

## The Tornado of 1985 Taught Niles to "BE ALERT"

As the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the May 31, 1985 tornado outbreak approaches, many Niles residents remember that fateful day. They can tell you with clarity where they were, what they were doing and what happened after the tornado hit Niles. The destruction and death that took place in Niles and the communities in the path of the tornado that day will never be forgotten. With the spirit and dedication shown by Niles residents, we picked ourselves up and put our city back together. It took teamwork and neighbor helping neighbor. We took disaster, looked it straight in the eye and with determination rebuilt our homes, neighborhoods and city. We should be proud of how far we've progressed as a city and look at how much has changed especially in the area of weather detection, notification and alerting residents and visitors alike of severe weather in the City of Niles.

That historic tornado, touched down at the Ravenna Arsenal in eastern Portage County around 6:35 p.m., intensified to an F5 as it tracked east across southern Trumbull County devastating the communities of Newton Falls and Niles, killing nine people in the Niles business district, injuring hundreds and damaging or destroying nearly a thousand homes and businesses. The tornado caused a forty-one mile path of destruction and 16 lives were lost before finally lifting south of Mercer. PA.

Since then, the National Weather Service (NWS) installed new Radars throughout the country between 1988 and 2000 giving communities the ability to see radar data almost as quickly as it comes in and can be sent out. It takes the NWS radar four to five minutes to complete its cycle and send its images out to Public Safety agencies, the local news and other media organizations. At this time, the NWS determines and issues warnings.

During severe weather events, the city of Niles Emergency Management Agency (EMA) monitors the weather from the time severe weather is under discussion at the NWS Storm Prediction Center until the threat has cleared our area. Using a variety of weather, radar and alerting service providers, we keep a constant hands-on of the storm's approach throughout a possible severe weather outbreak.

We rely primarily on the NWS for Tornado warnings but also rely on our Police and Fire personnel for real-time observations that can precede the NWS if there is a threat to the city, such as the spotting of a funnel cloud.

Since 2008, the way the NWS alerts for warnings has changed. Before 2008, the NWS issued warnings by county, but now the NWS uses what are called Storm-Based Warnings (SBW). Storm-Based Warnings show the specific threat area and are not restricted to geopolitical boundaries. By focusing on the true threat area, warning polygons will improve NWS warning accuracy and quality. By keeping the alert area to threatened locations, it helps people not to become complacent when they hear warning sirens go off. Our goal is to change comments like "they (the warning sirens) always go off and nothing ever happens", to knowing that when the warning sirens do go off that, people should immediately seek shelter and tune to local television, radio, or your weather radio for current information.

It is also important to make sure citizens understand that Tornado Sirens are intended to be heard outdoors for people to seek shelter, not designed for everyone in a city to hear them while indoors. We strongly encourage that all residents keep a Weather Alert Radio with S.A.M.E. technology in their homes and businesses to receive the most current warnings and watches especially in the middle of the night. Many times before a strong storm reaches the city, local communities or surrounding counties that are being affected may receive an alert over the weather radio giving residents some advanced notice of oncoming storms. Even with the most advanced systems available to man today, it is up to you to be vigilant and be alert when severe weather conditions are forecasted or warnings issued. Be prepared to react quickly.

Each year, many people are killed or seriously injured by tornadoes despite advance warning. Some do not hear the warning while others receive the warning but do not believe a tornado would actually affect them. Preparedness information combined with timely severe weather watches and warnings could save your life in the event a tornado threatens your area. After you have received the warning or observed threatening skies, YOU must make the decision to seek shelter before the storm arrives. It could be the most important decision you will ever make! Occasionally, tornadoes develop so rapidly that advance warning is not possible. Remain alert for signs of an approaching tornado. Flying debris from tornadoes causes most deaths and injuries.

Finally, with the support and foresight of the Mayor, City Council and the Administration during the 2002-2003 warning siren citywide upgrades, Niles went from four to seven siren locations with new hardware and software at each location giving the city the ability to activate each siren individually or all at once. This technology was put in place for an All-Hazards use of the sirens. Not only can we alert the entire city all at once for a tornado warning, but we can also alert all the way down to one siren location for a small chemical spill that may only affect a very small section of town.

Remember, it is up to you to use the tools made available to us as citizens and be prepared to react when a warning is issued!

You can find more information on the city of Niles siren policy and preparedness information at [www.nilesema.com](http://www.nilesema.com).

### TORNADO SAFETY: WHAT YOU CAN DO

Before the Storm:

- Develop a plan for yourself and your family for home, work, school and when outdoors. Call Niles EMA for assistance.
- Have frequent drills.
- Have a NOAA Weather Radio with a warning alarm tone and a battery backup to receive warnings.
- Listen to radio and television for information.
- If planning a trip outdoors, listen to the latest forecasts and take necessary action if threatening weather is possible.

If a warning is issued or if threatening weather approaches:

- In a home or building, move to a pre-designated shelter, such as a basement.
- If an underground shelter is not available, move to an interior room or hallway on the lowest floor and get under a sturdy piece of furniture.
- Stay away from windows.
- Do not try to outrun a tornado in your car; instead leave it immediately.
- If caught outside or in a vehicle, lie flat in a nearby ditch or depression.
- Mobile homes, even if tied down, offer little protection from tornadoes and should be abandoned.

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Thomas M. Telego, Director  
Office of Emergency Management  
City of Niles, Ohio  
34 W State St  
Niles, Ohio 44446  
E-mail: [ttelego@thecityofniles.com](mailto:ttelego@thecityofniles.com)  
Web: [www.thecityofniles.com](http://www.thecityofniles.com)  
Twitter: CityofNilesOH