



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers

New Preparedness Guide

by Kelly Heavey



Kansas is smack-dab in the middle of tornado alley, due to the collision of winds from the arctic North and from the balmy Gulf of Mexico. It is prime ground for billowing super-cell thunderstorms, which may produce tornadoes. Many Kansas residents recognize this and prepare by means of family emergency plans. A transit agency needs to be prepared, too.

The National Weather Service may issue a tornado watch or tornado warning for your area during a strong storm. Knowing the difference between the two is essential. During a watch, the conditions for a tornado exist, but there is no tornado on the ground. During a tornado warning, either a funnel or a tornado on the ground has been spotted.

So how does a transit agency prepare for severe weather? It depends whether you're in the office or driving. Either way, pay attention to the

conditions outside. Be aware of the alerts that may occur around you, such as sirens or radio broadcasts.

In the office, designate a shelter in which to seek cover. The safest place is in an interior hallway on the lowest possible level, under a staircase, or in a designated shelter area. Use your arms and hands to protect your neck and head, and stay away from windows. The University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agriculture's *Disaster Handbook* recommends having a briefcase or small suitcase on hand to take important documents with you to shelter. The *Emergency Preparedness Guide for Transit Employees* by FTA and NTI suggests avoiding large open areas such as auditoriums and cafeterias, and to be aware that mobile structures will offer little-to-no protection from a tornado, even if

tied down.

On the road, a bus driver should have discussed the weather conditions with a supervisor prior to beginning a shift. Open communication should be maintained, especially if the weather worsens. A bus should not accept riders if there is a tornado warning in effect, said Iowa's State Transportation Director Terry Voy, cited in a North Carolina School Bus Safety's Web site resource called *Tornado Preparedness*. If a tornado touches down en route, Voy says the driver should be aware of any possible shelters on the route, such as buildings, caves or any other strong structure to protect people. Do *not* take shelter under an overpass.

If a shelter cannot be found, the rider should locate a ditch on the side of the road and instruct riders to take cover in it. The bus should be parked far away from the people to prevent strong winds from blowing it onto them. Do not ever try to outrun a tornado.

At all times during a period of severe weather, communication should be maintained between the driver and an individual at the transit office if

A tornado, Kansas' most violent natural occurrence, has an average speed of 30 mph, but can reach speeds above 250 mph. The tornado that destroyed Greensburg in May 2007 whipped around at 200 mph; however, most tornadoes (83 percent) are considered weak with winds of less than 110 mph, according to the National Climate Data Center.

possible. If communication does not work due to storm damage, develop and know the policies and recommended steps of your office in a severe weather situation, and continue efforts to get in touch with the office after those steps have been carried out and also when you and your riders are secure.

A NOAA weather radio programmable for your service area is a low-cost investment to keep informed 24 hours a day, seven days a week on weather conditions and more. Radios are plugged into the wall but tend to have a long battery life of around 30 hours in case power is knocked out by a storm. The weather radio alerts listeners to all hazards in the area, whether the emergency is natural such as a tornado, environmental like a chemical release, or public safety such as Amber Alerts. Weather radios can be purchased for as low as \$20 or as high as \$200, depending on how many features you desire. They are available at retail outlets or online merchants. It may be your only reliable source of weather updates when the power goes out.

To learn about severe weather by other sources, simply turn on the TV, radio, or Internet—directed to a weather Web site. All three will always provide up-to-the-minute coverage on your area during severe weather. www.weather.com provides a nearly immediate local forecast after you type your zip code in.

Create a severe weather plan in your office with these suggestions, and have your employees learn it. It may protect the lives of your employees and your riders during tornado season.

Sources:

www.itre.ncsu.edu/ghsp/tornado.html

www.nws.noaa.gov/om/brochures/ttl.pdf

University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agriculture's *Disaster Handbook*, <http://disaster.ifas.ufl.edu/PDFS/CHAP10/D10-05.PDF>

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