

Speaker 1: [00:00](#) 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.

Bushra Mollick: [00:27](#) Hello everyone, thank you for listening. I'm Bushra Mollick.

R. Sulaymanov: [00:30](#) And I'm Rachel Sulaymanov.

Bushra Mollick: [00:32](#) Welcome Rachel. For our listeners, Rachel is the executive director for intergovernmental affairs at New York City Emergency Management. Allison Pennisi will return later this year, and we'll hear back from Omar Bourne in the next episode.

R. Sulaymanov: [00:45](#) Thanks for having me. I'm excited to participate.

Bushra Mollick: [00:48](#) To our listeners, 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 on our Twitter @nycemergencymgt, Facebook, or Instagram sites.

R. Sulaymanov: [01:04](#) On this episode of "Prep Talk," we are discussing the Wireless Emergency Alert systems, also known as WEA.

Bushra Mollick: [01:11](#) Wireless emergency alerts are emergency messages, sent to your mobile device, accompanied by a loud tone and vibration. They sound something like this... The Federal Communications Commission, or FCC, and Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA, in conjunction with mobile phone companies, are making improvements to the emergency messaging system.

R. Sulaymanov: [01:36](#) We have two special guests here, to discuss what these new updates are, and what they will mean for you.

Bushra Mollick: [01:42](#) But before we dive in, it's time to give our listeners the latest hot topics in the emergency management field.

Speaker 4: [01:51](#) Here's your Prep Talk situation Report.

Bushra Mollick: [01:55](#) This is a situation report. Let's get started.

- R. Sulaymanov: [01:59](#) The Federal Communications Commission reiterated that major phone carriers implement a standardized caller ID authentication network by the end of the year, a move that would aid in combating both scammers, and the number of robocalls plaguing people's phones. According to YouMail, a software company that blocks robocalls, nearly 48 billion robocalls were made nationally in 2018, a roughly 19 billion increase from two years prior. The FCC took a major step towards limiting these calls by voting to allow service providers to block unwanted calls by default, so long as customers have the option to opt out of the service. Currently, blocking such robo calls is available on an opt in basis, but many customers are not aware of this option.
- Bushra Mollick: [02:46](#) A new survey indicates a large number of Americans are concerned about their vulnerability to a disaster. Of the 1245 adults surveyed, 54% say that they are aware their families could be affected by a disaster within the next five years, an increase from last year's 51%. However, 51% of respondents say that, despite concerns, they do not have an emergency plan with their family. The slight uptake in people who are concerned could be good news. But the survey also shows more work needs to go into preparing individuals and communities for emergencies.
- Bushra Mollick: [03:23](#) Experts say it is critical for emergency managers and local governments to build relationships in communities to help prepare families prior to a disaster.
- R. Sulaymanov: [03:33](#) The country's measles outbreak in over 25 years has spread to two more states, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For the first time in the current outbreak, cases of measles were confirmed in Virginia and Idaho. There are now confirmed cases in 28 states across the country, bringing the total to 1022 cases. The current outbreak, through the first five months of this year, is already the worst since 1992, and federal health officials have warned the country is at risk of losing its measles elimination status.
- R. Sulaymanov: [04:05](#) Most of the measles cases are concentrated in New York, where two outbreaks have been raging in Rockland County, as well as in Brooklyn, and Queens.
- Bushra Mollick: [04:13](#) A state commission approved New York City's use of a new, so-called Rapid DNA Technology, to help quickly identify victims in a mass casualty event. The Commission on Forensic Science

approved the city's Office of Chief Medical Examiner to use the new system.

- Bushra Mollick: [04:28](#) The device is made by ANDE, a Colorado based technology company. In 2018 the technology was used to identify victims of the Paradise Wildfire in California, and in 2017 it was used after Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. The 117 pound device, which can fit in the back of an SUV tests DNA from the relatives of the deceased, and develops genetic profiles in about two hours. Using traditional DNA testing, it can take weeks or months for genetic profiles to generate.
- Bushra Mollick: [04:59](#) The state commission's ruling only pertains to New York City for mass disasters. Use of the rapid system in criminal cases is still something the commission said requires validation before approved.
- R. Sulaymanov: [05:10](#) And that is the situation report. Before we jump into today's show, here is a public service announcement from NYC Emergency Management and the Ad Council.
- Speaker 5: [05:20](#) Open Calendar, what's my schedule looking like?
- Speaker 6: [05:23](#) Next Thursday, you will be caught in an emergency flash flood between Park and 1st Street.
- Speaker 5: [05:28](#) What? No! No, that doesn't work. I'm busy then. Decline, decline!
- Speaker 7: [05:33](#) Disasters don't plan ahead, but you can. It starts with talking to your loved ones about making an emergency plan. So don't wait, communicate. Get started today at NYC.gov/readyNY or call 311. Brought to you by New York City Emergency Management and the Ad Council.
- Speaker 4: [05:52](#) You're listening to "Prep Talk," the Emergency Management podcast.
- Bushra Mollick: [05:56](#) You're listening to "Prep Talk," and we are back.
- Bushra Mollick: [05:59](#) As we mentioned earlier, we were talking about improvements to the Wireless Emergency Alert system.
- Bushra Mollick: [06:04](#) Here to tell us more are Lisa Fowlkes, the bureau chief of the FCC's Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau, and

Benjamin Krakauer, assistant commissioner of strategy and program development, and New York City Emergency Management.

- Bushra Mollick: [06:16](#) I thank you both for joining the show.
- Benjamin K.: [06:18](#) Thanks.
- Lisa Fowlkes: [06:18](#) Thank you.
- R. Sulaymanov: [06:19](#) Chief Fowlkes, can you please give our listeners an overview of the FCC and its mission.
- Lisa Fowlkes: [06:24](#) The Federal Communications Commission is an independent federal government agency that reports to Congress. It's mission is to oversee communications, whether that be radio or broadcast, mobile communications, your landline communications, or satellite. One of the big priorities for the FCC is ensuring reliable and resilient communications systems that will ensure that when the public is in need of emergency assistance, then they dial 911, they're able to reach someone. It's also to ensure that the public receives timely and accurate emergency alerts.
- R. Sulaymanov: [07:07](#) And what's your role at the FCC?
- Lisa Fowlkes: [07:09](#) I'm the Chief of the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau. My bureau oversees emergency alerting that are based on communications platforms, 911, reliability, and security of communications networks. We also lead the FCC's emergency response when there's a disaster.
- Bushra Mollick: [07:29](#) So Ben, for our listeners, what's a Wireless Emergency Alert, and how does it work? And can you give us some examples of emergencies or incidents that have called for its usage?
- Benjamin K.: [07:38](#) Sure Bushra, so Wireless Emergency Alert's a very powerful tool that allows authorized parties like New York City Emergency and Management to send urgent messages to cellphones within a particular geographic area. The messages have a very similar look and feel to that of a regular text message, but when they're delivered they come with a loud attention tone, and a vibration cadence to get your attention. WEA messages are delivered via a special channel so it's not susceptible to the network congestion that we see on some cellphone networks during peak times like during emergencies. And one of the most

powerful elements of WEA is that it's an opt-out system. So most cellphones today have it built in, and unless you go in and opt-out from your phone's settings, which we strongly recommend against, you're going to get that message when we send it.

- Benjamin K.: [08:20](#) As far as using the system, in New York we've used it ten times since it became available in 2012. Three of those times were during Hurricane Sandy, two of them were for blizzards when the mayor issued a travel ban, three were issued for the Chelsea Bombing, and then most recently we issued two of them for a suspicious package near the Time Warner Center in Manhattan.
- Bushra Mollick: [08:42](#) That's really interesting, and I think it's really incredible that now it comes with our phones, so hopefully most people choose not to opt-out of it.
- R. Sulaymanov: [08:50](#) Ben, other than emergency management, who else can provide these alerts in New York City?
- Benjamin K.: [08:54](#) Certainly New York City Emergency Management, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children for AMBER alerts, the port authority in New York and New Jersey for they're facilities, the National Weather Service, who's probably the largest user nationally of Wireless Emergency Alerts. So whenever there's a flash flood warning, a tornado warning, they can also issue the messages.
- R. Sulaymanov: [09:12](#) Chief Fowlkes, what is the FCC's role in the WEA system?
- Lisa Fowlkes: [09:15](#) The FCC writes the technical rules that apply to the mobile carriers. Some of the rules, for example, cover things such as geographic targeting, how specifically targeted the alert needs to be to someone's location. Recently, we also adapted some improvements that required that mobile devices accept an alert along with a URL so when an alert management agency or an other alert originator wants to send an alert, they can add a link so that the consumer can receive additional information.
- R. Sulaymanov: [09:57](#) How will subscribers know if their carriers offer WEAs?
- Benjamin K.: [10:02](#) So if you're a subscriber on one of the major national networks, and you have a device that's been manufactured since 2012, chances are it works, but most manufacturers put a little message on the box that says that it's Wireless Emergency Alert equipped. And recently the FCC also adopted rules, and the

chief can let us know if they are in effect yet, or if they're going to be in effect, that requires disclosure at the point of sale, if you're going to be purchasing a device, or purchasing a device on a network that does not support WEA.

Lisa Fowlkes: [10:32](#) Those rules will be in effect later this year.

Benjamin K.: [10:34](#) Okay.

R. Sulaymanov: [10:35](#) Chief Fowlkes, you've been responsible for development and implementation of FCC policies in areas of communications reliability and emergency alerting. You've also led many of the FCC's Public Safety Policy Initiatives, including the adoption of rules to ensure that consumers can receive emergency alerts over cellphones and other mobile devices through WEAs.

R. Sulaymanov: [10:53](#) What do you want our listeners to know about the importance of these initiatives, to their public safety?

Lisa Fowlkes: [10:59](#) Well one of the things I always tell my team, is in the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau, the public's safety is job number one. For example, with respect to 911 we've been working very carefully with the 911 community and wireless carriers to improve, what we call, location accuracy. The purpose of this is to ensure that when someone dials 911, one they're able to reach help, and then the emergency responder that's dispatched has a better chance of finding the person, particularly if they are in a multilevel building.

Lisa Fowlkes: [11:38](#) With respect to emergency alerts, I think one of the most important things to keep in mind is that the Wireless Emergency Alerts save lives. The National Center for Missing and Exploited children has reported that the WEA has helped to find over 50 children, and they in fact credit that directly to the use of WEA.

Lisa Fowlkes: [12:01](#) The other thing that I would say is very important to consumers, because I know in talking to people, a lot of times they'll complain about getting these alerts, don't disable them, because if you do, you stand a chance of missing very important and critical information that could save your life.

Bushra Mollick: [12:20](#) That's really incredible. I feel like with these alerts also, you also give them power to the subscribers, or the people who receive these alerts because you're giving them the option to help find these missing children, or understand that there's this

emergency right here, and the power's in your hands to help find this person or just assist in the whole process.

Lisa Fowlkes: [12:38](#)

Yes.

Bushra Mollick: [12:40](#)

That's incredible.

Bushra Mollick: [12:41](#)

So Ben, this question is for you. You've been at the forefront of advocating for improvements to the WEA system. Before we get to these improvements, can you speak to the current utility of the system?

Benjamin K.: [12:53](#)

So as we've been talking about, the system has a lot of utility, it's, not a perfect system, it's just one tool in our emergency alerting tool box, but today we can deliver 90 characters of English text, we can include a phone number, or a link to more information like the chief mentioned. And the geotargeting has improved since that became available in 2012. So a very, very powerful tool that is only expected to get even better.

R. Sulaymanov: [13:17](#)

So this question is for both of you. We're seeing some improvements to the system, including additional geotargeting improvements that we've spoken about, scheduled for November 2019. What can users expect with the upcoming improvements?

Lisa Fowlkes: [13:30](#)

One, they can expect to get more information. Originally WEA was designed to have a limit of 90 characters. The commission, a few years ago, adopted changes to expand the character limit to 360 characters. Those who speak Spanish can expect to start seeing WEA alerts in Spanish. In addition to which, as I said, the big improvement is the geographic targeting of the alerts. Right now we say that the rules say that the alert has to be delivered to the best approximation of the target area.

Lisa Fowlkes: [14:08](#)

In November, or at the end of November, we've required carriers to make that even more granular by saying there can't be more than a one tenth of a mile overshoot of the target area that the alert originator specifies.

Benjamin K.: [14:22](#)

I want to talk about why those alert improvements, particularly improvements to geotargeting, are so important to us as alert originators. One of the things that we're concerned about is warning fatigue, people who get messages that are not intended for them, and as a result, become annoyed and frustrated, and end up opting out of the system, or becoming

desensitized to those alerts. The improved geotargeting is going to allow us to make sure that the people who receive the message actually need to react to the message.

Benjamin K.: [14:49](#) When WEA first started in 2012, if we wanted to alert a two block square area in Manhattan, we'd actually have to send a WEA to the entire borough, lighting up millions and millions of phones. And as you go across the country outside the New York City area, counties can be massive, so if you may have an incident that's very isolated to a very small portion of a county, you'd be alerting tens of thousands of people all over that county. The improved geo targeting requirements that go into effect in November are going to allow us to make sure that only the people who need the message are going to get the message. And that's going to improve alert and warning for everybody.

Bushra Mollick: [15:24](#) So on October 3rd, 2018, a nationwide Wireless Emergency Alert, and emergency alert system test was conducted. Can you speak to the frequency of these tests, national or local, and of their importance?

Lisa Fowlkes: [15:37](#) With respect to the national alerting tests, FEMA and the FCC tests the systems nationally, periodically, in order to ensure that those systems are able to receive a national alert. When we did the test in October, that was actually the very first time we had tested the Wireless Emergency Alert system nationwide.

Benjamin K.: [16:00](#) Yeah and Bushra what I would add is that the FEMA and the FCC should really be commended for doing that national test. It was a big step forward. I think it really led to an increase in public awareness. But just like any of our emergency exercises, it also pointed out some gaps that we as an emergency management community, with FEMA and the FCC, and the wireless carriers need to work on.

Benjamin K.: [16:20](#) So New York City studied that test, and we did a convenience sample, we sent out a survey through Notify NYC, and some of our trusted partners. And what we found was that 81.4% of people should have received that message, received the message, which means that 18.6% of people who should have received the message didn't receive it.

Benjamin K.: [16:39](#) What concerns us is that three quarters of that 18% had no discernible reason for not receiving it. They weren't in the subway without cellphone service, they weren't in silent mode,

they didn't have their phone off, they weren't in a building with spotty service. So they really should have received that message and they didn't. And we think that the wireless industry, the FCC, FEMA, really need to figure out why they didn't receive the message, and make sure that reliability in delivery improves going forward.

- Bushra Mollick: [17:09](#) What advice would you give to people who are skeptical about the system.
- Lisa Fowlkes: [17:12](#) I would say that the system has been proven to save lives when it I used. And resist the temptation to disable them, because again, you risk missing out on critical information that can save your life. Right now, with respect to the Wireless Emergency Alert system, a consumer could disable the AMBER alerts, they could disable the eminent threat alerts. Well guess what, the eminent threat alerts are typically the alerts that you would get from emergency management or first-responders at the state and local level. Well guess what again, those are the people that are going to issue most of your alerts.
- Benjamin K.: [17:56](#) I would agree with the chief wholeheartedly. And what I would add is, beyond the technology, public safety, emergency management, are very invested in the system, are very invested in making sure that it's not overused, and that the messages are appropriately crafted, and sent at appropriate times. So when that phone rings, there's a lot of work that's happening on the back end, a lot of thought that goes into what that message says, how that message is delivered, who we're sending the message to, what time we're sending it, that we really need people to pay attention. It's not something that we take very lightly.
- Speaker 4: [18:29](#) If you don't know, now you know.
- Speaker 10: [18:31](#) You're listening to "Prep Talk."
- Speaker 4: [18:33](#) The Emergency Management Podcast.
- Speaker 4: [18:39](#) It's time for "Prep Talk" Rapid Response.
- R. Sulaymanov: [18:45](#) So it is rapid response time, and if you're a first time listener it's simple. Bushra and I will ask our guests and they will give the first answer that comes to mind. Lets get into it.

Bushra Mollick: [18:55](#) Chief, let's start with you. What is one emergency item you cannot live without?

Lisa Fowlkes: [19:00](#) My mobile device.

Benjamin K.: [19:03](#) My mobile device.

R. Sulaymanov: [19:05](#) Yep, ditto.

Bushra Mollick: [19:05](#) Yep, same, same.

R. Sulaymanov: [19:07](#) What is your favorite TV show or movie? Ben, We'll start with you.

Benjamin K.: [19:11](#) "The West Wing."

R. Sulaymanov: [19:12](#) Quick response.

Lisa Fowlkes: [19:14](#) I'm a Trekkie who loves "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit," and "New Amsterdam."

Bushra Mollick: [19:19](#) Chief, in your life, who has inspired you the most?

Lisa Fowlkes: [19:23](#) My paternal grandfather, who was a retired detective with the Philadelphia police department.

Benjamin K.: [19:29](#) My father.

R. Sulaymanov: [19:30](#) And this is our final question. Some of the work you do in one word. We'll start with you Chief.

Lisa Fowlkes: [19:37](#) Safety.

Benjamin K.: [19:40](#) Busy.

Bushra Mollick: [19:40](#) We could attest to that.

R. Sulaymanov: [19:43](#) Yes.

Bushra Mollick: [19:44](#) Agreed. But this has really been an incredible episode. I think it's really informative and I think it's great for our listeners to understand how important this work is that we do, and that we make sure they don't opt out of these wireless emergency alerts.

This transcript was exported on Jul 11, 2019 - view latest version [here](#).

Bushra Mollick: [19:57](#) So thank you so much. to Ben and thank you again Chief Fowlkes for coming in and speaking with us today.

Lisa Fowlkes: [20:02](#) My Pleasure.

Benjamin K.: [20:03](#) Thanks Bushra.

R. Sulaymanov: [20:03](#) Thank you so much, it's been a pleasure.

Speaker 1: [20:09](#) That's this episode of "Prep Talk." If you liked what you heard, you can listen anytime online, or through your favorite RSS feed. Until next time, stay safe and prepared.