

As more storms move in, death toll rises in Joplin, Missouri

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Another major storm system churned into Oklahoma and the US Midwest Tuesday, bearing more tornadoes.

Two tornadoes struck an Oklahoma City suburb, killing at least four and injuring 60 others. Several residents are missing. Numerous homes were destroyed, and 58,000 residences lost power.

Another funnel cloud touched down near Canton Lake, 70 miles northwest of Oklahoma City. Initial reports indicated some damage to natural gas rigs.

Meanwhile, the death toll from Sunday's tornado in Joplin, Missouri has grown to 124. More than 1,000 Joplin residents were injured, and 1,500 remain missing.

The Joplin tornado has been re-classified as an EF5, the strongest category with wind speeds in excess of 200 miles per hour. It is the deadliest such storm since 1947.

The death toll is certain to rise as rescue crews scour the extensive damage in downtown Joplin, where the storm cut a six-mile-long and nearly mile-wide path. "We're getting more bodies," Newton County Coroner Mark Bridges told reporters Tuesday afternoon. "We've been running calls all morning." Local officials were storing bodies in five refrigerated tractor-trailers.

Missouri Governor Jay Nixon told local television station NewsChannel 5 that the crews would stop search and rescue efforts early Tuesday afternoon and

shift to recovering the dead.

The Missouri State Emergency Management Agency said its search operations were only halfway complete Tuesday. Local officials have estimated that as much as one-third of the city was destroyed, including a hospital, nursing homes, schools, entire apartment complexes and neighborhoods, and busy shopping centers.

Emergency responders were working to locate victims under the collapsed roof of a Wal-Mart Supercenter, where employees estimated some 150 workers and shoppers had been at the time of impact.

Rescuers were also searching at a nearby Home Depot, probing through concrete slabs that collapsed into the store. According to local reports, seven bodies were found beneath one of the slabs Monday.

At St. John's Regional Medical Center, six bodies were recovered. Five of the victims had been in critical condition when the tornado hit the hospital. According to a hospital spokesperson, staff had only five minutes' warning to begin moving patients into interior hallways. Over 180 patients had to be evacuated.

At least 11 people were killed at the Greenbriar nursing home, and another is missing. Staff at the facility and at another nursing home nearby said they had received a warning of the storm's approach but the impact came much quicker than expected.

Elsewhere, seven people were pulled alive from

rubble. Along with state and local rescue teams, residents and volunteers have been digging through the debris of the more than 2,000 obliterated buildings in the storm's path. The town remains crippled, with roads blocked, power lines down and water lines damaged. At least 17,000 residences remain without electricity.

Thunderstorms have hampered rescue operations over the past two days. On Monday, two emergency workers were hospitalized after being struck by lightning while conducting a search.

Initial damage estimates put the cost of insured property loss at several billion dollars for the city of Joplin and millions more for Minneapolis and other impacted areas. President Barack Obama issued a statement from London, pledging resources without citing a specific level of aid. "I want everybody in Joplin, everybody in Missouri, everybody in Minnesota, everybody across the Midwest to know that we are here for you," he said.

However, administration officials have emphasized repeatedly that budget-strapped state and local governments will play the leading role in the recovery efforts, with the federal government in "a support role."

Federal Emergency Management Agency Director Craig Fugate flew over the damage Tuesday morning with Governor Nixon; Obama is slated to tour the area Sunday. Fugate issued a statement calling on residents to "contact FEMA about applying for federal disaster aid" through the agency's web site. For many of the neediest residents, lacking electricity, internet, and phone service, the application process is long, difficult and circuitous.

Meteorologists warned of a moderate risk for more severe weather in the region Wednesday. National Weather Service meteorologist Doug Cramer told the *New York Times* Tuesday, "We are expecting some violent storms to develop across Kansas and Oklahoma today bringing rain, hail and the risk of tornadoes that could move into the Joplin area this evening... this is a very good set up for very big tornadoes." The NWS forecasts strong winds and baseball-sized hail.

In advance of the latest storm system, Joplin officials tested the city's sirens Tuesday morning. Many, if not all, in the system were not functioning. On the *Joplin Globe* Facebook notice of the test, residents said they did not sound in the neighborhoods of Royal Heights, Rangeline, Zora, Collegeview, and many other areas.

At least 493 people have died in tornadoes this spring, the most since 1925. "We are now on pace for a record year for tornado fatalities," NWS Storm Prediction Center Director Russ Schneider said in a conference call with the media. "We have to be aware that we are just now entering the peak of the season."



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