

Central Region of the Oklahoma Emergency Management Association Public Storm Shelter Position Statement

The Central Region of the Oklahoma Emergency Management Association (COEMA) would like to address the recent focus placed on the availability of “public storm shelters”. COEMA is sympathetic to the sense of security some feel toward public storm shelters, but the reality is that public structures built to withstand the force of severe winds (FEMA standards) or large enough to accommodate the number of people that would seek shelter do not exist in most jurisdictions. COEMA also stresses that a personal storm shelter is the best option to protect your family against the destructive nature of these type events.

The decision to not identify public storm shelters is not an easy one to make, but the overwhelming contradicting information is more than can be ignored. The rationale behind the decisions to not designate public buildings as storm shelters is outlined in the paragraphs below:

- **Travel to a Shelter** – One of the biggest challenges with public storm shelters is the requirement that citizens must travel to a distant location during a severe weather event, exposing them to the very hazard they are attempting to avoid. Vehicles are **NEVER** a safe place during significant severe weather events. A significant number of tornado related deaths are attributed to being in a vehicle¹. On the other hand, standard residential construction (manufactured housing excluded) typically provides survivable protection for approximately 98% of the tornados we experience in Oklahoma². **IF** those potentially impacted seek shelter early by moving to the lowest possible level in a small interior room or closet away from exterior openings such as doors or windows. The exceptions to this recommendation are those living in mobile homes and many manufactured structures. Those living in mobile homes and many manufactured structures **MUST** take shelter in a safe room or personal storm shelter (discussed below) or travel to a safer location well in advance of the storm’s arrival. Well constructed residential safe rooms or personal storm shelters provide the **BEST** protection against the impact of tornadoes, including those considered as extremely violent. These types of personal shelters provide the same, if not greater, protection than public storm shelters without the travel risk and other issues.
- **Shelter Capacity** – Most local jurisdictions simply do not have access to enough readily available and functionally feasible sheltering locations to accommodate even a reasonably small percentage of their population. This often leads to people traveling to a public storm shelter site only to find the shelter is full, putting themselves and their families at greater risk. Public storm shelters are not designed to protect thousands of citizens. If a jurisdiction were to try to construct and maintain sufficient space to protect even a majority of its population, the costs would be prohibitive.
- **Shelter Availability** – The shelters may not always be open. In many instances, if they exist, local public storm shelters are either unstaffed or staffed by volunteers, volunteers that may not always be available. In other words, there might not be anyone available to open and manage the shelter. Even those shelters intended to be opened and operated by paid personnel may not always be open if those people are unavailable.
- **Shelter Construction** – The shelter construction standards have evolved over the last several years as a result of thorough engineering tests. Many facilities designated as shelters in the past no longer meet the current FEMA shelter construction standards, nor do they meet the current Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance standards. Concerns of not providing adequate and safe shelters also apply to well-meaning private property owners that offer their structures as shelters.
- **Shelter Rules, Risks and Liabilities** – Many jurisdictions have determined that the risks and liabilities associated with providing and operating public storm shelters out-weigh the potential benefit; particularly when viewed with other factors including those listed above.

If there are public shelters...

- Even for those jurisdictions that do provide public shelters, which again is very limited, we strongly recommend the local Emergency Manager be contacted during **pre-event** planning to determine exact locations, alternate travel routes to reach the shelter(s), potential hours of availability (some are simply not available while “regular occupants” such as school children are present), access or functional needs capabilities, shelter rules (typically no pets, no smoking, no alcohol, etc.), and available space. People have lined up outside of shelters in the severe weather or sat in their cars in the parking lot when there simply was no room inside for them, and it was far too late to go anywhere else.

The Better Solution is Personal Pre-planning for you and your family.

Personal preparedness limits risk and anxiety. The past shows that having a personal plan and staying informed (or awareness) are the two critical elements in staying safe during a severe weather event.

- **Develop a plan**, practice that **plan**, and make sure all family members and group members are aware of the **plan**. If travel is necessary, the decision to relocate must be made early in an event and should include the pre-event identification of an appropriate shelter site, preferably with other individuals, friends, family members, etc. This preplanned location must always be available, or availability must be verifiable well in advance of the event.
 - Having an underground shelter or safe room built in your home or business that meets FEMA standards can help provide near absolute protection from injury or death caused by dangerous winds. Near absolute protection means that, based on current knowledge of tornadoes, the occupant of a personal shelter built according to FEMA guidance will have a very high probability of being protected from injury or death.
 - An interior room in the lowest part of the home, as a rule, is usually survivable. A central small closet is best while taking other precautions like bicycle helmets and padding to protect from flying projectiles.
- **Awareness** is a critical factor. Knowing of a potential severe weather threat is critical and there are a variety of information sources available to provide warnings. These sources include:
 - Programmable All-Hazards Radios,
 - Multiple “free” notification systems/methods available from local television and radio stations for computers, telephones, electronic devices, etc.,
 - Internet,
 - Telephone “call down rosters” (PTOs, fraternal and church organizations...)
 - Local broadcast media.

Places to go for more information include;

- <http://www.ready.gov/>
- <http://www.redcross.org/disaster/masters>
- <http://www.ok.gov/oem/>
- <http://www.srh.noaa.gov/oun/?n=safety-severe>

1. National Weather Service Data; statistics from 2006-2010 severe weather; combined vehicle and mobile home deaths related to tornado incidents is 50% of total number of casualties.

2. National Weather Service Data; only 0.2% of Oklahoma tornadoes are EF5. When you combine EF4 and EF5, those only account for 1.8% of all tornadoes.