

For nearly 50 years, Nebraska Emergency Management Agency employees worked without any sunlight in an underground bunker built during the Cold War.

The bunker, just west of the former state fairgrounds near Military Road, was about 8,500 square feet and built during the 1960s, NEMA Assistant Director Al Berndt said.

The lack of windows didn't bother him, Berndt said, even though some of his employees may have felt like moles.

On Tuesday, Berndt led federal, state and local leaders on a tour of NEMA's bright and spacious home inside the new Nebraska National Guard Joint Force Headquarters building, which cost almost \$28 million, on the west side of Lincoln Airport.

NEMA occupies about 17,000 square feet of the 140,000-square-foot, four-story steel and glass building. Its other tenant-partners are the Nebraska Army and Air National Guard and the Nebraska State Patrol dispatch center.

During a ribbon-cutting ceremony, Gov. Dave Heineman praised the multi-government project, saying it brings several agencies under one roof. He said the old bunker had outlived its usefulness.

"This facility will allow closer coordination of services to provide immediate and faster response times. It will be an important tool in maintaining our readiness, allowing all three agencies to work and train together," he said. "It will provide statewide collaboration, which is an important element to our success."

The building is designed to be used during natural disasters or other high-profile emergencies. Berndt said it already has been used to coordinate federal and state response efforts to combat wildfires in western Nebraska and along the Niobrara River.

When a disaster strikes, federal, state and military emergency response officials will meet in an operations center that includes a giant TV wall, computers, communications equipment and a governor's conference room.

The TV wall, made up of a bank of monitors, allows officials to see aerial views of a wildfire or other disaster in real time, as an event is unfolding, Berndt said. Images are shot by a State Patrol plane.

"It gives fire-scene commanders the ability to see what is going on, and it also transmits here," he said. Other screens can monitor weather conditions, news reports and display a running log of activities.

"This really is the guts of the agency," said Berndt, referring to NEMA.

The operations center also serves as the building's tornado shelter, Berndt said, adding, "We think it's a secure building."

U.S. Sen. Ben Nelson, who began working on the project in his first term, called the new headquarters an exceptional building. He said he and others had to overcome many hurdles before Congress appropriated the bulk of the funds in 2010.

Much of the money -- \$23 million -- came from the Army National Guard. The Air National Guard contributed \$1.5 million; the Federal Emergency Management Agency, \$1.9 million; and the state of Nebraska, \$600,000.

Congressmen Jeff Fortenberry said the headquarters building will benefit the state for years to come and is a "worthy home base" for those who have served the country.

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