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Financial Capability is Critical for Disaster Recovery

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At the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA), we are responsible for coordinating preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation programs and activities with counties, state agencies, and other stakeholders. The side of our operation that citizens are probably most familiar with is the response phase, when the coordination of direct life-saving activities during natural or human-caused disasters and emergencies is critical.



However, most of our day-to-day work as an agency centers around the recovery and mitigation phases of emergency management.

The recovery phase focuses on the support of disaster survivors. Even with federal recovery programs that may be available as well as insurance, there are gaps in being able to adequately support disaster survivors at the level needed.

As an example, many communities faced flooding damage as a result of Tropical Storm Isaias last summer. That storm alone affected hundreds of buildings throughout various counties and caused several millions of dollars in damage. Despite the devastating loss many families faced, Pennsylvania was not approved for a FEMA Disaster Declaration for Individual Assistance, leaving Pennsylvania families with the daunting task of recovering on their own.

If not prepared, the impact can be devastating. While there are other programs available to assist such as Small Business Administration low-interest disaster loans and Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (VOADs), there are still significant gaps in funding the recovery process, which adversely impact the disaster survivor's ability to recover from the impacts of an incident in a timely manner.

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PA Severe Weather Awareness

Pennsylvania is home to various types of weather, but the most damaging is often tied to thunderstorms. Most typical in the spring and summer months, thunderstorms can occur any time of the year, with hazards ranging from tornadoes to flooding rain.

The National Weather Service issues watches and warnings for severe thunderstorms with the potential to produce tornadoes, damaging wind, and large hail.

However, the terms WATCH and WARNING are often confused, so let's break it down.

Severe Thunderstorm Watch:

A watch is issued for a large geographical area (multiple counties) over a several-hour period when conditions are ripe for severe weather. Think about having all the ingredients for a cupcake, but they haven't been mixed yet, so naturally, you don't have a yummy, delicious cupcake. Forecasters must feel confident that all ingredients for severe weather

are present to issue a watch, but storms have yet to form or have not reached the watch area.

When a severe thunderstorm watch is issued, you should prepare for the onset of severe weather within a few hours. Consider curtailing outdoor events and plans and have access to weather information, including tv, radio, and phone applications, in addition to an NOAA weather radio. Stay close to a safe shelter.

STAT: Since 2006, Pennsylvania averages 32 severe thunderstorm watches per year.

Severe Thunderstorm Warnings:

A warning is issued for a smaller geographic area for a shorter period of time when severe weather is occurring or imminent. The warning is typically issued for only one or a few counties for a half-hour to an hour. Using the baking analogy, your cupcakes are baked now and you're ready to eat them (it's no longer a thought, it's happening).

Severe thunderstorms are warned when a storm is capable of producing any one of the following:

- Damaging wind in excess of 58mph
- Hail of at least one-inch diameter (size of a quarter), or
- The potential to produce a tornado.

Note lightning is not warned, as it is an indirect hazard of any thunderstorm. All warnings should be taken seriously. Head to a sturdy interior room away from doors and windows to ride out the storm and don't go outdoors until a half-hour after the last rumble of thunder.

STAT: Since 1990, Pennsylvania averages roughly 450 severe thunderstorm warnings a year. In 2019, we peaked at 787 severe thunderstorm warnings!

Tornadoes Happen in PA; Know Your Tornado Terms

Tornado Watch:

Similar to a severe thunderstorm watch, a tornado watch is issued when the primary severe weather hazard is tornadoes. Issued for a large geographic region for several hours, conditions are prime for the formation of tornadoes. Damaging wind and hail are also likely, but the risk of tornadoes takes the forefront due to their violent nature.

Take the same precautions as a severe thunderstorm watch and be sure to be within reach of a safe place within a few seconds should a warning be issued.

STAT: Since 2006, PA averages five tornado watches per year.

Tornado Warning:



A warning typically covers a small region within a county or a few counties for about 30-45 minutes where the tornado is expected. These warnings are issued when a tornado is spotted by radar or people, and an immediate threat to life and property exists. All Pennsylvania counties have recorded tornadoes, and while most are “weak,” they all cause damage and a threat to life. We have a record of strong tornadoes up to EF-5 in PA counties, so don’t be fooled by old tales of the mountains protecting us.

Tornado warnings should be taken with the utmost seriousness. Move to the lowest floor of your home or office, putting as many walls between you and the outside as possible. Wear helmets to protect your head. If stuck outdoors, there is no safe option. Lying flat in a low ditch or culvert is safer than a car that may be launched.

STAT: Since 1990, Pennsylvania averages 32 tornado warnings per year, peaking in 1998 at 109 warnings, with 2019 taking second place with 68 warnings.

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