Oklahoma tornadoes: Oklahoma City metro-area cities oppose public storm shelters

Several dozen people were turned away May 20 from what was previously a public storm shelter in Midwest City. Public officials said community storm shelters do more harm than good in larger cities. They said everyone is responsible for making their own plans for what to do during a tornado.

By Bryan Dean (more/Bryan Dean) Published: June 2, 2013

With a killer tornado on the ground in Moore and headed toward Midwest City, Marie Foster and about 40 others sought shelter at the Reed Center and its adjoining hotel May 20.

Foster was shocked to see frightened people turned away from what was once a public storm shelter.

Metro communities have gotten out of the business of public storm shelters because of a litany of safety concerns.

Foster said she understands those concerns, but they ring hollow to people who find themselves without shelter when a tornado is bearing down on them.

"There were children standing there, scared," she said. "It was pouring down rain and hail. People were terrified and asking to come inside. The police officers told them they needed to move on. You are on your own."

Oklahoma City and many other metro communities never have had public shelters. Others, such as Edmond, Midwest City and Norman, had public storm shelters but have closed them in recent years. The arguments against them are many.

Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett formed a task force after the May 20 tornado to look at safety options. Cornett said he is focused on what the city can do to protect schoolchildren, but the issue of community shelters will likely come before the group.

"I think there is a consensus that community shelters and the chaos that would surround the last few minutes before an approaching storm would probably create a bigger safety hazard than it would alleviate," Cornett said. "We can talk about it. We're going to talk about all this in the task force."

Some rural towns have public shelters. With low populations and no traffic concerns, public shelters can be a viable solution, Moore Emergency Management Director Gayland Kitch said.

But that simply isn't the case with larger cities.

"We don't have anything that has got a big basement," Kitch said. "We certainly don't have a basement that can hold 55,000 people."

Capacity is one of the biggest problems with building public shelters, city leaders from several communities agreed.

Yukon Emergency Management Director Frosty Peak said his city has never had public shelters for precisely this reason.

"If a shelter had enough room to fit 1,000 people, what happens to the 1,001st person?" Peak said. "Who would be that cutoff?"

Edmond schools used to open their doors during storms, said Mike Magee, Edmond's emergency management coordinator.

"We had cases where people were traveling too far to reach these shelters only to realize that they were already full," Magee said.

Coordinating volunteers to run the shelters posed additional problems, especially if a storm hit at night.

In Midwest City, tempers flared during a 2011 storm when the Reed Center, City Hall and a fire station designated as public shelters became overcrowded. A woman who couldn't get in to City Hall broke out a window to get access.

Emergency Management Director Mike Bower said operating the shelters caused too many safety problems. People were putting themselves in greater danger by getting in cars and driving to public shelters when the storm was too close.

Experts agree a car is one of the worst places to be during a tornado.

"There have been a lot of people who drive to a shelter and get killed because they couldn't make it in time," he said.
Kitch said people aren't necessarily safer in a public building than they would be in their own homes. But it is hard to convince people of that when they look at the pictures and video of the devastation caused by the May 20 tornado.

"There were hundreds if not thousands of people who sheltered in place who survived," Kitch said.

No guarantees
Foster said she's heard all the arguments against public shelters. But it's hard to tell people to ride a storm out in a closet when an EF5 tornado is in the area and TV weathermen are telling them they won't survive if they aren't underground.

Those driving in the area of a storm also don't have that option, she said. Many of those denied entry into the Reed Center had pulled off Interstate 40 after hearing reports on the radio telling them to get off the highway and find shelter at the nearest sturdy building.

"There is no guarantee if they do pull over that somebody is going to let them in," Foster said.

Foster and her husband were allowed into the hotel connected to the Reed Center when they agreed to rent a room. Those who didn't have the money were not.

"It just broke my heart," Foster said. "I felt really guilty that all these other people were not being allowed in. I know how frightened they were."

Bower said city officials are flooded with calls when the sirens start going off from people asking what they should do. But that is too late.

The best thing people can do to protect themselves from a killer tornado is plan ahead, emergency managers agreed.

"Everybody living in Oklahoma ought to have a safe plan, a safe kit, consider a safe room option and be aware of what to do when severe weather strikes," Magee said.

There are 3,170 registered storm shelters in Moore. Kitch said those without a storm shelter have a decision to make when severe weather is approaching — shelter in place or evacuate.

"Ultimately you are responsible for your own safety," Kitch said. "We provide people with information. That's what the sirens are about. How they choose to act on it is up to them."