Speaker 1:	00:07	Hello everyone, 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.
Speaker 1:	00:19	From the Emergency Management Department in the city that never sleeps, here are your hosts, Omar Bourne and Allison Pennisi.
Omar Bourne:	00:25	Hello everyone, thank you for listening. I'm Omar Bourne.
Allison Pennisi:	00:28	And I'm Allison Pennisi. Thank you for joining us. We want you to come back as often as you can, so feel free to add "Prep Talk" to your favorite RSS feed. You can also follow us on social media.
Omar Bourne:	00:38	This episode, we're looking at the Wireless Emergency Alert System, also known as WEA. We're going to be looking at what goes into issuing an emergency alert here in New York City along with an upcoming FCC vote on WEA enhancements.
Allison Pennisi:	00:51	That's right, Omar, we're going to be talking with Christine Maier, director of Watch Command here at New York City Emergency Management and later in the show we'll be speaking with Ben Krakauer, who serves as assistant commissioner for strategy and program development here at New York City Emergency Management.
Allison Pennisi:	01:06	Christine, we'll begin with you. Thank you first and foremost for being here, we really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us. Before we get into WEA, you're the director of Watch Command, can you describe to our listeners what that is?
Christine Maier:	01:19	Yeah and Allison and Omar, thanks so much for having me, it's an exciting opportunity. So Watch Command is the agency's 24-hour, 7-day-a-week unit. We are dedicated to monitoring everything going on in New York City, and sometimes events going on around the world. We look for large scale incidents and multi-agency incidents and when we find those we send out our citywide incident coordinators out in the field, they coordinate the agencies that are working on the incident and they'll send us back information about what's going on. Watch Command will serve as a clearing house for that information to distribute to our partners and also, most importantly, to the public and we do that using the notify NYC program and then Wireless Emergency Alert system, known as WEA.

Omar Bourne:	02:09	I'm glad that you mentioned WEA, for our listeners who may not know, what is a WEA, or a Wireless Emergency Alert and when is it used?
Christine Maier:	02:20	So a WEA message is a 90-character text message. It pings all cell phones in a specified area and we only use them for the most severe emergencies that might impact the public, generally life safety incidents.
Allison Pennisi:	02:35	Yeah, so Omar, when you run out of food at your desk, we're not issuing a WEA for that. Okay?
Omar Bourne:	02:41	That's good to know.
Allison Pennisi:	02:43	In case everybody needed to know, Omar gets hangry if he doesn't eat in a certain amount of time. Though full disclosure, I'm the same way.
Omar Bourne:	02:50	I'm not me when I'm hungry.
Allison Pennisi:	02:51	You're not you when you're hungry.
Christine Maier:	02:52	I'm not, either.
Allison Pennisi:	02:55	So Crissy, if I'm visiting New York City, obviously we have a lot of tourists who come into the city every single day, so I'm an out-of-towner, I'm walking around, would I receive an alert if I'm visiting? How does that work exactly?
Christine Maier:	03:08	No, that's one of the great things about WEA is that any cell phone that was manufactured 2012 or later, will receive the message.
Allison Pennisi:	03:15	So even if I'm from Nashville, Tennessee, I come to New York City, I'm in Times Square, I'm walking around with my family, something happens in New York, I'm going to get that message?
Christine Maier:	03:25	Absolutely and I'll tell you a funny story, last year a WEA message went out and I was with friends from the UK and they were wondering why their phones were all going off.
Allison Pennisi:	03:34	That's amazing.
Omar Bourne:	03:36	The power of the Wireless Emergency Alert. Now, with that power comes a number of steps taken here at New York City Emergency Management before we issue a WEA alert. From crafting the message, to approving it, to the mechanics behind

		issuing that message. Can you walk our listeners through the entire process?
Christine Maier:	03:55	Absolutely and this is something we take very seriously. Once an incident reaches the criteria for a potential WEA message, our public warning specialists will craft a message, they will send it out to our city wide incident coordinator in the field, who will work with the first responders in the field to approve that message. Make sure that message is correct and appropriate for the incident and they will send it back. That message will also be approved by one of our executives and as a last final step the Watch Command supervisor will go over that message and make sure that it is accurate before they hit send.
Omar Bourne:	04:34	So we have a number of people who are actually working together to make sure that this is the right message at the right time.
Christine Maier:	04:42	Absolutely and that final step where we have two people, I think is the most important part of it.
Allison Pennisi:	04:48	I think it's incredible. You think about it ... Crissy, you mentioned before, it's 90 characters and it goes through a chain of approval before it gets issued to the public. And speaking of which, everyone saw what happened with Hawaii with a message being sent to those who were residing on the island at the time, what do you say to people who may have lost confidence in the alerting system following this incident?
Christine Maier:	05:13	While what happened in Hawaii was unfortunate, there are thousands of messages that have been put out through WEA with no errors, so there should be a lot of confidence in the system. It's helped countless people avoid emergencies and that's what the goal of it is and that's what it's doing and will continue to do.
Allison Pennisi:	05:32	So how has WEA helped your role specifically in the City with emergency messaging.
Christine Maier:	05:38	Well, fortunately we've only had to use it a few times here in New York City, but it has allowed us to get a very important message out very quickly to a very specific area and we've had a lot of success and a lot of positive feedback from that.
Omar Bourne:	05:53	Wonderful, Chrissy, thank you for being with us. Any last words about the system and its impact on emergency communications?

Christine Maier:	06:03	Yeah, WEA has been a great system for us to use here at New York City, although we haven't used it frequently, fortunately not frequently, it is something that we can really get word out to the public and give them direction to help prevent a life safety incident.
Allison Pennisi:	06:20	Crissy, thank you so much. I think this has been incredibly insightful into how WEAs are issued here in New York City.
Omar Bourne:	06:27	Very effective process as well.
Allison Pennisi:	06:31	Absolutely, Ben Krakauer is also here with us today. I want to turn to you Ben, you have a wealth of knowledge about the WEA system, I know you've worked extensively with it. Can you talk about the number of times the City has issued WEA and what those events were?
Ben:	06:45	So in New York City alerts are generated by New York City Management, it's only been eight times since 2012.
Omar Bourne:	06:52	Okay.
Ben:	06:52	Three times were for Hurricane Sandy, twice for blizzards and three times in response to the 2016 Chelsea bombing.
Allison Pennisi:	07:02	So you mentioned the Chelsea bombing, which occurred back in 2016, and that incident, I'm sure most of our listeners remember, brought a great attention to the alerting system. And I think it was the first time in its history that a WEA was used to try to locate a terror suspect, is that correct?
Ben:	07:16	That is correct.
Allison Pennisi:	07:17	Wow, so the system had some limitations then and the FCC voted on some improvements shortly thereafter. What were those improvements exactly?
Ben:	07:25	So some of the major improvements that we've been advocating for before and after the Chelsea bombing are increasing the character count. Right now we're limited to 90 characters, but thanks to the FCCs action in 2019 that will go up to 360 characters. We were not able to include a link or a phone number in a WEA message previously, but again as of November 2017 we're now able to include links and phone numbers which is a big improvement.
Allison Pennisi:	07:57	Wow.

Omar Bourne:	07:57	Wonderful, I want to turn to the FCC and their upcoming vote that they have on January 30th. This vote is focused on geotargeting. I've read the draft report and in it is proposed to require WEA messages to be delivered to 100% of the devices in a specified target area. Limiting that overshoot to .1 mile radius. Can you break down this improvement for our listeners?
Ben:	08:25	Sure, so one of the things that public safety and emergency management organizations have been advocating for for years is what we call improved geotargeting.
Omar Bourne:	08:33	Okay.
Ben:	08:33	When WEA first came out, the carriers were only required by FCC rule to target messages to county level, so if you wanted to send a message to one block in Manhattan, you'd actually be sending that message to all of Manhattan.
Omar Bourne:	08:47	Okay.
Ben:	08:47	Now over the years the carriers voluntarily narrowed their ability to target messages, not just to entire boroughs, but down to a cell site. So one cell phone tower, which is great, but in New York City, there's tens, if not hundreds of thousands of people in the vicinity of these cell phone towers.
Omar Bourne:	09:04	Right.
Ben:	09:05	You have the potential and what concerned us very greatly in the emergency mass warning industry, is warning fatigue. People get messages that are not intended for them and they become annoyed and then they opt out of the system and then when you want to get a message targeted to them that they really need, they're not going to get it because they've opted out.
Omar Bourne:	09:23	Right.
Ben:	09:24	So the FCC rule strives to require carriers to target down to a very narrow area, a tenth of a mile overshoot, so just to put that in perspective that's 528 feet so the rule if its adopted, will allow messages to be targeted within 528 feet of the target area. Now, unfortunately the way the rule is crafted it does have us a little bit concerned. It's one of the things that we're talking to the commission about in the coming days prior to our vote.

Allison Pennisi:	09:55	Alright, the draft report also calls for WEA-capable devices to preserve an alert message for at least 24 hours after an alert is received on a device. And it also defines carrier participation as "in whole or in part," so why are those improvements important and what do they mean for someone who's receiving the alert?
Ben:	10:18	Sure so why don't we talk about alert preservation first and this is another item that we've been advocating for. So right now, today, it's up to the device manufacturer, there's no standard across devices, as to what happens to that WEA message after it appears on your screen and you view it. So if you dismiss it and then you want to go and find out what that WEA said, some phones you can do that, other phones that WEA message is gone and you can't have access to it.
Omar Bourne:	10:42	Right.
Ben:	10:43	And what we've been arguing and what the FCC is adopting with this proposed rule, is consumers may want to go back and see what we said. For example, in New York City, our coastal storm timeline ahead of an approaching hurricane, calls for an evacuating order 48 hours before the onset of tropical storm-force winds. So if we issue a WEA informing people that there's an evacuating order and we provide a link to the hurricane evacuation zone finder and so that's where people will go to find out their nearest evacuation center that they can evacuate to, they might not evacuate 48 hours before zero hour. They might wait until 24 hours, or 12 hours.
Allison Pennisi:	11:21	Wow.
Ben:	11:22	We want people to be able to go back and click on that link that we provided in the WEA message to make it easy for them. So just like your phone saves text messages and images and videos, we want the same thing for WEA messages and it looks like the FCC is going to adopt that.
Allison Pennisi:	11:36	I think it's really interesting because I do remember receiving WEA messages during Hurricane Sandy and also other incidents that we've mentioned earlier as well and I distinctly remember taking screenshots of them with my smart phone so I could preserve them. So not having to do that in the future will be really helpful because, especially if that incident is still ongoing and there isn't an update since the initial message was disseminated, at least that way I could still stay informed and I'd be confident to know what information has been put out there to the public.

Omar Bourne:	12:09	It's a great practical improvement.
Allison Pennisi:	12:11	Yup.
Ben:	12:11	It is, we're very happy with that particular proposal by the FCC.
Omar Bourne:	12:15	Now Ben, you and other public safety officials here in the city would like to see more enhancements approved and in a timelier fashion, and I know there was a letter that was written earlier in January 2018, to the FCC chairman in which it calls for improvements to multimedia alerts and it asks for an implementation requirement no later than May 2019. The multimedia alerts are currently excluded from the FCCs draft report for the upcoming vote on January 30th.
Ben:	12:54	Yeah, Omar, that's right, its probably one of the most disappointing elements of the draft report that the FCC posted a few weeks ago and that they'll vote on later this month. That multimedia alerts are not included. So when we issued that message that Alison talked about earlier during the Chelsea bombing, the wanted message for the suspected terrorist, rather than embedding an image of the suspect in the message, we actually had to write, "See media for pic."
Omar Bourne:	13:19	Right.
Ben:	13:20	And then after that incident was over we commissioned a survey and we talked to a lot of New Yorkers to find out how many of them actually went and looked for that image so that they could help law enforcement locate the suspect and bring his actions to an end. And less than half went ahead and did that.
Omar Bourne:	13:39	Wow.
Ben:	13:40	So by incorporating multimedia, we would be able to send out a picture of that wanted suspect. We'd be able to send out a picture of an abducted child. We'd be able to put out an infographic of what people can do after a terrorist attack and that would help us locate suspects, locate abducted children, it would also allow us to communicate better with those with limited English proficiency.
Omar Bourne:	14:03	Wonderful and do you think that with this push we might be able to see these improvements in the draft report for the upcoming vote?

Ben:	14:15	We're really hoping so. The FCC operates on a timeline. They post these draft reports three weeks before a vote, and one week before a vote they enter a sunshine period where they can ask for feedback but you can't approach the FCC while they deliberate. So we're right in the middle of that window right now and we're doing a lot of advocacy both in New York City, our partners across the country, a lot of the National organizations that represent Emergency Management Public Safety to encourage the commission to adopt additional enhancements including multimedia alerting.
Omar Bourne:	14:49	The main 2019 deadline requirement that was written about in this letter, do you see the FCC, or do you see the carriers being able to meet that deadline?
Ben:	15:02	The argument that we've been making is that in 2018 cell phones are very, very powerful tools.
Omar Bourne:	15:08	Very much so. Everyone has them.
Ben:	15:09	You go into every coffee shop, you stand on the subway platform, people are watching live sporting events, and they're watching full length movies, and they're live streaming video. But when it comes time to do an emergency alert, you're limited to 90 characters. We just got the ability to include a hyperlink, we can't send a picture, so our argument is that the technology exists for cell phones to receive and transmit imagery. We should be able to do the same thing with emergency alert.
Allison Pennisi:	15:37	Any last words about WEA and its impact on emergency communications?
Ben:	15:39	I think WEA overall has been one of the greatest enhancements to emergency mass notifications in decades. It puts the power of information in everybody's hand. It gives local government the ability to reach their entire population, or the vast majority of their population. In New York City, millions of people, millions of devices at the click of a button. We want people to stay opted into the system. We want people to follow the instructions that they receive by WEA, and lastly we want the FCC to make even further enhancements to the system.
Omar Bourne:	16:15	Wonderful, talking to Ben Krakauer of New York City Emergency Management Department, thank you very much Ben for spending some time to talk to us about the Wireless Emergency Alert System. We're going to hope to have you back with an

update after the January 30th vote but thank you very much for being here with us today.

Ben: 16:39   Thanks for having me.

Speaker 1:   16:41   That's this edition of "Prep Talk." If you like what you heard you can listen anytime online and through your favorite RSS feed. Until next time, stay safe and prepare.