

Jeremy Knighton, CEM
Division Chief, Asheville Fire Department

Speaker Bio:

Jeremy Knighton serves as the Chief of Emergency Management and Special Operations for the City of Asheville Fire Department, with 23 years of service. He is a Certified Emergency Manager (CEM), credentialed Incident Commander, Planning Section Chief, and NWCG Qualified Liaison Officer. He has led responses to hurricanes, wildfires, civil unrest, COVID-19, and line-of-duty deaths. During Hurricane Helene, he served as EOC Manager and Deputy Incident Commander for Asheville. An experienced instructor and exercise designer, he delivers ICS and EOC training nationwide, strengthening emergency management capabilities.

Presentation:

How Hurricane Helene Stress Tested Asheville's New EM Program:
Resilience through Commitment

In 2023 the City of Asheville began a one-year citywide planning process to create a new Emergency Management Program. This effort involved drafting an Emergency Operations Plan, Continuity of Operations Plan, conducting community engagement, holding trainings, and building an Emergency Operations Center facility. City partners played an integral role, engaging in monthly workshops, planning meetings, four tabletop exercises, and a functional exercise to stress-test preparedness and coordination. Their commitment to proactive planning proved critical when, just six months after finalizing these plans, Hurricane Helene put Asheville's emergency management program to the ultimate test.

In the wake of the region's most devastating storm, Asheville conducted a comprehensive after-action review, evaluating the effectiveness of the newly implemented plans and identifying key plan changes for building future resilience. This session will explore how Asheville's commitment to preparedness shaped its response, the challenges faced in real-time incident management, and the critical

takeaways for other municipalities aiming to build adaptive and resilient emergency programs.