

Protecting Children from Severe Storms at Trooper Island Summer Camp

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ATLANTA – FEMA and the Commonwealth of Kentucky have approved a grant to help Trooper Island rebuild a community safe room.

The community safe room designed years ago to provide protection in extreme weather is out of service. The safe room, built in the 1970s, took a battering from severe storms and tornadoes in mid-July 2015 that resulted in a major disaster declaration for the Commonwealth. Roof joists were knocked loose, making the room structurally unsafe and impractical for use by campers or the families who use the 28,000-acre lake and surrounding woodlands.

But soon, the island will have a safe space that can handle the worst weather. FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program recently approved \$96,975 for the camp to rebuild the community safe room. Hazard mitigation is any sustainable action that reduces or eliminates long-term risk to people and property from disasters that are sure to come.

“This project will help protect the lives of Trooper Island campers and residents during tornadoes and other severe weather events,” FEMA Region 4 Administrator Gracia B. Szczech said.

The new safe room will be able to withstand winds up to 250 mph and have a capacity for 113 occupants. Demolition of the current safe room will start in the fall. Kentucky State Trooper Jonathan Biven is hoping the new building will be completed by March 2023, before the hectic summer season. FEMA will pay 75% of the project cost, or \$72,731. The remaining 25% of the cost will be split between the Commonwealth of Kentucky paying and Trooper Island Kid’s Camp.

Trooper Island, located in Cumberland County in south-central Kentucky, sits on Dale Hollow Lake, which straddles the Kentucky-Tennessee border. The camp was founded in 1965 by former Kentucky State Police Director Col. James E. Bassett as a place where state troopers and children whose families might not be



able to afford a stay at summer camp can spend time together.

“He wanted to give these kids an escape from their everyday turmoil, and for one week be able to just not worry about those things,” Biven said.

Since the opening of Trooper Island 57 years ago, more than 60 former campers and counselors have gone on to become state troopers. Among them is Kentucky Emergency Management Director Jeremy Slinker, who retired as a colonel with the Kentucky State Police.

“It had such an impact and influence on me that my career thinking started changing,” said Slinker, who spent four summers working as a counselor at Trooper Island.

Safety has been a priority throughout the years. Troopers and counselors are prepared for the rare, dangerous storms. They usher the children to a protected space and encourage boaters to tie their boats along the docks and take cover on the island.

Until the new community safe room is built, Biven’s basement will fill that role. But once construction is complete, signs will go up around the lake to let the public know the safe room is open to everyone during severe weather.

“Even if a bad storm develops, having that ability to make sure they are safe is more than significant,” Slinker said. “It is huge because (counselors) take every precaution to ensure the safety of the kids while they are there.”

Biven wants the week the campers spend on the island to be a memory they recall with fondness. He also wants the troopers and counselors to have peace of mind when it comes to weather safety.

“I’m highly protective of all of them,” he said. “This is our future.”

