



# FEMA

## Fire Fighter Protects Family By Building Safe Room

**Autauga County, AL** - After seeing the destruction of his parents' home, an Autauga County fire fighter has decided that it is up to him to keep himself and his family safe from storms.

Robert Van Valkenburg, 52, decided to look into building a tornado safe room for his home after his parents' home was destroyed by a tornado spawned by Hurricane Andrew. "I grew up in that house and it was lost during Hurricane Andrew, so I take this stuff very seriously," says Van Valkenburg. He adds, "When it impacts your family, and you see how it affects them, you take it seriously and say 'Well if it could happen to my mom and dad, it could happen to me.'" Van Valkenburg started the process of building his safe room in 2001. He called his local emergency manager and enrolled in the Alabama safe room program sponsored by The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Alabama Emergency Management Agency. Actual construction of the safe room took place over eight months in 2002. FEMA paid 75% of the cost to build it or \$3500 through its Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). "My local emergency managers came out to look at the safe room while it was under construction and took pictures. I had to show an itemized break down of everything, and show the cost to substantiate what I paid for it. Then they gave me the money," Van Valkenburg stated. He also spent more of his own money to add a second entry way to the room, in the event the other entry is blocked, a drainage system and a generator in the back of his house that kicks in if there is a loss of power.

The safe room got its first test the following spring. Van Valkenburg, his wife, two children, and three dogs stayed in it when a storm system came through and a tornado touched down in the area. "We heard the sirens and went down there in the middle of the night," says Van Valkenburg "I have my pager from the fire department, and when it goes off I know we have severe weather coming into Autauga County. If they say tornado warning we go there." His family also took shelter in it during Hurricanes Ivan and Dennis.

The safe room is 11-by-12 feet and sits ten feet below the ground under a new wing that Van Valkenburg built onto his house for his elderly father-in-law. It is built to be a natural extension of the house. "I knew because of my wife being claustrophobic, I had to design it where it looked like a room or she wouldn't go into it," he said. The room is made of reinforced concrete and has steel doors that lock from the inside. Van Valkenburg has also equipped it with a big, sturdy bed, battery powered televisions, water, non-perishable foods, a first aid kit, power tools and the negatives to all family photos.

"We can come out of there and we can start life again, said Van Valkenburg. "That's what it is all about, coming out of the safe room and being able to live."



Autauga County,  
Alabama



### Quick Facts

Sector:

**Public/Private Partnership**

Cost:

**Amount Not Available**

Primary Activity/Project:

**Safe Rooms/Community Shelters**

Primary Funding:

**Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)**