Mark Peterson - Host:

I am Mark Peterson, and this is "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA."

Mark Peterson - Host:

On today's episode, we have a really exciting conversation that we'd like to highlight for you. FEMA was thrilled to recently host a joint FEMA virtual townhall with our colleagues at the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency - CISA. FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell joined CISA director Jen Easterly for a special fireside chat where they discuss the crossover in our two mission spaces and our shared commitment to resilience and unity. FEMA and CISA often work hand in hand to keep communities across our nation safe. And issues surrounding cybersecurity and infrastructure security continue to be increasingly important areas of focus for all emergency managers. So to that end, we wanted to represent their conversation for you here on today's episode. I hope you enjoy this fantastic conversation.

Michael Wadowski:

Hello, good morning or good afternoon, depending on where you are joining us from. And welcome to a joint CISA, FEMA townhall. My name is Michael Wadowski. I am the Chief of the Office of Workforce Engagement within, within the Office of the Chief People Officer. So welcome. Welcome to all the people out there from CISA who joined and welcome to our colleagues across the nation, not only here in DC but across the country from FEMA. This is a, like I said, this is a joint townhall. It's the first one that we've had. It's with one of our sister agencies here at DHS, so with FEMA and CISA, and this one is a little personal to me. I must admit. I've been looking forward to this one for quite some time. I think there's probably a few people I remember at FEMA.

Jen Easterly:

I was at FEMA for 14 years, from 2000 until 2013, and then came over here to CISA and loved all of my time in DHS. It's really great that we are having this townhall today as CISAs focused on the year of unity and resilience. And I know how important that is to FEMA's mission as well and how much we really overlap in the areas of mitigation, preparedness, recovery, response, emergency communications, infrastructure protection, the list goes on. So, I think we're gonna have a great conversation today between Director Jen Easterly and FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell. With that, let me turn things over to the director and administrator. Director Easterly, over to you.

Jen Easterly:

Awesome. Thank you so much, Michael. So, I am super excited to have Deanne Criswell, the administrator of FEMA with us today for our first ever joint DHS townhall. So, folks know we set yearly themes to help drive how we do engagement with the workforce. So, 2022 coming out of COVID, we did the year of mental health and wellbeing. Twenty-three we did the year of leadership and learning. And now 2024 is the year of One CISA, the year of Unity and Resilience. And, you know, our fourth goal of our CISA strategic plan is all about unifying CISA as one integrated agency in terms of our functions, our capabilities, and our workforce. And while that has been super important as we've been building a new agency, certainly new relative to FEMA that's been around since.

Deanne Criswell:

1979.

Jen Easterly:

1979. Wow.

Deanne Criswell:

April 1st.

Jen Easterly:

Wow. So, but I'm actually really happy that we're able to continue to catalyze these strong partnerships with our sister agencies and DHS. And so having you here and Team CISA and I think we've got some teammates from FEMA here, I think it's just a really important symbol to our workforce about how important that partnership is.

Jen Easterly:

So, Deanne and I wanted to make a point to do this townhall so that both our workforce hear the same message and have an opportunity to ask us questions. And as Mike Michael said, we took a bunch of questions in advance, so we've got those tee'd up after our discussion. Deanne and I actually had a great trip together at the end of the year last year to kick off a campaign that we called Shields Ready, which is really the follow on to our Shields Up campaign that we launched around Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine. And it was really a recognition that it is extraordinarily difficult to prevent bad things from happening.

Jen Easterly:

And so, we have to work together to build that resilience in so that we can be prepared for disruption, we can respond and we can recover as rapidly as possible. And of course, you have made a big focus on resilience. The importance of building that resilience even as you respond to all of the disasters that have, really feel like they've plagued the environment.

Deanne Criswell:

It's been busy so far this year already.

Jen Easterly:

It's been crazy. So, before we dive in a little bit more about my friend Deanne, first female and 12th administrator of FEMA. Head of the agency since April of 2021. You came on pretty early on, probably the first component Chief. Started her emergency management career in Colorado, where you were the head of the Office of Emergency Management for Aurora, Colorado, where I've actually been a bunch of times. Assisted with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, back in those days. Served in the Colorado Air National Guard for more than 20 years, so another veteran. As well as the Commissioner of New York City Emergency Management for two years, which is also a pretty huge job and probably a great preparation to be administrator of FEMA. So, welcome to CISA.

Deanne Criswell:

Thank you, Jen.

Jen Easterly:

Welcome to all members of Team FEMA. We're thrilled to do this.

Deanne Criswell:

Well, Jen, I am so excited to be here and for all of my FEMA colleagues on the line this is such a great opportunity for Director Easterly, Jen and I to be able to talk about, you know, the shared space that we have and the work that we do together. And I love the fact that, you know, your theme for this year is of unity and resilience. And while we have not typically had themes for a year, we just so happen to have one this year. And our theme this year has been our year of resilience. As people think about FEMA, we often think about the role that we play in response and recovery, but we have always had such a huge role to play in the before part of our mission. And that is building resilience in communities, whether it's through preparedness, whether it's through exercises, whether it's through mitigation projects. And so I think, you know, the work that CISA does and the work that we are trying to do to help communities be stronger is so interconnected. And the opportunity for us now to come together just is perfect timing, right, to really help strengthen our communities 'cause I think you and I have shared visions on how we want to do that. And while this is a great setting, I have to say though, it does not compare to the setting that we had in Long Beach.

Jen Easterly:

Oh my gosh. I know.

Deanne Criswell:

Had the most beautiful background.

Jen Easterly:

It was unbelievable. Yeah. Whoever set that up, well done. Well done.

Deanne Criswell:

It was. It was. But it was a really great way to demonstrate how we work together, right, and do that public service announcement and talk about Shields Ready and how it, you know, really plays right into the work that we do as far as our ready campaign. And I just think as we go through the conversation today, there's gonna be so much more that we can talk about. Before we get to the questions, just a real quick introduction for my FEMA colleagues to Jen. So, this is the newest agency within, I think actually all of the federal governments, right?

Jen Easterly:

I think so too, but.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

That's what I say. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Deanne Criswell:

2018. So, you're just a little bit over five years old. Yep, yep. Which is awesome. And I think it's, you know, gotta be really exciting to be really building something from the ground up and being able to shape what it looks like. But Jen has so much experience coming into this role. I mean, you have been with DHS before you worked in the National Security Council. She is also a veteran of how many years?

Jen Easterly:

21.

Deanne Criswell:

21 years. Oh, so the same, you have something similar there, except mine was just traditional guard. Wow. But all of that experience has really led to Jen being the second director of CISA and really being able to now take it from inception, I think, to actual making a difference in the world, which is exactly what you've been able to do.

Jen Easterly:

Thank you. Thank you. Well, I'm really excited to have this conversation. So, we always start out our townhalls with the same question, and I'm pretty excited about this one, but, you know, what makes Deanne Deanne? Just tell us a little bit about your background and really what brought you to this place in your, in your life and your career.

Deanne Criswell:

You know, it's, it's really been a journey and I, you know, I start by thinking about all of the experiences that I've had throughout my life. I grew up in a very small town in Michigan. Very close family, but really rural neighborhood. And I remember, you know, all of the challenges you had with just day-to-day life in this rural neighborhood. And then as I started through my career, I started as a firefighter, one of the first women on the fire department in Aurora, Colorado. And from there, got introduced to emergency management and always looked for these opportunities to challenge myself to the next thing and put myself in positions that I wanted to learn more or would help me grow professionally or personally. And putting myself in situations where I was always a little bit over my head and had to really learn it and perform.

Jen Easterly:

And so, I think all of those things really have helped chart the journey that I've had. I've never had this kind of set, you know, path of where I wanted to go. I never thought I wanted to be a firefighter. And that's where the Colorado Air International Guard came in. I joined the Guard 'cause I wanted to go back to school, and they had money for school, and then they said they had bomb loading and firefighting. The bomb loaders looked bored, and the firefighters were playing basketball in the parking lot. And I said, I'm just gonna give that a try. And so that's how I got started in firefighting, which then led me to Aurora Fire Department and emergency management. And, you know, I moved over to our FEMA region office then in Colorado, in Denver. And I spent a couple of years there.

Jen Easterly:

And then I got noticed by somebody at headquarters and they moved me to DC always with the intent of going back to Colorado. And I'm still trying to figure out how to get there. But all of those different experiences I think have really helped me as I've gotten into this role. You know, I've been a local emergency manager for a small town. I know what it's like to live in a small rural neighborhood. I worked for one of the largest cities in the world in New York City with tons of complexities. I was there during COVID and supported that entire response. And it's really helped shape how I want to drive our agency to help people. Yeah. Right. And never forgetting that everybody has a story. Everybody has, you know, their own unique situation and the impacts that they're gonna have, whether it's trying to prepare for a disaster or recover, are gonna be unique to them. And we have to be able to listen to their story.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. I love that. I'm gonna go off script. I have this obsession with firefighting. I don't know if it was like from seeing Backdraft from many years ago, but is there ever like a, what was the most intense moment you had as a firefighter?

Deanne Criswell:

Well, the one that always comes to mind for me is the first fire that I went on.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

And I was brand new. I'm riding in the backseat, and the, the lieutenant, the officer, as we're driving up to the the fire, he was acting in the position and he approached it really routine. And we do a size up. And so, when you're driving up to the scene, you get on the radio, and you do a size up. And the call had come in from one address. So, he's looking at this address and does his normal size up, "Engine one's on scene, single family structure, nothing's showing." And he turns and he goes, "Holy, there's fire!" And so, then my tension gets really high. And that's how we go into fighting what would be my first fire.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. But it, but it was okay.

Deanne Criswell:

It was good. We put it out, house was destroyed, but,

Jen Easterly:

Oh, wow. It takes a lot of courage and resilience.

Deanne Criswell:

It does. It takes a lot of confidence in your own abilities.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. In your own abilities, and I guess your teammates.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

As well.

Deanne Criswell:

Absolutely. Trust

Jen Easterly:

Since your life's on the line. Yeah. The trust thing. You know, for, for me, it, I started off sort of similar. I mean, I was in the Army.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

Ever since I, right after my 18th birthday. My dad had been a Vietnam veteran. And that was an experience that really influenced him very early on. You know, he was a high school dropout, kind of a disaffected but highly curious kid.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

And so went off, joined the Army ended up in Vietnam, but in the early days. So, 62 - 63.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

And it really kind of cracked open the world for him. Learned about a different culture, felt relevant and impactful. And in fact, after he came back to the States and put himself through college, he went back to Vietnam and built an orphanage.

Deanne Criswell:

Oh, wow. Wow.

Jen Easterly:

For Vietnamese orphans, which is, you know, fantastic. And he and I traveled back there when we went to Vietnam together in 1999. And we visited the orphanage and we visited places where he was stationed. And so, you know, he's always had such an impact on me. And then he was in, in the Reagan years, he was in the Defense Department, and that was when I was in high school. And so, you know, the idea of serving, of being in the military and then applying to West Point. So, applied, got in early, decided to go there, made the mistake of never visiting the school before I showed up. So, it was much more difficult and stressful.

Deanne Criswell:

I bet.

Jen Easterly:

Than I expected but, but at the end of the day, you know, West Point, I think is about two things fundamentally, that both things that we need to be successful in the jobs that we're doing. One is about values. You know, you walk around the campus that I was just up there with my board last week, I, we convened it at West Point, and you see duty, honor, country. So, the core values of West Point, and it's about leadership. So, at the end of the day, when you're leading big organizations, it's sort of those fundamental tenets of servant leadership, leading by example. And that's really what the military gave me. Whether it was leading up platoon or a battalion or, you know, as a military officer working in policy or whether that was at the intelligence community. And so, you know, these are the things that inform our lives. It's sort of like between our parents and our, and our education.

Deanne Criswell:

That's right.

Jen Easterly:

And how we take that and put that into our own successes.

Deanne Criswell:

Well then how did you, how did your career path take you into the cyber realm?

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. I was in the active duty for a long time and, you know, in the military, you don't really necessarily get to say where you wanna go. Right. And you change jobs every two to three years. And so I was at the National Security Council working for Condoleezza Rice, the National Security Advisor from 2002 to 2004. And after that period of time, I, you know, wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. She, Condi, had been a fellow with Mike Hayden, who was the director of NSA, the National Security Agency at the time. And she suggested that I look to go to Fort Meade. So I ended up at Fort Meade, and that was really the beginning of my immersion into the world's world of kind of national security communications and the world of cryptography and code making and code breaking. And then that would evolve into cyber, which I became, you know, operationally immersed in when I was in Iraq for the first time from 06 - 07 as we saw insurgents using communications for recruitment and radicalization and operationalizing attacks against US troops and Iraqi civilians.

Jen Easterly:

And then when I redeployed the current head of the NSA at the time, General Alexander, had asked me to help stand up US Cyber Command and the Army's first cyber battalion. So, really started with being on the intel side, evolved into the military cyber aspect, and then, you know, in the private sector working at Morgan Stanley, but really as part of my time in the military.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah. Yeah.

Deanne Criswell:

Military really helps shape both of our lives.

Jen Easterly:

You know, I, I really think so. And, and I know you have a lot of veterans in FEMA.

Deanne Criswell:

Well, we do. I don't know the exact number, but we do have quite a few. We have a Veterans Ferg even - employee resource group, and they're really active.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah, we do too. We've got about 40% veterans.

Deanne Criswell:

That's great.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. We're very super, super proud of. So, you know, I shared that it's our year of unity and resilience, and it is your year of resilience, which I think is pretty cool. But why don't we talk a little bit about what that actually means.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

In the context of our, of our two missions. So, you can go first and I'll jump in.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah. I mean, I think, again, when I go back to our mission statement of helping people before, during, and after disasters, you know, the big, there's a big part of our agency that has always been focused on resilience. Yet, people don't think of us in that realm. And so for us, it was really about using this as an opportunity to lift up that part of our agency more and help people understand the tools and the resources that they have available to them in order to make their communities more resilient. And so, we've had a really deliberate effort about trying to showcase some of our resilience projects and we, last year, designated August as National Resilience Month. Right. And so, that will be again this year. And really just, again, just like our national preparedness month that we do in September, it just gives us an opportunity to focus the whole month and lift up some of this work.

Deanne Criswell:

But we also wanted to have people start thinking about FEMA in this realm. And if I had, you know, my way five years from now, when people think about FEMA, they wouldn't think about our response and recovery roles. They would be thinking about our resilience roles, because then we wouldn't have to respond as much, and the recoveries would be simpler.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah.

Deanne Criswell:

And I was even at a tribal summit recently, and we did some work with one of the tribes in Alaska, and we do this thing called direct technical assistance as part of one of our resilience grant programs. And we helped them think through their tsunami threats and what they could do to help protect their communities. And he came back into this summit and he said, I never knew FEMA did that. I only thought you responded to us afterwards. And then he became one of our biggest advocates throughout that summit. And so, it's just really important that we, we help people understand the tools and resources that are available for them.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah.

Deanne Criswell:

And we have shared resources that, you know, we can both use to help these communities become stronger because we know the threat environment is continuing to change and get worse. Severe weather events are continuing to get stronger. They're intensifying more rapidly. They're happening more frequently. You know, we are already at staffing levels this year right now that, that we typically don't see until the middle, the high height of hurricane season because of the number of disasters we've had. And so, we have to do the work to help these communities have less impact from the threats that they're facing.

Jen Easterly:

I wanna come to the threats for a second, but what, can you explain to the, to these team Team CISA, when you say like the staffing and because you can tap into more folks than, so talk a little bit.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah. So, I mean, we have a variety of different layers or levels or tiers of staffing. We have our day-to-day headquarters staff and regional staff that work on, you know, just our blue sky operations and making sure that we can sustain the operations and the work across the agency, whether it's our, you know, the work that we're doing in resilience or the day-to-day work we're doing to continue some of the recoveries that are going on. But when we respond, we have to tap into our whole workforce. And so the biggest part of our workforce is our incident management workforce. And the primary piece of that is our reservists. And so, we have a whole reservist workforce that is really the heart of our ability to do our job in response and recovery. And they go out to disasters and they help these communities.

Jen Easterly:

And you wouldn't, you'd be, I think you'll be surprised when you hear this, we just got last year, USERRA like protections like the military has for reservists. And so, now our reservists can have day-to-day jobs and want to be, you know, a reservist with the, with FEMA, and be able to give back to their communities and go help them in some of their worst times and so, they are a big piece of what we do. We can also then reassign some of our headquarter staff to go out and support. But another big piece, and where it really plays in with CISA, is we have our DHS surge capacity course. And so you can volunteer to be part of the surge capacity, and we can mobilize you and deploy you out to disasters. We have every year since we initiated this in 2012, some years more than others, 2012, we did the first deployment during Hurricane Sandy. Hundreds and hundreds of DHS staff that went out. Harvey, Irma, and Maria in '17, again, sent many people out. And it takes that whole network of employee staffing to be able to support the continued rise in the number of events we're responding to.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. I mean, it really has been, it, you, you've been doing this for so long, Deanne. What is, do you have sort of a memory of a response that really just impacted you and kind of just illuminated like how important the work that your team does on the ground?

Deanne Criswell:

Oh, I mean, do I have to just pick one?

Jen Easterly:

I think there's been, I mean there, you know, no, but I, well.

Deanne Criswell:

I mean, I think the, one of the examples that I'll give is one of the first things I had to deploy on in this role was the collapse of the condo building in Surfside, Florida. Remember that. And so, you wouldn't think of FEMA responding to a building collapse, and typically we don't. But this one had such an incredible loss of life, trauma to the community. And that the programs that we could bring in to help with that. We have crisis counseling. We had funeral assistance, which was able to help them. We were able to bring in our search and rescue teams to help go through the debris pile. And it really highlighted that, again, even in a community as capable as Miami-Dade County is, something can always really push them to their limit.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah.

Deanne Criswell:

Of their ability to respond.

Deanne Criswell:

And it, it's both capability, but also mental capacity too. You know, think about this is your community. You're going through this debris pile for days on end of people that lived in your community, and it takes a mental toll on them as well. And so, it really helped me also make sure we were doing our due diligence to focus on the mental health of our staff and really trying to de-stigmatize the fact that we all have bad days. We all have other things going on in our lives and that we want to be able to make sure that you have the resources, but you also have the permission to say, I need help, right, or I just need to take a break.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. I know we talked about that a lot. You know, we're both big champions for mental health and you know, we have the same issues here with just the high intensity, the urgency of the mission whether it's responding from a cyber perspective or even working with you all in communities around the country when you respond to disasters and we're there to help in terms of how do you strengthen that infrastructure. You, you know, resilience, it's interesting as we talk through this, and I often think about Ukraine. I was in Ukraine in February with the cyber ambassador, Nate Fick. When you think about examples of incredible resilience, not just infrastructure resilience or cyber resilience, but really the human resilience piece, which is why when we call this sort of the year of unity and resilience, you know, there's a resilience of course, from a critical infrastructure perspective but again, there's a really important element of human resilience that I think is, I'd say societal resilience, societal resilience as well. I mean, it really was a stunning example when, when we pulled into the outskirts of Kiev. And you go out there on a train and you, you know, security and all of that. But we pulled in and there it was massive rocket attacks into the city. So, the train stopped, and after a while, the rocket attacks stopped. But, you know, there, there had been buildings destroyed. There had been people killed. And then you go in and there are people going about their day and you know, because they have to continue to provide for their families, even though as they're under this terrible siege. But, you know, societal resilience and human resilience and in, I talked about this maybe when we were together in, in California, but you know, the threats in Brandon Wales, our executive doctor, actually was mentioning this to me when you were at NEMA. The threats you talked about with nation state threats in particular, China. And that's what we talked about as well at the International Emergency Managers, managers conference. And people think, "Oh, you're gonna talk about climate, you're gonna talk about disasters and hurricanes" and all of that. But, you know, the idea of nation state threats and ultimately how we think about Chinese cyber actors and our water and our transportation and our communication in our power, building up that resilience so that we can respond more effectively, and we can recover more rapidly. I mean, those are as serious threats as anything. Right?

Deanne Criswell:

They are. Yeah. I mean, it's, the thing that I worry about so much is, as we continue to see this increase in the severe weather events, you know, our, our adversaries are watching, and they are identifying where we are gonna be vulnerable. And so, I worry about the opportunities that they're going to find to use both a cyber attack at the same time we're responding to a severe weather event. And what does that do? And will we know whether or not this is a result of the severe weather event, or this is something bigger than that. I mean, I go back and think about Hurricane Ian that happened last year. And Fort Myers Beach down in that area, they had had a significant cyber event the week before Ian hit. And so, you think about, okay, what would that have looked like if it happened at the same time?

Jen Easterly:

And these are the types of threats and challenges that I'm really trying to get across to our emergency management community, that we can't think of them as singular events anymore, that they are gonna have interdependencies. They are gonna come at the same time. They could be deliberately at the same time or just happenstance at the same time. And how do we, what is our role gonna be? How are we gonna rely on CISA to help give us the right information so we better understand the nature and how long is it gonna take for us to restore that so we know what kind of services we're gonna have to continue to provide to those communities. I think, you know, having that conversation at NEMA, your conversation with me at IAM has really kind of opened up the eyes of our emergency management community, and many of them are really taking this seriously and they're going back to their civil defense plans, right, and what can we learn from what we did in the past and adapt it to, you know, the tools and the technology and the resources we have to, you know, to make sure that we are, you know, taking different scenarios into account. You know, I get asked a lot about, can you give me some exec, specific examples? And I'm like, you don't need a specific example. You just need to watch the news and put that on your community. And how would you respond to that? Right. That's your example. 'cause Any of those can happen here.

Jen Easterly:

A hundred percent. Now you guys are 45 years.

Deanne Criswell:

Forty-five years. Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

Forty-five year! Wow. What are you gonna to commemorate that?

Deanne Criswell:

We had on, April 1st, in that whole week, we had a really big celebration. We did a video that really highlighted the work that we're doing. And it's been fun. I think, you know, when we think about the evolution of FEMA over the last 45 years, it's, it's, we, there's been triggering points. Right? And there's been things that have caused us to shift the way that, that we do things. You know, we started, Jimmy Carter formed us and he did that as a result of the Three Mile Island incident.

Jen Easterly:

Oh, that's right. Is that '77?

Deanne Criswell:

I think it was it, '77 or '78, somewhere right before that. And wanted, there were too many disparate capabilities across the federal government. And so wanted to bring them together to better support the communities that were impacted. And so, that was really what started FEMA. And then we turned into really kind of this preparedness and helping communities become prepared for these types of things. You know, building off of our old civil defense days.

Jen Easterly:

And then we turned into a recovery agency, just, you know, small recovery coming in and helping communities after a disaster happened. But then you go to 2001, 911, and a bit of the response piece started to come out and what is FEMA's role and what should they be doing to help that? And it really helped highlight the other parts of the emergency management, you know, founding principles of, you know response, recovery, mitigation, and how do we make sure that we can support these communities during these terrorist attacks, right, and that came with the grant programs and building capacity at the state and local level to better understand what their threat is, the creation of NIMS, to bring all of us on the same page. And how do we respond with common...

Jen Easterly:

I don't know if my CISA folks, those all about the NIMS.

Deanne Criswell:

NIMS. NIMS is the National Incident Management System and if they don't know, they should go online and take the courses.

Jen Easterly:

Oh, there's courses you can take?

Deanne Criswell:

Yes. yes.

Jen Easterly:

Oh. Maybe they all know and I'm the only one that doesn't know. But.

Deanne Criswell:

There's plenty of them out there. So, that was one of the triggering events that, you know, how do we, we don't have a common structure as a federal government to work together. You know, taking principles from the military, taking principles from the wildfire community that was using it, that had the same challenges. You know, and then we had Katrina. And Katrina really fast forwarded the need for FEMA to turn into a response agency. And how do we get into these communities faster and helping them support, you know, those immediate lifesaving needs? We are not first responders, like firefighters and police officers in EMS, but we do help enable them and we bring them resources when they don't have the capabilities. And we have some of those capabilities, but we still always work for the governor and the local jurisdictions.

Jen Easterly:

And then you go into COVID, right? So now you have COVID-19 and another triggering event. That's what, what is FEMA really for? And I always say, you know, the e in FEMA emergency doesn't mean just severe weather.

Jen Easterly:

Right.

Deanne Criswell:

It's a problem. And, and I look at us as chief problem solvers, which kind of takes us to where we're at today with the resilience piece and all of the, you know, evolving threat landscape. These are tough problems, challenging problems and the skillset that we as an agency bring is the art of bringing the right people to the table. Making sure that we, we don't need to be the expert at it all. We just need to know who they are so they can come to the table and have a conversation.

Jen Easterly:

A hundred percent on that. You know, you mentioned you work with governors, and can you talk a little bit about how to ensure that you are building these trusted partnerships? Because, you know, we're, we're in the same boat, right, in terms of trusted partnerships at the state and local level, election officials, industry, academia, the research community. So how, how do you think about the elements of building trusted partnerships?

Deanne Criswell:

It's communication, right? It's talking to people. For me, I'm calling governors all the time when something's happening, right. I'm reaching out to them, is there anything that you need right away? But also managing expectations of this is probably not gonna rise to the level of a Stafford Act declaration, but hearing what your needs are right now. And always having that open line of communication. And I've built such great trust with so many different governors. I was counting the governor phone numbers in my phone the other day 'cause It's all ones that I've talked to because of a disaster and it's close to 40.

Jen Easterly:

Wow.

Deanne Criswell:

And so that includes, you know, our, our territories as well. But that just goes to show how busy it's been. So, keeping that line of communication as open and unconstrained as we possibly can. But it's, you know, recognizing the whole team, right. We are just one piece of the team, and it takes academia and really trying to bridge some of the knowledge sharing from academia to operators. And how do you do that in a way that that really great research that's out there can help a community build the resilience that they have to have. And so I think building the trust is really about building that communication network and building just the network in general of being able to talk to people and having them know that they're not in this alone, that we have others that can help us with this.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. I think you're similar. You know, I often talk about us, we're not, we don't collect intel like a Title 50 agency. We don't have law enforcement capabilities. We don't, I guess, you have some regulatory power?

Deanne Criswell:

We have like our flood insurance program.

Jen Easterly:

Yes. We have that, which is not really regulation.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

We have some rules around it, but you know, both of us, I think are, are inherently partnership, voluntary agencies and so, and

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah. And we're non-partisan.

Jen Easterly:

And nonpartisan. Absolutely. And so, it's all about how can you use your, you know, what I would say kind of hard skills, your subject matter expertise, but then also your human skills. Your ability to communicate, to build that trust. And in many ways, like that's harder. It's harder to, to, to be in that type of a of an agency. But I love it because.

Deanne Criswell:

And how do you teach that? Like how do you?

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. I mean, it's, it's very hard. You know, at the end of the day, I think people really have to work at it. particularly. And, and we can practice every day, whether, you know, if we're married or have a significant other or have kids. I think a lot of it is the, first of all, the empathy, always putting yourself in another person's shoes and sort of trying to have their experience. But it's, a lot of it is listening.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

At the end of the day. And, and that frankly is a skill that you learn.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

That not everybody is as good at.

Deanne Criswell:

And you have to value it.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah.

Deanne Criswell:

Right, you have to value that skill of listening and truly listening. And I went to a retirement ceremony yesterday for a colleague from a different agency, and she talked about how she approached everything with heart and mind, and I think that's the empathy piece that we need to make sure that we do have the knowledge, but we also have to have the passion and the heart for the people that we're trying to help.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. That's one of our core principles here is lead with empathy. I do think that's.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

Incredibly important. You empathy, obviously with our teammates, but in some ways, you also need to, to have a little bit when you're thinking about dealing with some very aggressive nation state adversaries.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

As well as cyber criminals and terrorists, you need to have a little bit of adversarial empathy.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

So that you understand what you're up against because you, you know, we deal in both the sort of threats that we just can't control from, you know, hurricanes or firefighters. But then those, you know, those manmade threats, those intrusions from Chinese cyber actors, those attacks against power infrastructure from Russian cyber actors. And so, it's very important to understand some of the tactics and techniques that, that they will use so that we can get ahead of dealing with those potential mass disruptions. And so again, it all sort of comes down to the power of the power of resilience.

Deanne Criswell:

So, and as an agency that's five years old.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah.

Deanne Criswell:

And going through their maturity process, like how do you, how do you build your organization for the future with all of those threats and challenges you're facing?

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. So, you know, when I got here three years ago now. To me, I know it's, it's crazy, right? I think about it. Woo. The most important thing that I wanted to do was to set the organizational culture. Because I really fundamentally believe at the end of the day that that's what holds an organization together, is you really have to understand what you value and then those behaviors that we expect from each other, that we expect from our teammates that we aspire to be as an organization. So, setting that culture framework of our core values, our core principles, that I think was really step one. And, and also as much as we could really co-creating that with the workforce. So, I did a lot of sensing sessions, a lot of listening sessions, a lot of talking to people and really understanding what is important to be successful in this organization. So, you sort of have that as the foundation.

Jen Easterly:

And then as we evolved, I, I think one of the most important things that I recognized as I spent more time here is really this, and that's why we called it one CISA year of unity, is, you know, you, you have to be able to bring the agency together to operate as one agency because we truly are stronger when we are operating in a unified way as opposed to one division and another division. And I think we have really seen that the sum of the parts is greater than the, the whole, when we bring those pieces together, and we see it in many ways, you know, the great creating greater connectivity with our headquarters folks into our field.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

Which is really, and you have a strong field force as well. I mean, they're on the front lines of some of these partnerships, whether it's election officials.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

Or state and local leaders or industry. And then bringing able, being able to bring the power of the headquarters and then help to operationalize it in the field. That conductivity can be so powerful when you're able to, to really tap into the full breadth and depth of the agency. Elections is another example.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

You know, there's parts of this agency, whether it's the National Risk Management Center, the JCDC, the field forces, the election security advisors, and our integrated operations division and Kate Conley, who's our senior advisor for elections, sort of building that cross-agency team. It's just so much powerful than, more powerful than trying to operate in, you know, silos.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

So, that has been a huge focus area of us. And then you, you know, similar to you although we don't have a cool, I guess FEMA Corps or reserve we can tap into but building the workforce and being able to,

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

You know, attract some fantastic world class talent that has helped us really drive change to the ecosystem. Which is not easy.

Deanne Criswell:

No, it's not.

Jen Easterly:

Which is not easy. We're dealing with decades of sort of technology that did not prioritize security. And frankly, that's why we're in this issue of having to build resilience in and having to be prepared to respond because much of the technology that we rely upon has been bolted on with security as opposed to baked in. And so catalyzing that change in the ecosystem is also, and I think hugely important.

Deanne Criswell:

That part is so important. I mean, we, we actually also just went through a complete transformation of our resilience part of our agency. And in the last administration it was combined, two different parts of the organization were combined into one and named resilience with, you know, some synergies, but a lot of it in name only. And we really took the time to go through and understand where there were, you know, similarities that could be grouped together better to be able to provide better service to our customers. And, you know, it was not easy. It was challenging along the way to, you know, help kind of grow this concept of resilience and what does it mean and how does everybody have a role to play in that. But I think in the end, it's really about our customers and making sure that it's as easy on them to access the resources that we have to offer.

Jen Easterly:

And I also think too, you know, you talk about the connectivity and, and we have so many people that are out in the field, you know, I also want, you know, talk with my team about making sure that everybody knows, like we know for us, we're, we're out there trying to help the survivor on the ground. Like at the end of the day, that's our ultimate outcome is helping that, that individual or that community. But how do we make sure everybody knows that the work and how the work they do each and every day actually touches that person, right? And, and trying to find those opportunities to demonstrate that what you do in an office every day has a direct impact on the outcome that you're trying to achieve out in the field. And I think that some of the same challenges I heard you talk about is how do you make sure people know that you all have a part to play? You all touch, that you are enabling the overall success of the entire organization.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. Well, it's helping, helping people before, during, and after disasters? Is that your mission?

Deanne Criswell:

That's our mission statement.

Jen Easterly:

Has that been the mission for, since 1979?

Deanne Criswell:

No, no. The mission statement. I don't even, couldn't even recite it anymore. It was so incredibly complicated and a bunch of words. And it was actually, I believe it was either, I think it was Brock Long in the last administration. He just simplified it and it is so perfect. And it just helps us stay focused on what we wanna do.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. I love that. It's got like, the helping.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah.

Jen Easterly:

'Cause that is really important with the focus on customers, as you said. I know we have a bunch of questions that I'm sure Michael is anxious to get. But I have to ask you one last thing.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah?

Jen Easterly:

What, what do you do to relieve stress?

Deanne Criswell:

Oh, we were talking about this a little bit beforehand. I like to get outside, and I love to do triathlons.

Jen Easterly:

I love that you love to do triathlons, because I'm going to live vicariously through your, through you doing triathlons 'cause I'm probably not gonna be doing. What, you've got one coming up?

Deanne Criswell:

I have one in, not this weekend, but next weekend down in Colonial Beach. I'm just doing short ones now. Sprints, which are 750 meter swims, 14 mile bike rides and 5K runs. But I have done three Ironmans.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. Oh my gosh. That is fantastic. And talk about the jellyfish.

Deanne Criswell:

Oh, yeah. So, the last time I did this particular one in Colonial Beach, it was full of jellyfish. Every stroke was a sting, was pulling 'em off my face. And I got to this point where I'm like, "Alright, this is now a rite of passage. I have got to finish this swim." 'Cause I kept thinking, "They're just gonna go away eventually." No, they never went away. The entire swim was jellyfish.

Jen Easterly:

You are tough.

Deanne Criswell:

Well, or stubborn.

Jen Easterly:

Both of those are good traits, especially with the empathy. I don't do triathlons as my triathlon days are, are long pass. But I, during COVID we got my son a guitar, an electric guitar.

Deanne Criswell:

Oh.

Jen Easterly:

He got quite good at it. So, I got one as well. And I've gotten really, really into it.

Deanne Criswell:

Nice.

Jen Easterly:

That is what I do for fun.

Deanne Criswell:

That is a great release. I saw it in your office.

Jen Easterly:

You did, yes. That's what I do during my little free time.

Deanne Criswell:

Nice. They give you free time. I gotta work on my staff.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. It's called lunch. It's called lunch. They call it lunch as well. But yeah, I mean, we do, I think it's important actually for all our folks, right? I mean, we, we talk about the importance of taking time off. Taking time for yourself for your physical health, for your mental health, going on vacation. You know, if you're burnt out, you're not gonna be good to anybody.

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah. No.

Jen Easterly:

This is not a, you know, the person who works the hardest wins it's, we all need to,

Deanne Criswell:

And if you're doing your job as a leader, you have built a team.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah.

Deanne Criswell:

That can do the work while you take that time for yourself.

Jen Easterly:

A hundred percent. Yeah. There are no single points of failure. That's exactly right.

Jen Easterly:

Alright. Only hard questions for Deanne.

Michael Wadowski:

Okay. I'm happy to do that. But the first question is actually for Director Easterly.

Jen Easterly:

Oh, okay. Alright.

Michael Wadowski:

Actually, I was sitting,

Jen Easterly:

That'd be an easy one.

Michael Wadowski:

I have to say this because I'm sitting across and I could see the chief of staff and when, when the administrator was talking about the jellyfish, the look on her face was the priceless because it was the same look that I wanted to give. And I was like, "Oh, jellyfish on your face is, is."

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. No, I don't, I'm not, I don't like that either.

Michael Wadowski:

But the question comes from a member of the FEMA staff in the Office of National Continuity Programs. And it is basically in layman's terms, what are the most critical concerns and strategies that we can share with our state and local agencies when doing outreach to help the helping them with awareness about cybersecurity.

Jen Easterly:

Well, most, that's a great question because it reminds me of our Cyber Public Service Awareness campaign, also known as Secure Our World. So, if you, you go to CISA.gov/secureourworld, you will learn the four simple steps that you need to do.

Deanne Criswell:

Oh.

Jen Easterly:

To keep yourself and your family and your community and your small business safe online. So, if Team FEMA could help get this out,

Deanne Criswell:

We can

Jen Easterly:

Folks around the country, and if you go to this website, you'll see our PSAs. One that was inspired by, by Schoolhouse Rock.

Deanne Criswell:

Oh, I love it.

Jen Easterly:

With the music written by our Chief AI Officer, Lisa Einstein. But, and it's very easy to remember. It's like four simple steps that are cyber hygiene which research shows prevents 98% of cyber attacks. So it's install.

Deanne Criswell:

I don't change my password enough.

Jen Easterly:

Well, you have to install your updates, make better passwords. You don't necessarily need to change them. You need a password manager to generate and store complex, unique passwords. Yeah. You need to recognize and report phishing. And then also use multifactor authentication. So, super easy. Go to secure our world, be part of the cyber hygiene revolution.

Deanne Criswell:

Love it. We will help you lift up that message.

Jen Easterly:

Woohoo. Thank you.

Michael Wadowski:

Okay. The next question is actually from somebody at CISA and this is for the FEMA administrator. And it's regarding national continuity. Can you please discuss the organization and importance of the FEMA's National Continuity Program missions?

Deanne Criswell:

Well, I'm thinking just to piggyback a little bit on what Jen talked about, right. continuity, the, the ability to continue to perform our mission is so important and any number of things can affect that. And so, the National Continuity Programs, they have responsibility for ensuring that we can sustain federal government operations. We also now have just recently taken on the role for all of DHS and ensuring that we're working with all of the components within DHS on what their continuity plans are. And so, just as Jen talked about the work that's going on out there to help, you know, local communities develop their continuity principles and the things that they can do to be better prepared, that's what our National Continuity Programs does for the federal government. They have a responsibility to ensure that all of our federal partners across all departments and agencies know the steps and the tools that they need to put in place. That they understand what their capabilities, but more importantly, what their gaps are and how they're going to be able to continue to perform their mission essential functions on America's worst day.

Michael Wadowski:

Great. This one is for both of you. And it comes from a member of the FEMA staff, and I think it's a softball, but you might have, think about it for a little bit. Can you recommend some books and articles that would help us better understand the cybersecurity threats facing FEMA and CISA? And I guess probably maybe even just the in industry or infrastructure at large.

Deanne Criswell:

I mean, I would start, I just started when I started in this position, putting out a reading list every year.

Jen Easterly:

Oh, good for you.

Deanne Criswell:

I copied Chief of staff of the Air Force when I was in the Air Force. I always looked at that reading list. And so, last year on my reading list I put out there, "This is how they tell me the world ends."

Jen Easterly:

Oh, you know, Nicole is on our board.

Deanne Criswell:

Oh, really?

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. I'll let her know that she'll be excited.

Deanne Criswell:

An eye-opening book for me. And really help to better articulate the threats that are out there and how they can actually implicate our mission set. And so, to me, it was one of the best books for us to think about, you know, what is the potential threat that we're facing? And use it as a, a lot of case studies in there on how, you know, we would approach those if it were happening simultaneously with one of our severe weather events.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. That is, it's Nicole Perlroth. Yeah, that is a great book.

Deanne Criswell:

It really is.

Jen Easterly:

I think I read that before I came into this, this role. You, you know, I'll probably just recommend something that I read at the beginning of the year by a good friend of mine, Mustafa Soloman, who just went to be a CEO for consumer AI at Microsoft. But he was one of the founders of DeepMind, which is the AI company based in London. And then he founded a company called Inflection AI. But the book is called "The Coming Wave" and it's all about threats of artificial intelligence, the good stuff, but it really looks at it from a potential threats perspective.

Deanne Criswell:

I like that.

Jen Easterly:

And then policy recommendations about how to deal with the safety issues. And so, yeah, it is super interesting. And, you know, I was reviewing it again 'cause I've got this panel later in the day. You, you know, AI, when you think about, I, I'm sure there are probably amazing uses in emergency management with AI and there are amazing uses within cyber defense and cybersecurity. But you know, the burden of being the risk people and the security people and emergency management people is we do have to be able to think about what are those worst case scenarios so that we can in fact be able to plan for them, be able to prepare for them, be able to build the resilience against 'em. Yeah. I mean, it's just, you, you have to think like that, quite frankly, which is not always the funnest thing. And, and, but it's a certain kind of imagination that I think can ultimately prevent another failure of imagination. And you, and I've lived through a lot of those, and so I think that book's a good one.

Deanne Criswell:

The Coming Wave.

Jen Easterly:

The Coming Wave.

Deanne Criswell:

The Coming Wave.

Jen Easterly:

Yes.

Deanne Criswell:

I'm gonna add it.

Jen Easterly:

Alright. Alright.

Michael Wadowski:

Another question for both and it comes from FEMA's Office of Recovery Reporting and Analytics Division. Although I, it, it's, the question is what do you see as the biggest challenging facing FEMA in the next five years? And how can the partnership with CISA help address these challenges? But I'm gonna add a little bit on that and say, what are the biggest challenges facing CISA a as well, and I can maybe FEMA help that. So so a little bit on, on both challenges on both agencies.

Deanne Criswell:

The first thing that comes to mind for me is thinking about the strain on our infrastructure. And there's a lot of strains in our infrastructure, not just, you know, potential threats, but it's aging in infrastructure. It's infrastructure that is stressed because it was designed for less population that we're having right now. So, the population density, old infrastructure, and we're seeing it fail in a variety of different ways across the country. And so, as I think about the challenges over the next five years, we have weak infrastructure in many places. We have threats to infrastructure in many places. And all of that is really starting to become more prevalent in our day-to-day responses and our ability to help these communities recover. And so I think part of the collaboration that is so great about our two agencies is that knowledge and understanding of where we need to focus our efforts to build resilient infrastructure as we do work through our resilience programs. Or we're helping to rebuild the community after an event so we can address the challenges that some of this infrastructure has.

Jen Easterly:

You know, we talked a little bit about this at IAM, you, you know, one of the changes that we've seen with respect to the threat landscape over the past year is the evolution of China and Chinese cyber actors, specifically from espionage and data theft and intellectual property theft, which is what we had really focused on for the past, you know, 20 years plus to pre-positioning capabilities within our critical infrastructure for the purpose of launching disruptive and destructive cyber attacks. In the event of a major crisis in the Taiwan Strait. So, this is a world where a, a military invasion of Taiwan, or a blockade of Taiwan by the PRC could be accompanied with disruptions here at home. mass disruptions across the country, severing of telecommunications, derailing of transportation, pollution of our water systems, attacks against pipelines and power grids. And so, you know, we know based on expertise, both from the intelligence community and then also what the policy community is saying in terms of what president Xi is being pretty clear about, that the goal is to induce societal panic, induce chaos to ultimately deter our ability to marshal military might and citizen will. And so that is something that we know is a real possibility. And so, we need to do everything now to prepare for it. To be able to build resilience against it. To respond; to recover. And that is what was I think about how we align our capabilities with our authorities, with our talented workforce, and how we work together with critical partners like you all. That, that is really informing how I am thinking about everything is that is sort of the major threat that I think we're going to face in the next three to five years. So, and why partnerships and collaboration and resilience is so unbelievably important.

Deanne Criswell:

Well then understanding where we think the greatest capability gaps are, so we know where we're gonna have to focus our efforts to support.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah, exactly. And you know, to, you said earlier, some of that is just acknowledging that, you know, within a critical infrastructure owner and operator, not everything is important. Yeah. Right. You have to identify your critical assets that are most important to continuing to provide those critical services. And so it's all part of the, the work that needs to be done. What's next, Michael?

Michael Wadowski:

I'm gonna end on the last question. We've got a couple minutes left. It's very personal question, but I think it will resonate with everybody out there who has children. And that is how do you balance professional leadership roles as being parents for your children?

Deanne Criswell:

Hmm. You wanna start that one?

Jen Easterly:

I mean, I would start to say not very well. You know, I have, I have one. How many kids do you have?

Deanne Criswell:

Two.

Jen Easterly:

Two. And they're all, they're a little older, right?

Deanne Criswell:

Yeah, 35 and 37.

Jen Easterly:

Okay. So, I have a 19-year-old and you know, it, it's been a challenge. I was, when my son had just turned two, I deployed to Iraq. Then I deployed again. My husband was in Afghanistan. I was in Afghanistan. And so, I think for the first 10 years of his life, he didn't really have one or the other of us around. Now. Now I think the really good part about that is he spent a lot of time with his grandparents, and that was very much about unconditional love. And I think it gave him a sort of like, sweetness to him. And he is very close with his grandparents now. But as he got older, I really recognize that, you know, the most important thing that I can do is to give him my time and attention. So, even if we don't spend a lot of time since he was in boarding school, and then he is got all kinds of things he wants to do, the time that I am with him and able to really, really focus, I took him, he wanted me to take him to a Tyler Childers concert. And so I took him to one we were a couple weeks ago in Baltimore, and, you know, we just had the best time. And it was sort of three, four hours of just concentrated mom and, and Jet time. And it, it was.

Deanne Criswell:

That's great.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. And he, it was just a joy. It was a real joy. So, you know, we all have the stressors of our jobs, but the time we do get together really making the most of that, I think.

Deanne Criswell:

Well, I think that's the biggest piece when I think back to when my children were younger and I was a firefighter, which meant that I worked, you know, 24-hour shifts, missed a lot of birthdays and holidays. I was in the Air National Guard, deployed as well. Not as much as you, but I, it all adds to that stress. And I think, you know, when I think back and I talked to young moms now, you know, the one part I like to emphasize is when you are with your family, is that you are present with your family, and you have to be deliberate about being present, and you have to be willing to put down for a period of time, you know, work. And in our jobs now, it's harder to do that, but not impossible, right, and just making sure that you have those opportunities to stay really present with them when you are with them. And another piece of advice that I give people and, and I didn't learn this till later and my kids were a bit older, is really sitting down and ahead of time setting some boundaries. And that is, you know, what are those things that are so important about my career that I'm unwilling to compromise for, that I need to do? And what are those things about my family that are so important that I'm unwilling to compromise for? And so then when you're faced with a choice, you at least have these boundaries that you've already pre-identified in a non-stressful situation. But there's still gonna be times where the two collide and you're still gonna have to make decisions. But then at the end of the day, it all goes back to, you know, making sure that the time that you're with them, you're present and, and creating those memories. Right. Because it's the memories that they're gonna remember. And the, the good memories are the ones that will stand out.

Jen Easterly:

Yeah. I Love that. It's a great, great thing to end on.

Deanne Criswell:

It is.

Jen Easterly:

Thank you so much.

Deanne Criswell:

Thank you, Jen.

Jen Easterly:

Thank you for being here. It's wonderful to spend time with you. Thank you for your leadership and your partnership and your friendship.

Deanne Criswell:

It is such a great honor to be able to be a partner with you in this. Thank you.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Hey, thanks for listening to this episode of "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA." If you'd like to learn more about this episode or other topics, or have ideas for future episodes, visit us at FEMA.gov/podcast.