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FEATURED

## 'It's pretty devastating'; Blackburn: Tornado traveled 7 miles, injured 23 as Bell homes struck

BY ERIC E. GARCIA | TELEGRAM CITY EDITOR

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The roof and walls of a home in Salado were ripped off during the Tuesday night tornado in Bell County.

Courtesy | Emily Evatt via Twitter

**BELTON** — A powerful tornado that swept into Bell County Tuesday night carved a path of destruction along its seven-mile route — reducing homes to rubble, slicing down large trees and power lines, and injuring 23 people, one critically.

Amazingly, no fatalities were immediately reported as responders from multiple agencies canvassed damaged neighborhoods, including the Salado and Youngsport areas, Bell County Judge David Blackburn said during a news conference late Tuesday night.

“The extent of the damage is significant, and at least at this time, to not have any reported fatalities is in and of itself, amazing,” the judge told reporters outside the Bell County Communications Center in Belton.

“Twelve have been transported to area hospitals, one I’m told in critical condition,” Blackburn said. “The other eleven were either not transported or treated and released from the hospital.”

Rescue and debris clearing operations that began Tuesday night continued into Wednesday morning.

“Power lines, debris, (and) trees are all scattered across roadways and properties,” Blackburn said. “This activity will occur throughout the night.”

Emergency responders conducted walk-arounds and walk-throughs at properties to assess injuries and damage. Social media photographs showed Salado area homes with roofs and walls heavily damaged. Metal and other debris was scattered along the tornado’s path, which the National Weather Service said had “significant strength.”

“We believe we have everyone accounted for, but they’re double- and triple-checking that this evening,” Blackburn said.

### **Tornado’s formation**

The tornado “popped up fairly quickly,” forming over northern Williamson County near the intersection of County Road 228 and State Highway 195, Blackburn said. It caused damage between Florence and Jarrell, before moving into Bell County, traveling along FM 2843 west of Cedar Valley.

Bell emergency communications staff received the first call about the tornado at 5:37 p.m. Minutes later, about 20 others calls came in.

First responders immediately launched operations, the judge said.

"There were multiple agencies that responded to the initial calls, including multiple Bell County agencies, agencies from Williamson, McLennan County, Texas Department of Emergency Management, Texas Department of Transportation and others all responded to the calls," Blackburn said. "We also have assets in the air, helicopters assisting land assets right now to ensure that we have everyone accounted for along the path of the tornado."

Blackburn said the county is "very appreciative of that response" from multiple agencies.

## **Devastation**

Blackburn, the county's chief executive, said he witnessed "lots and lots of debris" as he toured some of the areas hit by the tornado.

"The path of the tornado, which again extends several miles — there's not much left," he said. "Large trees uprooted, overturned, stripped. Buildings really reduced to rubble in many locations. Power lines, power poles scattered all over the place.

"It's pretty devastating."

The Bell County Sheriff's Department said 15 to 20 homes were hit by the tornado's touchdown in Salado.

Blackburn said weather alerts and information on television and online helped inform people about the tornado and urged them to immediately take cover. Those alerts probably helped save lives, he said.

"The damage, while significant, it certainly could have been worse," Blackburn said.

## **Cleanup, recovery operations**

Community organizations and churches immediately launched relief efforts for area residents.

Salado United Methodist Church, 650 Royal St., said in a social media post that a shelter was set up at the church for anyone affected by the tornado.

The Garden of Hope Resource Center, 10208 Cedar Knob Church Road in Salado, said it would provide clothing and toiletries to people in need. The center, open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday, can provide clothing for men, women and children, according to a Twitter post by the village of Salado.

Blackburn said county officials were prepared to set up a shelter but there was no need by Tuesday night.

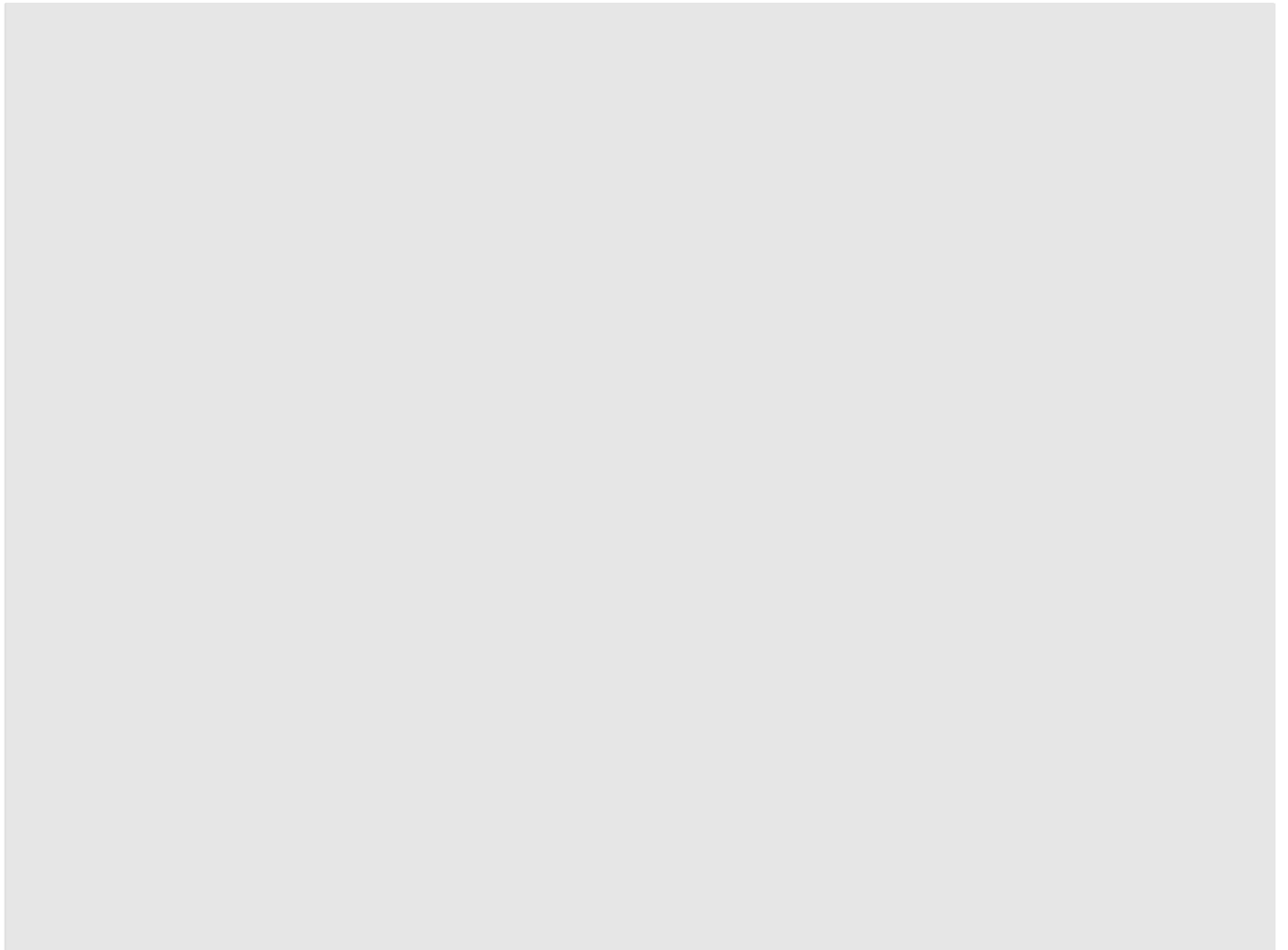
Bell County is prepared to assist property owners and others, the judge said.

"We'll continue to work with them in the days ahead for any further assistance they may need," he said.

Cleanup will take time, he added.

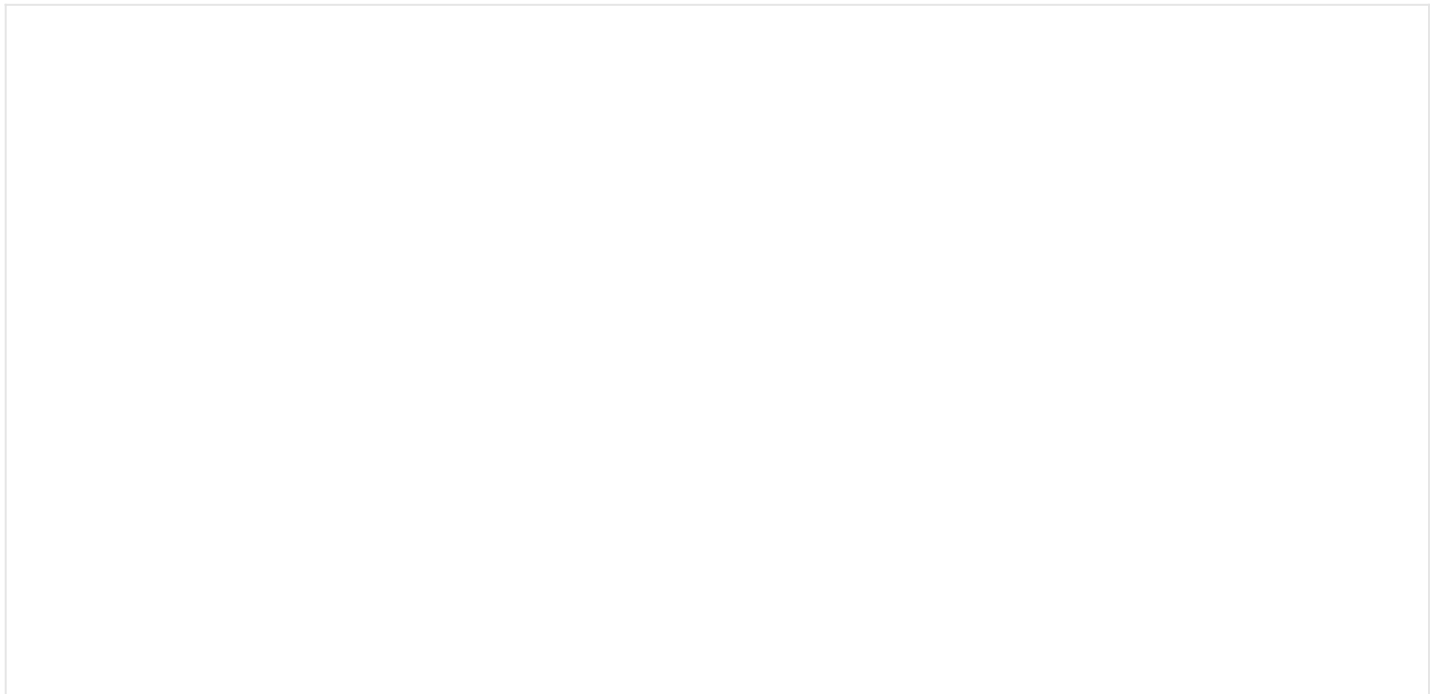
"There's going to be many, many, many days of cleanup to follow this," Blackburn said. "This is just the beginning of a long stretch."

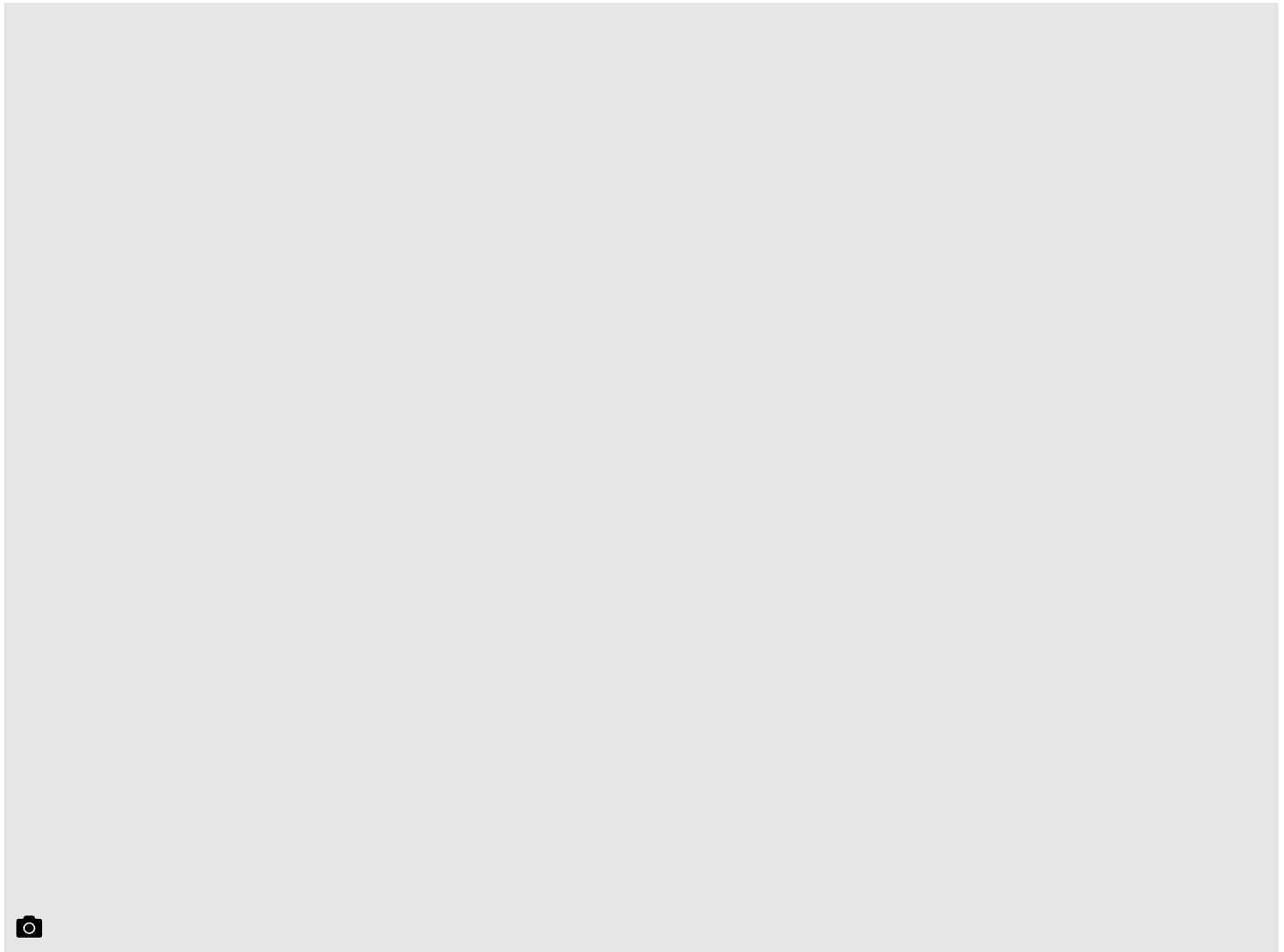
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Multiple agencies working to help tornado victims

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