



## Safe Rooms Save Lives: State of Oklahoma Safe Room Initiative

### Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

#### State-wide, Oklahoma



**The State of Oklahoma** - On May 3, 1999, more than 70 tornadoes tore through Kansas and Oklahoma in the worst tornado outbreak in a generation. As a result, in Oklahoma alone more than 44 people died and almost 800 were injured. Approximately 90 percent of the buildings damaged were single-family dwellings. How could Oklahomans feel safe during future tornadoes?

To help answer this question, the State of Oklahoma launched an initiative to promote and support the construction of storm shelters in homes. The initiative was the first large-scale effort to build thousands of safe rooms through a rebate program, and its success is a direct result of the involvement and strong support of the Governor of Oklahoma and the participation of partners in industry, business, government, and the private sector.

An extensive public education campaign was launched by FEMA's Office of Public Affairs and supported by the State of Oklahoma. Teams of FEMA mitigation advisors fanned out across the state to show people how to build disaster-resistant residential structures, with an emphasis on safe rooms. Four thousand people were reached in a one-week period.

With the goal of saving lives in future tornadoes and severe storms, Federal and state agencies developed a first-in-the-nation safe room rebate program to help Oklahomans cover the cost of constructing safe rooms. The program offered a \$2,000 rebate. The state provided rebates to local jurisdictions on a worst-first basis from \$12 million dollars in Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) funds. The safe room rebate program resulted in the construction of 6,016 shelters throughout the State of Oklahoma. Additional safe room financial assistance was provided by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Fannie Mae.

To ensure that safe rooms were constructed and installed to resist appropriate wind- and debris-impact forces, technical support and information had to be provided to the public and to builders and contractors who would be designing and constructing. To meet this need, FEMA and the State of Oklahoma required that safe room and shelter performance standards be met (according to the design plans depicted in FEMA 320, *Taking Shelter From the Storm*, or other FEMA-defined performance criteria), retained a technical representative, and conducted technical seminars.

As an effort to continue promoting safe rooms throughout the state, several builders have constructed safe rooms with their newly built communities. The Millennium House, a project of Neighbor for Neighbor, a nonprofit, privately funded agency that serves the disadvantaged, serves as a model home for low- to moderate- income families in North Tulsa. Habitat for Humanity of Altus defined a tornado safe room as a standard feature. Therefore, every home they build will have a safe room. The Community Action Project (CAP) of Tulsa County helps individuals and families in economic need achieve self-sufficiency. CAP teamed with Tulsa's Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program to provide safe rooms for low-income, first-time home-buyers.

The State of Oklahoma's safe room initiative was the first statewide safe room mitigation program in the Nation. Under the initiative, homeowners, government officials, private industry, research and academic institutions and non-profit groups worked together to promote safe room construction and create safer communities for future generations. Their efforts have resulted in the construction of over 6,000 residential safe rooms, through the rebate program alone, throughout the State of Oklahoma.

#### 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**  
Activity/Project Start Date: **05/1999**  
Activity/Project End Date: **Ongoing**  
Funding Source: **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP); U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA)**  
Funding Recipient: **State Government**  
Funding Recipient Name: **State of Oklahoma**

## Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **Amount Not Available**

## Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal Disaster? **Unknown**  
Value Tested By Disaster? **Unknown**  
Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

## Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.fema.gov/pdf/plan/prevent/bestpractices/okcasestudies.pdf>  
Reference URL 2: <http://www.fema.gov/plan/prevent/bestpractices/casestudies.shtm>

## Main Points

- The State of Oklahoma launched an initiative to promote and support the construction of storm shelters in homes. The initiative was the first large-scale effort to build thousands of safe rooms through a rebate program.
- An extensive public education campaign was launched by FEMA, supported by the State of Oklahoma. Teams of FEMA mitigation advisors fanned out across the state to show people how to build disaster-resistant residential structures, with an emphasis on safe rooms.
- As an effort to continue promoting safe rooms throughout the state, several builders and non-profit organizations have constructed safe rooms with their newly built communities.



Oklahoma builder in front of a new home with a safe room



Construction industry conducts seminars and workshops in tornado-prone communities.