

### **Tornado Shelters Face Dilemma With Pet Lovers**

#### **News**

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OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) -- Jerry Starr thought he was taking the safe approach when a twister was reported heading toward his suburban neighborhood outside Oklahoma City last May. He grabbed his teenage daughter Dyonna and his dog and drove to the local City Hall, which serves as a public storm shelter.



But when he arrived, a police officer told him that the only way they could come in was if Tobi, his shih tzu-yorkie mix, stayed outside. No pets allowed. So Starr and Tobi rode out the storm in his car, one of the most dangerous places he could be.

"I love her and there's no way I was going to live knowing I was abandoning her," said Starr, of Del City.

Modern forecasting technology now gives residents hours of notice of threatening conditions and precise projections of a storm's likely path. Residents are bombarded with broadcast warnings to take shelter.

But as the spring storm season arrives in Tornado Alley, emergency officials are still wrestling with a dilemma posed by man's best friends. Since many public shelters won't accept animals, people wind up dashing across town to rescue their pets or staying in unprotected houses rather than hunkering down in safety.

"Pets and sheltering is always a problem," said David Grizzle, emergency management coordinator for the college town of Norman, which closed its public shelters last fall because of problems with pets and overcrowding.

"Pets come in and sometimes they're hard to control," he said, describing past scenes of dozens of frantic dogs along with snakes, chickens and even iguanas brought inside.

Access to shelters has gotten special attention in Oklahoma this year after 79 tornadoes strafed the state in 2013, the second highest total in the nation, killing 34 people and injuring hundreds. Most of the victims were in cars, houses or unreinforced buildings. A joint state-federal program offered up to a \$2,000 rebate to help eligible homeowners install fortified "safe rooms" or above or underground shelters.

"One of the most common injuries that people may sustain during tornadoes, storms or straight-line winds are injuries from falling or flying debris, so it's important to take shelter," said Keli Cain, spokeswoman for the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management.

But while the number of in-home shelters is growing, most people in small towns and of modest incomes depend on sturdy public buildings like schools, hospitals and courthouses. And more than 60 percent of households have pets.

At city council and campus administration meetings this spring, officials reviewing local emergency plans are again debating the implications of turning animals away.

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"People are so attached to their pets, I don't think it's even possible to ban them," said Byron Boshell, director of Security at Oklahoma City's Integris Baptist Medical Center, where people from surrounding neighborhoods come when funnel clouds approach.

Staff members try to herd the pets to the basement garage, away from the patients. But at some shelters, 60 to 70 dogs may be packed in with the people.

Southwestern Oklahoma State University, in Weatherford, used to allow pets into the campus buildings until several bad scenes involving dozens of barking, lunging dogs and other panicked animals.

The animals "were kind of terrified from the storm and also strange people," said Rick Bolar, chief of the campus police.

One of the final straws in Norman's decision to close its shelters came when one family was asked to put its dogs outside to make room for another family that had arrived.

"The adults actually got into fights over that decision and trying to boil down the priority of who should be inside a facility during a storm: a pet or a person. It's a constant fight," Grizzle said.

But holding to the no-pets policy isn't easy because of the chilling consequence - rebuffed people sitting outside in their flimsy cars as the twisters move in.

When a tornado approached the community of Tuttle last May 31, Suzanne Brown, 48, rushed to shelter at the local city hall, which was equipped to accommodate 1,000 people. She managed to sneak in her cat, but not her Pomeranian, so she remained outside as the storm came through. She was unharmed, but eight people in nearby El Reno were killed.

"My dog is like my child," she said. "I know some people don't understand that."

The National Weather Service recognized the pet predicament in a recent report on last May's tornadoes in Oklahoma. The report recommended that local emergency managers get out the word on how to shelter pets during severe weather, but didn't have any options to suggest.

Emergency officials say that at the very least, pet owners should think ahead about where they'll go. Brown said she's already thinking.

"We understand that when we have to go, they get into a crate," Brown said.