

**COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE SUBCOMMITTEE  
ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND EMERGENCY  
MANAGEMENT HEARING "ASSURING PUBLIC ALERT SYSTEMS WORK TO WARN  
AMERICAN CITIZENS OF NATURAL AND TERRORIST DISASTERS."**

**Testimony on behalf of tornado survivors from the City of Suffolk, Virginia  
June 4, 2008  
10 am**

**Submitted by Captain James T Judkins, Jr.  
Coordinator  
City of Suffolk Department of Fire and Rescue  
Division of Emergency Management  
400 Market Street  
Suffolk, Va.  
757-514-7586**

On the afternoon of, April 28, 2008, a tornado struck the City of Suffolk, Virginia. Later classified as a strong EF-3 on the Enhanced Fujita Scale, the twister moved through the City on a Southwest to Northeast path. Radar data received from the National Weather Service, Wakefield, Virginia indicated Vortex Tornado Signatures occurring within the City from 3:46:49pm at a location southwest of the Village of Holland to 4:21:11pm at a location near the Village of Driver. Forecasters estimated the funnel cloud as being approximately a quarter mile wide at the point of touchdown.

In its aftermath, assessment teams identified five hundred residential or commercial structures affected, forty-nine of those listed as destroyed. Damage estimates approached thirty million dollars. Area hospital emergency departments, urgent care centers and on-scene emergency care personnel treated almost two hundred patients. Miraculously, no one died. Only six required hospitalization.

Hundreds of stories surface in the aftermath of this storm illustrating the courage and determination of emergency responders and average citizens. I would like to share a few of those stories with this committee about those average citizens. Some were reported by the local media. Some were shared with emergency responders.

Case #1

On afternoon of April 28, 2008, a resident of the Hillpoint Farms subdivision was on his way home in his pick-up when he heard on the radio what he later described as several EAS activation tones specific for the City of Suffolk. He cell phoned his wife and advised her to watch the skies and take cover in the hallway if she spots a funnel cloud. Later, he received a frantic call from his wife huddled in the downstairs hallway as the twister roared outside severely damaging their beautiful home. His wife escaped serious injury.

Case # 2

“I had the radio on, and I heard them talking about a tornado approaching,” reported one resident. “I thought, ‘We don’t have to worry about that.’” The man of the house was upstairs working on the computer. His wife, who was down stairs, looked out the window a moment later. “There was nothing but debris blowing in the wind,” she said. Suddenly, glass in the house began to break. Within seconds, both husband and wife found each other and ducked into a closet as they watched their house come apart around them. Pictures blew off the walls, mattresses tumbled down the hall and lamps were sucked out the window.

### Case #3

Upon hearing the weather alert on the television, this family took cover in a small half bath on the second floor. Walls and windows of rooms next to and below that bathroom were blasted away by the twister’s strong winds, but amazingly, the family was unharmed.

### Case #4

A grandmother reports she is still shaken from what she described as a horrifying tornado experience. This senior citizen, who breathes with the aid of portable oxygen, was sitting in her home's south-facing sunroom with her sister and moved to heed a televised weather warning. They had only gotten a few steps into the interior hallway before the twister struck.

### Case 5#

First Responders reported a story of a grandmother and her grand daughter who “rode” out the storm in a bathtub. In that account, upon hearing the warning, the grandmother and child took cover in their bathroom, grasping each as they nestled themselves in the tub. The tornado leveled their home and tossed the tub with its precious contents into a near-by lake. Both survived with only cuts and scrapes.

### Case #6

This case is personal to me as it involves my mother who was caring for my terminally ill aunt. They were watching television when the weather alert sounded. Specific information about the Sadler Heights neighborhood was broadcast. Mom managed to get my aunt and herself to the interior hallway just as the rear of the home was torn away.

### Case #7

Spring athletics were underway at Suffolk’s three high schools. Teams were on their respective practice fields when school officials received the tornado warning via NOAA All Hazards Weather Radio. Athletes were directed to the school’s interior hallways for refuge without incident.

In each of these seven cases, there are two common factors. The first and most remarkable was the fact that no one was seriously injured. Secondly, life-saving measures were prompted by Emergency Alert System messages.

In my 28 plus years experience, I find there is no one perfect alert system. Sirens fail, either mechanically or may not be heard due to the use of headphones on personal listening devices. Weather radios are turned of for unexplained reasons. More and more people are watching or listening to satellite radio and television where local warnings are not available. Subscriber based weather warning services require pre-registering.

My Grandmother once said, “you can lead a mule to water but you can’t force him to drink”. The same thing applies to warning systems. Each of us has a responsibility to our families for their safety and well-being. That responsibility includes knowing your community’s warning system and having a method to receive emergency messages.

Three simple phrases say it all. Get a kit, have a plan and stay informed.

Respectively Submitted,

Captain James T. Judkins, Jr.  
Emergency Management Coordinator  
Suffolk, Virginia