Kiowa County Health Department

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Kiowa County Health Department Encourages Storm Preparedness

As severe weather season approaches, the Kiowa County Health Department and the Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH) reminds Oklahomans to have an emergency plan in place prior to a tornado. Knowing where to take shelter and having a disaster kit with basic supplies are crucial in surviving a damaging storm and avoiding injuries.

OSDH determined that of the 49 deaths associated with the May 2013 tornado events, 70 percent were a direct result of the tornadoes and 30 percent were indirectly related in incidents such as drowning and motor vehicle crashes. During the same events, more than 700 people suffered nonfatal injuries. The majority of these injuries were indirectly related with more than two-thirds obtained during clean-up of debris, or getting in/out of a shelter.

For residents in a well-built home, it is best to shelter in place rather than trying to flee in a vehicle. Of the surviving people OSDH surveyed from the 2013 event, half of the people who were at a home in the tornado's path were in a storm shelter. The other half were in other areas of the home such as a hallway, closet or bathroom. Residents living in a mobile home should know in advance where the nearest shelter is located, how long it takes to travel to the shelter, and allow plenty of time to escape before the storm.

If caught in a vehicle during a tornado, it is important to remember that storm drainage ditches or parking underneath an overpass are not safe options. Although drainage ditches may be below ground level, they can fill quickly with flood waters after heavy rainfall. The areas underneath an overpass become wind tunnels with large amounts of flying debris and increased wind speeds.

Business owners should ensure their employees are aware of shelter areas while at work. Walk-in refrigerators/freezers are not safe for sheltering as they are not anchored and cannot withstand high level tornado-strength winds. In 2013, at least two people died while sheltering in a walk-in cooling unit.

In order to prevent injuries after a storm, OSDH recommends taking precautions for cleanup, including wearing gloves and sturdy shoes, and watching out for broken glass, nails and other sharp objects in the debris. Planning beforehand is recommended to avoid rushing and minimizing stress and by periodically practicing tornado drills, recognizing any potential hazards such as falling down stairs or being struck by a shelter door.

For more information about preparing for tornadoes or other natural disasters, contact the Kiowa County Health Department at 580-726-3316 or visit www.ready.gov.