

New Sirens Save Lives During 2019 Missouri Tornado

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. – Thanks to new sirens blaring a warning message about the approaching tornado this past May, no lives were lost in Missouri’s Cole County and Jefferson City, the state capital.

In 2011 a deadly EF-5 tornado—winds more than 200 mph, top of the Enhanced Fujita Damage Scale—took 161 lives in Joplin, MO. The catastrophic event, which brought down nearly 7,000 homes, a hospital and other public buildings, prompted a wave of initiatives throughout the state to reduce risks to lives and damage to property in the path of another disaster.

The county and city evaluated their emergency sirens and agreed to replace them.

According to Bill Farr, Cole County’s emergency management director, the warning sirens within Jefferson City limits needed to be upgraded and replaced. They were “old-style World War II civil defense sirens.” Maintenance costs were “unbelievable” and parts for repair were no longer available.

The new system with 29 sirens cost about \$750,000 with each siren averaging between \$30,000 and \$35,000. The project was funded by capital improvement sales taxes. The joint Cole County-Jefferson City siren project was completed in 2012.



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Eerily, on May 22 this year, the eighth anniversary of the Joplin tornado, Mother Nature tested the new emergency sirens. An EF-3 tornado, with 136-165 mph winds plowed through Cole County and Jefferson City. Not one fatality was reported.

Jefferson City resident Joe Gassoway, Jr., who lives in a street parallel to the area where the tornado touched down, said, “I heard the second siren after hearing the wind pick up, felt my house shake, grabbed my cat and headed toward the cellar.” A former New Orleans resident and Hurricane Katrina survivor, Gassoway knows that weather can wreak havoc. Trees fell on and totaled his car, but he was unhurt — except for cat scratches.

Lt. David Williams, Jefferson City Police Department, noted residents were positive about the siren warning. “After Joplin, people paid attention. Sirens made a big difference. A digital message sent with the siren blast indicated a tornado was on the way. Watches and warnings from the National Weather Service feed into the Jefferson City Police Department, the joint communications center for the city and county.”

“National Weather Service warnings prompted siren blasts for 30 minutes; damage reports came into the 911 system as the tornado passed,” he added.

Residents, Cole County and Jefferson City officials feel safer with the sirens. As Williams says, “... people listened on May 22 and they knew what to do.”

FEMA provides three grant programs that offer funding for eligible mitigation planning and projects that reduce disaster losses and protect life and property from future disaster damages: Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, the Flood Mitigation Assistance Program, and the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program.



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