remains constant, and that is the need for accurate and timely information.

Allison Pennisi (01:04):

That's right, Omar. From severe weather to health emergencies, like COVID-19. Emergency managers on the local, state, and federal level have a big responsibility to ensure the public stays informed and takes appropriate action when disaster strikes. So joining us to discuss best practices and challenges for running emergency communications, is Rebecca Baudendistel, who is the Director of Public Warning at New York City Emergency Management. And she also oversees Notify NYC. New York City's official emergency communications program. Becca, welcome back to "Prep Talk."

Rebecca Baudendistel (01:37):

Hey, Allison and Omar, thanks for having me.

Omar Bourne (01:39):

Thank you for being here. Becca, let's get right into it. Now, New York City has been especially busy with emergencies, as I've said. In fact, from July 2019 through June 2020, Notify NYC has sent close to 4,000 alerts to over 800,000 subscribers. Now, in your experience, what are the challenges of keeping the public informed especially over the past year?

Rebecca Baudendistel (02:06):

Sure. Yeah, we've definitely been busy this year. I would say some of the hardest thing about messaging has been just the sheer volume of it, which is certainly different than other years. As you mentioned, we've had a lot of incidents going on simultaneously. And one of the issues in public warning as a whole is always over alerting versus under alerting. Because you don't want to send people too many messages and then you lose their attention. And the issue with this year has been there's just been so many things going on that you really have to toe that line extra close. So we've been trying to use as many different tools as we can to do that in a way that still keeps people engaged.

Allison Pennisi (02:49):

So Becca, one of the tools used by the Notify NYC program to keep New Yorkers informed about ongoing incidents is a shortcode messaging service and it is currently being used during the COVID-19 pandemic. Can you tell our listeners about that?

Rebecca Baudendistel (03:04):

Sure, so this is actually a fairly new capability that we're really excited about. We've used it a few times in the past for mainly large scale planned events, such as New Year's Eve, Thanksgiving Day Parade, things like that. And basically it gives New Yorkers a way to subscribe to Notify NYC alerts that are specific to an individual incident. In this case, we can also use it for emergencies, which we did for the previous Queens sewage backup incident. And that was helpful for the residents in that area. It was a very localized event, but it was a quick way to get them information as that incident unfolded.

Rebecca Baudendistel (03:43):

And then for COVID, we started this as a way for people to quickly, often to Notify, to receive COVID-specific information. And it's actually been one of our biggest successes. So far we've had over 875,000 people sign up. And we also, this was the first time we were able to launch a keyword in Spanish as well. So we could reach Spanish speaking New Yorkers about COVID as well. So it's been a really impressive tool in our toolbox, and this is a really good use case of it].

Omar Bourne (04:16):

Now here in New York City, we have 8.6 million residents. And obviously if you've got 8.6 million people, we're looking at people who speak different languages. So what has Notify NYC done to ensure that a message reaches non-English-speaking New Yorkers or even those with limited English proficiency?

Rebecca Baudendistel (04:37):

Yeah, our goal as always with Notify NYC is to reach as many people as possible. And we've made a lot of improvements with the program in that direction. Currently you can sign up to get alerts in 13 languages in addition to English, which is really great. We also, like I mentioned, for the first time we're able to use the Spanish SMS often keyword for COVID. Meaning that you could sign up to receive COVID alerts in Spanish. And we also amplified all of our COVID messaging on Twitter in both simplified and traditional Chinese. Prior to launching our multilingual messaging that actually been issuing messages with an American Sign Language component. So basically we have a lot of pre-translated content for a variety of emergencies that people can get a link to right at the bottom of every message that goes out in English. So they can be taken to a video that corresponds to that message, but it's wholly in American sign language. So we were making a lot of strides in that direction and I think it's definitely important and we want to continue down that road.

Allison Pennisi (05:42):

So in addition to the short code messaging and multilingual messaging, Notify NYC sends emails, text messages, phone calls, and alerts through the Notify NYC mobile application, just to name a few. But in addition to that, Becca, your team has assisted the city in sending wireless emergency alerts or WEAs, which provide critical emergency updates to all equipped cell phones in New York City. Can you explain to our listeners why it's important to offer the public an opt-in notification system when something like WEA already exists?

Rebecca Baudendistel (06:13):

Yeah, you hit the nail right on the head there. Wireless emergency alerts or the WEA system. They're meant to provide critical information in the most severe incidents. It's a very powerful tool and it's very far-reaching and there are cases where that's necessary, but on a more day to day basis, you really want to give people the information that comes to them in a customizable way.

Rebecca Baudendistel (06:37):

In my experience, alerts are much more effective when they're relevant to the person receiving them, meaning you don't want to send messaging that you think people want, it's much better to have them sign up for what they need. Because then you have a more captive audience. And also in New York City we all know that everything may not necessarily be a severe emergency, but it can still disrupt your day. Your train being delayed, traffic being an issue, those what we call quality of life messaging. And those are also important on those non-severe incident days. So while we do have that as one of our tools, we try to only reserve it for the most critical events.

Omar Bourne (07:18):

And what has the feedback been like from the subscribers? How do they feel about the messaging and the types of messages that they're receiving?

Rebecca Baudendistel (07:28):

It's been fairly positive. Over the years that I've been here, we've done a few customer surveys actually, because of course we want to serve people as best we can. And we actually have made programmatic changes based off of the feedback we've gotten from customers. For example, recently, I think this was just a couple of years ago, we actually created a group specific for weather notifications, because people had shown us that that was one of the categories they're most interested in. And it wasn't a standalone category at the time. So now when you sign up, there are multiple options for you to tailor your messages. And it really creates an environment where you can make sure you're getting all of the information you need, the way that you need it.

Omar Bourne (08:09):

That's what it's about, the information that you need and the way that you need it. Now, if people were developing a communications program, similar to Notify NYC in their jurisdiction, what advice would you give them?

Rebecca Baudendistel (08:24):

I think first off, you have to develop a threshold for messaging because of what constitutes an emergency varies depending on location. I know like in New York City a road closure may not be an emergency, but in a smaller jurisdiction, an arterial road being closed for an extended period of time could be a significant issue. So maybe they have something they want to alert about. So I think that you need to have an honest conversation about your locality and what your hazards are and go from there.

Rebecca Baudendistel (08:52):

I would also say the two biggest things to get ahead of time before the disaster are to develop a clear authority and approval structure for messaging, because that's not the time when you want to be figuring out, who needs to send those, who needs to approve it, et cetera. And also to make sure that

you treat your messaging like a brand, and building public trust is difficult, but it can be done, and the problem is you you have to live up to that trust every day. So on your more routine messaging days, that's when you really build that trust for when there is a big emergency.

Rebecca Baudendistel (09:25):

And then the last thing I would say is for public warning, one size does not fit all. You definitely have to use all the tools available to you. WEAs, for example, if we talked about, is just one tool in the toolbox is what we say, but you really have to use everything at your disposal to try to get messaging out as far as you can. So you definitely can't have a one size fits all view of public warning.

Omar Bourne (09:48):

And public warning is so important. I want you to talk about practice because I think that's key. And I know you guys have something called WEA Wednesdays, but how important is it for people to be able to practice this messaging so that in the emergency, it comes as second nature?

Rebecca Baudendistel (10:06):

You don't want the day that you have questions about how to send messages be the day that they're critical to get out quickly. Public alerting is very focused on correct information being issued in a timely manner. And so we drill a lot in New York City Emergency Management. Our public warning specialists, they do great work and they work 24/7 in that unit to send out messaging. And when we're not in the midst of an emergency, we're practicing sending out messaging. So like you mentioned, we do WEA Wednesdays where the public warning specialists on duty, I actually send them mock scenarios. They draft the alerts as quickly as they can, and then we review them as a team. So they're using their skills to draft messaging, but also the systems themselves, which is very important because, I guess I would say luckily, but the system itself to issue these critical alerts doesn't get used that often. So you really have to make sure that when it's game time you know exactly what you're doing. So practices is very important.

Rebecca Baudendistel (11:05):

And that's also why I mentioned having a clear authority and approval structure in place ahead of time, which is something that is also useful to test in this practicing and the drills that we do, because you want to make sure that not only does your operator know how to send a message, but the people who are going to be called upon to basically approve the issuance of it also needs to know their role ahead of time and what's expected of them. So it's really a team effort to make sure everyone is prepared.

Omar Bourne (11:31):

And when we talk about tests, obviously, there is a template in which you have, this is a test, this is a drill clearly slated all over this message. Is that correct? Because one of the things that we've seen in the past is that emergency warning systems have slipped up and sent test messages to the general public. So I guess the question would be, what protocols are in place to prevent that from happening here at Emergency Management?

Rebecca Baudendistel (12:04):

Definitely, that's always a concern of anybody in the public warning field. For us, even when we do testing, it's still a two person process. So it's never just one person sitting there pushing out a test

message. Secondly, all testing is done in a completely different environment from the live environment, they use different credentials, everything. So it's kind of knock on wood, very difficult to be in a live environment and not know it.

Rebecca Baudendistel (12:30):

And then third, when we do testing, we might draft messaging based on a scenario that we've come up with, but the test language regarding a specific scenario or drill, whatever it is, doesn't ever actually go in the system. So basically what I mean is I could give you a mock incident that's occurred. You will draft me an alert based on that incident. But when we go through the process of actually sending a test alert, the test alert language is always standard and says, "This is a test." And that's all it says. So we don't ever use drill content in the actual system, just in case.

Allison Pennisi (13:07):

It goes back to what we say in emergency management and emergency preparedness is to have a plan in place, so we know how to take action and respond appropriately. So it's really great to hear that Notify NYC has a plan in place. How has emergency communications evolved over the last few years, and where do you see it going?

Rebecca Baudendistel (13:26):

Well, I've been involved in public alerting now for about six years, and even in that short amount of time, there's been huge changes to the industry and also our program. I think the first thing is definitely an increase in technology. We have a much bigger presence on social media, I think, than we did years ago. And also like we mentioned, we have this new SMS opt-in capability. We also have had gotten a lot of improvements to the wireless emergency alert system that have been helpful, including our ability to send messages now over that system in 360 characters and in Spanish, that's also very useful.

Rebecca Baudendistel (14:01):

So definitely a lot of technology. And I would also say the changes over the last two years by themselves have been in kind of industry communication, I guess. We've done a lot more coordination specifically on public alerting with other jurisdictions about best practices and experiences, lessons learned, things like that. And that's really, it's improved I think everybody across the board. We tend to get together with other jurisdictions on an emergency management level in general, but in my time there hasn't been as much interaction just about public alerting and that has certainly increased over the last few years. So it's been a really good learning experience. I think nationwide, there's a lot of opportunities out there that we want to push towards such as smart technologies here now, it'd be interesting to see how public alerting can tie into that.

Rebecca Baudendistel (14:52):

I also mentioned the improvements we had to wireless emergency alerts in the last few years, but going forward, our geotargeting capabilities, meaning how granular we can get with the wireless emergency alert and only going to improve. So that'll be really interesting as well because now we have the capabilities to send more localized alerts for a localized severe incident. So I think technology is definitely the way to go in the future as well.

Omar Bourne (15:17):

Becca for our listeners. Can you talk to them about the importance of signing up for a program like Notify NYC? Why should I have it?

Rebecca Baudendistel (15:27):

Notify NYC, we strive every day to make sure that people are prepared as they go about their lives in the event of a real, real emergency, like a significant emergency. We are the official source for information. And it's very important to have timely trusted information from one source that you can act on if you need to. So one of our goals, as well, as you know, we do a lot of interagency communication to make sure that we're working across the City to get out this one message that's actionable for people. And you only get that message if you're going to sign up. So you really need to have this as one of the tools in your preparedness kit, and make sure that you're ready to receive emergency communication.

Omar Bourne (16:12):

And how can people sign up for Notify NYC? I like to say, "If you don't know, now you know." So tell the people.

Rebecca Baudendistel (16:18):

Yeah, there's a lot of ways, basically, we try to be as customizable as we can. So you can sign up on Twitter, just follow us, you can go to NYC.gov/notifynyc and sign up for email, text message, phone call alerts. You can download our mobile app, which is my personal favorite. I think that that's a very useful tool, it's free, it's in the app store for either Google or Apple. Those are the main ways.

Omar Bourne (16:46):

And that's @NotifyNYC on Twitter, correct?

Rebecca Baudendistel (16:49):

Yes.

Allison Pennisi (16:50):

All right, we're talking to Becca Baudendistel. Rapid Response is up next, but first, here's a message from New York City Emergency Management.

Speaker 1 (17:00):

New Yorkers love to be the first to know. That's why the City of New York has Notify NYC. So you can be the first to know when an emergency happens. If there's a fire in your neighborhood or the weather takes a turn for the worst, stay informed with Notify NYC. Get the free app today for your Apple or Android device. You can also visit NYC.gov/notifynyc. Call 311, or follow Notify NYC on Twitter. Because a notified New Yorker is a prepared New Yorker.

Omar Bourne (17:41):

If you don't know, now you know. You're listening to "Prep Talk," the emergency management podcast. It's time for "Prep Talk" Rapid Response.

Allison Pennisi (17:57):

All right, 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. Okay, Becca, what is the one emergency item you cannot live without?

Rebecca Baudendistel (18:13):
Battery powered radio.

Omar Bourne (18:16):
Second question, the one thing you want listeners to know about personal preparedness.

Rebecca Baudendistel (18:21):
That it's continuous and has never really done. You have to always be upkeeping.

Allison Pennisi (18:27):
I like that. Last but not least, some of the work you do in one word?

Rebecca Baudendistel (18:31):
That's tough, but I'd have to go with "impactful."

Omar Bourne (18:37):
I think that's accurate, yeah.

Allison Pennisi (18:38):
Excellent. So if you live, you work in New York City, or even if you're coming to visit, you can stay informed by signing up for Notify NYC, visit nyc.gov/notifynyc. You could download the free mobile app or you can follow @NotifyNYC on Twitter.

Speaker 1 (18:59):
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.