

Speaker 1:

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.

Ashleigh Holmes:

Hello everyone. Thank you for listening. I am Ashleigh Holmes.

Allison Pennisi:

And I'm Allison Pennisi, and you are 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.

Ashleigh Holmes:

In recognition of Women's History Month, we are going to be joined by leaders in emergency management and public health, who will each share their experiences as a woman in the field and their journey to their most recent role. Please welcome from the city's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Elyse Morris, field training operations manager, and Cory Pardo, director of public health, emergency planning.

Allison Pennisi:

Elyse and Cory, thank you both for joining us. Let's get started. Can you each describe your role for our listeners? Cory, let's start with you.

Cory Pardo:

Okay. Thank you so much for the invitation to join this podcast. So I'm Cory Pardo. I'm the director of public health emergency planning in the Bureau of Agency Preparedness and Response, and briefly, I oversee a team of emergency planners who work on our emergency response plans, protocols and frameworks about how the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene will respond to a variety of emergencies. So our plans include plans on our general emergency response structure, how we maintain critical essential services, our citywide health and safety planning, pandemic planning, and that's just to name a few.

Allison Pennisi:

Elyse.

Elyse Morris:

Hi, thank you. Thank you so much for having me. So as you said, I'm field ops training manager in the planning and training unit that's housed within the Bureau of Emergency Field Operations. We call it BEFO. So I supervise and manage the field ops training program, which primarily consists of PECO, the Post Emergency Canvassing Operation, and POD, the Point of Dispensing Operations. We train about 2,500 to 3,000 city workers a year, including MRC volunteers that represent over 27 agencies, and so I supervise those training programs as well as our over 30 facilitators that are part of our program.

Allison Pennisi:

Wonderful. Thank you both for sharing. We were saying this conversation is about women in emergency management, public service and public health, and since March is women's history month, you're both leaders in this field. Elyse, you actually started as a fellow with the John D. Solomon Fellowship for Public Service, before taking a full time position with the New York City's Health Department, and I know, Cory, you are recently promoted, so congratulations to you. Can you each share with us what drew you to the field and a little bit more about your journey? Elyse, let's begin with you.

Elyse Morris:

Thank you so much. I remember the fellowship days. My journey in public health AND emergency management is not traditional. I started out in the performing arts. I was actually in professional dancer for a few years, which allowed me to travel a lot in my twenties, and so during my time in undergrad, what drew me to public health specifically was an event I was a part of where we took a tour through the inner city of a city I was a part of, and the retired city bus driver was pointing out some areas where they had mounds of debris at construction sites. And what they were finding were some residents were showing up with tiny shards of glass in their lungs and other adverse substances. And so I didn't know at the time, but it was public health. It gave me an idea of how different social determinants can affect one's health, whether it's socioeconomic, race, neighborhood residence.

Elyse Morris:

And so from there, my interest in public health really peaked. I went and got my master's in public health and started to get internships having to do with disaster recovery, specifically working with the Program on population impact, recovery and resilience, looking at child health recovery after hurricane Sandy, and then the Solomon fellowship. And so from all those experiences, I really got a feel of how disasters and emergencies exacerbate social vulnerabilities that already exist. And so emergency management became a way for me to bridge my interest in public health, community, emergency preparedness, health system strengthening, even humanitarian aid, which I have an interest in as well. So that was my journey into where I am now.

Allison Pennisi:

Thank you. And Cory, what about you?

Cory Pardo:

So I'd like to say that emergency preparedness has always had a hand in my life. It's sort of like the friend that has checked in on me occasionally. So I actually grew up in Miami, Florida, and hurricane preparedness was just part of my family culture. Every June, we'd check our hurricane supplies, we'd check our generator, and it was just part of growing up. And so I think that has just provided a lens for me in general about being prepared for a wide variety of emergencies, of which New York city has many, thankfully, not hurricanes, but super storms included.

Cory Pardo:

And when I was doing my undergraduate work, which was in anthropology and environmental science, another way that my friend checked in on me was I worked with a professor following up on recovery and reconstitution programs in post earthquake Haiti. And after a study abroad, a very short study abroad in Iceland and Greenland, that's actually what brought me to my public health background

because I stayed in a very, very small town and it didn't have a lot of public health infrastructure, and that's really what drove me into public health.

Cory Pardo:

So I did my master's of public health at Columbia with a focus on environmental health policy, and when I graduated, I was really looking for policy positions because I thought that was really where my strengths were, and so I actually applied to a policy analyst position in the Office of Emergency Preparedness and Response. I wasn't selected, there's an amazing person in that role now, but when I was applying for these roles, I had friends and colleagues note that a lot of my skills were translatable to emergency planning, and I'm a person who loves a checklist, I love a to-do list, I love writing stuff down. I love distilling complex information into easy to read documents, and so I sort of went out on a limb and I said, okay, I guess I'm going to do some emergency management planning if they're willing to accept me.

Cory Pardo:

And so I applied and I went into the role of the all hazard emergency planning lead, which works on the plans and protocols that pretty much the Department of Health uses for every type of response. In every response, there's always going to be a surveillance function, there's always going to be staff needs, there's always going to be stuff needs. And so I had been in that role for about six and a half years and then I was presented the opportunity to apply for the director of the emergency planning unit, and I'm very grateful to accept that position and bring the things that I've learned from my variety of experiences and apply them to a lot of the plans that we have and improving emergency planning at Department of Health as a whole. So it's a little bit of a meander as well.

Ashleigh Holmes:

Oh, wow. That was great. I hope you guys inspire more women to get into the emergency management field. So you both have responded to a wide range of public health emergencies in your tenure, including the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic response. The city recently marked the second anniversary of the first confirmed case in the five boroughs. Share one of the biggest successes during one of these crises, as well as the biggest challenges you have faced and lessons learned. Elyse, you can go first.

Elyse Morris:

Yeah. Wow. Yes, these two years have been one for the books for everyone. Working in the Bureau of Emergency Field Operations, I served many ICS roles and field roles over the past two years as a part of the Citywide Health and Emergency Response Group, and so I'll just talk about one in particular. I would say it was a success and a challenge. Emergency Response Group was responsible for leading a massive PPE distribution operation and supporting the New York City healthcare system at the high of the first wave of the pandemic in the spring and summer of 2020.

Elyse Morris:

And so I was deployed for three months to assist primarily in the inbound section, and being a part of that team really changed me, especially during that difficult time. And so during the time that we were there, we serviced over 55 different hospitals, over 150 nursing homes, healthcare facilities, funeral homes, dialysis centers, later, primary care providers, distributing massive amounts of PPE, millions of [inaudible 00:09:30] 53 face masks at one point, 7 million N95s, 5 million gowns and I think it was over

3000 beds to hospitals in a matter of days. And so it was a 24 hour operation and we worked extremely hard and strategically to face the unprecedented challenges our city was going through.

Elyse Morris:

We would get phone calls from hospitals thanking us, letters from people across the city, the globe, donating items and praying for us. And just to see the result of it, we don't know exactly, we can't put a pin on our impact, but we can say without that gap being filled, who knows what would've happened with the city. So it was one of the most professional and personal challenges of my life, working with little information, many stakeholders with competing priorities. We know some of the challenges and so that, I would say, was a success and a challenge for me.

Elyse Morris:

And some of the things I've learned is that emergency management is about teamwork. Without this, nothing can be accomplished or solved, and everyone has a part to play. If there's an SME, if there's a subject matter expert, we have to value their expertise, we have to listen to them. We have to join in and see where we can fit in specifically. Communication is key, and then thirdly, I would say mental health is a huge component of working in this field. We have to understand how to take care of ourselves and support the mental wellness of our teams, and so those are just a few of the lessons that I've learned from that experience and that challenge.

Ashleigh Holmes:

You said it changed you, responding to the COVID 19 pandemic. Could you elaborate a little bit more about that, how it has changed you?

Elyse Morris:

Yeah. I would say logistically, I was able to learn an entirely different skill set because I was plugged in. There was a lot of training that was involved and so I got to learn how to work in the logistics realm. But also, how to be a mentor, a better mentor and a coach and a leader. I was helping to lead a team of 15 people in the unit that I was in, and so because we were all going through this pandemic, it was about the work but it was also personal. People's lives were changing, people had loved ones that were passing away. We were also in the middle of this racial pandemic so we were feeling that as well, and so it made me a more compassionate individual and grow in those areas, so professionally and personally, and really figure out what I want out of life and how I can make every moment count and not to take anyone or anything for granted. So I feel like I was changed in a lot of different ways and those are just some of them.

Ashleigh Holmes:

Great. Thank you so much, Elyse, for sharing. Cory, how about you? What are some of the biggest successes during one of these crises, as well as the biggest challenges you faced and lessons learned?

Cory Pardo:

Thank you. Man, it's hard to follow up on that, Elyse. I think one of the biggest successes just of this response has just been what we've been able to do with our emergency response structure and how much the agency has been able to use our emergency plans and pivot based off whatever the latest crisis of the day is. I just really have to credit our department of health staff. I mean, for reference, in

some of our other emergencies, we maybe mobilized a couple hundred staff, and at this point, we've mobilized I think over 4,000 Department Of Health staff. And also to connect with what Elyse is saying, I think we were able to bring in so many Department of Health staff to learn about our emergency response, planned about how we respond, and I think the Department of Health is all the better for it and I think we've been able to expand the professional skill sets to cover some of those maybe skillset gaps we had before because staff had an opportunity to learn in the moment.

Cory Pardo:

The fact that in a little less than a year and a half, we have over 6 million people with two doses in New York City, it just blows my mind away. So I think that's just a success just of this response, and personally, in my role, I tend to get deployed to different areas of the response to, quote unquote, fix it or come up with solutions and I can't name just one. I've had to create plans in the moment, I've had to create staffing dashboards, technological solutions, so I think one of my successes is just having to show my flexibility and consistently challenge myself. You're never bored in a response if you're willing to do the hard work.

Cory Pardo:

And then I think in terms of challenges and lessons learned, I think pandemic fatigue is really real. I think it's real for our staff, I think it's real for other agencies, I think it's for real for everybody who's been impacted by this response, myself included. And I think one of the challenges is that, at least in particular for our division, when a response ends, our work starts. It's on us to really look at the lessons learned from this response and engage with our stakeholders to try to find solutions to them in the short, medium and long term. So I think it'll be a challenge to continue to stay motivated, though I think we're surrounded by an amazing group of staff. So I think that's a challenge in itself.

Cory Pardo:

We're still in a global pandemic. I think New York City's in a much, much better place than we were before but we're not there just yet, we're not in those green pastures. And then I think a lesson learned is that as mentioned before, a lot of our responses before, not to say they weren't significant but they were much smaller than this. So I think our emergency plans were challenged like they never have been before, so I think it's a challenge and a lesson learned to make it so that our plans are as flexible as possible and also make sure that we train that accordingly. Well, we can plan till we're blue in the face but there's going to always be something new that comes around the corner, so I think it's trying to balance that. But I think that covers my general successes, challenges and lessons learned. This has been one of the most formative experiences of my life and I don't say that just for myself. For my family, my friends and all my colleagues.

Ashleigh Holmes:

In addition to working at the same agency, you both have enrolled in the National Preparedness Leadership Initiatives Emerging Leaders in Crisis Program. Could you share with our listeners some of the lessons you will apply to your work as emergency managers?

Cory Pardo:

I'm really looking forward to improving my leadership skills and response. I think I've learned a lot about myself and as well as areas that I could grow, and I think the other thing is I'm really looking forward to the network that this program provides and being able to engage with other emergency managers or

other folks involved in emergency management across a variety of sectors to learn what worked well for them, what didn't? What do they see as the national/local state gaps that we can work on together and learn from together? Because I think even just internally, we have a million lessons learned and I think we're going to have to figure out how to prioritize those, and I think similar to what Elyse is saying is looking at that big picture and motivating staff towards fixing some of these issues, especially ones that are systemic.

Cory Pardo:

Emergencies highlight things that were already there and so I think it's figuring out how to prioritize what you focus on first, how you motivate staff towards coming up with longstanding issues, and just, honestly, learning from the other folks in the program and what worked well and what didn't for them and getting another perspective, so I'm really looking forward to that.

Allison Pennisi:

Thank you for sharing. I think it is absolutely a testament to who you are as leaders at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene that you also have been taking this critical next step to enhance your leadership skills. So in that vein, the emergency management field continues to evolve, and especially in New York City, I know your department as well as at New York City Emergency Management, we are committed to diversity, equity and inclusion in our workforce and how we help New Yorkers. So with this, where do you see the field in the next five years? And I think maybe more simply put, how do we encourage more women to get involved in the emergency management field, even in public health and public service? Cory, why don't we start with you?

Cory Pardo:

Thanks. So I think in terms of the next five years, as I mentioned, I think emergencies highlight gaps that were already there, and so I think actually, emergency management is more in the forefront of people's minds now than ever. And I also think people had experiences and they want to improve it for themselves and for their communities, so I wouldn't be surprised if we see more and more people interested in public health and healthcare and in emergency management in general. And I think we really need to capitalize on that, and the one thing that I personally would advise is that I think a lot of people think you have to have a law enforcement or a military background or a firefighting background because that tends to translate to emergency management and I know those tend to be male dominated fields, but I think one of the beautiful things about public health and open, I think what we're seeing in the emergency management field is a bigger diversification.

Cory Pardo:

So many people in my office have a variety of backgrounds, so a credit to Elyse and her background, and my boss used to be a lawyer. You do not need to have a traditional emergency management background to be an amazing emergency manager, so I think we just need to emphasize that. And also, emergencies hit every sector, so I think you can do emergency preparedness for your home, for your community, for your job, for continuity of a business. I think we're going to see an expansion of what emergency management means and I think reducing whatever barriers and any misunderstandings folks have in terms of what do you need to be an emergency manager. I think you've got to be able to be detailed, quick on your feet and go with the flow. If you can do that, that's a great starting point. So I think we just need to get that out there and capitalize on the publicity that emergency management has right now.

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Allison Pennisi:

Thank you for those insights. And Elyse, what about you?

Elyse Morris:

Yeah, I would echo everything that Cory has said, but also, we've been seeing an environmental trend for decades. Climate change is affecting our biodiversity, the ecology of our planet, seeing more extreme temperatures, rising oceans, natural disasters, zoonotic diseases. We're seeing all these things affecting our planet and we know that these things are going to be more frequent. In 2021, we saw just a rise in coastal storms and hurricanes like we've never had before, I think it was the third most active Atlantic hurricane season we've ever had, and so we're seeing this trend and we have to go with it, sense the times. And so we're going to have to increase our capacity in this field and so one aspect of that is bringing the non-traditional voices to the table, more people of color, more women, more people of diverse backgrounds because disasters and emergencies affect us all. We're all connected, we're globally connected, and so we've seen that through the pandemic, one country affected and how that affects us all. So we have to be dedicated to bringing those non-traditional voices to the table.

Allison Pennisi:

Speaking with Elyse Morris and Cory Pardo from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Any final thoughts you would like to share before we go to Rapid Response?

Elyse Morris:

Yeah. I would like to share that I think in practicality, in our public health schools, I think we're going to see or we should see more opportunity to study emergency management in the curriculum or even as a concentration. I think if we can see that and make it more visible, as Cory said, more publicized, then we would get more women in the field.

Allison Pennisi:

It is Rapid Response time and if you are a first time listener, it's simple. Prep Talk will ask questions and our guests will give the first answer that comes to mind, but before Rapid Response, here is a message from Notify NYC.

Speaker 6:

New Yorkers love to be the first to know. That's why the City of New York has notify NYC, so you can be the first to know when an emergency happens. If there's a fire in your neighborhood or the weather takes a turn for the worse, stay informed with Notify NYC. Get the free app today for your Apple or Android device. You can also visit nyc.gov/notifyNYC, call 311, or follow Notify NYC on Twitter, because a notified New Yorker is a prepared New Yorker.

Speaker 7:

You're listening to Prep Talk, the emergency management podcast.

Allison Pennisi:

We are back with Rapid Response with Elyse Morris and Cory Pardo from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. First question, what is one emergency item you cannot live without? Cory, we'll start with you.

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Cory Pardo:

So I'm going to give the millennial answer and save my phone.

Allison Pennisi:

Fair enough. Elyse, what about you?

Elyse Morris:

I'm going to give the old school answer, flashlight.

Allison Pennisi:

We will accept both of those answers.

Ashleigh Holmes:

What is the best professional advice you have received? Elyse, we can start with you.

Elyse Morris:

Strength beyond the presence of one individual, we need that in every aspect of life.

Ashleigh Holmes:

And Cory?

Cory Pardo:

If you're going to bring up an issue, create a plan for how you are going to address it. It doesn't mean you have to have a solution but you've got to have an idea about how you're going to address it.

Ashleigh Holmes:

That's a really good one. What is on your playlist? And Cory, we can start with you.

Cory Pardo:

My poor playlist has a mixture of multiple genres. It includes classical Broadway, pop, singer songwriter, jazz, you name it.

Ashleigh Holmes:

Elyse?

Elyse Morris:

Jazz, reggae, more recently, the South African singer named Amanda Black.

Allison Pennisi:

Very cool. We're all going to have to exchange playlists after this. Last but not least, sum up the work you do in one word. Elyse, we'll start with you.

Elyse Morris:

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Build.

Allison Pennisi:

Cory?

Cory Pardo:

Puzzle.

Allison Pennisi:

Both excellent answers. Speaking with two incredible women representing emergency management, public service and public health, Elyse Morris and Cory Pardo. Thank you for your time. For those interested in learning more about the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and their emergency management, you can visit nyc.gov/health. Until next time, thank you all very much.

Speaker 1:

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.