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Countywide program offers storm shelter assistance

A countywide effort has been launched to help assist a limited number of Washington County residents with storm shelter rebates — thanks to a federal grant program administered by the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management.

The county's municipalities are teaming up with Washington County staff to submit an application for funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The money will be used to offer a rebate to 100 qualified Washington County residents who sign up for and are chosen for the program.

Meetings are planned for Bartlesville, Copan and Ramona for all interested Washington County residents to learn more about the program and its requirements, and provide sign-up forms for anyone wishing to participate.

City of Ramona, Wednesday, Feb. 22

- Ramona City Hall, 400 Second Street, 6-7 p.m.

City of Bartlesville, Thursday, Feb. 23 (two meetings)

- Bartlesville Public Library, downstairs meeting room, 600 S. Johnstone Ave., noon to 1 p.m.
- City Hall, City Council Chambers, 401 S. Johnstone Ave., 6-7 p.m.

City of Copan, Friday, Feb. 24

- Copan High School, gymnasium, 527 Hornet Lane, 6-7 p.m.

Any Washington County resident is welcome to attend any or all of the meetings.

According to officials, a storm shelter rebate program has been a goal for Washington County for a while.

"We've been thinking about doing a shelter program for some time, but the process was so cumbersome," said City of Bartlesville Grants Administrator Nancy Warring. "The State has made it a lot easier, and we're excited to get started."

Warring said the need for the program became evident during separate countywide effort — the comprehensive Hazard Mitigation Plan. The Hazard Mitigation Plan is a multi-agency overview designed to identify potential hazards and develop projects to mitigate their impact.

"We recently completed the update of our hazard mitigation plan, which was also a joint effort with the county," Warring said. "The plan analyzed our vulnerability to tornadoes and recommended that we implement a program to offer financial incentives for residents to install storm shelters."

Washington County Emergency Management volunteers have spent several years documenting storm shelter locations in Washington County to make locating the sites easier in the event of a disaster, according to Washington County Community Development Officer Eric Ashlock.

"After doing this for three years, we had 150 shelters. In the last year that number jumped to nearly 500 storm shelters registered," Ashlock said. "This is clearly something citizens are interested in, and this funding is a great way to help more citizens get the shelters they want and need."

There are some requirements and specific criteria that must be met to qualify for the program; for instance, recipients of the rebates must own the property and it must be the primary residence. Mobile home owners must own the land where the shelter will be placed. And, perhaps most importantly, the rebate will not be available to property owners who have already installed a shelter.

Details of the program and requirements will be discussed during the public meetings, according to Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management Soonersafe Program Administrator Melissa Moore.

"The requirements to participate in the rebate program will be explained at all four planned meetings, and residents can fill out an application to participate," Moore said.

For an application to be submitted to the state for the funding, at least 150 Washington County residents must apply to participate — and only 100 will receive the rebates.

“We really need our county’s residents to turn out to these meetings and fill out a one-sheet application form to show widespread interest in the program,” Warring said.

“Filling out the application doesn’t obligate anyone to install a shelter; it just shows that we have enough interest here to qualify for the funding,” said Ashlock.

Depending on the number of applicants, the recipients of the money could be chosen from a random drawing, Moore said.

“There will likely be a random drawing, if we get more applications than we have funding,” Moore said.

Once the meetings are held and at least 150 applications are collected, Ashlock submit the paperwork to the State for processing. An application will then be submitted for the federal funding by the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management.

"We appreciate the county for taking the lead on this program," Warring said. "This is a great partnership that everyone in Washington County can benefit from."

The meetings and the application submission are the first steps toward launching the program, but the process could take up to a year “from start to finish,” Moore said.

For more information, please plan to attend one of the meetings set for Feb. 22 in Ramona, Feb. 23 in Bartlesville, and Feb. 24 in Copan.