

# **PRESS RELEASE**

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

October 29, 2010

## **Warning Siren Education**

Michigan City Indiana; The intended mission of the Michigan City Emergency Management Agency is to use early warning sirens to alert our citizens and visitors of tornados, Hazardous Material incidents, or other public safety warnings. The Emergency Management Agency will use all information technology and human resources at its disposal to limit siren activation to incidents which are known to threaten lives. To this end, the Emergency Management Agency will use education and siren testing to create a standardized public reaction to the emergency warning system which is intended to save lives. Because tornados can form and strike in as little as two minutes, the Emergency Management Agency, through its working relationships with trained weather experts and other emergency response departments, will err on the side of caution, rather than endanger lives with a delayed warning. "The above paragraph is the Mission Statement taken from the City of Michigan City Early Warning Sirens Activation Protocol" stated John Jones, Director of the City's Emergency Management Agency.

Last Wednesday, on the morning of October 27, the sirens were activated county-wide because of the Tornado Warning which was in effect for La Porte County. What was billed as the storm of the century by weather prediction centers passed by the city leaving it unharmed. This is not to say however that the city was without danger. A confirmed F1 tornado had left a home in Porter County and a couple of structures in Wanatah in southern La Porte County with significant damage. With luck and proper actions of seeking shelter by those in its path, no one was injured. Anytime a tornado warning is issued by the National Weather Service for our area, activating the sirens is always in order during the storms arrival to our jurisdiction. The City and County leaders and public safety officials plan for the most effective Standard Operating Procedures that will result in the highest level of safety without creating complacency associated with activating sirens too frequently during storms without tornado warnings present. Community Complacency has also been called the crying wolf syndrome. When the National Weather Service (NWS) issues a warning they do so for the entire county. The NWS does not by policy issue warnings for partial county jurisdictional communities within the county. Local public safety officials must rely on radar, trained weather spotters and First Responders to determine when a threat has passed through a community.

### **What do the sirens mean?**

The outdoor early warning sirens are intended to warn citizens of impending danger from storms, hazardous material spills, terrorist attacks or other life endangering circumstances. The sirens will sound in three (3) minute cycles and will be repeated as long as danger or warnings prescribed by the emergency plan are present in the community. The concept of an all clear siren is not used because of the improbability of knowing whether the siren was signaling continued danger or that the danger had passed. Therefore we use local media outlets to inform citizens on instructions from Emergency Management and a notice that storms or danger is no longer present. In La Porte County citizens may also call the United Way sponsored 2-1-1 call and referral service to gain information.

### **Actions that must be taken**

When the sirens are activated, or news media alerts are received of a tornado warning; citizens should immediately take shelter. Taking shelter in a designated safe room within a home, school or business should be preplanned and practiced so that everyone present gets to the shelter as quickly as humanly possible after receiving a warning. Family and business plans should be in place and planning guidance is available online at [fema.gov](http://www.crh.noaa.gov/iwx), from the national weather service at <http://www.crh.noaa.gov/iwx> or by calling the Emergency Management Office at 219-873-1499 during business hours.

### **Sirens are tested**

The sirens are tested each month on the first Saturday at 11:00 a.m. Two 3 minute cycles are heard with a period of silence between the two activations. One cycle is a steady siren sound and the other cycle activated is a warble or fluctuating wailing sound. The sirens are tested for sound quality, volume level, and mechanical rotation. The sirens are not tested during inclement weather so as not to unduly alarm the public.

### **Advanced preparation for storms and other emergencies**

As in the case of last Wednesday, the Michigan City Emergency Operations Center was activated in advance of the storm and Public Safety Officials were present in the planning center. The schools were in close contact with officials operating in the Center. Radio contact with the Porter County Emergency Management Agency also provided valuable information about the approaching storm as it left Porter County to enter La Porte County.

The following criteria is used in the Michigan City Early Warning Siren Activation Protocol to guide officials in the decision making process of when to activate the community warning

sirens. **The early warning sirens will be activated when one or more of the following events occur:**

1. When severe weather is present in the community and the National Weather Service, (NWS), issues one of the following alerts for Michigan City / LaPorte County.
  - Tornado **Warning**.
  - Severe Thunderstorm **Warnings when accompanied by** a Tornado **Watch**; (see definitions).
2. The 911 dispatch Center / radio room receives notification of a **tornado sighting** by a trained spotter, police officer, fire fighter, authorized Skywarn Spotter, or EMS professional, which would affect the citizens of Michigan City, (see Roster section for authorized Skywarn Spotters).
3. The **on-duty shift commander** for the Michigan City Police Department receives information that he/she feels is **from a reliable source** that would require the warning system to be activated under the criteria established by this protocol.
4. The 911 Center **Dispatcher** receives information, which he/she believes is **from a reliable source** that would require the emergency warning system to be activated in accordance with the criteria established by this protocol.

In an online Safety article written by Roger Edwards of the Storm Prediction Center in Norman Oklahoma on Tornado Safety, Mr. Edwards writes “there is no such thing as guaranteed safety inside a tornado. Freak accidents happen; and the most violent tornadoes can level and blow away almost any house and its occupants. Extremely violent F5 tornadoes are very rare, though. Most tornadoes are actually much weaker and can be survived using these safety ideas...

**Prevention and practice before the storm:** At home, have a family tornado plan in place, based on the kind of dwelling you live in and the safety tips below. Know where you can take shelter in a matter of seconds, and practice a family tornado drill at least once a year. Have a pre-determined place to meet after a disaster. Flying debris is the greatest danger in tornadoes; so store protective coverings (e.g., mattress, sleeping bags, thick blankets, etc) in or next to your shelter space, ready to use on a few seconds' notice. When a tornado watch is issued, think about the drill and check to make sure all your safety supplies are handy. Turn on local TV, radio or NOAA Weather Radio and stay alert for warnings. Forget about the old notion of opening windows to equalize pressure; the tornado will blast open the windows for you! If you shop frequently at certain stores, learn where there are bathrooms, storage rooms or other interior shelter areas away from windows, and the shortest ways to get there. All administrators of schools, shopping centers, nursing homes, hospitals, sports arenas, stadiums, mobile home communities and offices should have a tornado safety plan in place, with easy-to-read signs

posted to direct everyone to a safe, close by shelter area. Schools and office building managers should regularly run well-coordinated drills. If you are planning to build a house, especially east of the Rockies, consider an underground tornado shelter or an interior "safe room".

**Know the signs of a tornado:** Weather forecasting science is not perfect and some tornadoes do occur without a tornado warning. There is no substitute for staying alert to the sky. Besides an obviously visible tornado, here are some things to look and listen for:

1. Strong, persistent rotation in the cloud base.
2. Whirling dust or debris on the ground under a cloud base -- tornadoes sometimes have no funnel!
3. Hail or heavy rain followed by either dead calm or a fast, intense wind shift. Many tornadoes are wrapped in heavy precipitation and can't be seen.
4. Day or night - Loud, continuous roar or rumble, which doesn't fade in a few seconds like thunder.
5. Night - Small, bright, blue-green to white flashes at ground level near a thunderstorm (as opposed to silvery lightning up in the clouds). These mean power lines are being snapped by very strong wind, maybe a tornado.
6. Night - *Persistent* lowering from the cloud base, illuminated or silhouetted by lightning -- especially if it is on the ground or there is a blue-green-white power flash underneath.

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## WHAT TO DO...

**In a house with a basement:** Avoid windows. Get in the basement and under some kind of sturdy protection (heavy table or work bench), or cover yourself with a mattress or sleeping bag. Know where very heavy objects rest on the floor above (pianos, refrigerators, waterbeds, etc.) and do not go under them. They may fall down through a weakened floor and crush you.

**In a house with no basement, a dorm, or an apartment:** Avoid windows. Go to the lowest floor, small center room (like a bathroom or closet), under a stairwell, or in an interior hallway with no windows. Crouch as low as possible to the floor, facing down; and cover your head with your hands. A bath tub may offer a shell of partial protection. Even in an interior room, you should cover yourself with some sort of thick padding (mattress, blankets, etc.), to protect against falling debris in case the roof and ceiling fail.

**In an office building, hospital, nursing home or skyscraper:** Go directly to an enclosed, windowless area in the center of the building -- *away from glass* and on the lowest floor possible. Then, crouch down and cover your head. Interior stairwells are usually good places to take shelter, and if not crowded, allow you to get to a lower level quickly. Stay off the elevators; you could be trapped in them if the power is lost.

**In a mobile home:** Get out! Even if your home is tied down, you are probably safer outside, even if the only alternative is to seek shelter out in the open. Most tornadoes can destroy even tied-down mobile homes; and it is best not to play the low odds that yours will make it. If your community has a tornado shelter, go there fast. If there is a sturdy permanent building within easy running distance, seek shelter there. Otherwise, lie flat on low ground away from your home, protecting your head. If possible, use open ground away from trees and cars, which can be blown onto you.

**At school:** Follow the drill! Go to the interior hall or room in an orderly way as you are told. Crouch low, head down, and protect the back of your head with your arms. Stay away from windows and large open rooms like gyms and auditoriums.

**In a car or truck:** Vehicles are extremely dangerous in a tornado. If the tornado is visible, far away, and the traffic is light, you may be able to drive out of its path by moving at right angles to the tornado. Otherwise, park the car as quickly and safely as possible -- out of the traffic lanes. [It is safer to get the car out of mud later if necessary than to cause a crash.] Get out and seek shelter in a sturdy building. If in the open country, run to low ground away from any cars (which may roll over on you). Lie flat and face-down, protecting the back of your head with your arms. Avoid seeking shelter under bridges, which can create deadly traffic hazards while offering little protection against flying debris.

**In the open outdoors:** If possible, seek shelter in a sturdy building. If not, lie flat and face-down on low ground, protecting the back of your head with your arms. Get as far away from trees and cars as you can; they may be blown onto you in a tornado.

**In a shopping mall or large store:** Do not panic. Watch for others. Move as quickly as possible to an interior bathroom, storage room or other small enclosed area, away from windows.

**In a church or theater:** Do not panic. If possible, move quickly but orderly to an interior bathroom or hallway, away from windows. Crouch face-down and protect your head with your arms. If there is no time to do that, get under the seats or pews, protecting your head with your arms or hands.

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**AFTER THE TORNADO...**

Keep your family together and wait for emergency personnel to arrive. Carefully render aid to those who are injured. Stay away from power lines and puddles with wires in them; they may still be carrying electricity! Watch your step to avoid broken glass, nails, and other sharp objects. Stay out of any heavily damaged houses or buildings; they could collapse at any time. Do not use matches or lighters, in case of leaking natural gas pipes or fuel tanks nearby. Remain calm and alert, and listen for information and instructions from emergency crews or local officials.

For more information contact the Michigan City Emergency Management Agency at (219) 873-1499 or by email at [jjones@emichigancity.com](mailto:jjones@emichigancity.com) or on the Michigan City Web site at [www.emichigancity.com](http://www.emichigancity.com)