



Safe Room Program Offers Cooke County Texas Residents Peace of Mind

COOKE COUNTY, TX – Faced with a long local history of dangerous tornadoes, Cooke County officials wanted to help residents protect themselves in the future. They achieved that goal by offering homeowners financial incentives to build tornado shelters and safe rooms.

Established in May 2011, with the help of federal mitigation funds, the county’s Residential Safe Room Rebate Program reimburses homeowners for part of the cost of installing safe rooms and shelters on their property. The rebate covers 50 percent of the total cost, up to \$3,000. To date, about 150 residents have benefitted.

“The goals of this rebate program are to help Cooke County residents be as prepared as possible and help provide them a safe place to go in the event of a tornado,” said Emergency Management Coordinator Ray Fletcher. “It’s not a matter of if we will have another tornado in Cooke County, but when.”

According to the National Climatic Data Center, Cooke County, Texas, has had 53 tornado events since 1950. The tornadoes caused \$54 million in damage and injured 27 people.

Fletcher said that starting up a safe room initiative had always been one of the first mitigation activities he wanted to see implemented during his term as the county’s emergency management coordinator. However, he had to wait until the county had a viable hazard mitigation plan in order to apply for federal funding.

In 2011, the county received a \$750,000 grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) to fund the start-up project. “We advised and encouraged residents to apply,” Fletcher said. “Residents were aware that not all who applied would get a grant. It was on a first-come, first-served basis. We got a great response.”

To be eligible for the program, applicants must meet the following criteria:

- They must own and reside at the Cooke County property, for which they are applying.
- The residence must be outside of a FEMA or locally mapped floodplain.
- Residents in incorporated communities must comply with their community’s permit processes.
- They must be able to cover the cost of the safe room and its installation, then submit invoices and receipts for reimbursement.

Fletcher also cautioned residents that the safe room and installer must be certified by the National Storm Shelter Association (NSSA) or the American Tornado Shelter Association (ATSA). The NSSA and ATSA are the only industry organizations recognized by FEMA to certify that a safe room or storm shelter meets or exceeds FEMA standards.

“I actually go out to each site following installation, and take a picture of the shelter and of the seal that verifies the certification,” Fletcher said.

In May 2015, safe room owners had an opportunity to experience the security of the shelters as they endured a night of turbulent weather, tornadoes, and floods in North Texas. At 7:30 p.m. on May 7, the National Weather Service (NWS) in Fort Worth issued a tornado warning for south central Cooke County.

NWS announced: “To repeat....a tornado is on the ground. Take cover now! Move to a basement or an interior room on the lowest floor of a sturdy building. Avoid windows. If you are outdoors...in a mobile home...or in a vehicle...move to the closest substantial shelter and protect yourself from flying debris.”

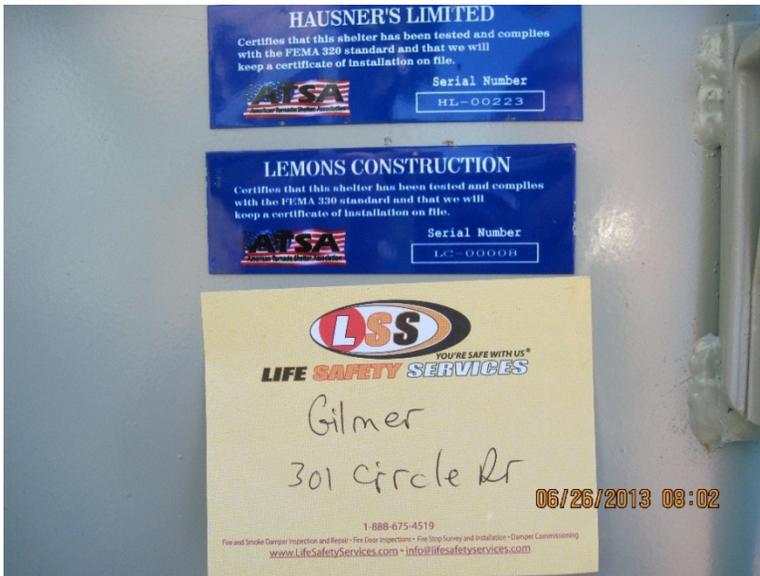
Residents reported they took shelter in their safe rooms during the storm that generated damaging tornadoes in Wise, Denton, and Cooke counties.

“Safe room owners are satisfied with our safe room initiative. In fact, some are willing to talk about how well-received the program is,” said Fletcher. “Last year, we had several close calls. This year, so far in 2015, four



tornadoes were sighted and the safe rooms were used. We have a long waiting list and are looking forward to funding additional safe rooms.”

For additional information on Cooke County Texas’ Safe Room Initiative, visit: [www.fema.gov/safe rooms](http://www.fema.gov/safe-rooms), www.nssa.cc , www.americantornadoshelterassociation.org and www.fema.gov/hazard-mitigation-grant-program.



A photo of the seal following shelter installation to validate NSSA or ATSA certification. (Photo by: Ray Fletcher, Cooke County Emergency Manager)



This safe room was purchased by a homeowner who participated in the safe room initiative program. (Photo by: Ray Fletcher, Cooke County Emergency Manager)