Mark Peterson - Host:

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

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A big part of FEMA administrator Deanna Criswell's strategic plan centers around instilling equity in emergency management. With this renewed focus, we are delighted to introduce FEMA's first National Tribal Affairs Advocate, Kelbie Kennedy, to the podcast. Since joining FEMA in October 2022, Kelbie has brought a wealth of knowledge about Indian country to the agency with the goal of helping FEMA live up to our trust and treaty responsibilities to tribal nations while focusing on equity. Troy Christensen from the FEMA podcast team caught up with Kelbie at the National Advisory Council meeting that was recently held at the Choctaw Nation to discuss her background and her vision for the future of FEMA's tribal engagement and collaboration.

Troy Christensen:

I'm here with Kelbie Kennedy. Kelbie is FEMA's new tribal affairs advocate for the agency, and we're really excited that she's here. Kelbie, welcome to the podcast.

Kelbie Kennedy:

Thank you so much Troy, and welcome to the Homelands of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. I'm so excited that you get to be in Indian country for this episode.

Troy Christensen:

Absolutely. We are recording this in Durant, Oklahoma and, really excited to be here. We're here for the NAC Conference, the National Advisory Council, talking not only about tribal issues, but issues that resonate across all levels of emergency management. But this one right here, is very unique. This is the first time that we've held a NAC conference at a tribe. Correct?

Kelbie Kennedy:

Yes, absolutely. And I very much hope it is not the last time that you get to go out to Indian country to go visit a tribal nation because you can hear about issues that tribal nations are facing every single day. You can hear directly from tribal leaders, but there's really nothing like experiencing Indian country on the ground. It just gives you that kind of perspective that you can't get from written testimony or even verbal testimony.

Troy Christensen:

Absolutely. So, you know, your position, as I mentioned, you have a new position. Tell me about your position as the tribal affairs advocate for the agency and really why it's so important.

Kelbie Kennedy:

Oh, yes, absolutely. So, the National Tribal Affairs Advocate, as you mentioned, is a brand new position. I am the first tribal affairs political appointee in FEMA history and also, the Department of Homeland Security history. So, you know, big shoes to create. I was gonna say fill but really, it's creating new shoes and I think it really showcases the administration's dedication to making sure to have an important focus on tribal nations. So, I'm really excited that administrator Criswell picked me for this. Excited to be appointed by President Biden. The position in and of itself, I mean, baseline is, my job is to advise the administrator on all affairs related to tribal nations, tribal citizens, any tribal affairs I have direct access to or to advise her. And part of that advising component is really making sure that FEMA, as an extension of the United States government, lives up to its treaty and trust responsibilities to tribal nations.

Now, and I was talking to Troy about this before the podcast episode started, I don't expect everybody to, like, know everything about tribal nations or tribal citizens. I mean, I went to a high school, I went to Talihina, which is a small high school out here in southeastern Oklahoma. I was born and raised on my nation's reservation and, when we got to Oklahoma history at my high school, we spent five minutes on it. And I can say my high school, we had a very large Choctaw population. I mean, we were so Choctaw that we had our two foreign languages were Spanish and Choctaw. Like, that's how many Choctaw students, you know, we had at our high school. And for me as a tribal citizen, only getting five minutes on the trail of tears, which is the whole reason my family is in Oklahoma to begin with, I can't expect the, you know, everyday emergency manager or everyday person to just know everything about tribal nation.

So, you know, having this role is to really explain what that treaty and trust responsibility is, have really important, but tough, conversations internally at the agency about tribal nations and tribal needs, and listen to tribal leaders. Listen to them, be able to help advocate for tribal nations and just making sure overall the agency, whether you know, whether you live here in Durant, Oklahoma, you live in Washington DC, you live in Chicago, you live in a rural place in Alaska, a rural tribal village in Alaska. You are safe before, during, and after disaster occurs in your lands.

Troy Christensen:

Absolutely. And you know, you mentioned a little bit about treaty and trust responsibility. For our listeners who may not be familiar with the term and familiar with those responsibilities, just tell us a little bit about what that means in a nutshell.

Kelbie Kennedy:

Oh, yeah. So, this is also a subject that could span several weeks in a class.

Troy Christensen:

Sure.

Kelbie Kennedy:

But I think the shortest way to describe treating trust responsibilities is, tribal nations were in this country before non-native people came here and colonized United States. In part of that, it's hard to call it a negotiation process but, when lands receded to the United States, United States took on a fiduciary duty to tribal nations to be able to provide, you know, certain assurances. So, my tribal nation gave up huge swaths of land in southeastern United States to move here to Indian territory, wasn't Oklahoma at the time. And, giving up that land and making that down payment, quite frankly, and everybody, by the way, wherever you are at in the United States of America, you are on tribal land. You can find out what tribal land you're on. Tribal nations and giving up that land and giving up those resources guaranteed with the federal government that they would have certain rights and protections.

And, that evolves over time, right? That treaty and trust responsibility, it's not like back in the 1800s tribal nations were talking about emergency management, right? But, it does still extend to emergency management. It still extends to public safety. It extends to healthcare. And so, having that really important evolving conversation within the back of your mind going, "Hey, tribes down paid for all of this, beforehand, and how do we make sure that we are living up to our responsibility that our ancestors, you know, promise to tribes many, many years ago? And, that we keep holding onto those promises and living up to those promises, for time and immemorial" - which is a very legal term but, meaning a very long time.

Troy Christensen:

Yeah. I think that's a great explanation and it really, kinda, hits home for, you know, why we have a trust responsibility as a federal agency with FEMA. So, I think that's a great primer.

Kelbie Kennedy:

And, I think sometimes people think of, you know, a treaty and trust responsibility in more, and like, Congress has that responsibility, right? Like, the president has a responsibility and, the president does,and Congress does, but each agency as an arm of the federal government, right, as an arm of the body that took possession of lands and distributed lands in the United States, has that responsibility to make sure to help tribal nations in certain ways because we are all arms of the federal government. So, now that I'm on the federal side, it's like, okay, great, I represent the federal government. It's, you know, my job to remind folks internally what your responsibilities are, and have that evolving conversations of how we can best live up to that responsibility. And again, I think the administrator and President Biden have really lived up to that.

I mean, the National Tribal Affairs strategy is a great example of that because, it's the first national tribal, fully focused, tribal strategy that we've ever had in the agency's history. And, there's some really important components. I think in particular, what is, you know, important to me, is the administrator's dedication to identifying policies - both at the based policy level, regulations, statutorily, what are those things in law that keep a tribal nation when they get hit by a wildfire, when they get hit by a flood, when they wanna prepare for, you know, certain disasters. What are those policies that are inherently made to where tribes can't access those resources and funding to make people safer in their communities? And, I know Chief Batton, Chief of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, when he was speaking to the NAC earlier this morning, talked about, you know, protecting everybody in our communities.

And, I think that's something that people who don't interact with tribal nations really know that, you know, many tribal nations because of where we live, are in some of the most rural parts of America. And I mean, very, very <laugh>, very rural parts of America. And there are other people, besides tribal citizens, that live along in tribal communities. And, when tribal nations have the resources, the funding, the support that they need to make this community safer, they mean everybody. You know, a forest catches fire, a tornado happens. Tribal nations are not gonna ask, "Hey, are you native or non-native?" They're gonna say, "Hey, you're in my community. Come on. We need to get to safety. We'll figure out everything." And, I think that that is such an important community approach that tribal nations have that, honestly, would make all of our work much better because it's thinking of helping everybody regardless of the situation that they're in.

Troy Christensen:

Yeah. And, as you mentioned earlier, you know, we're recording this in your homeland so, you know, tell us a little bit about your background but also how you got involved in emergency management and really your journey to being in the position you are now, in FEMA.

Kelbie Kennedy:

Absolutely. So, one thing quickly, before we hop into my background, I'd also love to note that there are many tribal nations whose homelands we're standing in right now. The Trail of Tears forced five tribal nations from the southeast - the Choctaw Cherokee, Chickasaw, Seminole, Muskogee Creek nations, forced them into areas in Indian territory where other tribal nations were living. So, definitely recognizing that, you know, Choctaw Nation, our traditional homelands - where our ceremonies and where our traditional lands are actually more in the southeast but, we have made these our homelands alongside the other tribal nations that were here before. So, definitely wanna recognize the other nations that are here as well. And, I know there's other tribes who are like that as well, where it's multiple tribal nations and their homelands. But yes, I definitely consider this our, my nation's, homelands as well.

And so, my journey through, to kind of get where I am in emergency management is, I was born and raised in southeastern Oklahoma, Buffalo Valley to be exact. All of those of you, who are from small towns, know that you never just stay in one town. You go, you do something in one town and another town. And so I, I was born and raised in Buffalo Valley and, you know, went to a junior college, Eastern Oklahoma State College in Wilburton, Oklahoma. Went to finish my undergrad at the University of Oklahoma, here at OU, and did my law degree there. But I grew up in southeastern Oklahoma and one of my earliest memories, quite frankly, is seeing a tornado out the back of our home and our back pasture. And so, in terms of emergency management, when I started working in the field for my job at the National Congress of American Indians, I was like, "Whoa, I've been doing emergency management for a long time and it's just been on the side of the person who's been impacted."

I mean, even my high school graduation. We couldn't have my high school graduation party 'cause a tornado went around my aunt's house. And so, we donated all the food from my high school graduation party to the recovery efforts that my tribe was doing with all the people in our local community. So that, you know, really highlights that tribal nations and emergency management work has really been ingrained throughout my life. And so, I, like I said, born and raised here, went to school here, went to law school. For a time, I worked in the Federated States of Micronesia as an assistant attorney general, so that's on the other side of the world near Guam. Had a lot of great experiences over there with the Chuukese people. I came back to the US after working over there and worked for the National Congress of American Indians.

And, when I took over my portfolio and it, and the name of it changed over the years, but you know, the thing that really remained the same is, half of my portfolio was Homeland Security and Emergency Management, and the other half was criminal justice, violence against native women, missing and murder indigenous women work. So, I was doing both of those tracks and I really didn't know much about emergency management policy when I started. I, you know, obviously had been on the survivor side of emergency management, but it was really Robert Holden, who is the deputy director of NCAI, he's a Choctaw Nation citizen, and actually he's from McAllister, Oklahoma, which is not far away from where I grew up. And, I didn't even know that he worked there. And he said, you know, this is really important work, let me talk to you about it.

Other tribal leaders like Paul Downing, Jeff Hanson from Choctaw Nation - I mean, I've been really lucky, Nelson Andrews Jr. from Mashpee Wampanoag, and others that I'm totally forgetting. The moment that, you know, there were tribal leaders and tribal experts, like folks over at, like David Monroe - used to be at Homeland Security, who really, you know, I asked a lot of questions. And they were very generous with their time and generous with their explanation. So, it's one of those things that I often find, particularly in Indian country, that if you keep asking questions and you're very genuine with, "I want to learn, I want to understand," people really respond to that. Because, I don't need to come into the room and say like, "I know everything." I know, even sitting here after having four and a half years of work in tribal emergency management, I don't know everything. But, what I wanna do is, you know, be humble and ask tribal nations, "What do I not know? What do I not understand? How can I work really hard and do the research to be able to work with you to get our same goal?" Right? And that is, again, to make every single person in this country, regardless of native or non-native, make sure that they're safe wherever they're living. And I think that is really what compelled me to go on into the emergency management area. And in fact, my current position was something that tribal leaders recommended me for and was really, really excited that the administrator created this brand new position that, again, is something that tribal nations needed for a long time. And I'm excited to be the first, and I really am excited to not be the last, 'cause this is a position that should remain and there should definitely be more tribal affairs political appointees, not only in FEMA but across the Department of Homeland Security because, there's so much tribal work across homeland security that tribal citizens interact with DHS employees and FEMA employees on a daily basis.

And so, instead of, you know, kind of making it a one off thing, where it's like, "Oh, we've got this tribal issue, we don't really, you know, we have this one niche person that can handle it," it's like, let's make tribal affairs a consistent workload that we have. And so, we're engaging with tribes more effectively, more regularly. So, when a disaster does hit, it's not them trying to scramble and find, you know, "Who's the person that I contact at FEMA?" It's like, they already have that relationship. They already have, you know, the preparedness built up internally in a culturally appropriate manner and they're able to respond quite faster. And, that's ultimately what it is, right? The more prepared you are on the front end, the quicker that you're able to respond and the quicker you're able to save more lives.

And, I think, ultimately, that's where we want Indian Country to go. And,that looks different for each tribal nation. You know, some tribal nations wanna have a very robust relationship with the federal government. They wanna engage with FEMA a lot, some tribal nations don't want that, and some tribal nations just don't have the capacity, right? State and local governments have gotten, you know, 50 years of funding from FEMA that tribal nations just haven't. And so, whereas, and we saw this throughout the COVID 19 pandemic, where states were able to be really adaptive, right? Because none of us had experienced, in our lifetimes, at least none of us had experienced a pandemic to that magnitude during our lifetimes but state and local government employees were able to be really flexible. They could work with the system. Tribal nations, especially those who didn't have emergency management departments, suddenly, you know, they turned to their chairwoman or their president or the head of their police department, they're like, "What do we do?"

And so, we saw at the end of it, I believe the numbers are, you know, out of the 574 federally recognized tribes in this country, I think only 99 have been able to access COVID 19 funding. And so, that is a huge number, right? A huge number of tribal nations who couldn't access that funding. And that kind of highlights the same problem in the, you know, quote unquote traditional emergency management area that you only see a small number of tribal nations being able to access a disaster declaration, a major disaster declaration emergency. Yes, tribes can go under states, but there are tribes that are so understaffed and under resources they can't even afford to go under a state. So, I think it's, you know, ultimately,my goal is to help increase knowledge to collaborate both with tribal nations and internally at FEMA to see what are the creative solutions that we can come to, to make sure, again, that everybody is safe, that we respect tribal sovereignty, that we're living up to our treaty and trust responsibilities, to have, you know, infrastructure, to have policies, to have ways that we are doing things that will outlast me and outlast anybody else that I work with that are just here and in a good place for everybody to be able to use, you know, further on.

Troy Christensen:

Some great points you made. I have a question. A lot of the people that listen to our podcast are emergency managers at all levels of government, in different forms of government. So, Kelbie, in your experience, how is tribal emergency management different compared to emergency management that happens at the state or local or county level?

Kelbie Kennedy:

Yeah. It's a really great question. So, first and foremost, tribal nations are incredibly under-resourced in terms of funding from the Department of Homeland Security and from FEMA, specifically. They don't get consistent funding like tribal or, not tribal, but state and local governments get from like the emergency management performance grant, the EMPG. Some tribal nations can get it, but many tribal nations can't access that annual funding. And so, what happens is, tribal nations that don't have an emergency management department, they always appoint somebody to handle a disaster, right? It doesn't matter, an emergency doesn't care whether or not you're prepared for it.

Troy Christensen:

Absolutely.

Kelbie Kennedy:

So, maybe the tribal chairwoman or the president or the chief or the head of, you know, public safety or the police department will get appointed to be the quote unquote emergency manager. And so, it's different in that, there's not that annual funding. It's also different even in the governance structure. So, tribal nations predate, you know, predate the United States. And so, their governance structure may require that certain people handle emergency situations. So, even when you're talking about from the base down and moving up, some tribal nations, even how they handle emergencies, would be fundamentally different from a local jurisdiction. So, let's say that one tribal nation, and please take this - not everything I say is applicable to all 574 tribes, each are different language culture governance.

Troy Christensen:

Right.

Kelbie Kennedy:

But some tribal nations, you can't even talk about an emergency, right? When you talk about, "Okay, how do we prepare for this tornado?" The belief that those nations have, their sincere belief is, what you're doing is you're calling that bad thing into your community. And so, how do we work with that at the FEMA level?

Well, we let tribal nations make their preparedness plans to where they're talking about their neighbor. Now, for you, local or state emergency managers, they are not wishing bad things on you. They just need to work in the FEMA system. So, the tribal nation will actually make a plan for their next door neighbor. And, it's really a plan that applies to them but, the language that they use has to be different because of cultural considerations. So, an emergency management department at a tribal nation may have cultural considerations, it may be understaffed or it may have, you know, many more staff. But really, it's, at least my observation from many tribal nations, regardless of if they have quote unquote well staffed, more staffed tribal emergency management department, is that ultimately, they want to help people, they want to help people in their communities.

And so, that is very similar to state and local emergency managers, you know, ultimately wanting to help people. And, I think, you know, it doesn't have to be a situation where state and local governments compete with tribal nations for funding or resources because ultimately, it's one of those things where like, a rising tide floats all boats, right? So, the tribal nation doing really well in the community is actually going to make the community better, you know, in terms of partnering, for emergency management or public safety purposes, they can coordinate.

You know, for your emergency managers that listen to this podcast, in particular, a couple of pieces of advice that I have. One, you know, if you haven't interacted with tribal nations in your communities before, definitely reach out. Don't reach out to the chief. Don't reach out to the chief. Don't reach out to the president. Because, that chief or president or chairwoman - their level within their tribal nation is the same level as President Biden at the White House, right?

Troy Christensen:

Yeah.

Kelbie Kennedy:

That is the level that that person is. So, you as a staff member need to reach out and just ask, "Hey, who handles emergency management?" Maybe it's the head of a department. "Who can I talk to, to start, you know, building this conversation?" And, build that trust. And also, know that there is a relationship that happened before you walked into the room, right? The state, the local governments, tribal governments, they were all here long before any of us were born. They will be here long after all of us are dead. Just know that when you walk in, you might have to overcome some bad relationships that happened, you know, way back when so, the tribal nation, when they may be suspicious of you or be like, really hesitant to working with you, that's not a "you" issue. That's a, "there's a long history" issue and you as a human being can overcome that by, you know, kind of making headway, following up on, you know, any type of relationship that you wanna have. Making sure that you're doing good by the tribal nation is the way that you overcome that.

But I just wanna, you know, flag for folks sometimes they think, "Oh man, I'm the new person, I didn't do anything to you." It's like, no, you didn't do anything to you but the government that you represent, like, supported Indian hunts.

Troy Christensen:

Right.

Kelbie Kennedy:

To like, literally murder people and remove them from this land. So, they may have a bit of hesitancy working with you but, ultimately, it's worth reaching out to the tribal nation and, kind of, starting those conversations and figuring out how to partner. And, I think, there are several tribal nations in Oklahoma, I know my own nation, Choctaw Nation, has really, really great relationships with all the local jurisdictions. Jeff Hansen, a couple of years ago, I was down here in Durant and Jeff Hansen got a call from like, one of the local counties and was like, "Hey, I gotta go over and help out." So, like, it wasn't a question, it was, we had a meeting, he got a call from a local partner and was like, "Hey, let me go help out." Right?

Another thing I will say to emergency managers is, sometimes there are cultural things that maybe the tribal nation can't tell you. So, let's talk about wildfires. So, the NAC, right now, is talking about wildfires and specifically wildfires, sometimes, that go into federal areas. And, one of the issues that I raised with one of the tribal citizens that sits on the NAC is, "Well, what about wildfires that actually destroyed tribal religious sites?" You know, that's not something that a state or local government is gonna think of.

Troy Christensen:

Yeah.

Kelbie Kennedy:

Because it's mostly, you know, what are these religious particular buildings? But tribal nations may have religious sites that they can't tell you about for very good reason, but they wanna make sure that they're protecting. And so, there's, for some tribal nations, there's really an attachment to the land that sometimes you just have to like, just leave an unsaid, you know, it's like cool, there are particular things they can't really talk about with me but, we're just gonna go with it and we're gonna keep building this relationship. So, I think, just to summarize, tribal nations are different in that they have been here for a very long time, but they haven't received the same opportunity or funding to get, you know, honestly to the same capacity level that many state and local jurisdictions are. And, you'll have to overcome, sometimes, some really bad history. But, it's worth overcoming it because ultimately if you have a new partner in your neighborhood and then you can easily coordinate when a flood hits your area, I mean, that's kind of the gold standard. So, encourage all of you, please reach out to your tribal nation’s staff - don't reach out to leadership, reach out to the staff and be open to those conversations.

Troy Christensen:

And Kelbie, going back to what you were talking about, you know, tribes not having the resources that state and local emergency management has. I've heard quite a few times, in fact, more often than not in some parts of the country, that tribal emergency managers wear 3, 4, 5, 6 hats, which is something that's surprising when you tell that to people who may not be familiar with tribal emergency management. Is that something that you see as a hindrance, going forward, in making some of those relationships that you just mentioned?

Kelbie Kennedy:

Well, hindrance -it would be a challenge. I would call it a challenge because you're completely right. Tribal emergency managers - if tribes have an emergency manager or you might be, you know, the chief of police and been told, "Hey, you're gonna be also the emergency manager," and have, you know, 10 different roles, it will make it challenging to be able to meet that person. So, if there are resources or connections or ways that you can be helpful, you know, the nation might not have time for it because they have, again, 30 different hats. But, you know, it's definitely worth trying to have that relationship with the tribal nation. And, to your point about tribal leaders or tribal nation staff or even leaders, I'll go back to that, being emergency managers. Tribal nations are the first and sometimes only line of defense, especially in really rural parts of the country. And so, it doesn't matter if they have the funding, they wanna go get out and be able to help people. Right? And it doesn't matter if they're actually going to be able to get a major disaster declaration or emergency disaster declaration, they know that they need to help people.

So, a great example of that is, you know, during the COVID 19 pandemic, tribal nations were really stepping up and helping pay for funerals for tribal citizens. I mean, Indian country had a huge number of deaths in terms of, throughout COVID. And so, tribal nations were like, "You know what? We're gonna reach into our pocket and we're gonna make sure that the family has the funding they need for ceremonies or specific burial rights or just, you know, a standard funeral to be able to bury their loved one." And part of the funeral assistance problem that we have after COVID was, funeral assistance was really geared toward refunding the individual for funeral assistance, right? But, if I'm a tribal citizen and I did lose one of my step-grandparents during the pandemic, you know, if I went to my nation to ask for funding, my nation can't recoup that cost that then they would use, right, to pay an emergency manager or heat an elders home during winter. And so, you know, that very specific funeral assistant question, that's not something FEMA as an agency can change. It has to be changed in legislation. But, that just really highlights that when you build a policy that is very local or state focused, it's not gonna have the benefit of knowing, "Hey, you know, this is what a tribal community needs." And, I often think that if you build a policy that's much more tribally focused to where, you know, the tribal citizen that's gonna have the hardest time accessing resources is able to access them, anybody else above that will have the ability to access them. It's just building the policy toward the lowest common denominator and making it easy for everyone to access. Same thing with policies that are built toward state, tribal, local, and territorial partners. If you can build a policy to where any tribal nation is able to access it, anybody else can have the benefit of, you know, a more streamlined policy that's easier to access for the people that you serve.

Troy Christensen:

That's a great point. So, you know, we're talking about changes and potential changes, you know, to policies and to other things that we're doing as an agency. So, you know, what are some of the priorities in your position, especially when it comes to making change for Indian country going forward?

Kelbie Kennedy:

Yeah, thanks so much for asking. So, I wanna make sure that the policies that I put as priorities, you know, definitely have priorities that I've discussed with the administrator and the deputy administrator, wanna make sure that I am flexible in meeting with tribal leadership and what tribal nations want to be priorities within the, you know, the limited time that I am in my role.

And, I wanna make sure, ultimately, that FEMA lives up to that treaty and trust responsibility and that tribal nations are able to have much easier access to resources and funding that is available. And, I think that's one of the best things in the national tribal strategy. The national tribal strategy is fantastic but, that's the component within it where the FEMA administrator dedicated to identifying those policies that need to change, those regulations, those laws that need to change. How do we change those to make it where tribal nations can access those resources much easier? Or, are there new resources that we need to make sure to get for tribal nations to help build their capacity.

So, I want access. Accessibility is something in particular that I personally want to focus on because I've heard from tribal leaders directly, throughout my time at NCAI, about the, the problems with accessibility. And, I think it's a twofold answer, right? The policy itself needs to change to be more accessible so tribes can check the boxes that are needed to access it. It also means that tribal nations need to have the capacity internally. They need to have funding and resources internally to hire staff, right, that can meet those resources. Because, if you have to fill out a grant application and the application pages are taller than where you are standing, that's a little too much, especially if you have a grants manager whose whole job it is, is to apply for every grant for the tribe.

Well, tribes get a lot more money from the Indian Health Services or the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Ag, they get so much more money from them, why would they waste time applying for a FEMA grant that they get very little money and they have to fill out an application that, like, literally if you set it down on the ground, the application reaches above your head when you're standing. Like, that's way too much work for very little input. And additionally, I wanna make sure that we have long lasting policies that are able to be something that tribal nations can utilize that internally, that staff can utilize after I'm gone. And, I would really love to, you know, following on this theme of making sure that we have the policies in place, that tribal nations have the funding that they need, that FEMA itself has the staff they deserve. If we get more staff at FEMA, at HQ throughout all of the regions that focus on tribal affairs so they can better meet the needs of 574 tribal nations, we're just not dumping new work on people who already have huge portfolios, right? We're getting more work for more employees that can then work with tribal nations who also have more employees to be able to help protect people. So, my priorities are not one size fits all. It is multilayered and I wanna make sure that I am collaborating and making sure that tribal nations, again, have the resources they're able to have, you know, are getting the various components to work alongside them and then, that FEMA is living up to that treating trust responsibility.

Troy Christensen:

Is there anything that you'd like to add?

Kelbie Kennedy:

So, one of the things I forgot to mention at the beginning, and I usually do this, and I was so excited about the start of the podcast, so I'll go ahead and reintroduce myself here toward the end.

Kelbie Kennedy:

[speaks Choctaw].

Kelbie Kennedy:

So like I said, my name's Kelbie Kennedy, citizen of Choctaw Nation from Buffalo Valley, Oklahoma, excited to be here. And one of the things, when I do presentations, I always like, you know, span the crowd and I ask people, you know, how many of you have ever worked at tribal nations before? And like some people might raise their hand, how many of you have worked at tribal citizens before? And like maybe one or two, you know, will raise their hand. And then I'm like, how many of you speak Choctaw? And if I'm in Choctaw Nation, more hands will be up.

But, I always tell folks, you know, you have worked with tribal citizens before, much like you have been speaking Choctaw your entire life and you never knew it. So, the word okeh, okeh, is actually the word that you use for, okay, like, that is the word that it's derived from. And it's, like, an affirmation in Choctaw. Like, yeah, that's really great [speaks Choctaw]. Like, I'm really, I'm a Choctaw citizen. I'm really excited to be a Choctaw citizen. And so you, as an emergency manager or a FEMA employee, probably have come across some type of tribal issue, whether it would be a cultural site, whether it be some jurisdiction land, whether you've encountered a tribal emergency manager or a tribal leader when you were getting groceries one day, you, in some way, have interacted in Indian country and you never knew it and isn't excited - much like you've been using okeh and speaking Choctaw your entire life, that you now can start working with tribal nations more and building up the capacity for all of your communities to make people safer. So, that's kind of like the last thing I'll end you on is letting you know that you've all been speaking Choctaw, actually.

Mark Peterson - Host:

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.