# SKYWARN FAQs

**1. What is SKYWARN?**

The effects of severe weather are felt every year by many Americans. To obtain critical weather information, the National Weather Service established SKYWARN® with partner organizations. SKYWARN® is a volunteer program with nearly 290,000 trained severe weather spotters. For more than 35 years, the Skywarn program has been helping the National Weather Service gather critical "ground truth" information from the field before, during and even after severe weather events. These volunteers help keep their local communities safe by providing timely and accurate reports of severe weather to the National Weather Service. Since the program started in the 1970s, the information provided by SKYWARN® spotters, coupled with Doppler radar technology, improved satellite and other data, has enabled the NWS to issue more timely and accurate warnings for tornadoes, severe thunderstorms and flash floods. Countless lives have been saved because of the unique partnership between volunteer storm spotters, emergency management and the NOAA National Weather Service. Just one report from a single Skywarn storm spotter can save thousands of lives. SKYWARN® storm spotters are part of the ranks of citizens who form the Nation's first line of defense against severe weather. There can be no finer reward than to know that their efforts have given communities the precious gift of time--seconds and minutes that can help save lives.

**2. Who can be a spotter?**

Anyone with an interest in public service and access to communication can join the Skywarn program. Volunteers include amateur radio operators, law enforcement and fire personnel, emergency medical services workers, dispatchers, postal workers, public utility workers, city or county workers, farmers, and other concerned private citizens. Individuals affiliated with hospitals, schools, churches, nursing homes or who have a responsibility for protecting others are encouraged to become a spotter.

**3. Why does the NWS need storm spotters?**

The National Weather Service is responsible for issuing severe weather warnings that alert people when a potential threat will affect their area. To do this, we study the environment leading up to a severe weather event in great detail and monitor technologically advanced Doppler Radar data. This technology does have limitations though. By adding in real-time reports from what the storm is actually doing makes our warnings that much more accurate, credible, and timely. We also use spotter reports to help verify if severe weather is or did occur during the official warning. The NWS will ALWAYS need storm spotters.

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**4. How do I become a spotter?**
The first step is to attend a spotter training class in your area. These are typically held in the early spring (Jan-Mar) and provide you with the basics and contact information you'll need to get started. You may also want to contact your county Emergency Management director to find out how you can get involved locally. A good way to get involved is to become an amateur radio operator. You can get your license, a radio, and talk with other spotters on ham radio frequencies in the region, who communicate directly with the Paducah NWS.

**5. Is there a cost for the training?**
No. The NWS provides training free of charge.


**6. Do I need to pre-register before the training?**
Usually not. In most cases the training is open to the public. All you have to do is show up. If registration is required, such as with the Elite Spotter Workshop, will be stated in the class schedule.

**7. Do I need to bring anything to the training class?**
Bring a pen, pencil, and paper to take notes with. Spotter guide books and several other pamphlets are provided.

**8. Is there a minimum age requirement to become a spotter?**
Because of the complexity of severe thunderstorms and the potential dangers involved, spotting is recommended for adults (18 yrs or older). High school and middle school students are welcome to attend the classes with a parent or other adult.

**9. When are spotter training classes held?**
The Paducah NWS office usually conducts training from January through March. Classes are normally held during the evening hours, although sometimes an afternoon class is scheduled. We offer additional classes in the fall.

**10. Are classes rescheduled due to bad weather?**
Although ironic, Yes - normally they are rescheduled if they were cancelled because of hazardous winter weather or on-going severe thunderstorms. If a class has been cancelled, there will be a headline on our homepage letting you know the class was canceled. When the class is rescheduled, it will be listed on our Skywarn webpage.

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**11. How do I find the training schedule?**
Check our spotter training schedule at:
http://www.weather.gov/pah/spottertraining
Press releases for individual training sessions are sometimes sent to area newspapers, television, and radio stations. You can also check with your county Emergency Management director.

**12. How long is a typical training class?**
Usually two to three hours. The exception is the Elite Spotter Workshop, which is about 3.5 hours.

**13. What is the training like?**
An interactive multimedia presentation is given by a meteorologist, including various images and video loops from past storms in our area. The presentation includes detailed information on storm types, identifying potential severe weather features, spotter safety and reporting procedures and severe weather meteorology. Some locations host the class with snacks or refreshments. While classroom training is essential, it may take several severe weather seasons for spotter groups to become experienced in what they are seeing and what to report.

**14. Will I get paid for being a spotter?**
No. Storm spotting is a volunteer service. A spotter can help out their community by being the "eyes" of the National Weather Service.

**15. Will I get an official ID, Certificate, or spotter number?**
The Paducah NWS office assigns spotter IDs or numbers for individual counties but not for individual spotters. Local emergency managers or other groups may extend the NWS provided IDs to the individual level. We do hand out a certificate of completion at the end of the class. Some counties do assign IDs and numbers though which you obtain at the training class in their county. Contact your county Emergency Management director for any local policies.

**16. Can I storm spot from home?**
Certainly. You can call us directly using the spotter hotline, use our online reporting form or various social media platforms to interact with us.

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**17. What is the difference between a storm spotter and a storm chaser?**
Skywarn spotters are not by definition "storm chasers." While their functions and methods are similar, the storm spotter stays close to home and has close ties to a local weather forecast office. Storm chasers, on the other hand, are meteorologists, thrill seekers or individuals working for the media, who race to find storms and may cover hundreds of miles a day. (The National Weather Service does not condone storm chasing.)

**18. Who typically deploys SKYWARN spotters?**
Usually the county (911/dispatch, Sheriff Dept., Emergency Management director) deploys their spotter networks. Amateur radio operators may activate their networks as well. The National Weather Service may request spotters to deploy in a particular area but it is up to the individual group to decide when to go out. Spotters should be deployed anytime thunderstorms threaten their community. A WATCH is a good time to prepare. A WARNING is often too late to deploy. Spotter networks need to be proactive and position themselves before storms move in. The National Weather Service tries to provide the groups with as much information as possible. Use NOAA Weather Radio as another source of severe weather information. Use our Hazardous Weather Outlook as a way to stay ahead of a severe weather risk or to plan when deployment may be needed. You can also view the daily convective outlooks or severe weather risks for the next 7 days at the Storm Predictions Center's Outlook page: http://www.spc.noaa.gov/products/outlook/

**19. Who organizes local spotter networks?**
Spotter groups are typically run within each county, and hence are usually organized by the county Emergency Management director. It varies from county to county. Amateur radio operators often work through clubs. In some cases fire departments organize themselves.


Christian County Weather Spotters

**20. Who organizes and schedules the spotter training class?**
Usually the training class is scheduled and organized by the county Emergency Management director. They work with the Warning Coordination Meteorologist (WCM) at the local NWS office to pick a date that works best for the group. If you would like to organize a class, check with your county Emergency Management director first. Make sure a class is not already scheduled in your area or in a neighboring county. Minimum attendance should be 25 so ensure you have enough interest first. You can also contact Ricky Shanklin, Warning Coordination Meteorologist at the NWS in Paducah, KY at Ricky.Shanklin@noaa.gov.

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**21. Can I attend training in a different county?**
Sure. Training is not held in every county every year. The material presented is the same for each talk. Spotter procedures may be different in each county though. For specifics in your area, be sure to contact your county Emergency Management director.

**22. Why can't training be held in my community?**
The location chosen for training in a county can vary. Some spots are used because of their central location in the county. Some are used because of size limitations of the group or equipment needed. Some counties move the location of the training from year to year. Spotter groups may need to travel a small distance in order to make a nearby session.

**23. Why isn't training being held in my county this year?**
Often times the NWS will coordinate spotter training sessions with county Emergency Management directors. In some areas, counties will alternate training with neighboring counties, hold training every other year, or may not be having training this year due to low expected attendance. You can always attend training in a neighboring county.

**24. Is an Advanced Spotter Training class available?**
The Paducah NWS office conducts training that covers basic to advanced material in one session. However, an Elite Spotter Workshop has been developed for those spotters who have completed the basic level training and wish to delve deeper into more complex concepts of meteorology and storm spotting. Please refer to our class schedule for more details.

**25. Where can I learn more about severe thunderstorms or tornadoes?**
There is a lot of information via the Internet about severe weather. Some universities have material on-line you can use to educate yourself. Consider taking a class on meteorology at a local college or university. The information provided in our spotter training class is all we expect of our spotters.

**26. How often do I need to come to training?**
The Paducah NWS recommends spotters attend a training session at least every 3 years. Some new information or spotting ideas are presented each year to keep the training as fresh as possible.

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**27. I am unable to drive to attend a course or the available classes are too far for me to drive. Is there any way to take classes from my home?**

Yes, you are in luck. We do offer spotter training webinars which you can view from any computer with internet service. On the spotter training calendar, these type of classes will be marked as “WEBINAR”. About ten minutes before class is scheduled to start, go to:

https://join.me/nws-paducah

The image above shows what you will see once you arrive at the website. Once the meteorologist at NWS Paducah unlocks the screen, you will then be able to view the spotter course slideshow, as the meteorologist conducts the course virtually from our office. Next, you will need to call this number in order to hear the audio: 866-440-7702. The access code is 8162683154.

Within the join.me website, you will be able to chat with the instructor and ask questions during the virtual class.

You can also opt to take online courses via the MetEd website in order to earn your spotter certificate:

Skywarn Spotter (REQUIRED)
https://www.meted.ucar.edu/training_course.php?id=23
Role of Skywarn Spotter (RECOMMENDED)
https://www.meted.ucar.edu/training_module.php?id=817#.VQrsP3sYEsI
Skywarn Spotter Convective Basics (RECOMMENDED)
https://www.meted.ucar.edu/training_module.php?id=816#.VQrsZXsYEsI
Once you complete these courses, you can contact Ricky Shanklin or Christine Wielgos for further instruction. (Ricky.Shanklin@noaa.gov or Christine.Wielgos@noaa.gov)