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Safer Places Program Guidelines

Version 1 – 12/30/2021

About the Program

Alabama Act 2021-165 was approved and signed into law by Governor Kay Ivey on April 7, 2021, requiring the Alabama Emergency Management Agency (AEMA) to “develop [uniform] guidelines for the volunteer designation of safer place facilities throughout the state to protect individuals during severe weather events.”

These guidelines for the Safer Places Program are jointly developed and maintained by a working group comprising representatives from AEMA, the Association of County Commissioners of Alabama (ACCA), local emergency managers, and other stakeholders and subject matter experts. The program guidelines will be updated and revised, as necessary, by AEMA after consultation with the working group.

Each county emergency management program is unique, and multiple counties in Alabama have been operating Safer Places programs (or programs closely associated with the Safer Places concept) for many years. As such, these Guidelines are intended to set out basic terms and conditions in compliance with Act 2021-165 while also affording a substantial amount of flexibility to each local EMA to organize and operate its own Safer Places program.

Program Guidelines

1. No Limitation on Other Uses of Facilities

Nothing in these guidelines is intended to limit the use of facilities as mass care shelters, warming centers, cooling centers, or other such emergency management support facilities as may be authorized by state code or defined by separate agreements, where applicable.

2. No Guarantee of Safety

No guarantee of safety is made. People may be severely injured or killed in any structure during a tornado or other extreme wind event, including facilities designated as Safer Places. The intent of the Safer Places program is to provide better relative protection from the threat of severe weather than residents may otherwise have access to, especially for those residents who do not have access to a FEMA-rated community tornado safe room.

3. Pre-existing Safer Places and Equivalent Facilities

Any facility that has been designated by a local emergency management agency (EMA) as a “Safer Place” or substantially equivalent facility on or before December 31, 2021, will be considered as meeting the criteria set out in these program guidelines.

4. Notification Requirements and Program Requirements

Local EMA’s will notify AEMA (by email to the AEMA Division Coordinator) of Safer Place facilities as they are designated. Notification will include the following:

1. Facility name
2. Physical (street) address
3. A brief description of the facility and location(s) within (if not the entire facility) that is designated as a Safer Place

The local EMA will publicize the location of designated Safer Places, including listing this information on the EMA website and (as appropriate) other forms of social media. Safer Places should be listed along with FEMA-rated community tornado saferooms; however, Safer Places should be clearly identified with a disclaimer that the facilities are *not* FEMA-rated in accordance with established codes, such as ICC-500.

AEMA will also publicize the location of Safer Places along with identified FEMA-rated community tornado saferooms. This information will be shared with the public using a system to be developed by AEMA during 2022.

Signage must be posted outside each Safer Place facility clearly designating the location of the Safer Place. Where the Safer Place is only a room or portion of a facility, signage must be posted both outside the structure as well as inside to clearly identify the area of the facility to be used as a Safer Place.

The local EMA must also ensure signage regarding facility rules and use conditions is posted within the Safer Place. This signage must include, at a minimum:

- General safety information, such as any applicable rules related to the possession of weapons or drugs in the facility
- Information pertaining to convenience, such as that relating to tobacco use and behavior in general
- Instructions for calling 9-1-1 in the event of an emergency
- A point-of-contact for the facility owner
- A point-of-contact for the local EMA office
- A statement that reads as follows: “The portion of this facility designated as a Safer Place is made available for community use in the event of severe weather. The Safer Place is not guaranteed to provide any level of safety in the event of a tornado. Use of this Safer Place is at your own risk.”

A good practice is for rules regarding facility use to be mutually agreed-to by the facility owner and local EMA.

Local EMA's are encouraged to host regular meetings with Safer Place facility owners and their points-of-contact to share good practices, discuss the Safer Places program, to learn about severe weather safety, and to share other educational information pertinent to the Safer Places program in each county.

5. Application Process

The application process is managed at the local level, through the local EMA. (See Attachment 1) The applicant must submit a completed application for voluntary designation of a facility (which may include all or only a portion of a facility) as a Safer Place.

The application must clearly identify which specific areas, rooms, or buildings are to be designated as Safer Places.

The application may be submitted in person, by mail, or electronically, as directed by the local EMA.

The applicant will certify that the structure meets the criteria listed in the Program Guidelines and will affirm that the facility will be made available to the public on a nondiscriminatory when utilized as a Safer Place.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) delineating responsibilities of all parties will be executed between the local EMA and the applicant. (See Attachment 2)

A facility may be withdrawn from the Safer Places program by written request of the applicant or at the discretion of the local EMA director. The local EMA will notify AEMA of any facilities that are no longer designated as Safer Places.

6. Circumstances and Conditions

Safer Places facilities should be used when there is the threat of an extreme wind event such as tornado or hurricane. The intention of the program is to make Safer Places facilities available during tornado watches; however, there may also be other scenarios in which the facilities can provide public protection, such as an extreme wind event. The availability of Safer Places facilities and notification of facility owners to open the facility is at the discretion of the local EMA.

The length of availability of the Safer Place facility will be dictated by the weather event at the discretion of the local EMA. Generally, the Safer Places facilities should be available for the duration of a tornado watch. It is recommended that local EMA's work to ensure Safer Places are open and available to the public whenever community tornado saferooms are similarly open and available, whenever possible.

In general, AEMA encourages local EMA's to follow the best practice of making community tornado saferooms and Safer Places available to the public for the duration of a tornado watch.

There may also be other circumstances which, at the discretion of the local EMA, the facilities should be made available for use.

7. Facility Selection Criteria

The Safer Place facility must satisfy the applicable building codes at the time of construction of the facility, as attested to by the facility owner. The local EMA may request the facility be inspected by an appropriate official to validate any questions or concerns related to the type, quality, or compliance of a particular facility's construction. The applicant must agree to allow a cursory inspection, if requested by the local EMA. However, the applicant may not be required to pay for any inspection in the event one is requested by the EMA. Local EMA's are encouraged to engage the support of subject matter experts, such as those with expertise in architecture and civil/structural engineering, in identifying the best available Safer Place locations.

General Facility Guidelines

The facility should provide improved protection from the elements.

The condition of the facility should be suitable for occupation, and nothing in the facility should pose a direct threat to health and safety of those seeking refuge.

There must be a secondary exit from the facility, to provide for safe exit in the event of fire or other emergency.

There must be smoke detectors that comply with applicable building codes.

There should be sufficient sanitary facilities that are in proper operating condition, are private, and are adequate for personal cleanliness and the disposal of human waste. These facilities should be ADA-accessible whenever possible.

To estimate occupancy and capacity, the following average space requirement for saferoom space allowances may be used:

Standing or sitting	5 sq. ft. per person
Wheelchair	10 sq. ft per person

Selecting the type of structure:

For general guidance on selecting the best available refuge area for tornados, applicants and local EMA's should consult FEMA publication [P-431 "Tornado Protection: Selecting Refuge Areas in Buildings."](#) and the associated [P-431 "Best Available Refuge Area Checklist."](#)

First preference should be given to facilities that are unlikely to structurally fail in any way during a tornado.

Second preference should be given to facilities that are unlikely to completely collapse even if they do suffer a structural failure of some kind. This may include wood-framed structures in cases where robust and redundant structural members are employed in the construction of the facility.

Third preference, as a last resort, would include those facilities that are likely to suffer structural failure in the event of a tornado. In general, these structures should not be designated as Safer Places, but may still provide relative protection for those who would otherwise be located in a vehicle or unanchored mobile home during a tornado.

Selecting the best available refuge area involves balancing “building safety” with finding the best area “within the building” for safety. The first step is identifying the “safest building.” The second step is then identifying the safest possible area(s) within the building.

Additional considerations:

- The lowest floor of the building should usually be used as the Safer Place, preferably a basement or other below-ground floor.
- In general, at- or above-grade wood-framed and pre-engineered metal buildings should not be used as Safer Places.
- Unreinforced concrete block masonry is not desirable and may provide worse protection than a typical wood-framed structure. Masonry construction may collapse. Note that it is usually not possible to determine whether masonry is reinforced or unreinforced without consulting architectural drawings or other construction records.
- Interior rooms without windows provide the greatest protection. Walls that are massive and fit tightly and securely to the roof or floor structure also provide greater protection than lightly built structures.
- Buildings with a continuous load path (anchored to a secure foundation with a reinforced wall and roof structure that is securely attached together) usually fare better during extreme wind events.
- Poured-in-place reinforced concrete, fully grouted and reinforced masonry, and rigidly connected steel frames usually are still in place after tornadoes pass. The floors and roofs should be securely connected to the supports in these types of constructions. Avoid buildings with an unsecured connection of the roof deck to the frame.

Selecting the best available refuge area within the facility:

Consider potentially hazardous elements within the Safer Place:

- Large, open-span rooms that may be vulnerable to collapse.
- Masonry construction that may be vulnerable to collapse.
- Stairwells, closets, narrow storage areas and restrooms are usually more resistant to structural failure. Interior rooms may afford more protection than rooms along an exterior wall.

- Lightweight roofs will be lifted and partially carried away while debris falls into the exposed rooms.
- Heavier roofs can be lifted, moved slightly, and collapse.
- Windows, especially those at the end of hallways, may break from the strong wind or projectiles.
- Unprotected hallways exposed to exterior walls create wind tunnels.
- Loadbearing walls are generally stronger than non-loadbearing walls.

Other site considerations:

- Identify trees greater than 6 inches in diameter, masonry chimneys, and towers that are close enough to fall on a building.
- Look for potential and nearby sources of small and large windborne projectiles.
- Consider issues related to emergency access, such as distance from a roadway, accessible parking, other nearby structures, etc.

Accessibility:

- ADA compliance is preferred, whenever possible. The facility should provide accessible access to toilets (including toilets that may be accessed from the side) even if the facility is not otherwise ADA-accessible.
- Restroom stall: remove the stall wall if it obstructs side access to the toilet.
- Restroom sign: place sign on wall of the latch side of the restroom door.
- Grab bars in restroom: mount the bars no higher than 34 to 36 inches to center of grab bar depending on the height of the toilet.
- Toilet height: the toilet should be 17 to 19 inches from the finished floor.
- Mirrors, soap dispensers, paper towels, hand dryers: these items should be 48 inches from the finished floor or place items on the sink surface.
- Sink pipes: if the sink pipes are exposed, cover the pipes with some type of pipe wrap or insulation.
- Barriers: remove any barriers that may be in the way for someone to maneuver.
- Doors: make sure that a person can enter the area. The door closer should be door closer to 5 lbs. maximum force needed to open.
- Parking: Designate parking spaces for disabled individuals. Use clear signage for these spaces.

8. Miscellaneous

The Safer Place facility is not required to be always available to the public or to provide staff, food, water, medicine, electricity, air conditioning, first aid, telecommunications, or any other life- or health-preserving goods or services before, during, or after a severe weather event.

No state or local governmental entity shall provide or offer to provide compensation or financial support to an individual or entity relating to the designation or operation of a safer place.

A user of a Safer Place is not an invitee or licensee; he or she uses the Safer Place at his or her own risk, with full knowledge and appreciation of the risks.

A local EMA, pursuant to emergency management functions, may perform any tasks provided in the Program Guidelines. An individual who volunteers a structure for a safer place is a volunteer as established under the Volunteer Service Act (Ala. Code § 6-5-336) for the time of designation. Any entity offering a structure for a safer place will be afforded the same protections of an emergency management worker, individual, partnership, association, or corporation (Ala. Code § 31-9-16).



TUSCALOOSA COUNTY EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

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Tuscaloosa Safer Places Guidelines Signature Page

By signing below, I certify that as the Primary Applicant, I have
read and understand the Safer Places Program Guidelines
outlined by the Alabama Emergency Management Agency
(AMEA).

Facility Name: _____

Facility Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____

Primary Applicant:

Primary Applicant (Print)

Primary Applicant Signature

Date