

Announcer:

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.

Ashley Holmes:

Hello everyone. Thank you for listening. I'm Ashley Holmes.

Allison Pennisi:

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 @NYCEmergencyMGT, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and much more.

Ashley Holmes:

NYC Emergency Management recently welcomed Zach Iscol as its new commissioner. In this episode, we will be speaking with him about his path to emergency management, his goals as a leader of the agency and more.

Allison Pennisi:

Thank you for joining us, Commissioner Iscol. Let's get started. What sparked your interest in the field and how did you get started in the field of public service?

Zach Iscol:

Yeah. So first off, thank you guys for having me here. Thank you for what you do with this podcast. Before it was announced that I was coming aboard and even just through the interview process, my wife and I had a couple long drives with the family and the kids on holidays, over Christmas break, holiday break, and my whole family, we were tuned into the podcast, listening to it. It was fantastic. And what a great entree to all the great work and some of the great people here at New York City Emergency Management. So thank you for having me here.

So to answer your question, what sparked my interest in the field and how to get started in public service, for public service, I think it's something that's been core to my family for generations. My mom taught in the city, my aunt just retired after 40 something, maybe even more than 40 years at DOE, my cousin's a DOE teacher. My grandfather worked for the Department of Sanitation and I had a pretty strong military background in my family. My dad came from a Gold Star family. His uncle was killed in World War II. His dad, who was working at the Department of Sanitation, at the age of 41, volunteered to go off to Europe during World War II. So these are the stories that I grew up with. His stepfather, who was like my grandfather, had fought throughout Europe under Patton. So, I grew up with those stories and was always drawn to public service. I think it makes life meaningful when you're able to have an impact on other people.

It's one of the things I love about emergency management. For emergency management, I've been tangentially involved in and out of the military. I had an opportunity to go ashore in Haiti in 2010 after the earthquake. I actually met my wife volunteering in the wake of Hurricane Sandy out on the Rockaways. I had actually met her in September before. She was not interested in me when I first met

her. I know it's hard to believe that. I was helping run some of the efforts out on the Rockaways with a great organization called Team Rubicon, and my wife wanted to volunteer with her daughter, now our daughter, Eloise, who was six turning seven, and nobody would let anybody under the age of 18 volunteer anywhere in the disaster zones of Sandy, and Meredith really wanted to bring Eloise out. She called a friend who had introduced us. She said, "You should call Zach. He's out on the Rockaways." Meredith said, "I don't want to bother him." My friend said, "He's been asking about you every day for the last two or three months. You're not going to be bothering him."

So, she came out. I got a date out of it. So if you are involved in our cert program, if you are volunteering in emergency management, you might meet your significant other. It worked for me.

And then at the beginning of COVID, I had an opportunity to go into Javits Medical Center initially as a volunteer and ended up becoming the deputy director there. I think through all of those experiences, the thing I really fell in love with about emergency management is it's an area where you have strategic impacts in terms of policy. You are working with senior leadership and decision makers at 30,000 feet, but you also get to really feel the immediate impacts of your work at the most local and personal level. So at Javits, we were, within the same hour, we'd have a call with the White House, with the governor's office, with City Hall, but at the same time, you're down in the hospital beds meeting with the people who you were actually caring for, helping them make a phone call home to Honduras or El Salvador or elsewhere, and get in touch with their family members. And you really have that personal connection with the people that you're helping, and that more than anything really made me fall in love with this field.

Allison Pennisi:

Thank you for sharing that. In emergency management, we talk about the whole community approach to preparedness and frankly the entire disaster cycle. I've heard you say there is only we and not I, and that we're here to serve every New Yorker, whether they have been here for 20 years, whether they got here yesterday or they're coming tomorrow. Can you talk a little about the importance of building relationships within communities during what we call blue sky times or non-emergency times?

Zach Iscol:

Yeah, it's incredibly important. I mean, I think for one, government only works when it works together. I think when you are faced with a disaster as a civilian, somebody who's impacted by a disaster, and look, that could be a hurricane, it could be an earthquake, it could be being evacuated from a subway tunnel, like was done on Sunday. There was about 1000 people who got stuck on the 7 train, and the Fire Department, MTA, us, we worked to get them out. When you are affected and you are looking for government to help, you don't see, oh, that's the federal government, that's the state government, this is the city government, this is the local government. It's all the same to you. You're just looking for people to help. I think for us, what I've seen throughout my career is those partnerships are incredibly, incredibly important.

Just to give some examples. I mean, even my work in the private sector, I founded a nonprofit called the Headstrong Project that's now one of the largest providers of mental health for veterans in the US. And President Obama, I think it was probably around 2010, maybe 2011, made a commitment to end veteran homelessness. And in doing so, he established that, okay, the Department of Veterans Affairs was going to be the lead agency, but the Department of Labor is going to help with jobs. Department of Education is going to help with education. HUD is going to help with housing. And really created a whole of government approach to this. But also he engaged the private sector to work with organizations like Headstrong to provide mental health and other services. You saw a massive reduction

in veteran homelessness from, I think it was like 200, 300,000 homeless veterans in the US down to less than 30,000. It was really about that whole of government approach and engaging with the private sector.

I think similarly for us in blue sky times, you don't want the first moment that you're working with somebody, whether it's another agency, whether it's a private sector partner, whether it's a community group, to be in the middle of a disaster. You want to have that relationship ahead of time. I think for us here, we're always looking for those opportunities to reach out and build those relationships when the skies are blue and not gray.

Allison Pennisi:

Yeah. You don't want to exchange business cards in the middle of a disaster. That's an excellent point. Thank you.

Ashley Holmes:

How have your previous experiences as a leader in the military and the nonprofit sector shaped your leadership approach?

Zach Iscol:

So, I'm coming right now, earlier today, I had a meeting with David Banks, the Schools Chancellor, and we were talking about his father. His father was an NYPD officer, I think one of the first black chiefs in the NYPD, and had actually been a mentor to Eric Adams, our current mayor. I was talking to Chancellor Banks a little bit about just the importance of mentorship. I have been incredibly lucky throughout my career to have remarkable mentors, whether it was my battalion commander, Colonel Willie Buell. Colonel Buell really, to this day, and I served under his command, I mean, 16, 17 years ago, to this day, Colonel Buell will call me and he'll say, "How's Elvarado doing? How's Hennessy doing? How's Martinez doing?" He's checking in on guys that I was responsible for, Marines I was responsible for 17 years ago, but that responsibility to take care of your people, in Colonel Buell's world, it doesn't end when you take off the uniform. It doesn't end when you relinquish command.

I think more than anything, what I've learned from a lot of my mentors is that you take care of your people. And that is the number one job of a leader, is that you take care of them and they take care of the mission. I had another mentor in the Marine Corps, a guy named captain John Maloney, who was killed in Iraq in 2005 and left behind a wife and two really remarkable young kids who are now in college. They're thriving and it's a real credit to his wife and the work she has done since losing John. But John was somebody who encouraged all of us lieutenants. He actually was one of my instructors at the Marine Corps infantry officer course, and it's a moment I will never forget in my career.

We'd gone through this really, really difficult exercise. Hadn't eaten or slept in days. He thought this was a moment for a teachable moment. So he called all of us in. He had us school circle around him. We're waiting for the trucks to bring us back to the barracks. He said, "I just have a simple question for you all. What's more important? Your mission, your Marines?" This was the summer of 2002. All of us knew we were about to be leading Marines in combat. All of us knew that we'd be faced with that decision as to whether we were going to risk our Marines lives for a mission. And we debated. Some of us thought that the mission was always paramount. Some of us thought, sometimes you're given a mission that's not that important. One of us then asked him, and he said, "I think you take care of your Marines and they take care of the mission." And I think that more than anything is fundamental to my leadership approach.

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Really, you want to make sure the people that you're working with have the resources they need, that you're clear in what the mission is that you need them to accomplish, but that you have to make sure that you are supporting them so that they can do the best work of their careers. And that's my hope here at NYCEM. I hope that the people that are here right now can look back at their time at New York City Emergency Management and said, "Yep, that was the time in my career where I did the best work of my career, the most meaningful work of my career."

Ashley Holmes:

Thank you commissioner for that. That's very important that you mentioned mentorship because that's very important in all facets of life, whether your personal or professional life. Mentorship's very important. Thank you for that. What are you looking forward to the most here at NYC Emergency Management?

Zach Iscol:

So, working with the great people here. I mean, it really is. The people that I've met at New York City Emergency Management are simply remarkable. These are people who are on 24/7. They are driven by a commitment to public service and serving others. They put other people first. I'm really looking forward to building those relationships, to investing in the culture here, to having conversations about leadership and management and about the work that we do here, and that, more than anything, is what I'm most looking forward to.

Ashley Holmes:

What do you want our listeners to know about you?

Zach Iscol:

God, I don't have such a good answer to this one. What do I want listeners to know about me? More than anything else, I'm a husband and a father, that I care deeply about New York and New Yorkers. I think, look, I know Ashley, you're from Boston and we'll forgive you for that. But few places matter more in the arc of human history than New York City. What happens here just doesn't happen anywhere else. The numbers of languages spoken, just what takes place here on a daily basis. I think it's important as those of us that serve New Yorkers and that are custodians of that, that we take that seriously and that it's really humbling to get to be a part of this city and get to serve the city.

Ashley Holmes:

Awesome.

Allison Pennisi:

Yep.

Ashley Holmes:

Thank you. Go Patriots.

Allison Pennisi:

So the Big Apple, the city that never sleeps, but the ultimate question, what keeps you up at night? And your kids is an unacceptable answer, but I don't know if your wife would be too happy with that answer.

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Zach Iscol:

It is my kids. It is 100% my kids is what keeps me up at night.

Allison Pennisi:

Fair enough. Fair enough. Speaking with Commissioner Zach Iscol, the new commissioner here at New York City Emergency Management. It is rapid response time. If you are a first time listener, it's simple. Prep Talk 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.

Speaker 5:

New York City needs your help to make our community safer, stronger, and better prepared. Support your community by getting involved in the NYC Emergency Management Share Your Space survey. Do you manage or own a facility in NYC with a large interior room, like a community center, a place of worship or a campus facility? These can be used for outreach, for training, as a gathering space in an emergency, or as a disaster recovery center for your community. Community spaces can be used as a resource before, during and after an emergency organization. Organizations citywide are encouraged to participate. Go to nyc.gov/shareyourspace survey. There, you can register your space. By working together, we can build resilient communities one space at a time. Learn more at nyc.gov/shareyourspace survey or call 311.

Speaker 6:

It's time for Prep Talk rapid response.

Allison Pennisi:

We are back with rapid response with Commissioner Zach Iscol. Commissioner, first question. What is one emergency item you cannot live without?

Zach Iscol:

The team here at New York City Emergency Management.

Allison Pennisi:

A first, and I will accept it.

Zach Iscol:

I will say, if it's accepted. If it's not, I was going to go with a Woobie, which is, I don't know if you guys know what a Woobie is, but in the military, you have a poncho liner, which is probably the most comfortable blanket of all time. And for veterans, for service members, it's like a security blanket. It's like a little kid's blanket, but it is comfortable, it's warm. So I'll take New York City Emergency Management team if you'll take it. Otherwise, I'm going to go with a Woobie.

Allison Pennisi:

Works for me.

Ashley Holmes:

What is the best professional advice you have received?

Zach Iscol:

So, I have been, as I mentioned earlier, I've been very fortunate in terms of the mentors I've had in my career. When I was a kid, my dad and I were getting ready to go on a camping trip in the Adirondacks. My dad was tough, to say the least. He was a hard guy, born and raised in Queens. And we had a packing list. So we were going through the packing list for this hiking trip in the Adirondacks. I was probably in like second or third grade and I couldn't wait to go with my dad. We're going through the list and checking off everything. Then we get to my Swiss Army Knife and I'd lost it.

My dad put me in the car. We drove to the sporting good store and he immediately bought me a new Swiss Army Knife. This was completely unlike him. He handed it to me and he said, "I want you to know that every man, everyone deserves a second chance. I'm never going to buy you another Swiss Army Knife for as long as you live, but I don't want you to forget this lesson." And I think for me, when I think about professional advice, what I would want people to know is it's okay to make mistakes. It's not okay to not learn from them. It's not okay to repeat them, but it's 100% okay to make those mistakes and that giving people second chances, sometimes you get the best out of people.

Ashley Holmes:

Absolutely. And my favorite question, what is on your playlist?

Zach Iscol:

Oh God, I'm embarrassed to admit. So I'm listening to some great books on tape, but in terms of music, I work out to the Les Mis soundtrack.

Allison Pennisi:

My kids listen to Hamilton on repeat, so that's perfectly fine.

Ashley Holmes:

Oh, really? I was like, okay.

Zach Iscol:

Ashley's judging now. Ashley is definitely judging.

Ashley Holmes:

No, absolutely not.

Zach Iscol:

What's on your playlist, Ashley?

Ashley Holmes:

I have a bunch of random songs. I'm not [inaudible 00:17:50].

Zach Iscol:

You should give the Les Mis original London cast soundtrack a try. It's pretty remarkable.

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Ashley Holmes:

Okay. Okay. I'll give it a shot. I will, I will.

Zach Iscol:

Let me know what you think.

Ashley Holmes:

Okay. I will do. Will do.

Allison Pennisi:

We'll figure out the hype song before the next activation. Last but not least, sum up the work you do in one word.

Zach Iscol:

Incredibly meaningful.

Allison Pennisi:

I will take it. It's more than one word, but we will take it. Speaking with New York City Emergency Management Commissioner Zach Iscol. Thank you for your time. For those interested in learning more about Commissioner Iscol and the New York City Emergency Management team, you can visit us online at nyc.gov/emergencymanagement, or listen to any of our Prep Talk or Preparate episodes. Take care. We'll see you next time.

Ashley Holmes:

Thank you, commissioner.

Zach Iscol:

Thank you all so much.

Announcer:

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.