In this Friday photo, a tornado forms near Banner Road and Praire Circle in El Reno, Okla. The National Weather Service says the deadly tornado that struck near Oklahoma City late last week was another top-of-the-scale EF5 that packed winds reaching 295 mph. The weather service also says the twister's 2.6-mile width is the widest ever recorded. AP photo/Alonzo Adams By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times In May, the Oklahoma City metro area was ravaged by tornadoes touching down across the city, including a huge one destroying most of Moore, Okla., in the south part of the community.

The storms left many without a home, and others were powerless for sometime as the weather knocked out electricity in a large part of Oklahoma City.

Locally, many people have friends and family affected by the severe storms in central Oklahoma, and some may have been thinking about how Seward County and its neighbors could prepare should disaster strike.

Emergency management director Greg Standard said the county has spotters and law enforcement continually watching weather to keep people alerted about what's happening.

"We're coordinating with the National Weather Service and the local observers to make sure that if there's any sign of severe weather, we get a warning out through the sirens and through the media so people will know about that and be able to take shelter," he said. "If we are impacted, the law enforcement, fire and EMS is going to get in and respond to the needs of those who've been affected."

Following storms, Standard said the county would request assistance most likely through mutual aide.

"Everything depends on how big of an event it was, but likely, mutual aide and perhaps state and federal assistance if that were appropriate, which fortunately isn't very often," he said. "I think the last time we got that far was in 2003. Optimistically, I'm hoping we won't be doing that again anytime soon."

Standard said neither Seward County nor the City of Liberal operates a public shelter, but there are other places people can go to get away from severe weather in the community.

“I am aware of some churches that open. Any government building that is open at that time, if somebody’s in need of shelter, I think they could go at that time, and they’d be welcomed in,” he said. “We don’t have any staffed facilities that are operated just as shelters though.”

Officials with Arkalon Park east of Liberal have said they would like to have a storm shelter in that park and are seeking grant funds to accomplish this.

Seward County’s mitigation plan does mention funding of storm shelters, but the Arkalon location was not mentioned in the plan. Standard recently asked the Local Emergency Planning Committee for permission to seek grant funds in support of that project.

The shelter is proposed to be located in the campground area of Arkalon Park, and the camp host would be responsible for ensuring that the shelter is opened.

Standard said a camp host would always be on site when the campground is open.

“The fact that makes that work is they’ll have that staffed 24/7 while that park is open,” he said. “They already have that staff in place to do that.”

Standard said normally, a problem is created during severe weather due to emergency personnel responding to incidents outside of Arkalon Park.

“Therefore, they’re not available to be there to make sure doors are unlocked,” he said.

The LEPC voted to allow Standard to continue to pursue grants for the Arkalon project. Standard said creating a public shelter in Liberal actually encourages people to leave their homes, get in their cars and be out on the streets during severe weather.

“That’s probably the worst place you can be when a tornado hits,” he said. “We most strongly encourage people to do what they can at their home and near their home whether it’s a shelter in the backyard, a safe room in the house, a basement, a neighbor’s basement, something like that which is immediately available to them so they can get into shelter before the storm actually hits.”

When people are caught outdoors during a tornado, there are several factors Standard said people need to consider when finding shelter.

“How far do they have to drive?” he said. “What’s the other traffic? Is the shelter full when they get there? There’s so many what if’s or might be’s that makes that problematic, and it’s something that most communities that have tried it have backed away from. They’re concerned that they’re causing more injuries than they’re preventing.”

Standard said issues about severe weather in the community were already in existence prior to last month’s storms in Oklahoma.

“It’s been a pressing concern forever,” he said. “Tornadoes are a risk here. We hope that all of our citizens have taken steps to protect themselves.”

Standard said because of its location, Southwest Kansas is less likely to see the types of tornados that occurred in Oklahoma last month, which he said are more prevalent in eastern parts of Kansas, Oklahoma and Missouri.

“Having said that, weather is an unpredictable thing, and I suppose that enough circumstances came together all at the same time, we might have the potential for something like that,” he said. “That type of tornado is rare even further east of us. I think mainly we’re concerned in the EF-3 category. It’s a pretty intense tornado for this part of the world.”

Standard said when it comes to what results from a tornado, that depends on the citizens and their preparations.

“There’s not enough deputies and EMTs and firefighters to be there for everybody,” he said. “Folks have got to take those steps on their own and have their plans in place, where they’re going to go to shelter and respond quickly. Remain informed, and pay attention to the weather. All those things are the stuff they’ve got to do to come out of these things as safe as possible.”

Standard said while damage is a concern, the issues of lives are bigger.

“Hopefully, they’re insured,” he said. “Things can be replaced. People can’t be replaced.”

Standard said he has confidence in those assigned to help the community recover should a tornado occur.

“I think that all of our responders are ready to go,” he said. “We continually look for ways to be better prepared, but I don’t know that we’re ever satisfied that we’ve reached perfection. We just keep trying to get a little better as time goes on.”

Be prepared for tornadoes

• www.ksready.gov Make a disaster kit; Make a family emergency plan • Practice a family tornado drill at least once a year;

• Plan places where your family will meet, both within and outside your immediate neighborhood if you are separated;

• Identify an out-of-town contact to call to let them know you are okay and can pass that information on to other family members;

• Identify your shelter in case of a tornado warning -

• A storm cellar or basement provides the best protection;

• If you do not have an underground shelter, go to an interior room or hallway on the lowest floor;

• Stay away from windows, doors and outside walls;

• If you are in a vehicle, get out and lie flat in a ditch or other low-lying area, using your hands and arms to protect your head. DO NOT get under an overpass or bridge. The winds can pull you out from underneath it.

• Listen to radio or TV stations for information;

• Make sure your pets are safe if you can't bring them into the shelter with you;

• Opening windows does not keep a house or building safe from exploding due to low air pressure during a tornado. It actually increases the chance of high winds entering and causing more damage to your home and exposing you to injury.

After the Storm:

• Make sure the danger has passed before coming out of your shelter;

• Stay with your family. Don't wander away, as it is easy to get disoriented due to street signs being gone and landmarks destroyed;

• Watch for broken glass, nails and other sharp objects;

• Stay away from downed power lines – they could still be live;

• Avoid using matches and/or lighters – flammable gas may be leaking from damaged gas lines;

• Contact your insurance agent and advise them of any damage;

• Do not use generators, grills, camp stoves, or other gas, propane, natural gas, or charcoal-burning devices inside your home, basement, garage or camper, or outside near an open window, door or vent. Carbon monoxide can build up and poison the people and animals inside;

• Use battery-powered lanterns for light;

• Cooperate fully with public safety officials.