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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.

Ines Bebea ([00:21](#)):

Hello, everyone. Thank you for listening. I'm Ines Bebea.

Allison Pennisi ([00:24](#)):

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.

Ines Bebea ([00:44](#)):

This episode, we're going to discuss diversity and inclusion in the emergency management field. Our special guest today is the champion of diversity, equity, and inclusion within and beyond emergency management.

Allison Pennisi ([00:57](#)):

Sonja Orgias is acting deputy chief council for New York City Emergency Management and co-chair of the agency's equity and diversity council. Sonja, welcome to Prep Talk.

Sonja Orgias ([01:08](#)):

Good morning. Thank you for having me.

Ines Bebea ([01:11](#)):

Let us get right into it. Tell us about your role at the agency and what led you to a career in law and then into emergency management.

Sonja Orgias ([01:20](#)):

Right now, in my current role, I am the chief legal officer for the agency following the retirement of our chief council. And I manage the legal unit, the record's management unit, and DAF and legal. And as to what led me to a career in law, I wanted to be an attorney since I was 12 years old. And every decision that I made since then was to have a career in law in mind. And when I went to law school, initially I was drawn to transactional work. I even trained as a litigator. And then I decided I wanted to be a permanent law clerk for a federal judge, but somehow I ended up in consumer bankruptcy work and I did that for a while. And then I ended up in administrative law and I began as a hearing officer for the city, New York City Environmental Control Board, and then the fire department. And then my relationship with our then deputy commissioner of operations, working on a building collapse, explosion and fire, for over a year led me to coming to emergency management.

Ines Bebea ([02:29](#)):

So it was an explosion?

Sonja Orgias ([02:32](#)):

There was an explosion.

Ines Bebea ([02:32](#)):

That brought you in.

Allison Pennisi ([02:37](#)):

So not only do you supervise agency councils, you provide legal advice to executives, you draft contracts and agreements, and you address litigation related matters. You also serve as a co-chair of the agency's equity and diversity council, which was created at the agency in 2020. Can you tell us why you wanted to be part of the council and the work that you and the team are spearheading to diversify the emergency management field through this initiative?

Sonja Orgias ([03:05](#)):

Initially in 2020, I was part of an agency working group that was responsible for contracting third party to conduct listening sessions for the staff. If we recall the summer of 2020 was really a time following the death of George Floyd and the issues of race had really roiled the public over the summer. And there were protests and a lot of different things happening in New York City and across the state, across the United States and out of those listening sessions, it appeared that agency employees really wanted to have some level of engagement with respect to diversity equity and inclusion issues across the agency. And our then commissioner asked me if I'd like to be co-chair of the council. And I agreed because I figured in my role as a senior manager at the time and a woman of color that I had a very invested part in wanting to see those discussions happen.

It's an employee led council, and I think we have a way to engage our senior managers, our executives, which now I'm an executive. And I think I was a good person in my role as an attorney, sort of impartial, but also respected, that I could bring some of the issues that more junior employees were concerned about expressing themselves. So I was able to give a voice to those who didn't have a voice and be able to elevate those issues to leadership. And the work that we've been doing are across messaging, we send agency announcements about holidays and events that primarily have not been recognized, not to treat anyone as an outsider, but they might not be majority religions or areas of faith or just discussions or cultures that have been celebrated more regularly by the members of the majority.

Allison Pennisi ([05:25](#)):

So, and one of the things I think is really important about this work is that, you mentioned before that you were a senior manager, you're now an executive, but the individuals who are part of this council, they come from every single part of the agency. So different bureaus, different units, they represent not only, have different backgrounds, but also different backgrounds and discipline too, is that right?

Sonja Orgias ([05:48](#)):

That's correct. And I have always celebrated my own culture. I think I'm proud to be a Caribbean American woman, I'm first generation American. And I'm proud of that. And I think my culture and my family, my neighborhood roots, I'm a native Brooklynite, shaped who I am and the way that I operate as a professional. And I think that is the case for most people. So although our cultures may be different,

our cultures shape who we are, sometimes our professional choices or our career choices. And I think as emergency management, we're able to do the great work that we do because of our differences, whether it's in civil service, whether you are from the police department or the fire department, or from DEP or DOT, EMS, whatever your background is. When you bring those skills here, that's how we're able to plan and prepare and protect and respond and recover from the things that we do because of the knowledge that we have, whether it's learned or whether it's through work experience.

Allison Pennisi ([06:54](#)):

No, and that's incredibly well said because we like to say that it's important for us to reflect the communities that we're serving and not just coming from one background from one discipline. And I think it's really important that you know, this council is addressing that. So speaking of diversity and coming from different backgrounds, the council has put forth among its many efforts, an equitable recruitment best practices guide, and it highlights best practices that hiring managers should be mindful of when going through the recruitment process here at emergency management. And based on the work that this particular guide has put forth, what changes can emergency managers and agencies across all levels of government do to make the field more accessible for women, for black indigenous people of color, the LGBTQIA community?

Sonja Orgias ([07:52](#)):

As most of our listeners know, emergency management has its roots in first response. And first responders historically in the United States have been white men. We also have women, we have other people of color, but not in the same way that we have historically white men. And as the field of emergency management has grown, you can get your bachelor's, your master's degree in emergency management. We also need to reflect the communities that we serve in and the communities that we come from. And so we are very grateful to the recruitment committee who really focused on this and worked with our human capital management unit to bring this forward. We also have to think about as we show up and are fully present as emergency managers and they see more women of color or more women, more people of color, more people from the LGBTQIA community or BIPOC community, that younger people, college students, high school students can look at this career and think, oh, I can do that too.

Last week, I spoke with middle school students, and I explained to them what I do. And I talk about hurricane Sandy and I talk about our response to the pandemic. And in meeting me, they think, oh, I can be an attorney and an emergency manager as well. Whereas they wouldn't have seen anyone like me 10 years ago because that's not the field that I was in. So I think as we offer more internships, as we have more speaking engagements, we already do the Ready New York Program.

We already are very visible, but I think as we engage more in terms of recruitment at younger levels, high school internships, as we have with the Urban Assembly School for Emergency Management, and we also reach out possibly to other high schools, we have CUNY schools that some are not as familiar with us as perhaps John Jay, that we can really engage and start to present ourselves and have different speakers and even have panel interviews, or presentations, where we have an opportunity to talk more about the work that we do and talk more about our backgrounds. In that way, children across the city can see people that look like them and have an interest in, Hey, what do you do? And what that conversation would lead to.

Ines Bebea ([10:15](#)):

I'm glad that you just highlighted the issues in having a diverse field of emergency managers across all levels of government. So now I'm wondering how do you think that impacts the interaction with the community during that emergency when the people come in to rescue or provide services or whatever the emergency might be, doesn't reflect what the community looks like? How do you think that impacts the interaction?

Sonja Orgias ([10:42](#)):

That's a good question Ines. You know, I think there are incidents that we've had where we've responded to communities that are very insular, perhaps immigrant communities, or perhaps communities that have a distrust of government just based upon what may have happened in their home countries or even in their own neighborhoods. And I think it is important if we are more reflective of the community, likely that we have staff or liaisons that can engage with the community. Often we connect with community based organizations at a service center or at the scene of a fire during a vacate or the scene of an incident, to be able to engage with the people of the community in the same way NYPD has the community affairs police officers that know the community.

So they're more familiar. But I think when you have people that are viewed as outsiders, I think that diminishes the acceptance of help, the acceptance of resources, or perhaps the survivors of an incident might be less forthcoming to share what their true needs are at those moments. And that doesn't speak to our mission, that doesn't allow us to provide the help that we are intended.

Allison Pennisi ([11:56](#)):

How is diversity, equity and inclusion incorporated into emergency operations at New York City Emergency Management, and what could other emergency management agencies and first responder agencies at that incorporate into their practices as well?

Sonja Orgias ([12:12](#)):

In 2020, I was asked to serve in a role as a co-emergency operation center manager. And at that point I had provided legal support for emergency events and incidents, and I was clearly good at that. And I had also had a different emergency support function, but I was interested in becoming an EOC manager because I felt it allowed me to be a voice in the room and bringing my perspective, not only as a native New Yorker, also as a woman of color, also as someone who knows that sometimes there are nuances with certain communities and neighborhoods within New York City, that I would be part of the leadership, making decisions and reminders and suggestions, and thinking about the needs of the neighborhood, the needs of the community, the members of the public. And I think that that is a great consideration that people need to use and often have, I would imagine, but New York City is a large municipality in many different communities, many different ethnic groups.

And I think while we're all well trained, especially staff who've been through a number of incidents, especially with what we have experienced since 2020. We have significant experience with pandemics and emergencies and hurricanes and extreme weather and different events. I think now that perspective of being a voice in the room when questions are asked, when decisions are made, when we're giving guidance or directions on what's needed to respond to an incident, it's good to have different voices, varied experiences in the room. I think just the emergency management training itself is not sufficient. I think bringing your experiences into the room with you are more helpful at that time.

Allison Pennisi ([14:14](#)):

Yes. So not only just taking your own personal experiences and bringing that into the work that you're doing during a crisis, but even having a community first approach and asking yourself, what are the needs of the community that we're trying to help because of this emergency, whether it's every single neighborhood across all five boroughs, or if it's something as small as like a one block radius that was affected by something. I think that that is a really important point. So thank you for sharing that.

Ines Bebea ([14:43](#)):

During the unprecedented event of the COVID 19 pandemic, as it brought the world to a halt in 2020, many people began to work from home, it also brought challenges to make that a possibility for people with accessibility needs in the workplace. How has your work with agency helped address those issues?

Sonja Orgias ([15:02](#)):

I think one area that I can think of right now is accessible virtual meetings. And I would venture to say that at the time we went remote in about March to April 2020, when we were fully remote, I think most of the staff had very limited experience with virtual meetings or using softwares such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. I mean, I think I didn't even use Microsoft Teams with full capability probably until May 2020. And the one thing that I learned from some of my colleagues are that you really have to be mindful about what platform you use because not everything is accessible. Not everything can be read by a screen reader. And that led to really encouraging our staff to be mindful about their habits and what they do. I think one item that comes to mind is circulating an agenda prior to a meeting.

Most people tend to want a screen share, well, a screen reader can't read a screen share. So someone with vision issues cannot see what you're displaying. They can understand it. They don't know what, you'd have to describe it. And most people don't think to do that during a meeting. So I think one thing that it brought to my mind was having a conversation with MOPD and the council, along with the NYSOM Academy, co-sponsored a presentation of accessible virtual meetings. And I think that that was really helpful for the staff to engage. Unfortunately, the meeting happened, the presentation rather happened during our all hands Tropical storm Ida response. It is available in our learning management system where staff can view it at their leisure and really take away some good tips and be better about the work that we do and how we communicate with our colleagues.

Allison Pennisi ([16:54](#)):

So Sonja, you spoke about working with the mayor's office for people with disabilities, MOPD, working with different agencies to highlight social issues, disability access and functional needs, diversity, equity and inclusion. But when we think about the work environment, are there procedures an organization can implement to ensure people are being culturally sensitive, including when discussing their views about social issues? I know that this is a topic that does come up often for any workplace, regardless of whether you work in the public sector or the private sector.

Sonja Orgias ([17:30](#)):

I think one thing that comes to mind, we are working on releasing a disability etiquette guide for one. And we'll highlight that during our all hands and make sure that we remind the agency to take a look at the guide and make it available. But also I think what we've learned from the listening sessions is that it's okay to ask questions, but just be mindful of your tone and your perspective to not make assumptions and not expect everyone to share the same views. Personally, I can totally recognize our differences, but I think that we should practice being mindful. I know often people say, well, I am the way that I am and I'm fine with it, people can ask me anything and everything. Well, that may not be the

next person. And we're all colleagues and we work together. And I think just keeping that in mind, I think are things that we can do, but again, a disability etiquette guide or some sort of etiquette guide and just occasional reminders from your human capital management department or unit would be helpful to let people know it's okay to engage and ask questions.

It's okay to be curious. And I think that taking the time to celebrate different events, cultural events, and talk about the Genesis of different holidays and different aspects, there are holidays and events that different cultures celebrate and just understanding why we celebrate them in different ways, I think is a place to start.

Ines Bebea ([19:06](#)):

What do you think training and cultural sensitivity can go, especially in a field where, as we said earlier, you go into cities where like, you don't look like the people that you're helping and they're looking at you like you are the outsider, how much farther can we take that? As far as like, just even the day to day with the staff and like leadership and then the people they supervise and then just the junior people at the junior level. And then people that come into our agency from other agencies, for example, like I know early in the pandemic, we had people from FEMA, from the army that were here. How do we make that culture of sensitivity like across the board, that people are able to really be themselves?

Sonja Orgias ([19:48](#)):

I think we, as New York City Emergency Management, encourage our staff to be themselves, to show up as fully present, to be comfortable, to be just as you would be at home. I don't necessarily mean jeans and sneakers or pajamas, but I do mean if you wear a head wrap or if you wear your hair in a natural style as a person of color, who ordinarily people don't understand your braids or your locks, or your twists or your Afro, or maybe it might be a different color, but people dye their hair colors all the time, that it's okay to express yourself. And that is professional. And I think once we become comfortable with that, I think that gets the dialogue going and the understanding. I believe it's encouraged from the executive level down and that's how change starts.

Ines Bebea ([20:42](#)):

So what do you hope emergency managements field goes in the next five years in regards to diversity in management and also like inclusion in the staff and bringing people in for all different backgrounds?

Sonja Orgias ([20:59](#)):

I think as we recruit, as we deploy staff in response to mutual aid request, that we vary who we send, who has the same skillset, who we hire, who we interview, who we offer internships that has the same skillset as anyone else that they be maybe sitting next to or working with during an emergency. When we share what we have learned in New York City with other emergency managers across the nation and across the world, I think that we'll invite more women, more people of color, more people of an LGBTQIA background to bring their skillset to the field and that they'll be accepted as they are. And I think we're making steps in that direction.

Allison Pennisi ([21:58](#)):

Speaking with Sonja Orgias from New York City Emergency Management, it is Rapid Response and if you are a first time listener, it's simple. Prep Talk will ask questions and our guest will give the first answer

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that comes to mind. But before Rapid Response here is a message from New York City Emergency Management and the Ad Council.

Speaker 5 ([22:16](#)):

New York City's dense population and geographic location, make it especially vulnerable to emergencies caused by natural and man-made hazards. While it's important for you to protect yourself and your families from emergencies, it's also important to protect your property. Take steps to prepare, reduce your risk, go to nyc.gov/reduceyourrisk. There you'll find tips and information about the cost effective and sustained actions you can take to reduce your properties long term risk from hazards.

Speaker 6 ([22:48](#)):

It's time for Prep Talk Rapid Response.

Allison Pennisi ([22:57](#)):

Okay. We are back with Rapid Response. First question for Sonja or Jazz. What is one emergency item you cannot live without?

Sonja Orgias ([23:05](#)):

Flashlight.

Allison Pennisi ([23:06](#)):

Good answer. Classic answer. I like it.

Ines Bebea ([23:10](#)):

What is one important emergency tip people should remember?

Sonja Orgias ([23:15](#)):

In case of an emergency incident, how have a place to meet your family outside of the impacted area.

Ines Bebea ([23:24](#)):

Do you have a favorite disaster theme, movie or TV show or episode that you watch?

Sonja Orgias ([23:30](#)):

Not currently, but I used to watch, I mean, we can call it a disaster invasion. It was about an alien pod takeover.

Allison Pennisi ([23:40](#)):

Let's hope that doesn't happen here. Last but not least, sum up the work you do in one word.

Sonja Orgias ([23:46](#)):

Important.

Allison Pennisi ([23:47](#)):

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Important, indeed. For those interested in learning more about diversity, equity and inclusion and bringing these best practices to your own agency, to your own work, you can visit nyc.gov, check out your local municipality. It is of the utmost importance that everyone be included in mitigation, preparedness response and recovery. Sonja Orgias, thank you again.

Speaker 1 ([24:16](#)):

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.