

# Officials: local TV saved lives

*Stations' tornado warnings in Kansas, Oklahoma pushed populace to seek shelter*

By Elizabeth A. Rathbun

**T**he tornadoes that swept across Oklahoma and southern Kansas last Monday killed 41 people as of last Thursday. Some 100 were still missing.

But without the media, those numbers could have been much higher, according to government officials and members of the media.

Without the on-the-spot tracking of the local television stations and the immediate dissemination of National Weather Service warnings, "we probably would have lost a lot more lives," said Rick Buchanan, press secretary to Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating.

Oklahoma City Police Chief M.T. Berry took time at a news conference to praise the local stations. "People had great warning. People took heed to what you said and I think that's why we had so many survivors," he said, referring to Associated Press stories.

The market's TV stations were able to pinpoint the biggest storm in advance of its hitting, giving viewers ample time to find cover or flee. The stations "have unbelievable technology at their disposal" with Doppler radar, satellite trucks and the ability to send video over cellular telephones, Buchanan noted. He should know; he tracked storms as a past employee of all Big 3 affiliates in Oklahoma City.

At 8 p.m. last Monday, 72.4% of homes using TVs were tuned in, according to Nielsen. KFOR-TV held a 42.8 rating/59 share; KWTV had 23.9/33, and KOCO-TV was at 9.1/13.

The media indeed are being credited with saving lives, but "this is why we're here," said KFOR-TV General Manager Tim Morrissey. "This is truly the mission of a local television station." As the numbers show, people tuned in and when told to "take cover, they [took] it very seriously."

An NBC affiliate, KFOR-TV started tracking the storm nonstop at 4:45 p.m., 15 minutes into its early-evening newscast. "We just went straight through," commercial-free, until 1:15 a.m. After picking up again at 5 a.m. Tuesday, storm programming continued virtually



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commercial-free until 7 p.m., he said.

In his 27 years as weatherman for KWTV—the first to use Doppler, in 1981—Gary England said he never before had to tell viewers that an underground shelter was the only place to survive a tornado in the tornado-familiar state.

But he did this time and as a result, he has received happy "e-mails and calls by the hundreds."

England also gave credit to area residents, who know how to respond to a tornado. "If they had not responded, the fatalities could've been in the hundreds," England noted. He related the tale of one young couple who planned to take shelter in their doublewide trailer. When they heard England's warning to go underground, the husband turned to his wife and said, "We ain't stayin' here." When they returned, England reported, their trailer was gone.

KWTV turns over all its employees to England when a big storm looms, said News Director Joyce Reed. The station went with England at about 4:30 p.m. last Monday and stayed commercial-free with tornado stories until 11:00 the following night. Even after other stations stopped continuous programming, KWTV stuck with its coverage because "we felt like the story was just beginning at that point," Reed explained.

Since late Tuesday, the station has been offering "Storm Recovery Updates" every half hour. The updates

last anywhere from 30 seconds to several minutes and longer, if warranted. As part of the updates, viewers are told what they can do to help. Nine tractor-trailer trucks outside the station were filled with food, clothing and other supplies, Reed said.

The goal at KOCO-TV was "to inform the public as quickly as possible," said General Manager Joe Hengemuehler. One way the station got the word out was via pager. Subscriptions for "Weather Warn 5"

are available over the station's Web site. The total number of subscribers was not immediately available.

On-air, KOCO-TV broadcast its first warning at 4:40 p.m. last Monday. Commercial-free coverage continued until 1:15 a.m. Tuesday with updates offered the rest of the night. Local news came on at 5 a.m. Tuesday and local coverage—virtually ad-free—continued until 7:00 that night. "We blew out everything," Hengemuehler said.

Since the storm, the station has collected eight trucks' worth of food and \$10,000 for Oklahoma City-based Feed the Children.

A telephone call to KFOR-TV was not returned. However, Renda Broadcasting's four radio stations in Oklahoma City simulcast with that TV station last Monday night, according to General Manager Vance Harrison. "The coverage was so incredible" on all Big 3 affiliates, he said. "They have built their stations around weather. ... If this was in the '50s, thousands would be dead." As it was, "you could watch this devastation come across." Renda donated the vacant former home of one of its stations as a shelter for about 100 people that night. With its 50,000-watt generator, "it was the only building in Moore [Okla.] with electricity."

"All credit truly should go to the TV stations," said Chris Baker, operations manager for Caribou Communications' five Oklahoma City radios. ■