

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.

Ashley Holmes:

Hello everyone. Thank you for listening. I am Ashley 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 at NYC Emergency MGT, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and much more.

Ashley Holmes:

On this episode of Prep Talk. We are joined by staff members of NYC Emergency Management, who are here to discuss the agency's 2022 to 2026 Strategic Plan and its key priorities, including recruiting and retaining talent that can shape the emergency management field as it continues to grow and evolve. Please welcome Jimmy Deats, monitoring and evaluation program manager, Veronica Geager, deputy director of people and culture. Thank you both for joining us. Please share with our listeners your role and how you got started in the field. Jimmy, let's begin with you.

Jimmy Deats:

Hi, good morning. I'm Jimmy Deats, the monitoring evaluation program manager, as Ashley mentioned, and in my role, I'm responsible for the after action reporting process, so that includes coordinating and facilitating focus group sessions after an emergency response to gather information on best practices, recommendations, and areas of improvement, and then documenting those findings in after action reports. Another responsibility that I have is tracking those recommendations through implementation to make sure that we are actually improving on past activation. So we're continuing to grow as an agency in our response in recovery.

I also serve on the Equity and Diversity Council as a part of the recruitment committee, so thinking about priorities of recruitment and how we can improve our agency's recruitment. And so, I got into the field, I actually have a background in public health, and I was originally working in research and research moved a little bit slow for me, even though I appreciated the importance of it, and I wanted a more engaging and high impact position. So, I got involved at NYCEM in 2020, and it's been definitely very interesting and exciting for me. Thanks.

Ashley Holmes:

Veronica?

Veronica Geager:

And I'm Veronica Geager. I'm the deputy director of people and culture at New York City Emergency Management. I started with the agency almost six years ago now. I started as a agency timekeeper in our human capital management unit or what used to be human resources, so we went through a

rebranding last year. And I started there as the agency timekeeper, and then, I moved on to the people and culture side. So right now, I oversee and run our agency's recruitment practices and our recruiting. I oversee and run our agency internship programming. I oversee and run our health benefits programming and our retirement benefits programming and getting seminars and webinars to the agency. I also am the liaison to the Equity and Diversity Council from the human capital management team. So, I've worked with Jimmy quite often, recently from the EDI team. So, thank you so much for having me.

Allison Pennisi:

Thank you both for being here and being part of this very important conversation. So New York City Emergency Management recently launched its 2022 to 2026 Strategic Plan, which outlines the agency's key priorities. One of which being diversity, hiring and retention. It also serves as an update to the agency's initial strategic plan that was released in 2017. So a few questions here, why should emergency management agencies create strategic plans and talk to us about the improvements that New York City Emergency Management has made since that plan from 2017 and what are the priorities now? So I know that's a lot to unpack, but Jimmy, I'm going to start with you.

Jimmy Deats:

So, a strategic plan in general can help to outline a shared vision for the agency and what the agency seeks to accomplish and improve on. I mean, it instills a forward thinking mentality. And developing a strategic plan can help to hold the agency accountable. So, the goals are documented and it basically sets out the foundation for measuring success towards achieving these goals in the future. And so, the 2017 to 2021 plan was a good initial effort for documenting the strategic vision for the agency, but the content was largely based on executive input from focus group discussions. This current iteration engaged staff at all levels across the agency. We're getting perspectives from staff, from coordinator to the commissioner level. Additionally, this current iteration, the 2022 to 2026 Strategic Plan incorporating monitoring and evaluation principles to help define specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely metrics to help track progress towards achieving the goals that we set out.

And we've also created a robust metric reporting process that will engage bureaus throughout the year. And so, the data that we're collecting will help us track our progress and course correct along the way. And then finally, the strategic plan will be a web-based publication that has translation features integrated to make it more accessible and engaging for readers.

In regards to the priorities for the strategic plan, there are six overarching goals that are laid out in the strategic plan. The first is to continue to build on our preparedness efforts, including emergency plans, trainings, and exercises. And we do this by incorporating emerging threats in plans and emergency preparedness efforts, evaluating our emergency preparedness programs and further engaging community organizations and groups to encourage the implementation of community-based preparedness strategies.

Another priority is to strengthen the city's response recovery and mitigation operations. By working with agencies and stakeholders define operational responsibilities and build capacity for these operations, developing a long-term recovery strategy for the city and securing funding for hazard mitigation projects.

Another priority is fostering a diverse, inclusive and equitable agency by recruiting a more diverse pool of candidates and working to make sure our emergency response strategies, including plans, programs, and initiatives effectively serve all of New York City's communities.

Another priority is investing in NYCEM staff to improve retention employee satisfaction, and this includes strategies to reduce burnout and professional development of NYCEM staff.

Additionally, another priority is leveraging the latest technologies to inform decision-making by improving data collection, sharing, visualization and analytic capabilities, implementing new technologies for financial and legal operations and working with private sector to develop new solutions to identified gaps.

And then finally, the last priority is expanding NYCEM headquarters to meet future demands, developing solutions, to meet emergency staffing demands and encouraging creativity and innovation for new ideas throughout the agency.

Allison Pennisi:

Thank you. So a lot of priorities, but it's really great to hear that these priorities weren't just from the executive level, that there was exploration and conversations and listening sessions that were done at all staffing levels to ensure everybody's voice was included, so thank you for that. I do want to focus on the recruitment and talent strategies and priorities that have been outlined. So traditionally, the emergency management field on the local state and federal level has a large presence of first responders and people of specific races. So Veronica, this question is more for you. How and where do you recruit to attract people of different backgrounds and skills to encourage them to pursue careers in emergency management?

Veronica Geager:

That's a great question. To start our agency is, I don't want to say the emergency management leaders in the field, but we are probably the biggest emergency management agency in the country. So, what I try and do is I want to recruit and hire talent that reflects the communities that we work in and the communities that we try and prepare. So for me, I try and recruit from a wide pool of areas. Handshake has become my new best friend. It's actually the largest network of colleges and universities across the country. And from there, we try and recruit people of all backgrounds in all fields of study to come and work in emergency management because I think from where people get stuck in our field, or don't think that they're qualified for our positions because they think you need an emergency management background, which I am living proof that you don't.

My background is most definitely in human resources. Before coming to emergency management, I worked in HR and my field of study was actually in communications. And working at NYCEM fell in my lap, and I received a ton of on-the-job experience in learning. And that's one of the things that I think our agency brings to the field and that we do give a lot of training and a lot of on-the-job knowledge and emergency management.

I do go to a lot of in-person and virtual career fairs. Some that are through colleges and universities, others are sponsored from council members. And I try and put the emphasis on you don't have to be an emergency manager to work at NYCEM, which is one of the good things. Like I said, for me, it's a huge priority to bring in a workforce and recruit talent that reflects the communities of New York City. So going into the different areas of the city, doing career fairs in The Bronx and Queens, Manhattan, Brooklyn, Staten Island, making sure that our agency is out there and people are aware that we are recruiting and that we want to bring in diverse talent. So, that's where my priority is as far as recruiting goes.

Ashley Holmes:

One of the key priorities is recruiting talent that reflect the communities we serve. You both actively participate in the agency's Equity and Diversity Council, which we have mentioned on Prep Talk before. So this topic is near and dear to both of you. The point in question, what practices of recruitment and retention are being done currently and what is being done to change them? Jim, then Veronica.

Jimmy Deats:

I'll let Veronica talk a little bit about more about the current processes, but as part of the recruitment committee with Veronica, we're thinking about how to better standardize the recruitment process throughout the agency, so that includes things like a diverse interview panel. So you're getting those perspectives in the hiring process. And so, you're having these different voices as part of the hiring process. Additionally, basically going back to what Veronica was saying, thinking about how non-traditional backgrounds can have a fit emergency management, not necessarily needing to have a master's in emergency management or Homeland Security, but having skills that can be transferrable and thinking more of a cultural add than a cultural fit because in practice, thinking about cultural fit reinforces the status quo, and you think about a cultural add that brings a unique perspective to the agency.

As an initiative of the recruitment committee for the Equity and Diversity Council, we created a equitable recruitment best practices document, and shared with hiring managers and the whole agency to document some of these best practices, so hiring managers can keep them in mind, and it could be used as a resource to further improve how we think about diversity and equity at the agency.

Ashley Holmes:

Thank you, Jimmy. You guys are doing great work. Veronica?

Veronica Geager:

So, I'll speak to what we're doing currently. So, on the recruiting end, I feel like in a post-COVID world, we need to do some non-traditional recruiting. So Allison and the communications team has been a lifeline for me. As far as getting some of that non-traditional recruitment going, we're in talks to do an ethnic media round table, talk about our different vacancies and job openings that we have. I am working with Allison to also do some graphics on our social media channels. She actually has created an awesome video that I think is going to be shared soon, if not already. And we're trying to really recruit on our social media channels. And that includes LinkedIn first and foremost, but also includes Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, all those places because in a post-COVID world, I think people are looking on more in these non-traditional spaces to refine jobs.

As far as our retention practices go, I actually worked with the Retention Committee through the Equity and Diversity Council to work on a retention survey to really get the feel and the temperature of the agency. And where our staff is at in regards to their professional journeys at NYCME, I think from a recruiting end and from a human capital management perspective, that's super important to get the perspectives of everyone across the agency. Like Jimmy was talking earlier about getting the perspectives of everyone from a coordinator and specialist and program manager level for the strategic plan, from the Equity and Diversity Council and the HCM perspective, it's important to get everyone's temperature across the agency, not just at that executive level. So we launched a retention survey that we're going through right now. I'm going to be able to release some data on that very soon to the agency, but I think that was a great exercise in really getting the understandings of everyone across the agency.

So, we're hoping to use our retention survey as a benchmark to go year-over-year, set some goals based on our responses and make sure that we're measuring the metrics, to make sure that we're hitting those goals year-over-year. So, we definitely want to be able to use the retention survey and send it out every year so that we can get the temperature of the agency, but also use it as a benchmarker to set goals and policies for the agency as well, putting a lot of emphasis on recruiting and making sure that we're recruiting diverse talent that reflects the communities that we serve, but also, once we hire that talent, making sure that we're able to keep them and keep them happy and make sure that they're growing professionally as well, and making sure that we're giving them the tools and the tips that they need to really succeed at NYCEM.

So, that's some of the current stuff that we're doing, but I think going forward, HCM has our own strategic plan on where we want to go in the future. And like I was saying before, that includes doing more recruitment on non-traditional platforms, reaching out to our community and ethnic media partners, eventually doing job descriptions in other languages and being able to post in other languages. So, we do have our own recruiting and retention strategic plan as well on the HCM side.

Ashley Holmes:

Veronica, what are some of the challenges you have seen in recruitment and retention salaries or remote work? Can you speak to that?

Veronica Geager:

I absolutely can. So, right now, I think that the country as a whole is experiencing a shift in landscape as far as what people expect from their work and from their work environment. So I think it's been a little tough because I think the city as a whole is trying to move in a direction that retains staff, but also, being able to move with the times. So, I think that we're in a very interesting moment right now in the job landscape.

I think that salary has definitely been a challenge and being able to compete with the private sector, but that's always been a challenge with city government and with the private sector. But also now, remote work, we are in person, we are fully in the office, so that is also a challenge as well when some other jobs in the private sector are offering hybrid roles or fully remote roles. So that's a challenge too. And in a post-COVID world, it's going to be really interesting how us as a city are able to navigate those challenges and rise to the occasion, so that we can recruit the talent that we want to recruit or we can recruit more, bringing in more talent to the city instead of losing them to the private sector. So, those are definitely some challenges.

Ashley Holmes:

Thank you, Veronica. As you said, it is very important to be competitive in the job market, so you don't lose out people to the private sector. Either Jimmy or Veronica, why is diversity and inclusion important in the disaster cycle? Actually, we can start with Jim.

Jimmy Deats:

Sure. So, I think in general, having a diverse workforce is beneficial, not just for actual priorities, work priorities, but the culture at work. If we're thinking about the disaster cycle and emergency response, diversity is extremely important to bring these perspectives, these diverse perspectives that help us consider the different communities that we're serving and challenge conventional thinking and encourage innovation work environment. So, when we have a workforce that reflects the community

that we're serving, that important connection with the community can help us understand the needs and the gaps that we have as we respond and recover from emergencies. And it also helps like treating these communities with the dignity that they're entitled to. So I think that understanding is key. You're never going to have that understanding if you are coming as an outsider. You can try your best, but you need those voices in the room to encourage that and push us towards creating a more equitable operations and response.

Ashley Holmes:

Thank you for that, Jimmy. Veronica, do you have anything you want to add?

Veronica Geager:

I think it's so important to echo different voices across EM as an industry. As Allison said earlier, EM is predominantly made up of one person typically. So, it's important to reflect other voices because other voices can bring other perspectives. Other voices bring other experiences and some experience are shared, but others are not. So, it's so important to make sure that we are basically creating a work environment that is inclusive of all backgrounds and all people to make sure that we are creating a work environment that's not only open and inviting, but also allows for shared experiences. So, that's why I think that as an EM field, I think that it's not up to us solely, but I think that our field definitely needs to move in the direction of making sure that we're sharing the space with other voices as well. So that's why at NYCMEM, I think that the priority is to really make sure that we are creating a welcoming space for everyone to work in.

Allison Pennisi:

All great points. Just looking at this from a 10,000-foot view, if we look at the five barriers to equity, so race, age, income, education, and culture, they have a great deal of impact on all faces of the disaster cycle, especially in the response and recovery phases. So, can you all give us an example of how having a diverse staff helped during a recent response for the City of New York and how can emergency managers carefully consider and be mindful of these barriers as they look to improve their work and enhance their mission?

Jimmy Deats:

Yeah, I think often in an activation, my memory blends together, so it's hard to point out a specific scenario. But I think as in my emergency response role, I work in the planning section. And so, we work directly with leadership a lot, and just having a voice in the room that can ask the important questions that need to be asked. So for instance, what data we're reporting on what metrics are we collecting that's telling us, and what is that telling us about the communities that are just proportionately impacted by disasters? And in line with the barriers, I think it's really important to first recognize these barriers and then make sure you're accounting for them at all levels and throughout all aspects of emergency response, so in plans, reports, exercises, hiring.

And if you purposely are thinking about it and calling it out, that will allow you to better serve the community. So, as I mentioned before in our situational reporting, like what data are we collecting on communities disproportionately impacted by disasters and what are we doing with that data and information, and how is that changing how we respond? From my aspect of my day-to-day work for the hot washes and after action reports, are we specifically asking questions about diversity, equity, inclusion, and disability access and functional needs in these hot wash sessions to make sure that we are continuing to move forward and improve response from that perspective? And I think tying back to what

we've been talking about, having diversity at the agency helps us account for these barriers by asking these questions and having these voices in the room that can consider things that wouldn't be considered if you have a monolith of the same type of people throughout the agency.

Veronica Geager:

Having a diverse staff has helped during a multitude of activations and emergencies actually, making sure that we can communicate with those communities to give them the information that they need to recover from emergencies, or to be able to get through an emergency depending on what's going on. And I think that it's important, I said it a few times, to make sure that our staff reflects the communities that we are serving. New York City is made up of a melting pot of individuals from all different backgrounds and all different needs.

So, making sure that our staff reflects that, and I think also having a diverse staff also, I think makes it easier to communicate with the communities that we serve. And I think it also builds trust in our agency as well when someone that is experiencing a disaster, like a building collapse or a fire see someone that looks like them or reflects them, it makes it easier to build trust, so that we can better serve them, or they feel comfortable coming to us with questions or explaining their situation. I think it makes it so much easier to do that when we have a staff that reflects the community that we're serving.

Jimmy Deats:

And I actually just thought of an example, but totally echoing everything that Veronica said. I know during Ida, when we stood up service centers in all five boroughs, I know that having a coworker who was a Brooklyn-native, understanding where to stand up this service center, so that it was accessible for multiple forms of transit, and considering disability and access and functional needs is extremely important. And then also, echoing what Veronica said, having staff at the service centers that look like the people they're serving and can speak the language and understand the cultural context is important for building that trust with the community.

Veronica Geager:

I can also echo Hurricane Ida as well. I was in a service center in Staten Island for, I want to say like four weeks, and I'm a Staten Island native. So having that background of, not so much where to set up the facility or making sure that it's accessible to everyone, but just having that face of people coming in and explaining where they live or explaining where the water was coming from, having a face to say, "I can communicate with you. I know where this is. I'm so sorry." And making sure that people can see themselves in the staff that we deploy is very important because thinking back on that time, it brought a little bit of comfort knowing that we had staff that reflected the people that were directly impacted by Hurricane Ida. So, I think it's only positive when we can echo everyone's voices in the room, and we can deploy staff that reflects our whole community.

Ashley Holmes:

Veronica, in your opinion, what are some of the best practices or recommendations you have for those looking to create a strategic plan and how to prioritize initiatives in a holistic way?

Veronica Geager:

So, best practices that I would say for creating a strategic plan, from a recruitment and retention side, I would say best practice is to really, I would say, on the retention end, survey your current staff, make

sure that you are getting their voices and their opinions when you are coming up with any strategic plan because the people that are able to live that experience and the people that are currently doing the work, they have a lot of thoughts and opinions, and they need to be considered as well because it also fosters innovation. Like Jimmy had mentioned building innovation into your strategic plan, and I think that's so important. And a lot of those innovative ideas, they may not be coming from the top. They might be coming from someone who's a coordinator, a specialist level, but they have this great idea and they have their ears to the ground on what's important. So, making sure that we are surveying our staff is in my view, it is a great practice, not a best practice, a great practice.

But also, on the recruiting end, making sure that we are recruiting from a wide scope of areas and making sure that we are touching enough people that are able to visibly see our job postings, but also are intrigued by the area of study that we're in. Emergency management is not something that is widely talked about. It's talked about now, I think, because more disasters and natural disasters are coming around the country, so it's talked about more, but it's still not a field of study or a scope of work that I think a lot of people are looking at. So, it's important on the recruiting end to make sure that our job postings are visible and making sure that we're getting traction on them, and just make sure that you find niche places to recruit on, making sure that we're looking at areas that are touching a lot of people, but also a lot of people that reflect the community that we're serving.

Ashley Holmes:

Jim-

Jimmy Deats:

Just to add to that, I think having a strategic plan that specifically outlines goals but has some degree of flexibility. So, it's specific but broad. I know that's like a contradiction, but I'm just thinking about our strategic plan as a four-year strategic plan. And a lot of our priorities will remain the same, but our priorities might change over time. So reflecting overarching goals as opposed to being overly prescriptive is important.

And then, one of the portions that I'm involved in is the collection of data to track progress. And I think having a data-driven framework to track strategic plan progress is extremely important because you want to make sure that you are holding teams accountable, and that you're actually making progress towards these goals. And not only just collecting quantitative data, but some more the qualitative data to provide context because you can't get everything from numbers. There's a lot of information that you can't collect from just quantitative metrics. You want to supplement that, so you are looking holistically at progress because a number can tell you something, but it can't provide all the context needed to really show us our progress towards these goals. So I think those are just a couple to add to all the points Veronica brought up.

Allison Pennisi:

Great. Thank you, Jimmy.

Speaking with Jimmy Deats and Veronica Geager from 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 guests will give the first answer that comes to mind. But before Rapid Response, here is a message from New York City Emergency Management.

Speaker 6:

What do new Yorkers and hurricanes have in common? There are more of them each year. Hurricanes don't wait and neither should you. Visit nyc.gov/knowyourzone or call 311 to find out how to prepare for hurricanes in New York City. Prepare today, know your zone.

Speaker 7:

It's time for Prep Talk Rapid Response.

Allison Pennisi:

Okay. We are back with Rapid Response. First question, what is one emergency item that you cannot live without? Jimmy, we'll start with you.

Jimmy Deats:

I don't know if this counts. It might be a terrible answer, but I have my reusable water bottle that I have all the time because I'm always thirsty and I feel like in an emergency, that's kind of important.

Allison Pennisi:

Okay. Reusable water bottle. Veronica, what about you?

Veronica Geager:

I would say my portable phone charger. I think that's an item that I can't live without in an emergency or not. I think I carry it every day with me, so my portable phone charger.

Allison Pennisi:

Got it.

Ashley Holmes:

What is your favorite disaster movie? Veronica, we can start with you.

Veronica Geager:

Ooh, good question. I would say the movie 2012. I think Jake Gyllenhaal is in it. I'm pretty sure it's set in New York. And I remember I was in college and I went to school in Manhattan, so as I was watching it, I was watching Midtown get flooded. And the Statue of Liberty was in a pile of snow. And I remember actually being really scared watching it. And it's only ironic that now I work in emergency management. So, I think that would be my favorite disaster movie.

Ashley Holmes:

Jimmy?

Jimmy Deats:

Maybe I guess I'd say Deep Impact. I know Armageddon, Deep Impact came out around the same time. And for whatever reason, my family went to see Deep Impact. Maybe Armageddon again was sold out, but I just remember it being very entertaining. It was probably unrealistic and silly, but I just remember the effects being really cool and the story being entertaining for whatever. I was nine, 10 year old.

Ashley Holmes:

That's actually mine too.

Jimmy Deats:

Good choice. Good choice.

Veronica Geager:

This is, I guess, a question that I have. Whenever any of you see a disaster that hits New York, do any of you think at this point I'd get called into work? Because that's what I think of when I see a disaster that hits New York. I'm always like, "Mm, this is the point where I'd be called into work."

Allison Pennisi:

Oh, in a disaster movie? Yes, absolutely.

Ashley Holmes:

Yeah, no spoilers, but the new Batman movie towards the end gave me a little anxiety. I would definitely be called into work for this.

Jimmy Deats:

Just checking the weather gives me anxiety now, so I feel you there.

Veronica Geager:

I remember watching the first Avengers movie and it's like all the aliens are coming out of the sky. And Midtown Manhattan is just being pummeled with falling buildings and aliens and Avengers everywhere. And I turned to, now he's my husband, but he's my boyfriend at the time, I turned to him and I was like, "This is the point in the movie where I would get called into work. I'd be working in the EOC at this point."

Allison Pennisi:

Oh my gosh. Yeah. So we could do an entire episode of Prep Talk on disaster movies and art imitating life, but I'm going to go to our last rapid response question. Sum up the work you do in one word. Veronica, we'll start with you.

Veronica Geager:

Rewarding.

Allison Pennisi:

Jimmy?

Jimmy Deats:

Improvements.

Allison Pennisi:

This transcript was exported on Jun 28, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Speaking with Jimmy Deats and Veronica Geager from New York City Emergency Management, for those interested in checking out New York City Emergency Management's 2022 to 2026 Strategic Plan, you could visit the agency online at nyc.gov/emergencymanagement.

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.