

## Outdoor Warning System

Johnson County's outdoor warning system consists of 52 sirens placed strategically throughout the cities, the U of I Campus and the County as an early warning device to alert citizens of potential danger while they are outdoors. While the outdoor warning system is an effective method of notifying those outdoors, it is only one component of a comprehensive emergency warning system including the use of the use of [NOAA weather radios](#), the Emergency Alert System, and emergency notifications from local media. Through the NOAA Storm Ready program these radios are available through local retail stores.

Designed as an outdoor warning system, the sirens should not be relied upon to provide sufficient warning indoors or in noisy areas. Air-conditioning, thunder, wind, rain, and other conditions can cause the sirens not to be heard indoors or outdoors (even if sirens can be heard during tests). Winds are a strong variable as is the construction of buildings. Sirens are also subject to lightning strikes and other equipment malfunction. Furthermore, sirens provide no information on the type of threat or exact location of potential danger. For this reason, if you hear the sirens, you should seek shelter immediately as the threat is likely in your immediate area and tune to media outlets for detailed information on the threat.

Individuals, families, and businesses are strongly encouraged to use [NOAA weather radios](#) to receive warnings and emergency information. A battery, solar or hand crank AM/FM radio is also a must have item for when the electricity is off and TV stations are off the air or internet access is down.

### Testing

The outdoor warning system for Johnson County is tested at 10:00am on the first Wednesday of the month. No tests are conducted when there is severe weather (or potential severe weather) occurring in the local area and activating the outdoor warning system might cause confusion as to whether the activation is real event. We will skip the test for the month when this happens and instead conduct silent tests on sirens equipped with that feature.

(Please note that not all sirens are capable of doing a silent test though)

### **DO NOT CALL 911 to ASK WHY THE SIRENS ARE GOING OFF!**

Doing so ties up phone lines and prevents actual emergency calls from getting through.

In March the siren test is performed as part of a statewide tornado drill in conjunction with Severe Weather Awareness Week. These drills are typically conducted on a Wednesday usually in the 10-10:30 timeframe. A media release is published each year containing the details for that test.

### Activation

**All cities within the County own and maintain the sirens within their cities. The University of Iowa also owns and maintains a similar system they call "Hawk Alert". The County presently owns two sirens. They are located at Kent Park and near the Fry Town in the rural unincorporated area.**

Johnson County Emergency Management and Homeland Security has the primary responsibility to establish policy on when to activate the sirens throughout the county. This activation function is performed by our County Joint Emergency Communications Center and its 911 dispatchers.

A backup capability to perform this function is also present at the University of Iowa Department of Public Safety Communications Center in downtown Iowa City.

In addition, most cities also have the capability of activating their own sirens if they so chose.

The outdoor warning system is set up to alert the public that is outside, of a tornado warning or of a nuclear attack. There are three basic criteria to activate the sirens for tornadoes:

- The National Weather Service issues a Tornado Warning for any portion of Johnson County,
  - A trained and certified weather spotter reports a tornado; that is verifiable or highly reliable in nature or
  - A tornado is reported by a local public safety official.
- **We will always error on the side of activation of the tornado sirens when in doubt or when there is conflicting reports from reliable sources.**

Johnson County has the capability of activating all of the sirens at once or by activating one or more of the established siren zones. We can also do a city specific activation, though that is commonly only used for testing and maintenance related functionality. All sirens are sounded unless the threat is clearly confined to an individual zone (or zones). During a tornado warning the sirens will be sounded for three minute duration upon notice of each tornado sighting or changes in the warning issued by the National Weather Service. Tests are run for a period of one minute per zone and then 1 minute for the county wide activation. Therefore each area normally hears this test twice between 10 am and 10:05 am on the first Wednesday of each month. If you hear an additional test of the siren on that test day within the 10 am hour then that means we are testing again as something failed to perform correctly in your area.

There is NO “all-clear” siren. Sirens are meant to send people outside to indoors to seek shelter and additional information. They are not designed to be heard inside a structure such as a house even though sometimes they can be.

People need to tune in to either a NOAA all hazard radio, TV or AM/FM radio for more detailed information on the reason a siren went off or on details related to the storm or threats.

## **DO NOT CALL 911 to ASK WHY THE SIRENS ARE GOING OFF!**

Doing so ties up phone lines and prevents actual emergency calls from getting through.

If you have questions about sirens either call Emergency Management at 319-356-6761 or at 319-356-6700 and we will respond to your questions in a timely manner.

### **What to do**

If the outdoor warning system is heard at anytime other than scheduled test days, seek shelter immediately and tune in to local radio, television, or your NOAA weather radio for instructions and information. Do NOT CALL 911 to see what is going on.

911 should only to be called to report an actual emergency!

It is important to remember that severe thunderstorm can produce a tornado with little or no warning. When a tornado warning is issued, take the following immediate safety precautions:

**In homes or small buildings:** Go to a pre-designated safe area such as the basement (if available) or to an windowless interior room on the lowest floor, such as a closet or bathroom. Stay away from windows, doors, and outside walls. Upper floors are unsafe. If there is no time to descend, go to a closet, a small room with strong walls, or an inside hallway. Put as many walls as possible between you and the outside. Get under a sturdy protection (heavy table or work bench), cover yourself with some sort of thick padding (mattress, blankets, etc.), and use your arms to cover your head and neck to protect against flying debris.

**In schools, hospitals, factories, or shopping centers:** Go to interior rooms and halls on the lowest floor. Stay away from glass enclosed places or areas with wide-span roofs such as auditoriums and warehouses. Crouch down and cover your head and neck. Centrally-located stairwells are good shelter.

**In high-rise buildings:** Go to interior small rooms or halls. Stay away from exterior walls or glassy areas.

**In cars or mobile homes:** ABANDON THEM IMMEDIATELY! Most deaths occur in cars and mobile homes. If you are in either of those locations, leave them and go to a substantial structure or designated tornado shelter.

If no suitable structure is nearby: Lie flat in the nearest ditch or depression and use your hands to cover your head. Be alert for flash floods. It is not recommended to seek shelter under overpasses.

Listen to a battery-powered NOAA weather radio or local radio or television station for updated information and to determine when conditions are safe.