

Safe Room Shelters Evacuees from Hurricane Harvey

VICTORIA, TX – Nearly 400 evacuees with nowhere else to go in Victoria, Texas, sheltered inside a 168-foot wide steel-reinforced tornado/hurricane safe room the day Hurricane Harvey barreled into Texas.

When the city ordered a mandatory evacuation forcing people to find shelter, St. Joseph High School Principal Tom Maj was happy to help.

“This was the first ever use of the facility, and it performed as intended,” said Maj.

The community commonly refers to the safe room at the Tom O’Connor Jr. Athletic Center facility as the St. Joseph High School FEMA Dome. It was constructed to serve the Victoria community during catastrophic events.



Residents evacuated to the community safe room/indoor sports facility located at St. Joseph High during Hurricane Harvey event. **Photo by Pamela Campbell/FEMA**

“When the hurricane was devastating the area, you could not hear any noise from the storm while inside the safe room.” said Maj. Many of the residents who evacuated into the safe room were elderly, homeless or families who could not travel away from Victoria.

The safe room was constructed in 2015 for extreme weather events just like Harvey. The dome meets occupancy requirements for both hurricanes and tornadoes. The safe room has 20,000 square feet of protected space, which gives it the capacity to shelter 1,000 occupants. However, since a tornado is a maximum 2-hour event and the safe room’s occupant density is a minimum of 5 square feet standing or seated inside, the safe room can shelter up to 4,000 occupants during a tornado.

The criteria for a community safe room is contained in FEMA Publication P-361, *Safe Rooms for Tornadoes and Hurricanes: Guidance for Community and Residential Safe Rooms*. This publication provided guidance to engineers, architects, state, and local government officials during the construction of the St. Joseph facility. Following the FEMA guidelines produced a safe room that provided protection from the deadly winds and wind-borne debris associated with Hurricane Harvey.

The FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) helped fund the project and the Texas Department of Emergency Management (TEDM) administered the funds. The total cost of the community safe room was \$3,601,620. The federal share was \$2,701,215 and the local jurisdiction match was \$900,405.

FEMA grants have allowed the TDEM to award 41 Hurricane Community Safe Rooms along the coast. Other community safe rooms activated during Harvey are located in Jackson and Refugio counties.

For additional information visit:

- www.fema.gov/Texas-disaster-mitigation
- www.fema.gov/news-release/2013/05/06/fema-awards-23m-community-safe-room-victoria-co-tx
- www.victoriaadvocate.com/news/2017/aug/25/victoria-residents-take-shelter-at-st-joseph-gym/
- www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/2009
- www.fema.gov/fema-p-361-safe-rooms-tornadoes-and-hurricanes-guidance-community-and-residential-safe-rooms