

## Spring 2011 Tornadoes

*A woman dug through the debris that once was her house, pulling out and stacking picture frames containing valuable memories. She was surprised to learn State Health Department employees and Medical Reserve Corps volunteers had arrived to provide free tetanus shots for her family. As the strike team prepared to leave and her family headed back into the debris to try to save more memories, she turned back and said, "Thank you again, I hadn't even thought about needing a tetanus shot. I'm so glad you came by."*

When tornadoes strike Oklahoma, the Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH) responds immediately with assistance. During a very active storm season in spring 2011, the OSDH had several opportunities to deploy preparedness personnel to assist in storm recovery efforts.

Response efforts were coordinated by the OSDH Emergency Preparedness and Response Service (EPRS). Created in the aftermath of 9/11 and the anthrax attacks, EPRS has expanded the public health mission into rapid response. Federal terrorism prevention funding provided the initial momentum, but recent natural disasters have proved the worth of public health's role in community disaster recovery for all hazards.

Within hours after a tornado damaged the city of Tushka and other areas in Atoka County on April 14, 2011, EPRS staff and local county health department personnel from Atoka, Coal, Pittsburg, Bryan and Pushmataha counties mobilized quickly to assist both local first responders and storm victims. The EPRS sent a mobile health response trailer to provide on-site care to the area. More than 500 tetanus shots were provided to residents and responders to prevent infections caused by cuts and scrapes from cleaning up storm debris. Mental health counselors were on hand at the scene as well as in schools to provide counseling to people facing one of the most daunting challenges of their lifetime. In addition, teams of health department workers walked through storm-damaged areas to provide services as people began cleaning up. Bottles of water and gloves were distributed.



Unfortunately, this scene played out again on May 24, 2011, when the state was hit with seven tornadoes, killing 10 persons. EPRS deployed all four of its mobile health response trailers to Cashion, El Reno and Piedmont to provide services to those affected by the tornadoes in a three-county area. These trailers were staffed by OSDH and local county health department employees and Oklahoma Medical Reserve Corps volunteers. Roving strike teams were deployed to storm-affected areas to provide on-site tetanus shots and basic first aid to assist those affected by the storms. More than 900 tetanus vaccinations were given over a four-day period. Public health workers also provided information on food safety, carbon monoxide poisoning prevention and chainsaw safety information. Public health alerts were issued through the state Office of Emergency Management.

Local emergency managers have come to rely on OSDH personnel to assist with the important health issues that arise after a natural disaster. Unaffected county health departments across the state contribute staff and supplies to those areas damaged by the storms. An Incident Command System is used to handle the complex logistics surrounding the response as resources are re-directed hourly to areas facing the greatest need. In some cases, Mobile Health Trailers were redeployed several times in a day, to meet the needs of the community.

While the OSDH can't stop natural disasters, it can help prevent the tragedy of these disasters from becoming worse as people try to recover after the storm.

**Working together, we can keep Oklahomans safe — no matter the public health crisis!**

Public health plays a key role in disaster response. Known as ESF-8 (Emergency Support Function), public health provides assistance in many core functions including:

- Assessment of public health/medical needs
- Health surveillance
- Medical care personnel
- Health/medical/veterinary equipment & supplies
- Patient care & evacuation
- Food safety & security
- Public health & medical information



Oklahoma State  
Department of Health

Emergency Preparedness  
& Response Service

Terry L. Cline, PhD  
Commissioner  
Secretary of Health  
and Human Services