

Easter tornado threat poses safety dilemma during pandemic

11 April 2020, by Jay Reeves



In this April 29, 2014 file image taken from video, people enter a community storm shelter during a tornado watch in Tuscaloosa, Ala. As each day brings the United States closer to peak severe weather season, Tornado Alley residents are facing a difficult question: Is it better to take on a twister outside a community shelter or to face the possibility of contracting the new coronavirus inside one? (AP Photo/Jay Reeves, File)

The threat of strong tornadoes and other damaging weather on Easter posed a double-edged safety dilemma for Deep South communities deciding how to protect residents during the coronavirus pandemic.

An outbreak of severe thunderstorms was likely Sunday from Louisiana through the Tennessee Valley, the National Weather Service said. More than 4.5 million people live in the area where dangerous weather was most likely, including Birmingham and Jackson, Mississippi, the Storm Prediction Center said on its website.

The National Weather Service office in Jackson told residents to brace for the possibility of long-lasting [tornadoes](#), wind gusts up to 70 mph (113 km) and tennis ball-size hail through Sunday evening. Waves of storms with occasional lulls could continue into early Monday, with as much as

3 inches (8 centimeters) of rain possible.

"This could be one of our bigger events we've had in a long time around here. Take this seriously," weather service forecaster Gary Goggins said in a public briefing broadcast on Facebook live from the agency's Birmingham-area office on Saturday.

Seeking protection from violent [weather](#) during the coronavirus pandemic could present a challenge for some.

With many churches having ended traditional, indoor services because of the viral outbreak, congregations planned to hold online services or drive-in worship where people sit in vehicles, which are a bad place to be during a tornado. Some churches announced they were moving up Easter drive-in service to Saturday afternoon because of the threat.



Stephanie Fatheree, right, salvages items from her house damaged from the tornado the previous night with help from a neighbor on Thursday, April 9, 2020, in Harrisburg, Ark. Fatheree said she took shelter with her mother, Angie, in the bathroom during the tornado. Severe storms with high winds, hail and possible

tornadoes have caused damage to dozens of homes and businesses in parts of Indiana and Arkansas. (Quentin Winstine/The Jonesboro Sun via AP)

with temperature checks performed and gloves and masks being provided to anyone entering.

Community storm shelters presented another problem.

Although forecasters and the Alabama Department of Public Health advised people to seek protection in public storm shelters if faced with the possibility of twisters, some communities, citing COVID-19, waffled on whether to open shelters on Sunday.

In a video message posted on the town's Facebook page on Friday, Alexander City Mayor Thomas Spraggins said residents of the central Alabama town needed to find a safe place on their own since public buildings wouldn't be open as shelters because of the coronavirus.



In this Oct. 10, 2018 file photo, Emily Hindle lies on the floor at an evacuation shelter set up at Rutherford High School, in advance of Hurricane Michael, in Panama City Beach, Fla. As each day brings the United States closer to peak severe weather season, Tornado Alley residents are facing a difficult question: Is it better to take on a twister outside a community shelter or to face the possibility of contracting the new coronavirus inside one? (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File)



A building damaged from Wednesday night's storm is seen on Thursday, April 9, 2020, in Mooresville, Ind. Severe storms with high winds, hail and possible tornadoes swept across the Midwest and caused damage to dozens of homes and businesses in parts of Indiana and Arkansas. (Clark Wade/The Indianapolis Star via AP)

The initial decision against opening shelters was at odds with a message from Gov. Kay Ivey.

"Both the National Weather Service and the State Public Health Department remind Alabamians that the use of shelters and other resources take precedent, should the need arise," Ivey said in a statement Saturday.

The Mississippi Emergency Management Agency sent a tweet Saturday saying shelters would open. It encouraged residents entering one to wear masks, use hand sanitizer and stay 6 feet (2 meters) apart.

"I'll be praying for everyone to have a safe and happy Easter," he said.

Strong storms earlier in the week caused damage in the Midwest.

A statement from the city's police department on Saturday said shelters would be opened after all,

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