

Safe room addition serves multiple purposes

“We’re just sitting ducks here, aren’t we.” she said.

The elderly resident uttered those words to Wheatlands Health Care Center Administer Sheri Rinke as residents and staff took shelter in a hallway and tornado sirens sounded outside. Rinke knew the resident was right.

Like many health care facilities in Kansas, Kingman’s Wheatlands Health Care Center, which was barely 20 years old at that time in 2007, was built on a slab with no severe weather shelter other than the hallway. In the event of a tornado, there was little staff could do to protect residents other than what they were doing. The frightened resident got Rinke thinking about how a safer shelter could be provided for her residents and staff.

After several years of researching options, Rinke decided the addition of a safe room was what was needed, but funding was an issue.

Rinke said a change in classification -- the facility began offering therapy treatments -- allowed it to qualify for state tax credits. The community quickly snapped up the tax credits, money designated for the purpose in the operating fund was tapped, and Rinke and her board began work on the project.

“I had a pretty good idea of what we wanted, and we knew that we wanted Fuqua Construction to do the work,” Rinke said. “I had been looking around at various projects and talked to other elder care facilities that had recently done projects, and Fuqua Construction was the name that kept coming up. The board jumped in and agreed to commit.”

Meetings with Max Fuqua and his team began with a rough draft drawn up by Rinke and discussion about what was desired, what the requirements were for a FEMA-ap-



PROJECT FILE

Wheatlands Health Care Center Storm Shelters

Location: Kingman, Kansas
Completed: December 2014
Project Scope: Physical Therapy/ Safe Rooms
Square footage: 1,262 sq. ft
Design Build Team: Fuqua Construction, Landmark Architects

proved safe room, and the regulatory requirements for the additional therapy and social room uses.

The two resulting FEMA-rated safe rooms add over 1,200 square feet of space, one of which doubles as a therapy room

and coffee area and the other, adjoining the dementia wing, can be used as meeting space for families. Together they can provide shelter for approximately 120 people, seated, providing peace of



The larger of the two shelter rooms, which also doubles as a therapy room and coffee area. The protective shutters for the windows are also visible in these pictures. They can be closed in the event of severe weather or left open to provide natural light.

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mind when the sirens go off as well as additional space for day-to-day activities.

“Even though we thought we knew what we wanted when we started the process, Max Fuqua’s experience and knowledge of what FEMA required and what the state required was invaluable as we worked on the final design,” Rinke said.

Fuqua Construction and Wheatlands staff worked together as a team throughout the design and construction process. One of the innovative elements of the design are the large windows in the larger therapy room. The windows are fitted with metal shutters that can be closed and locked down, bringing the room into compliance during a storm event, but allow it to be flooded with natural light during day-to-day activities.

The construction project utilized local subcontractors whenever possible, a request made by the facility’s board, but also a practice that Fuqua Construction employs whenever possible. Providing continuity were Fuqua Construction superintendents Paul Westhoff and Bob Griffin.

Rinke and Wheatlands maintenance supervisor Destry Forcum were pleased with how smoothly the construction proceeded from groundbreaking to handing over the keys.

“Paul kept us informed about what was going on and consulted with us whenever there was a question about the existing building and systems,” Forcum said. “They were very open to me working on parts of the project, such as the nursing call system and door control system, that I was familiar with. It was efficient and saved us some money, which we could then put to other parts of the project.”

Forcum said it was very obvious that Max Fuqua and his crew were used to working with long-term care facilities and were very conscientious about the safety and comfort of the residents and staff as they worked. Whether it was safety fencing, maintaining fire codes or keeping the work area tidy, the crew made sure that standards were maintained and inconvenience to the staff and residents was kept to a minimum. Work areas were always tidy at the end of the day. That sometimes meant going the extra mile.

At one point during construction, a concrete sidewalk leading from an exit had to be removed. Fuqua’s crew built a temporary wood sidewalk to maintain fire codes, Forcum said. Rinke said the crew was also mindful of the facility’s calendar, at one point temporarily moving their portable construction office -- which was in direct line of sight with the main entrance -- prior to a major public event so it wasn’t the first thing guests saw when they arrived.

Forcum said that Fuqua did an excellent job of scheduling subcontractors so that the work progressed smoothly.

“I’ve worked a lot of construction,” Forcum said. “And it is rare to have something happening nearly every day. The

work flow was planned very well.”

Forcum noted that, as in any remodel, there were unexpected challenges as the project progressed.

“Paul and I would brainstorm until we came up with a solution, and he had suggestions that almost always made sense,” Forcum said. He added that Max Fuqua was onsite at least once a week and was always available if needed.

The end result are two FEMA-rated concrete-boxed



Two more perspectives of the larger therapy/ safe room. Over 75 people can shelter in this dual purpose room. If severe weather is predicted, staff set up chairs in advance so residents can be moved in quickly if a warning is issued.



rooms, bricked on the outside and finished on the inside in a manner that belies the fact that they can withstand 150-200 mph winds. Equipped with bathrooms, they are designed to keep residents comfortable as well as safe -- and for the 300-plus days per year when a shelter isn’t needed, they serve other needed purposes for the facility.

“We’re really proud of the addition. It looks like it was always part of the building, not tacked on,” Rinke said. “Max and his crew did a wonderful job, and we passed all inspections with no deficiencies. Max’s experience (with elder care facilities) is why we chose him. His record is good and it certainly paid off in how smoothly this project went.”

Rinke said the project was finished on schedule and came in under budget -- all a result of the team approach Fuqua Construction took with the Wheatlands board and staff. The build was such a positive experience, the board has already contracted with Fuqua Construction to build independent living duplexes on the campus.

And have the storm shelters been utilized yet?

Twice, Rinke said with a smile. The rooms worked perfectly. No more sitting ducks.

written by Cindy Baldwin, Baldwin Creative Services