



Getting the Alarm Out: USM's Tornado Warning System

Full Mitigation Best Practice Story

Forrest County, Mississippi

Hattiesburg, MS - Prior to 1998, students at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) were largely dependent upon “word of mouth” information when tornadoes threatened the campus.



According to Bob Hopkins, USM Chief of Security, the university recognized the need for a campus-wide tornado warning system when several alerts failed to reach a considerable portion of the 16,000 students enrolled.

“The critical need is for people outside to go inside,” Mr. Hopkins said. “There is an emergency plan in effect in each building with designated safety areas.” The University Police dispatch office manages the system.

University Officials say the system operates similarly to a radio or wireless system. “If a tornado warning is issued for our area, the University Police dispatcher calls the Emergency Management District to confirm the tornado is a threat to our campus. At that point, we set the alarm off,” Mr. Hopkins explained.

The most noticeable feature of the new system is its prominent position on top of Owings-McQuagge Hall. The radio-controlled warning system has two components: 1) an alarm characterized by Westminster Chimes, and 2) a voice system which announces, “A tornado warning has been issued for the Hattiesburg area. Please seek shelter.”

The Federal Emergency Management Agency contributed \$21,902 of the \$29,202 cost to install the warning system through its Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), which is administered by the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency. Following a major disaster declaration, the HMGP funds up to 75 percent of the eligible costs of a project that will reduce or eliminate damages from future natural hazard events.

“Students are acquainted with the system during risk management orientation. Each residence hall gets a copy of the Emergency Response Manual,” Mr. Hopkins noted. He is pleased with the system’s effectiveness.

During Hurricane Katrina (2005), approximately 1,800 students remained sheltered on USM’s campus

Activity/Project Location

Geographical Area: **Single County in a State**

FEMA Region: **Region IV**

State: **Mississippi**

County: **Forrest County**

City/Community: **Hattiesburg**

Key Activity/Project Information

Sector: **Public**
Hazard Type: **Tornado**
Activity/Project Type: **Warning Systems**
Activity/Project Start Date: **09/1999**
Activity/Project End Date: **03/2000**
Funding Source: **Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP)**
Funding Recipient: **Academic**
Funding Recipient Name: **University of Southern Mississippi**
Application/Project Number: **9999**

Activity/Project Economic Analysis

Cost: **\$29,202.00 (Estimated)**
Non FEMA Cost:

Activity/Project Disaster Information

Mitigation Resulted From Federal
Disaster? **Unknown**
Value Tested By Disaster? **Unknown**
Repetitive Loss Property? **Unknown**

Reference URLs

Reference URL 1: <http://www.msema.org>
Reference URL 2: <http://www.fema.gov/government/grant/hmgp/index.shtm>

Main Points

- The University of Mississippi recognized the need for a campus-wide tornado warning system.
- During Hurricane Katrina (2005), approximately 1,800 students remained sheltered on USM's campus.
- The radio-controlled warning system has two components: 1) an alarm characterized by Westminster Chimes, and 2) a voice system which announces, "A tornado warning has been issued for the Hattiesburg area. Please seek shelter."



Tornado warning system on top of Owings-McQuagge Hall.



Entrance to the University of Southern Mississippi.