

# Storm Season: Risk Lessons from Tornado Alley



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Dark storm clouds were just beginning to swallow the sky over my college house as my phone started making an eerily familiar sound. While growing up in Alabama, I often heard tornado watch and tornado warning alerts broadcasting from the sirens mounted on posts every few miles along the highway. The residents of my small town knew that when a siren sounded, it was time to take cover as quickly as possible.

Since I was familiar with the storm-warning coming from my phone, I was able to remain calm. My college roommate—a transplant from New England—was caught off guard. After the warning period passed, I learned that her tornado knowledge was limited to watching the movie *Twister* and making a “tornado in a bottle” in elementary school.

When my phone started beeping, she began rushing around the apartment collecting her prized possessions in a garbage bag. I watched in stunned silence. Had a tornado touched down, taking the time to gather her possessions could have cost both of us our lives.

My experience that day was an important reminder that when an unfamiliar crisis occurs, many people do things that *increase*, rather than *mitigate* the danger. Although the actual crisis your organization experiences may not be the one you imagined and planned for, any prior preparation and planning will serve you well.

Consider the following tips to prepare for the crisis that might be around the bend at your entity.

- **Expect the unexpected** – Simply because your entity’s mission seems far afield from “tornado alley,” a crisis could be around the corner. Resolve to take time now, while all is calm, to develop a simple action plan. For example, which stakeholder groups will you notify if your organization is unable to operate from its primary headquarters? Who will make the call? Is your spokesperson trained to calmly answer questions from the media?
- **Don’t be fooled by the calm before the storm** – If your organization is working smoothly in a peaceful environment, you may not notice the storm brewing in the distance. While it may not be possible to erect a dependable risk “radar” system, every entity can take steps to better spot storms and other crises brewing on the horizon. At a minimum, add a question about distant or approaching risks to your risk management committee discussions.
- **Recall that, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”** – Consider developing a “disaster supply kit” with up-to-date lists of key stakeholders, multiple ways to contact the members of your crisis response team, insurance policy and provider details, and other items you might need in an emergency.

Finally, remember that it’s usually not the pressure of the tornado that is the most dangerous, but the debris.

Similarly, in the world of crisis management, the initial “hit” may not cause the most damage. For some public entities, the greatest damage may result from the leadership team’s inconsistent responses to the media, or dissatisfaction by donors kept in the dark as your organization regroupes. By taking a few steps and making simple plans before you need them, you’ll not only inspire confidence about your degree of preparation, you’ll also minimize the risk of wasting time putting your “valuables” in a garbage bag when the storm touches down.

## **Tornado Preparation Tips:**

- Install the American Red Cross Tornado Warning app on your smartphone. [Click here](#) to learn more, or text “GETNADO” to 90999.
- Keep a pair of sturdy shoes and a flashlight within easy reach from your bed.

## **Under Water?**

This week we’re debuting the first in a series of new risk-themed infographics from the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Click here to visit our [Flood Risks](#) infographic. Bookmark our [Infographics](#) Webpage to check out the library!

*Emily Wilson is a summer intern with the Nonprofit Risk Management Center and is excited to apply her past experiences and knowledge to a better understanding of risk. If you have questions or comments, the NRMC can be reached at 703.777.3504.*