

# Johnson County Outdoor Warning System

## Purpose of the Outdoor Warning System

Johnson County's Outdoor Warning System (OWS) consists of 68 sirens strategically located throughout the county, including municipalities, the University of Iowa campus, and rural areas. The system is designed to provide an early warning to people who are outdoors and may be in danger from severe weather or other emergencies.

The sirens are only one component of a comprehensive public warning system. Residents should also utilize:

- NOAA Weather Radios
- Emergency Alert System (EAS) broadcasts
- Local television, radio stations and official websites
- Mobile emergency notification applications and social media channels
- Local emergency alert systems
- The Alert Iowa and Hawk Alert Systems (voice to phone, text & email) alerts

Individuals, families, and businesses are strongly encouraged to own a NOAA Weather Radio and maintain a battery-powered, solar-powered, or hand-crank AM/FM radio for use during power outages or communications disruptions as well as the "jocoreadyiowa" ema application

## Important Limitations

The Outdoor Warning System is designed primarily to alert people who are outdoors.

Sirens should **not** be relied upon as the sole source of warning while indoors. Factors such as building construction, air conditioning, thunder, rain, wind, and other environmental conditions can significantly reduce siren audibility. Additionally, sirens may occasionally be affected by lightning strikes, power failures, or mechanical malfunctions.

Sirens do not provide information regarding:

- The type of emergency
- The location of the threat
- Protective actions to take

If you hear a siren activation, immediately seek shelter and obtain additional information from reliable sources such as NOAA Weather Radio, local media, or official emergency notifications.

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# Outdoor Warning System Testing

The Outdoor Warning System is tested at **10:00 a.m. on the first Wednesday of every month.**

Testing may be canceled if severe weather is occurring or forecasted for the area at the time of the test. In these situations, silent testing may be performed on sirens equipped with that capability. Not all sirens can perform silent tests.

During monthly testing:

- Individual siren zones are tested per zone (Johnson County has 3 zones)
- A countywide activation test is conducted.
- Most locations will hear the siren twice between 10:00 a.m. and 10:05 a.m.
- Additional testing during the 10:00 a.m. hour may indicate troubleshooting or maintenance activities.
- Tests last 1 minute per zone unlike emergencies when they cycle for a full 3 minutes per issued warning(s)

## Statewide Tornado Drill

Each March, as part of Iowa Severe Weather Awareness Week, the monthly siren test is incorporated into the statewide tornado drill. Details are announced annually through public information releases.

## Important Reminder

**DO NOT CALL 911 TO ASK WHY THE SIRENS ARE SOUNDING.**

Calling 911 for non-emergency information can delay emergency response and prevent legitimate emergency calls from getting through.

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## Siren Ownership and Maintenance

Municipalities own and maintain sirens located within their jurisdictions.

The University of Iowa owns and operates its own warning system as part of the Hawk Alert program.

Johnson County currently owns 16 rural sirens:

Municipalities and the County are responsible for annual preventive maintenance, repairs, and service contracts for their respective sirens.

If you observe damage, malfunction, or other issues with a siren:

- Contact your local fire department or municipal officials for city-owned sirens.
  - Contact Johnson County Emergency Management for county-owned rural sirens.
  - Contact the University of Iowa Public Safety Department for Campus owned sirens.
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## Siren Activation Criteria

Johnson County Emergency Management establishes countywide siren activation policies. Activation is typically performed by the Johnson County Joint Emergency Communications Center (JECC), with backup activation capability available through the University of Iowa Department of Public Safety Communications Center.

Most municipalities also maintain the ability to activate their own sirens if necessary.

The Outdoor Warning System is intended to alert people outdoors of:

- Tornado threats
- 70 MPH winds
- Golf ball size hail
- National emergencies requiring public warning

Sirens may be activated when any of the following occur:

1. The National Weather Service issues a Tornado Warning for any portion of Johnson County, or a Severe Thunderstorm Warning for any part of the County that includes either golf ball size hail or 70 mph winds with the storm.
2. A trained and certified storm spotter reports a tornado and the report is considered reliable or verifiable.
3. A tornado is reported by a public safety official. or one of the above threats is observed by them.

When uncertainty exists, Johnson County Dispatch will err on the side of public safety and activate the sirens.

The County can activate:

- The entire county
- Individual siren zones

During tornado events, sirens are reactivated as new warnings, sightings, or significant storm updates are received.

## **No All-Clear Signal**

Johnson County does **not** utilize an "all-clear" siren signal.

Residents should continue monitoring NOAA Weather Radio, local media, or official emergency notifications until the threat has passed.

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## **What To Do When Sirens Sound**

If outdoor warning sirens sound at any time other than a scheduled test:

### **1. Seek Shelter Immediately**

Move to a safe location without delay.

### **2. Obtain Additional Information**

Monitor:

- NOAA Weather Radio
- Local television stations
- Local radio stations
- Official emergency notifications

### **3. Do Not Call 911 for Information**

Call 911 only to report an actual emergency.

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## **Tornado Safety Guidelines**

### **In Homes or Small Buildings**

- Go to a basement if available.
- Otherwise move to a small, windowless interior room on the lowest floor.
- Stay away from windows, doors, and exterior walls.
- Get under a sturdy table or workbench if possible.
- Protect your head and neck with blankets, cushions, a helmet, or a mattress.

### **In Schools, Hospitals, Factories, or Shopping Centers**

- Move to interior hallways or rooms on the lowest floor.
- Avoid large open-span areas such as gymnasiums, auditoriums, warehouses, and cafeterias.
- Stay away from windows and glass.
- Crouch down and protect your head and neck.

## **In High-Rise Buildings**

- Move to a small interior room or hallway.
- Stay away from exterior walls and windows.

## **In Vehicles or Mobile Homes**

**Leave immediately and seek shelter in a substantial building.**

Vehicles and mobile homes are extremely dangerous locations during tornadoes and account for many tornado-related fatalities.

## **If No Shelter Is Available**

- Lie flat in the nearest ditch or low-lying area.
- Cover your head and neck with your hands and arms.
- Remain alert for flash flooding.
- Do not seek shelter beneath highway overpasses.

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# **Additional Warning Resources**

Residents are encouraged to utilize multiple methods of receiving emergency alerts, including:

- NOAA Weather Radios
- Emergency Alert System broadcasts
- Local television and radio stations
- Official social media channels
- The Johnson County emergency notification system
- The **Joco Ready Iowa** mobile application, available for Apple and Android devices

Using multiple alerting methods provides the best protection against missed warnings and helps ensure timely notification during emergencies.

For questions regarding the Outdoor Warning System, contact Johnson County Emergency Management at:

319-356-6761 or 319-356-6700

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