



WADENA-DEER CREEK SCHOOL DISTRICT TORNADO SAFE ROOM PROJECT

It was June 17, 2010. Students were enjoying summer break, but about 25 people were inside the Wadena-Deer Creek School building. Some were making last minute preparations for a class reunion as an EF 4 tornado approached. Thanks to NOAA weather radios, outdoor warning sirens, and a look out the window, those in the school were able to find shelter in a basement or interior space. No one was seriously hurt — but the school was destroyed.

In August 2012, history was made in Minnesota when the first school-based, tornado-safe room opened in Wadena. The multi-purpose room will provide near-absolute life protection to students, staff and nearby residents in need of safe shelter.



In a first-of-its-kind partnership, Public Assistance funding available under a Presidential disaster declaration was used with funding from the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program to construct a tornado-safe room that provides a large shelter for the school and community. Wadena applied for \$950,462 in federal funding through the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program on July 5, 2011. Additional costs were paid by non-federal grants and the school district.

“Knowing that we have an EF-5 rated tornado-safe room that can protect all the students and staff at Wadena-Deer Creek Middle/High School provides tremendous peace of mind for our community,” said current Superintendent Lee Westrum.

On a typical school day, 670 people would need to find shelter. All students and staff will be able to walk to the new safe room within five minutes. The room is 6,547 square feet —large enough to hold 1,100 people, so nearby residents can use it along with students and school staff.

The safe room is attached to the north end of the main building. With its own restroom, it is used as an auxiliary gym, instructional space for physical education classes, district athletic programs and youth recreation programs.

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If a tornado strikes during non-school hours, staff at the sheriff's office can electronically unlock the building and turn on its interior and exterior lights, allowing immediate access for community members.



"The fact that the tornado-safe room is also accessible to the community 24 hours a day, via remote access from the Wadena County Sheriff's Department, makes this a communitywide hazard mitigation success story," according to Westrum.

More schools in Wadena County are now exploring the possibility of requesting similar safe rooms.

"The HSEM Hazard Mitigation staff hopes this inspiring mitigation project will be the first of several school-based safe rooms constructed in Minnesota," says State Hazard Mitigation Officer Jen Nelson. "We know tornado safe rooms save lives."