

Prep Talk - Episode 74 Exercising Your Emergency Plan

Speaker 1 ([00:04](#)):

Welcome to Prep Talk, the emergency management podcast. Find out what you need to know about preparedness. Get all the latest tips from experts in the field and learn what to do before the next disaster strikes.

Speaker 1 ([00:15](#)):

From the emergency management department in the city that never sleeps, here are your hosts.

Ines Bebea ([00:25](#)):

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

Allison Pennisi ([00:27](#)):

I'm Allison Pennisi. And you are listeners, and as always, we thank you for joining us.

Allison Pennisi ([00:32](#)):

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 at [nycemergencymgt](#), Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and much more.

Inés Bebea ([00:46](#)):

In this episode, we'll be sharing the importance of exercises in emergency management.

Allison Pennisi ([00:50](#)):

That's right. This is not a discussion about fitness, but rather how and why it's important for everyone to take the time to practice their emergency plans, whether you are an individual, a household or an organization. So here to discuss exercising emergency plans is New York City Emergency Management's director of exercises, Paula Carlson. Paula, welcome to Prep Talk.

Paula Carlson ([01:09](#)):

Thank you so much.

Allison Pennisi ([01:11](#)):

So tell our listeners about your role at New York City Emergency Management and the types of exercises your team conducts.

Paula Carlson ([01:17](#)):

Again, thank you both so much. Yeah. Most people hear the word exercises, and they think we're talking about cardio or lifting weights. Exercises or drills are some more familiar with that term are a way to help the city with preparedness efforts. How? Exercises help us evaluate plans while using simulated responses also known as a scenario to prepare for incidents and events. Exercises can be broken down into two main categories. We have discussion based, which are tabletop exercises. They're your seminars, and also operations based, our boots on the ground drills. And so those are our full scale exercises.

Prep Talk - Episode 74 Exercising Your Emergency Plan

Paula Carlson ([01:52](#)):

We exercise our plans to identify gaps, capabilities, and also to look at our best practices. Finally, the most important step is to make sure we follow up on those recommendations to improve identified gaps, or we continued with our best practices. And my team helps to conduct evaluate. And we also design exercises, not just for our own agency, but with our agency partners and other organizations. And we also participate in our other agency exercises as well.

Inés Bebea ([02:21](#)):

How often does the city exercise its emergency scenarios? Can you share what the process looks like? For example, why certain exercises are planned and others are not. And how long does it take to plan and execute an exercise?

Paula Carlson ([02:33](#)):

Of course. The city does have a lot of plans to exercise, but we also need to take into account considerations such as risks, threats, seasonal challenges, and also all the planned events that the city hosts. So we meet annually with our agency partners, and we review which plans need to be exercised. And we also review current or new threats or hazard. A big lesson that we learned 20 years ago is that we don't want to have a failure of imagination. And what that means is asking ourselves the question, what aren't we considering? We also look at real world events that happen elsewhere, and we run those scenarios based on those incidents. And typically our agency runs about 50 exercises a year. Discussion-based exercises can take anywhere from one to three months to plan and more complex exercises those boots on the ground or those operation-based exercises can take at least a year to plan because they require a lot of logistical considerations and planning.

Allison Pennisi ([03:26](#)):

So no failure of the imagination. I love that. As you were saying in emergency management, sharing what we've learned with others is paramount. And your team also hosts a regional quarterly exercise working group to share best practices and offer resources to our agency partners where possible. So tell us a little bit more about that, and why it's important.

Paula Carlson ([03:43](#)):

Yes, the exercise working group was created out of that need to not only share our exercise best practices and experiences, so we also have transparency in what we're exercising and helping our exercise partners with resources, such as evaluators, controllers, and other exercise support. And this group has grown to a very large substantial group that we're very proud of over the past couple of years. And we're all exercise design personnel from city, state, and federal partners, and also a private organization partners as well. Many agencies and organizations have the same needs or requirements. So we can work together and create exercises that benefit the many without stressing our exercise resources or the ability to put together a strong and beneficial exercise.

Allison Pennisi ([04:25](#)):

And I've actually served as both a participant and also as an evaluator for a lot of the exercises that your team has hosted. And we have a lot of fun with it too. And one of the things that I've heard, everyone say, especially if they work in exercises is, do not fight the scenario because you don't know if those circumstances are what you will be facing when this emergency does happen. So thank you for that.

Prep Talk - Episode 74 Exercising Your Emergency Plan

Inés Bebea ([04:47](#)):

Can you give us an example of an exercise that changed how the city then responded to that emergency? Like lessons learned that you actually saw this change needs to happen. So the next time the emergency happens, we can add this to it.

Paula Carlson ([05:01](#)):

Absolutely. And that's the reason why we do these exercises is we want to... We always say a good exercise is when something goes wrong because we learn from that so we can fix it for the real world response. So yes, we have. The goal of any exercise, like I said, is to find that gap, and we want to find those gaps during these exercises, as opposed to in the actual event. A couple years ago, we hosted a houses of worship workshop, which brought together staff and many of our houses of worship, interfaith organizations, and the fire department, fire safety unit. And what we did is we shared and discussed current fire and emergency safety plans, considerations that really provided a platform for our faith-based cultural heritage institutions so we can share knowledge on their different emergency preparedness plans, raise awareness regarding protection of the different cultural heritage, and really just there's so much culture, community culture, and importance in these institutions that we wanted to make sure that they are prepared for incidents such as these.

Paula Carlson ([06:01](#)):

So from this workshop, many best practices were shared on how to prepare, preserve, and recover from fires and other emergencies. And the fire department also updated and recirculated some of their procedures agency-wide based on this discussion. So it was really a great opportunity for the institutions to share what they house in their houses, what their preparedness plans were, how they are preparing and really to learn from each other on how to take these steps and also work with the fire department. And this happened because of the Notre Dame Cathedral fire. So we were prompted to host this because of a real world event.

Paula Carlson ([06:34](#)):

And also we do run coastal storm exercises. We run a lot of them. And one time during a real coastal storm event, it was two o'clock in the morning. Selma came up to me and said, this feels like one of your exercises. So I took that as a positive. And that was a great compliment for my team because we put together, we want to keep the exercises as real as possible. So people don't fight the scenario, but we're giving them every proactive and productive exercise experience.

Inés Bebea ([07:01](#)):

Can you share, at the moment of an exercise, if you see that something isn't working, how quickly can you adapt and take that off, I guess, the rotation of what you will do for the actual emergency?

Paula Carlson ([07:12](#)):

For the actual emergency, it's a great question. What we do in our evaluation process is we'll capture that and we'll immediately identify what agency or if it's individual person or plan what that observation was and what we can do, recommendations to change it. We don't necessarily, right there, say, this is how we're going to fix it. But what are the steps to, to make that change? So the change can happen fairly quickly, depending on how complex. So if it's something that we need to change communication or

Prep Talk - Episode 74 Exercising Your Emergency Plan

something in how we operate in the field that can be really discovered in this after action or improvement plan. And we can socialize that fairly quickly following the exercise.

Allison Pennisi ([07:53](#)):

Before I ask my next question, I need to know, do you have a favorite exercise that you've done?

Paula Carlson ([07:59](#)):

That is a great question that I never thought of the answer. It's like asking me my favorite concert that I've ever been to.

Allison Pennisi ([08:05](#)):

Yes, we will go to that in rapid response.

Paula Carlson ([08:09](#)):

There's so many that I could really pick from, but I would have to say that I love the field based exercises. Those are the ones where so much work goes into it and the culmination. And we had done an exercise, it was actually a 10 part exercise in Queens that we called NYC resilience. And just seeing that moment where everything came together, it was a multi incident scenario where we had victims that we call moulage. They had the makeup on to make them look like they were injured. There were people in a bus that had been in an incident and a car that was flipped over.

Paula Carlson ([08:42](#)):

And before we called what we call start ex, the start of the exercise, I looked out and it looked like a movie set. It looked like we had just created something. And when the first responders showed up, and they saw victims and they saw the smoke scene, it felt so real. And right there, I knew we put together a really great exercise where the first responders had an immediate reaction, and the team really did a lot of work and a great job. So I would say NYC resilience was one of my favorite up there exercises, but there's a lot.

Allison Pennisi ([09:14](#)):

That's wonderful. So how has the city been able to test and exercise its plans during the pandemic? Because I know that you talked about this discussion based exercises, field exercises, but obviously with the pandemic, there have been many cases where people aren't able to work with each other in the same space. So tell us how you've been able to adapt.

Paula Carlson ([09:33](#)):

So we needed to exercise during COVID, because we did have a lot of those COVID adaptations to our plans. We still had our annual hazards, snowstorms and coastal storms, they continued. So we needed to exercise those, but we also had to adapt to those operations functionally because we were doing so many things in a virtual environment. So we definitely had to exercise our ability to communicate and coordinate effectively in that virtual environment. So we did all of our exercises on Teams. We essentially did a bunch of discussion based exercises, but in this virtual environment, and also for the first time. We also did something that we would normally typically do together in a room as we hosted a simulation cell, which is we pretend we different agencies. And we throw these scenario updates to our partners, but we were all sitting in our own safe environments running this simulation cell virtually.

Prep Talk - Episode 74 Exercising Your Emergency Plan

Paula Carlson ([10:25](#)):

So we exercised our plans, but we also exercised exercises during COVID. So it was an interesting time, but exercises kept going. And we had to make sure that we were exercising these new updates so everyone was prepared in this new environment that we were in.

Inés Bebea ([10:43](#)):

How can individuals and families exercise their emergency plans?

Paula Carlson ([10:48](#)):

Families, neighbors, everyone can and should exercise their emergency plans. And doesn't have to be a complex process. First, you need a plan. That's what we always start with. For an exercise, you need a plan. So let's start there. If you don't already have an emergency preparedness plan for your home or your work, which you should have one, you can visit NYCEM, ready, New York, the webpage, for more information on different types of emergency plans. Once you have your plan, and you share it with your families, your friends, your coworkers, your neighbors, whatever your is, you can host one of your own exercises based on one of these plans.

Paula Carlson ([11:22](#)):

So you can call an out of area contact. You can check your ready to stay at home preparedness kit, or you can check your emergency meeting place. You could have an exercise to say, hey, something happens, do we all know where we should be meeting in the event of an emergency? Exercises can be done as often as you want. You can run one every day. I mean, that would make me happy, but you can run one, I would say run one once a month. If you've got family or friends that you want to make sure that they understand seasonal preparedness. And these exercise design resources, like I said, they don't have to be complex. You can find them online through FEMA. There's a lot of exercise design kits that are out there. But if you have a plan, you come up with your scenario and you say, okay, let everyone know what time the exercise is going to take place.

Paula Carlson ([12:05](#)):

Let them know what the goal of the objective is of the exercise. And then you hold your exercise. And then just like we do, you can sit around and say, what went right? What didn't go well? What do we need to change in our plan? So just like we would change our plans, the family or friends or neighbors or coworkers can sit around and say, okay, maybe not everyone knew we were supposed to meet. So maybe we should review that process of where we're meeting more often. And then you make changes on what you observed, and run it again.

Inés Bebea ([12:31](#)):

Is there something that all the exercises have in common? Like whether it's winter snowstorm, a flood, a heat wave, or a hurricane.

Paula Carlson ([12:41](#)):

They all have one thing in common, and that's the objective. What's the objective of the exercise. So people will come to us and say, I want to run a snowstorm or a tornado or whatever, the scenario is of exercise.

Prep Talk - Episode 74 Exercising Your Emergency Plan

Paula Carlson ([12:54](#)):

And the first thing I will always ask them is what is your objective? Are you exercising communications? Are you exercising coordination? Are you exercising resources? So those objectives are really, we call them the keystone of all exercises. And it's what helps you evaluate the exercise. So you're not evaluating your snowstorm. You're evaluating how do we communicate? How do we use our resources in the best way that we can? And that's really in the end, what you can go and you can fix. You can fix your communications, or you can fix how you are getting resources out to the field. So that's the one thing, whether it's a family plan an exercise, or one of those big, full scale exercises, they all have objectives in common. You'll always see that.

Allison Pennisi ([13:39](#)):

Speaking with Paula Carlson, director of exercises at New York City Emergency Management. It is rapid response time. And 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 first here is a message from New York City Emergency Management.

Speaker 5 ([14:04](#)):

Leaks, collapses, bomb threats. Those are emergencies that we consider.

Speaker 7 ([14:11](#)):

What keeps me up at night could be fire down the street, an earthquake around the globe, and with the pandemic, it could be anything.

Speaker 8 ([14:19](#)):

Patient safety is always in the forefront of everyone's mind. How do you keep a hospital running when parts of it aren't working?

Speaker 9 ([14:27](#)):

We have close to 60,000 students. And we need to be poised to respond to any potential emergency.

Speaker 10 ([14:39](#)):

Partners in preparedness helps organizations prepare their employees, services, and facilities for emergencies.

Speaker 9 ([14:46](#)):

New York City Emergency Management provides prudent steps to take to be prepared for any kind of emergency. Partners.

Speaker 7 ([14:53](#)):

Partners and preparedness allows me to make sure that we're as prepared as we possibly can be.

Speaker 8 ([15:00](#)):

It provides a bridge between us as a private sector, healthcare organization, and a municipal city agency.

Prep Talk - Episode 74 Exercising Your Emergency Plan

Speaker 6 ([15:09](#)):

And you can share that with your friends and family as well. Learn about it, assist with your community.

Speaker 9 ([15:14](#)):

We were very grateful to have the assistance of New York City Emergency Management. It's been tremendously helpful.

Speaker 8 ([15:20](#)):

The pamphlets, the maps, the stuff that we get from partners and preparedness has really been beneficial.

Speaker 10 ([15:27](#)):

Our partners come from all industries. So whether you operate a small or a large corporation, join partners in preparedness today.

Speaker 8 ([15:34](#)):

Any business in New York City would benefit from the information.

Speaker 9 ([15:38](#)):

It provides tremendous resources, a valuable peer network and support when you need it most.

Speaker 10 ([15:46](#)):

Joining is easy. Visit nyc.gov/partners and preparedness or call 311.

Speaker 11 ([15:51](#)):

It's time for Prep Talk, rapid response.

Allison Pennisi ([16:01](#)):

We are back with rapid response speaking with Paula Carlson from New York City Emergency Management. Paula, first question, what is your top emergency preparedness tip, summit music fan.

Paula Carlson ([16:11](#)):

And this is my concert preparedness tip. This is something that I do with my family, with my friends. And if you go to a concert with me, I'm going to make sure you do this as well. You can't forget about safety when you're at concerts when you're at festivals. So when you're in a venue, identify other exits besides the one that you came in. And this is just in case, the one that you used is not available during an emergency, or it isn't the closest option that you have during an emergency. Because what they found is most people are prone to want to exit the same way that they came into a venue.

Paula Carlson ([16:46](#)):

So even if there's an exit directly in front of them, they might not use that. That's just instinct, go out the way that I came in. So also identify several meeting places, one within the venue. So I'll probably tell you, meet me at the merchandise table. And then one outside of the venue, so finding somewhere outside. A street corner, if you're at a music festival, a different location just in the event that you can't

Prep Talk - Episode 74 Exercising Your Emergency Plan

locate each other in the venue if something were to happen. And also if cell services is overwhelmed. So emergency preparedness at music festivals and concerts is key.

Allison Pennisi ([17:18](#)):

I love it.

Inés Bebea ([17:20](#)):

Well, you mentioned that you love music, and we also know that you're a runner. So two part, what is on your playlist when you run? And two, what kind of exercise would you do for the New York City Marathon?

Paula Carlson ([17:31](#)):

Wow, these are great. Okay. And you mean exercise, you mean like an emergency manage? Because I was going to give you both. On the playlist, it depends on how long my run is going to be. So as a music fan, I have to think, am I going for a 5k? Because some of the songs that I listen to are like 15, 20 minutes long. So if I want to have a really fast pace, I might pick some shorter songs like some Clash or some Ramones. But if I'm going for the longer run, you might, well, there's always going to be Zeppelin in my playlist. So you'll always see some Led Zeppelin, and it's a mix. I'll put some blues in there. I'll put some jam music, but those are the ones that are typically on my playlist.

Paula Carlson ([18:18](#)):

So the exercise part. We do and we have exercised for the New York City Marathon. So it's bringing the agency partners together and even just exercise in the emergency management staff. So if something were to happen, and I think back to the Boston marathon, that kind of showed us some of the things that could happen, the responses that might be needed if something were to happen during the marathon route. So exercising with our EMS partners with the actual running event coordinator, whether it's New York City road runners and just making sure that we're coordinated with the, what ifs. What if, and this happened a couple years ago, there's a fire along the route. So you have to reroute the marathon and make sure that it's the same distance that you rerouted.

Inés Bebea ([19:04](#)):

How hard would that be?

Paula Carlson ([19:07](#)):

It happened, they did it. So making sure that the route is the same, the distance that you need to move it.

Paula Carlson ([19:13](#)):

But they were quickly able to adapt because they had exercised that scenario. So we don't want to have that failure of imagination. So if something happens at the start line, during the middle, whether it's weather, those are the things that we want to take into consideration during any event, which is such a large event, all five boroughs, many agencies and organizations. So we're always thinking of ways to make sure that we're prepared for just a wonderful event.

Inés Bebea ([19:42](#)):

Prep Talk - Episode 74 Exercising Your Emergency Plan

I was wondering if the exercise will be to like run the actual course. Like this is what it feels like. This is what it will be like at mile 21.

Paula Carlson ([19:53](#)):

That's a great way. And actually some people, they drive it, but they do drive the route just to see what types of hazards there might be along the route. But I'm going to suggest that to them that they should run it, and I'll run it with them. And please don't quote me on that.

Inés Bebea ([20:09](#)):

I won't, I won't.

Allison Pennisi ([20:10](#)):

Last but not least, Paula, sum up the work you do in one word.

Paula Carlson ([20:14](#)):

Imperative.

Allison Pennisi ([20:15](#)):

I like it. Speaking with Paula Carlson, director of exercises at New York City Emergency Management. For those interested in exercising their emergency plan, whether they are an individual or an organization, you could check out your local emergency management agency for additional tips and resource. Paula, thank you again.

Paula Carlson ([20:33](#)):

Thank you so much.

Inés Bebea ([20:34](#)):

Thank you, Paula.

Speaker 1 ([20:39](#)):

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 repaired.