

# Inside Citywide Podcast Transcript Episode 11

Michael Santos

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Nick Benson

Welcome to Inside Citywide. I'm Nick Benson. I'm the executive director of communications and public affairs at D C A S. And I'm joined, as always, by my colleague Belinda French.

Belinda French

Hi, I'm Belinda French, and I'm the diversity and EEO officer for DCAS.

Nick Benson

Today, we're joined by FDNY Commissioner Laura Kavanagh. As the head of the department, Commissioner Kavanagh oversees the day-to-day administration of the agency's 17,000 employees and \$2 billion budget. Since joining FDNY in 2014, she's been a key leader in the agency's response to major incidents, including the Ebola outbreak in 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic. As commissioner, she spearheaded key public policy initiatives for the department, including directing a recruitment campaign that yielded the most diverse applicant pool in the department's history, including graduating the largest and most diverse group of women in almost three decades.

Nick Benson

Prior to her time in city government, Commissioner Kavanagh worked in a variety of roles in management and campaign consulting for nonprofits, community-based organizations, and unions. She held senior roles on presidential, mayoral, congressional and local campaigns. Commissioner Kavanagh has a B.A. in Political Science and international relations from Whittier College and a master's degree in public administration from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.

Nick Benson

I'm pleased to welcome FDNY Commissioner Laura Kavanagh. Thank you for joining us, Commissioner.

Laura Kavanagh

Thanks for having me.

Nick Benson

In addition to giving listeners a behind the scenes look at city government, we also strive to let listeners get a better sense of senior leaders in city government. So, tell us a little bit about your upbringing and the formative years that helped make you the person you are today.

Laura Kavanagh

Sure. Thanks for having me. I do think that, you know, my upbringing was very maybe different than some others. I grew up in a lot of different places. While I was born in San Francisco, my parents were from Chicago and Flint, Michigan, respectively. And I come from a long line of people who pick up and move to other places and make their home elsewhere.

Laura Kavanagh

So the first time I ever told my parents I was moving to New York, I was five years old, and I never lost sight of the fact that for me that was where home was going to be. And I got a one-way ticket as soon as I could pull together the money as a young adult and came to New York.

Laura Kavanagh

And never, never went back. New York is home for me. And that's following in a long family tradition of doing that. So, I think that's obviously having chosen New York for me is very, I think, significant in my, you know, the way I think about public service. I feel like New York is the love of my life. I chose it.

Laura Kavanagh

I'm very passionate about what a wonderful place it is and how I can serve it. So, I think that's definitely a formative piece for me. I'd also say that, you know, both of my parents were involved in their unions when they were working. My mom was a teacher. My dad worked for the phone company, and my mom had grown up in Flint, Michigan, where I saw firsthand.

Laura Kavanagh

I spent most of my summers there as a kid. I saw firsthand what happens when good union jobs are decimated in a community and the impact that that has. I saw it in my own family, and I saw it in the town of Flint, where I had spent so much time. And so, I think that's also a very formative experience for me as a leader, especially in a union town and in an agency that has such strong unions, is that that's a really critical piece of what we do.

Laura Kavanagh

And really one of the things that makes New York great is that it is still a place that you can get a union job where you can raise a family on what you make. So those two things are, I think, very formative for me in my current role or just in serving government in general.

Nick Benson

And you worked in labor, right, as part of your career?

Laura Kavanagh

Yeah, I, I spent many years working in grassroots organizing, consulting, and some of the folks that I worked for, either for or with both scenarios were labor unions. So, you know whether it was helping, think of a strategy for them to achieve a strategic goal or they were working alongside an administration or a candidate to try to achieve something for their union.

Laura Kavanagh

I spent most of my life going from my parents to my career to this job working alongside unions in the work I've done.

Nick Benson

And I have a similar experience. I grew up in Ohio, so also the industrial Midwest and have seen the way communities have been decimated by outsourcing. And actually, my dad was a third-generation union firefighter. So, I certainly appreciate all the work of FDNY as well. So, you know, I know how that leaves an impression, seeing how the outsourcing of jobs and the gutting of unions can be really impactful.

Nick Benson

So certainly, I understand that.

Laura Kavanagh

Yeah, absolutely.

Belinda French

I'd love to hear a little bit more. I, I could not imagine that at five years old, I would tell my parents, like, I want to move to New York or New York City. And I'd love to hear a little bit more about why you chose New York in particular. What spoke to you about the city.

Laura Kavanagh

Yeah, So I think it was a few things. And I will say I was I think it's somewhat maybe as my mom has described to me, I didn't have a lot of things I felt strongly about when I was young, but I had a few things that I felt very strongly about, and that was one of them that I would not relent on is the way she would put it.

Laura Kavanagh

And, you know, for me, I think what it was, you know, one, having gotten to live so many places throughout my life, I one had a good sense of the sort of like the field, right. I had family. We had family all over the country. We have family all over the world. I lived for brief periods in a number of other cities when I was doing my work.

Laura Kavanagh

And so, I think one, you know, I really understood kind of what was out there and thought, you know, made the assessment about New York is the best of the best. And while that might be biased, I still believe it to be true. I also would say that for me, it was like the frenetic pace of the city. And that's what I still love.

Laura Kavanagh

Like New York is so alive. There are 100 worlds in New York City at any given time, right? You can walk through. I'm also a runner. So, like when you run the marathon, you run from neighborhood to neighborhood, and you really could be in any other place. You'd be running from state to state or country to country.

Laura Kavanagh

And how different the neighborhoods can be. And I really love that. And then I'd also say that because of its density, I often say that New York is the world's largest small town. And I still feel that way, which is, you know, it's big and it's vibrant and it's energetic, but it's not too big, you know? I actually feel like each one of those neighborhoods is a is a small, tight knit community in and of itself.

Laura Kavanagh

And because I've had, like the good fortune of having worked all over the city because of my work on campaigns is that, you know, I really for the most part, I've lived in all five boroughs. I've really gotten an opportunity to spend real time in most of those neighborhoods, you know, whether it's going to the local diner or visiting the local shops, getting to know the local community leaders, you know, sort of the people who are the mayors of their block, as we often say.

Laura Kavanagh

I really love that New York can be both so big and so personal at the same time and that we're very interdependent on one another. You know, New York is too dense of a place to not depend on your neighbors. And I. I love that. I know. You know, that might be some people's frustrations with New York, right?

Laura Kavanagh

Is that you're on top of one another all the time. And I actually think that's a great thing. I think that's where, like real community is built.

Belinda French

Oh, absolutely. And I can't agree more. There's been so many times that I myself have thought like, hmm, said, let me visit other places and see if I want to move away from New York. But I always miss New York so much. So, I totally understand what you're saying.

Nick Benson

So, Commissioner, you've been involved in public service in a number of different capacities throughout your career. What inspired this interest? Was there a role model or an event or an issue that really motivated you to get involved in public service?

Laura Kavanagh

So, I definitely think it's my upbringing. You know, as I mentioned before, both my parents were in, you know, public service of some kind, whether it was their work or the advocacy they did around their work. And they're both very passionate about public service, about giving back, about making a difference. I never, ever thought of my career as something where you would maximize pay.

Laura Kavanagh

Career was always framed to me as a way to maximize impact, to do good in the world. And so, you know, whether I don't know if my parents meant to do that, it's certainly who they are and is the type of person they raised. And I think that's very true in my wider family as well, is there's just a lot of conversation about doing good and not, you know, not on any specific side of the political spectrum.

Laura Kavanagh

It's about helping your neighbors, helping people around you or helping your community. And so, I was you know, I come from a very large diverse in in all sorts of ways background and sort of outlook in what they do and political leanings. But we've all had a connective tissue and we're very close, which is, you know, are you doing the right thing?

Laura Kavanagh

Are you taking care of your neighbors or taking care of your family or you're taking care of your community? And I think that is really shaped me. You know, I never considered a career actually in anything else.

Nick Benson

And that's fantastic. Well, you're definitely living out that mission. And we certainly appreciate your service. You're doing a great job.

Laura Kavanagh

Thanks.

Belinda French

So, you know, you've talked already about your diversity of experience from nonprofit to working on political campaigns, the labor movement, policy roles in government. I want to get to FDNY. Right. So, you started at FDNY in 2014. So, if you can go back to that time, tell us about your arrival, and if there was anything that surprised you once you joined FDNY.

Laura Kavanagh

You know, I think there's a lot that has surprised me about the fire department in a good way. It's everybody knows it's a community and knows it's a family. It is far more those things and so much greater depth than I ever could have imagined from the outside. It really has meaningfully changed my life. I can say unequivocally, you know, there was just like there is a commitment to one's brothers and sisters and to one's family.

Laura Kavanagh

Whether that family is your biological family, your fire or EMS family or the community writ large, that really has become ingrained in me. You know, they're really, they're there for one another in thick and thin. And I think that's because they have such a raw sense of how fleeting life can be. Right. So, I'd also I'd say in moments of happiness, they celebrate those moments far more than I ever did before.

Laura Kavanagh

And that has shaped me to just stop and enjoy those moments. And that's because they also know that there are moments of tragedy, because they face that so often. And they also come together in those moments, and they show up for one another. Or, you know, it's not just when we lose someone who's part of our fire department family, but when one of them loses a member of their family, the expectation is we all show up and support them.

Laura Kavanagh

And so, I'd say, you know, there's so much more depth to their commitment than I could have understood before I got there. It has certainly shaped me. And, you know, I think the other thing I'd say is it was not my intention to be here running the agency. I never could have imagined that. But I think that that journey for me has been about, you know, I've always been someone who is very good at I managed things, solving problems, you know, finding a way to move a strategic plan forward.

Laura Kavanagh

And what I realized when I got there, I come over to implement a couple of projects and I thought, okay, they need this from me, but then I'll be done, and they probably won't need anything else. But what I found once I was there is there was a need for someone with my experience, you know, of advocating for budgets, for implementing technology projects more than I could have imagined.

Laura Kavanagh

So, you know, where I might have thought, you know, obviously I'm not a firefighter. I think people know that that, you know, maybe my impact could be limited. What I actually found is that because they have so much extraordinary experience in responding to emergencies, what they leaned on me for was the things I had grown and done throughout my career and things I was really strong at, like, you know, drawing more money, drawing support, implementing new projects, upgrading technology.

Laura Kavanagh

And so, it really sorts of moved forward, I would say, slowly from there, where one project became two and two became five and five became 10, I still never could have imagined I'd end up here. But you know that that's the way I continue to think of my job is, you know, how do I go to the rest of the world and say, here is what the members of the New York City Fire Department need and how do I get it?

Belinda French

Absolutely.

Nick Benson

So, over the next eight years or so since you've been at FDNY, you continue to find great success at the agency becoming a deputy commissioner and then first deputy commissioner. And then in February 2022, you became the acting commissioner when Commissioner Daniel Nigro retired. What was it like in that moment when you assumed that awesome responsibility, the responsibility of overseeing more than 17,000 employees and the safety really, of all New Yorkers?

Laura Kavanagh

Yeah, you know, I didn't really have time to think about it. I don't know if you guys know this, but 5 minutes after Dan retired, we lost Jesse Gerhard in the line of duty. And so, I spent my first 24 hours as commissioner at the hospital with his family and with them and then with the mayor at City Hall discussing the loss.

Laura Kavanagh

And then the next day, which was, I think definitely not known because it wasn't public, but the next day someone who had been my aide for many years was a firefighter, also lost a long-term struggle, a medical struggle, and passed away the next day. And so, I actually spent my first two days as commissioner, first at the hospital with a line of duty family, and then at a hospital with a firefighter who had worked for me for many years, who was a friend, a very close friend.

Laura Kavanagh

And so, you know, I think that obviously those things are heartbreaking. You know, I still think about them and everyone we've lost every day. I also think it meant I never really stopped to think about taking on the job because the moment I had it, I was in not only the middle of it, but I think the moment that those commissioner and senior staff are most needed, which is to be there for a family on their worst day, and while there's nothing you can do to make it better, you certainly want to do everything you can to support them and their firehouse family.

Laura Kavanagh

And that's where I spent my first 48 hours. So certainly, think a lot about the job. You know, I care so much about our members. I care so much about the work. I spend 24 hours a day thinking about. It definitely wakes me up in the middle of the night. But the moment that I stepped into the role, I didn't have time to think about what it meant.

Laura Kavanagh

I just went to work. And so, I think that, you know, is sort of a significant entry into a job. Was, you know, just to do the work from the moment you were appointed.

Nick Benson

And I'm sure that's true of so many members of the department. You know, they rely on their training and so much of it, I'm sure, is muscle memory that they just have to react and move and rely on the experience they have. There's no time to think about it. You just have to go for it.

Laura Kavanagh

Yeah, exactly. I mean, they're the most inspiring people of all. You know, any time I stop and think like, oh, this is a tough day, or, you know, I'm frustrated with a certain decision, all I have to do is, is visit a station or firehouse or to think about our members. You know, they're doing the hard work, they're putting their lives on the line.

Laura Kavanagh

And that's a very grounding thing as a leader.

Belinda French

I wanted to ask you; you've already mentioned some difficult challenges that you've faced in the first 48 hours of becoming an acting the acting commissioner. Are there any other difficult challenges that you can recall from that time and how you faced them and handled them?

Laura Kavanagh

Yeah, I think what's difficult for any city leader, especially one leading an agency where their members are front and center every day doing really difficult work is just trying to get it all done in a day. You know, I always want to do more in a day than I have time for. I always want to spend more time talking to people.

Laura Kavanagh

You know, I think communication is really important, but there's real constraints on your time when you're trying to run an agency, run a staff, you know, speak to external stakeholders, talk to the press about emerging threats like e-bikes, need batteries, as I've been talking about over the last week. So, I think that's the biggest challenge for every leader, is how to figure out how to make a tough time, you know, how to decide what isn't going to get done in a day and accept that.

Laura Kavanagh

I don't know if I ever accept it, but also to find enough time to be able to communicate consistently with everyone around you. I think that's really what people need out of their leaders. It's what a leader needs in order to succeed to do change management. And there's really just never enough time to do it.

Belinda French

Understood.

Nick Benson

So that was a little bit about when you became the acting commissioner. But in October 2022, Mayor Adams appointed you as the 34th FDNY Commissioner, and you're the first woman to hold this position in the department's 157-year history. I watched your ceremony and that was held, and it was absolutely beautiful. Your mother was there and held the Bible, that you took your oath on that, and I understand belonged to your grandmother.

Nick Benson

You were also surrounded by so many other women leaders across this administration. All of our deputy mayors are currently women. What was that moment like for you? First, just stepping into this incredible position of responsibility, but also knowing that you were making history in the process.

Laura Kavanagh

You know, I would just say that I focus on the work, and I don't say that to avoid the question. I think just the history kind of moment here is just not fully sunk in yet. And I think I'd say it's also; I think for me important to just focus on the work. I think that's how I do it best.

Laura Kavanagh

Maybe it's also how I manage thinking about this moment, but I really have not fully absorbed it. I would say one thing, which is that, you know, that particular moment, having my mom there with my grandmother's Bible and having all of those women in the administration next to me was very, very representative of my life. I have long been surrounded by strong women who, you know, were by my side through thick and thin, you know, who believed in me and helped me and coached me and vice versa.

Laura Kavanagh

And I really believe that it takes a community to achieve something like this. I don't believe you know, of course, the moment you step into the position, people say, you know, you're the first, you're the one who broke the ceiling. But the reality is a lot of other people got you there, not just the people around you, but also all the women who've come before and have paved really difficult ground, all the other firsts.

Laura Kavanagh

You know, we just honored the first black FDNY commissioner a couple of days ago. And like all of those firsts are what helps me get here. And that community of people around me is what has gotten me here and will keep me honest to being a good commissioner. And so that was really notable to me that to have that whole community just really felt like very representative of my life.

Laura Kavanagh

And the way that I think about leading, you know, what that means being the first woman is not necessarily an answer I have yet. But what I'd say is that if it means something to someone else, that's enough for me.

Nick Benson

Yeah, I know. For me, when I see some of these firsts that happen, including your situation, it's not just about that person being the first one to do it, but it's really a reflection that merit has won out in a way that maybe it hadn't always in different situations that, you know, it's not that in 157 years that there wasn't another, you know, woman who was qualified for this kind of position.

Nick Benson

So, to me, it's really satisfying that it's a reflection that the door is open and that the best, you know, person for the job can get the job regardless of their background. So, I think it's a really proud moment for all New Yorkers.

Laura Kavanagh

You know, I think it's also a real credit to our mayor. It is easier to talk about firsts than it is to do it. It's not always easy to make a first. It's not always easy for people to see that change. And often they push back. And so, I think I'd give a lot of credit to our mayor for really making true on that promise, not just in the fire department, but in a lot of different places in the city.

Belinda French

So, Commissioner, I, I really want to tell you that I appreciate your humility, but as a woman, I got to tell you, your representation, I am so inspired and so I know it has not sunk in for you yet, but it's sunk in for me and for many. So, I just want to I just want to mention that and let you know that you're appreciated. And so, you know, and so with that as commissioner, you know, what are some of your I would say your top priorities for the department? I know one priority that our agencies are working on together is really building a diverse workforce that reflects the communities that we serve. So, can you tell us a little bit about that and your other goals and priorities?

Laura Kavanagh

Yeah. So, as you mentioned, we've collaborated for years on our recruitment campaigns and to make the ranks more diverse. And so that will definitely continue. I think it's a great thing. You know, your commissioner and myself have been working together for years. I think that's really essential for getting great things done. And so, I'm really excited to keep working with you guys on our diversity efforts.

Laura Kavanagh

I'd also say the safety of our members is always a top goal. You know, they already do very dangerous jobs. In many ways, those jobs are getting more dangerous as the city gets more complex, but new technology is also available that can help give them greater situational awareness and can potentially protect them in emergencies. And so, we're really, we're rolling out a lot of that technology and looking into a lot of other things.

Laura Kavanagh

And in the hopes of being able to make a dangerous job as safe as it can be. And then I'd say, you know, innovation more broadly, you know, bringing tools and technology and tactics and strategies to the agency that can really help it be ready for 2023 and beyond. You know, really looking at what will the city be in 20 years, in 10 years, and what are we going to need to meet that mission?

Laura Kavanagh

You know, what tools or resources can we be working towards now, anticipating what the city will look like and what challenges our members will confront? I think those are some of the big things. As I said, I always want to do a lot, but those are my top, top goals right now.

Nick Benson

So, this may dovetail a little bit. When people think of the FDNY, they obviously think of the emergency response efforts, but maybe not so much the department's efforts to prevent fires and to educate the public. What are some of those efforts that are underway and what tips would you give to listeners to keep safe? And I know you mentioned specifically e-bikes is a major issue, so maybe you can speak to that as well.

Laura Kavanagh

Yeah, I you know, we are as dedicated to preventing these emergencies as we are to responding to them. And so, our fire companies and our EMS units and then different units that are specifically dedicated to both fire and life safety education are out in the city, in the five boroughs all the time. They go to local schools, they go to senior centers, they go to community events and try to help educate everybody from zero through 90 about how to keep themselves safe, how to do CPR on a family member, how to call

911, how to plan for an emergency or a fire in your home, and how to prevent fires from occurring.

Laura Kavanagh

So that's a 365 day a year effort. Right now. We are very focused on e-bikes and those have emerged as a new danger, in particular, while we are working with the federal, state and city legislators to regulate these devices because they do need to be better regulated. But at the same time, we know that they're already in people's homes and we know that people rely on them for work.

Laura Kavanagh

And so, we're also trying to target communities where people already have these in those homes and encourage them to use them as safely as possible to make sure that they're not a victim of one of these e-bike fires. You know, the two things there are really for people to not charge them when they're not being monitored and also to not charge them in a location where they won't be able to get out of their apartment if that bike were to catch on fire.

Belinda French

Okay. So, before we wrap up our conversation, we always like to give listeners a better sense of our guests as a person. Now, I know you probably have very little free time, but what do you enjoy outside of work?

Laura Kavanagh

So, I love to cook. I have that in common with the FDNY, and so I have Sunday dinner most weeks at my home. Like you say, you know, I don't have a lot of free time. My friends also know at this point in my life that I might have to run at any given point. So now Sunday dinner is a little more collaborative than just me cooking, which it used to be, but I still do it.

Laura Kavanagh

I think having those moments with your friends and family are really important. I think they're even more important the busier you get. You know, you need to have that moment where you give yourself a break, but also that people that care about you can

be honest with you about how you're doing. And so, I do that regularly. I'm also a runner, so I do run quite a bit and I'm a very passionate reader.

Laura Kavanagh

Reading is probably my favorite thing in the whole world. I read a lot. I read fire department books, I read fiction or nonfiction. I'm always trying to start book clubs, even though I don't have the time to be in them. So, reading as long since I was very young has long been a passion of mine. And it remains so.

Nick Benson

What's the best thing you cook?

Laura Kavanagh

Oh, I don't know if there's a best thing. I mean, I'd say, you know, my grandmother did quite a bit of cooking with me when I was young. She's Italian, so I, you know, I can do with a pasta pretty easily, but I'd actually say my cooking is pretty diverse. I have dishes from like sort of the whole spectrum.

Laura Kavanagh

Also I'm a vegetarian. I have people who come over who eat meat or vegan gluten free, so I can kind of take a dish and make it for different ways. And I do a lot of that when I'm when I'm hosting.

Nick Benson

I'm very jealous of that. I have no skills when it comes to cooking.

Laura Kavanagh

So, I'll work on you, I'll give you a cooking class.

Nick Benson

I could use a lot of help. So, you've held a variety of different jobs in your career, as we've discussed, but what was your first job? Did you have a part time job in high school or college? And what did you learn from that experience?

Laura Kavanagh

Oh, yeah. I always worked. Probably the first money I ever made was I would like do all the pet sitting for my neighborhood and also like walk people's dogs for them. I don't know if we consider that an official role, but as soon as I could, I started working and then I was like a waitress in a coffee shop all throughout high school and then some in college.

Laura Kavanagh

So yeah, I've always worked from the point I, you know, legally could.

Nick Benson

And being a server working in the service sector has to be one of the toughest jobs. What was that experience like? I'm sure you had lots of frustrating situations, not getting paid what you had hoped. What was that like? What did you learn from that experience?

Laura Kavanagh

Yeah, I mean, well, I mean, I should point out that I was a teenager. And so even though I'm sure there's very much underpaid, I don't think I thought I could say anything about that. You know, I would take what I would get at that age. But I would say that, you know, it is a very frustrating service.

Laura Kavanagh

Jobs are very hard, but I'd actually say I liked it. I've always liked to work, actually. My parents often would yell at me because I would try to work. I try to go to work instead of going to school. So even when that job was frustrating, I always just really enjoyed getting out there, being able to like, talk to people.

Laura Kavanagh

There's a lot of talking to people in the service job, especially at the times it's most difficult, you know, you really have to try to charm your grumpy guests. And I liked that challenge for some reason. So, you know, it is hard, the long hours. People are often not particularly nice, but I always enjoyed working, probably helped make me a better cook, too.

Laura Kavanagh

I also made a lot of coffee drinks while I was there, so I became a pretty good barista at the same time, I became a pretty good waitress. So, you know, I think I learned some good life skills. And I think that having a hard not glamorous jobs is not a bad thing. It makes you appreciate what you achieve later in life.

Nick Benson

Absolutely.

Belinda French

So, one final question for you. What is the best compliment that you've ever received?

Laura Kavanagh

So, someone once said to me that even people who disagree with you, could never say or have never said that you don't care about the work and that you don't work hard. And that, I thought, was the kind of thing anyone could say to me, because people are going to disagree, of course, and you should have healthy disagreement in, you know, in a job that matters a lot and if people have strong feelings about it.

Laura Kavanagh

But I do my best and we're all human. We all have our moments of frustration. But I do my best to always be open minded, always willing to listen to people, always willing to do the work, you know, to actually learn about something before I form an opinion, to actually go out and spend time with someone before I decide how I feel about a particular problem set.

Laura Kavanagh

And so, to me it was a real compliment that for the most part I've been able to do that. I've been able to be a professional and really show my dedication to the work, even with those people that I might be, you know, sitting across the table disagreeing with. So I think that's the nicest thing anybody has ever said.

Belinda French

That that is definitely a good one. Commissioner, we've really, really enjoyed today's conversation with you and appreciate you taking the time to join us. Thank you so much.

Nick Benson

Thank you.

Laura Kavanagh

Thank you, guys. This was great. Talk to you soon.

Michael Santos

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