

Massachusetts tornadoes kill at least three, injure dozens

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At least three people were confirmed dead after violent storms, which included at least two tornadoes touching down at multiple sites, swept across the US state of Massachusetts Wednesday. Authorities said that 18 communities sustained serious damage in the central and western areas of the state.

Two people were killed in West Springfield and another in Brimfield. It was still being determined if the death of an elderly man in Springfield, who died from cardiac arrest, could be attributed to the storms. An estimated 200 people were injured.

The spate of tornadoes was the most deadly in Massachusetts since a massive tornado struck Worcester and surrounding towns in 1953, killing 90 people. The last tornado to hit the state was in 2008. No one has been killed by a tornado in Massachusetts since the mid-1990s. Meteorologists are still determining the strength of Wednesday's twisters, but it is thought they may have been EF2s or even EF3s, an extremely rare occurrence in New England.

The storms came a little more than a week after a massive funnel cloud hit Joplin, Missouri, claiming 138 lives in one of the worst tornado strikes to hit the United States in decades.

As of Thursday afternoon, about 40,000 Massachusetts residents remained without electricity, down from a high of about 60,000 at one point on Wednesday evening. A spokesperson for the Western Massachusetts Electric Co. said hard-hit areas might not have power until the end of the week.

Many local roads remained blocked by fallen trees, power lines and other debris. State police reported vehicles overturned on Interstate 84 in Sturbridge. Governor Deval Patrick declared a state of emergency Wednesday evening and called up 1,000 National Guard troops.

Ten disaster assessment teams, made up of people from the National Guard, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the state building inspector's office, were in the ravaged area.

Emergency response teams continued to knock on doors and search collapsed buildings on Thursday, looking for survivors and any uncounted casualties. Fire crews from Connecticut, New Hampshire and Vermont were also dispatched to assist in the search-and-rescue efforts.

Springfield, the state's third-largest city, lying about 90 miles west of Boston, was one of the hardest hit. A tornado was sighted at around 4:30 p.m. Wednesday in nearby Westfield before moving into Springfield's downtown area, then to the city's East Forest Park neighborhood.

One tornado was filmed by CNN television affiliate WSHM, churning up water on the Connecticut River before passing over a bridge with vehicles on it and moving into the city. The twister created a massive column of debris, picking up giant pieces of concrete, wood and other matter and tossing them up at least 25 stories high.

Springfield Deputy Fire Chief Joseph Conant said about 35 people were injured, including five who were being treated for critical injuries. A rescue staging area was set up at the Basketball Hall of Fame and about 400 people were sheltering Thursday morning at the MassMutual Center.

The Springfield courthouse was damaged, and a tractor-trailer was overturned on the city's Memorial Bridge, which spans the Connecticut River. Century-old buildings were damaged—"roofs torn off, facades ravaged, trees uprooted," one witness told CNN. On Maple Street, downed trees and large tree limbs lined the path where the tornado wrought its destruction.

Tow trucks pulled away damaged vehicles.

Carmen Melendez, 50, a Winthrop Street resident, told the *Boston Globe* that she had looked out the window as the storm approached and saw a cloud of debris barreling toward her home. “All the glass blew up” on her porch and window, she said. “It was a disaster.” When the cloud came, she and her handicapped child dropped to the floor and made it to the bathroom, where they survived.

A tornado in nearby West Springfield struck a 2-square-mile area. The town’s mayor, Ed Gibson, said that dozen of buildings were “totally demolished” and many others suffered significant damage.

West Springfield Police Chief Thomas Burke told the press that a woman “threw her 15-year-old daughter into the bathtub, jumped on top of her, and the house came down around her.” The daughter survived but the mother was killed. The town’s second fatality came when a tornado struck a vehicle.

The small town of Monson, with a population of about 8,000, took a direct hit. Like many towns in the area, Monson was once a thriving mill town but has now fallen on hard times. Remarkably, no one in the town was killed, but homes and businesses sustained severe damage. The steeple was ripped off the church and was lying in the front yard.

State police had set up roadblocks around the town as rescue workers searched for survivors and residents combed through the wreckage of their homes for belongings. One resident described the town’s center as a “war zone.” About 50 people stayed overnight Wednesday at the community’s middle school.

On Bethany Road, one of the worst impacted areas, one home was completely leveled and two others were severely damaged. Dwight and Deborah Meacham’s house was totally obliterated. “I just paid the mortgage off last month,” Dwight told the *Globe*.

Governor Patrick, along with Massachusetts senators John Kerry and Scott Brown, toured the area on Thursday. Patrick told the media, “I haven’t met people who have lost hope. I’ve met people who have lost stuff.” But as the shock wears off, residents and businesses that have suffered immense losses will be looking for assistance to rebuild their lives.

Senator Kerry told the media that “he could not imagine” that federal aid would not be forthcoming. How much aid, and when it will come, is still to be

determined. FEMA personnel were in the area Thursday assessing damages, which must reach a certain threshold to qualify for federal aid.

In addition to Massachusetts, in the past few days, tornadoes have been recorded in Nebraska, Kansas and Northern California. According to reports, as of June 1, there have been more than 1,000 confirmed tornado sightings in the US this year. At least 537 people have died, including those killed in Joplin and an estimated 322 who perished during an outbreak of tornadoes across the southeastern US in late April.



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