



Oklahoma City Residents Survive the May 2003 Tornado

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

State-wide, Oklahoma



Oklahoma City, OK - On May 9, 2003, tornados swooped across Oklahoma City's "Tornado Alley." The tornados path was virtually the same as the one that struck 4 years prior. Oklahoma has historically been subject to destructive and deadly tornados and high winds. After the 1999 tornado, 44 persons died, 800 were injured and over 6,000 homes were damaged or destroyed.

In order to make Oklahoma a safer place to live, the State launched a Safe Room Initiative Program. Oklahoma was the first State to promote and implement a Statewide residential safe room initiative to build safer communities. The safe room initiative was implemented by the State of Oklahoma with mitigation funds made available by FEMA through the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). This program funded the building of 6,016 safe rooms across the State.

The three basic objectives to help ensure a successful program were public education, financial assistance, and quality control. First, the State of Oklahoma and FEMA kicked off an extensive Public Education Campaign that encompassed a wide range of outreach projects using public service announcements through radio, television and print. The publication of books, resources and educational materials were distributed to the residents and communities, while speakers and meetings were used to reach the general public.

Next, the safe room had to be financially affordable to the people. Federal and State agencies developed a first-in-the-Nation safe room rebate program called "Oklahoma Can Survive" to help cover the cost of constructing safe rooms. A \$2,000 rebate was offered to property owners for the building of a safe room. The rebates were given in three phases. Phase 1 provided rebates to those people whose homes were destroyed or substantially damaged in the designated disaster area. Phase 2 provided rebates to people with damaged homes in the designated disaster area, and Phase 3 rebates were provided to anyone in the state who wanted a safe room.

Finally, minimal performance criteria guidelines were enforced for proper safe room construction. The FEMA publication 320, *Taking Shelter from the Storm*, was developed as a construction guideline to provide all the information a contractor needed to build a safe room including connection details, specifications, and material list for concrete, concrete masonry unit, wood-frame, and insulating concrete form designs. FEMA then defined performance criteria was developed and implemented. An engineer was retained to assist the State in technical support and help contractors and educating the general public about choosing a safe room construction contractor and helping homeowners with complaints against contractor performances.

The Safe Room Initiative and rebate program built 6,016 safe rooms after the 1999 tornado. There were no deaths in the 2003 tornado; the success directly attributable to the availability and utilization of the safe rooms. The Oklahomans in "Tornado Alley" felt safe and protected knowing that their families had a safe place to go.

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **State-wide**

FEMA Region: **Region VI**

State: **Oklahoma**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public**
Hazard Type: **Tornado**
Activity/Project Type: **Education/Outreach/Public Awareness; Safe Rooms/Community Shelters**
Structure Type: **Safe Room/Community Shelter**
Activity/Project Start Date: **08/1999**
Activity/Project End Date: **Ongoing**
Funding Source: **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)**
Funding Recipient: **Property Owner - Residential**
Funding Recipient Name: **Individual Homeowners**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **\$12,032,000.00 (Actual)**

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **Yes**

Federal Disaster #: **1272 , 05/04/1999**

Value Tested By Disaster? **Yes**

Tested By Federal Disaster #: **No Federal Disaster specified**

Year First Tested: **2003**

Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.fema.gov/about/contact/regionvi.shtm>

Reference URL 2: <http://www.ok.gov/oem/>

Main Points

- Oklahoma launched a Safe Room initiative and built 6016 Safe Rooms after the 5/4/1999 tornado.
- Safe Rooms were built through a rebate program using three basic objectives to assure a successful program: Public Education, Financial Assistance, and Quality Control.
- Funding was made available through FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). The Small Business Association (SBA), HUD, and Fannie Mae also made additional assistance available.
- No lives were lost after the May 2003 tornado and construction of 6016 safe rooms.
- Safe room initiative gained support and direction from Research and academic Institutes, City Governments, realtors, and contractors.