

Disaster preparedness trainer says her emergency management degree helps her maintain ‘public health as public safety’

By Mark J. Scarp, ASU News
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Editor’s note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2025 graduates](#).

Deena Khoury lived emergency management long before earning an Arizona State University degree in it.

Khoury was a part-time reservist with the Federal Emergency Management Agency in its the Uniformed Services, governed by the Civilian Reservist Emergency Workforce Act, or CREW Act. CREW Act reservists are dispatched to assist during disasters, emergencies and for critical training.

Khoury is the spring 2025 Outstanding Graduate from the [School of Public Affairs](#), part of the [Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions](#).

She spent more than five years as a public affairs specialist, mostly working in communications, which concluded in November 2024. During that time, Khoury was sent to help at 19 presidentially declared disasters. At each one, the Olympia, Washington, resident saw firsthand the devastating effects natural disasters can have on people and property.

She earned a bachelor's degree in public service and public policy (with an emphasis in emergency management and homeland security) in December 2024 before graduating with her Master of Arts degree in emergency management and homeland security through ASU Online this semester in an accelerated master's program.

Today, Khoury is the lead training and exercise coordinator for the Executive Office of Resiliency and Health Security for the Washington State Department of Health. She described her focus as "public health as public safety," training staff members on how to respond to such emergencies as a terrorist attack or a natural disaster.

It's a hands-on position with direct community impact, she said.

"There are a lot of things that can go wrong," Khoury said. "So my job is to anticipate those and then train staff on how to appropriately respond so we can protect our communities."

That response includes increasing preparedness through building community partnerships.

"If the lights go out tomorrow, we make sure we have a whole community approach to help build that community back up," she said.

Even though she had emergency management experience, she said her professors provided additional insights and access to further knowledge that boosted her career.

"The professors helped develop me as a professional more than if I hadn't gone to ASU," Khoury said. "This is exactly what I want to do. I'm excited to see where it goes."

Note: Answers may be edited for length and clarity.

Question: What was your "aha" moment, when you realized you wanted to study the field you majored in?

Answer: While deployed to Florida as a public affairs specialist during Hurricane Ian, I came across a small, historically Black community that had been repeatedly overlooked by the state of Florida. The residents were facing consistent flooding with each storm. On top of that, private developers were offering them unfairly low prices for their land and trying to capitalize on their vulnerability. I tried to organize a town hall to better understand their needs and see how I could support them, but I quickly realized how limited my influence was without policy knowledge or structural authority. I felt powerless, even though I had a platform.

That moment changed everything for me. I realized that if I truly wanted to make a difference, I needed to understand how policy drives these inequities in the first place. I saw that through education, I could not only gain the tools to shape systems more effectively but also surround myself with people who shared the same mission. I didn't want to offer temporary support. I wanted to be part of long-term, systemic change.

Q: What's something you learned while at ASU — in the classroom or otherwise — that surprised you, that changed your perspective?

A: Honestly, I didn't expect just how much political theater influences emergency management and public health decisions. Seeing how hazards governance plays out in real time, especially during

disaster response, really opened my eyes to the behind-the-scenes dynamics that shape outcomes for communities. It made me realize that technical skills alone aren't enough; you also need to understand the political environment you're working in.

Another shift came from how much I've grown through online networking and collaboration. Building real relationships virtually, co-creating projects with people I've never met in person and watching those efforts have real-world impact completely changed the way I view professional connection. It taught me that community and progress can happen across any distance if there's shared purpose and trust.

Q: Why did you choose ASU?

A: I chose ASU because it's one of the most respected universities offering fully online programs. That flexibility was huge for me because I needed a program that allowed me to balance deployments and other responsibilities while still making steady progress in my education.

What really sealed it for me was how accessible everything was. I could do coursework on my own time without sacrificing the quality of education or the support available. Having access to ASU's resources, faculty and academic community made it feel like I was part of something bigger, even from a distance.

Q: Which professor(s) taught you the most important lesson while at ASU?

A: Research faculty member [Monica Gaughan](#) was my capstone mentor for the Integrated Preparedness Plan project, and she truly changed the way I think about my career. She saw my passion for making the world a better place and helped me translate that into real goals and steps. Her guidance made me feel seen, not just as a student but as someone capable of leading meaningful change.

Faculty Associate [Kenneth Lewis](#) taught my exercises in emergency management and homeland security course, and it ended up being one of the most impactful classes I've taken. As a training and exercise coordinator for the state of Washington's Department of Health, I found myself immediately applying what I learned in real time. His class wasn't just educational, it was fun, empowering and gave me practical tools to improve how we plan and run emergency preparedness efforts.

Associate Professor [Brian Gerber](#)'s hazards governance course left a lasting impression on me. Through his lectures and readings, I began to truly understand the weight of political theater and how governance shapes every aspect of emergency management. His class pushed me to think deeper and more critically about the systems we work within and gave me the language to challenge them thoughtfully.

Q: As an online student, what was your favorite spot for power studying?

A: My go-to study spot was the bonus bed in hotel rooms during FEMA deployments. As a reservist, I didn't have the luxury of choosing a cozy study nook, most nights were spent in hotel rooms with two queen beds. One bed became my workspace, where I'd spread out my laptop, notes and dinner, while the other stayed untouched for sleep.

It wasn't ideal, but there was something comforting about carving out a little structure and purpose in a space that constantly changed. That second bed became my quiet corner for focus, reflection and a strange sense of normalcy while supporting disaster survivors.

Q: If someone gave you \$40 million to solve one problem on our planet, what would you tackle?

A: With how fragile our public health infrastructure has become in the U.S., especially in communities already at risk, I would invest in creating nonprofit regional public health emergency hubs in high-risk areas. These hubs would function as lifelines and places that could immediately respond to disasters, outbreaks and environmental crises while coordinating care through a public health lens.

With \$40 million, I could help stand up eight to 10 of these hubs, each fully equipped to distribute medical countermeasures, deploy trained response teams and reach the most vulnerable people who are those often left behind during heat waves, chemical spills or disease outbreaks. This wouldn't just be about emergency response, it would be about dignity, access and meeting people where they are before it's too late. Every disaster is a public health emergency, and I plan to reshape the way we think about public health in the United States. Public health is public safety.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Deena Khoury is the spring 2025 Outstanding Graduate of the School of Public Affairs. Courtesy photo