4-23-2019

Ports in a Storm: The Role of the Public Library in Times of Crisis

Michele Stricker
New Jersey State Library, mstricker@njstatelib.org

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship

Part of the Other Education Commons

From the Field

Ports in a Storm: The Role of Public Libraries in Times of Crisis

Michele Stricker (mstricker@njstatelib.org)
Deputy State Librarian for Lifelong Learning, New Jersey State Library

Abstract

This article will provide you with guidance on how to prepare your library to respond a disaster, as well as, how to resume providing services to the public as quickly as possible in the aftermath of a local or regional crisis. You will learn how libraries contribute to community resiliency by providing a safe haven and needed services after a disaster that allow people and local businesses to begin to put their shattered lives back together and resume normal activities.

Recent natural and manmade catastrophes have highlighted the important role public libraries play in enhancing their community's resiliency and post-disaster recovery efforts. Many community leaders and emergency responders now view libraries as disaster recovery and technology communication centers, recognizing the role of librarians as "Information First Responders." This article will help your library embrace this new role as an essential community service that quickly enables people to get back to work, back to their lives, and ensure recovery of the community's economic life after a disaster. Learn what you need to do to prepare your facility and staff before disaster strikes. You will be introduced to the New Jersey State Library's Disaster Preparedness & Community Resiliency Toolkit, which is a unique resource created by both librarians and emergency responders.

Your library can be at the forefront in providing a safe haven in times of crisis, and helping your community return to normal life when you prepare in advance, and understand the essential and critical role libraries play in the resiliency of community life.

Keywords: libraries, public libraries, disaster preparedness, safe haven, continuity planning, community resiliency, information first responders, disaster preparedness toolkit

Introduction

When disaster strikes, where do you go? After Hurricane Sandy hit New Jersey in late October 2012, people went to their local library. The severity of the storm, and damages to homes and businesses saw many community libraries pressed into service as ad hoc Disaster Recovery Centers. Even though they may have sustained great damage to their own homes, and were without power themselves, librarians rallied and were in the forefront of providing services and information to those in need, and respite from the storm for shattered communities. Unless

damaged by flooding, New Jersey libraries were open. The libraries became the place residents flocked to the morning after Sandy passed: using computers and free wireless to begin putting their lives back together; conducting business; working from "home;" contacting relatives and their insurance companies; filling out FEMA forms; powering up their phones and laptops and sitting by the heat to warm up.

Libraries truly served their communities as ports in a storm in this time of crisis, even though many were not prepared to serve in the capacity of official community Disaster Recovery Centers (DRC). This same scenario has played out in many states, from New York and New Jersey, to California and Texas, whether a natural disaster (hurricanes, fire, mudslides, floods), man-made disasters (chemical spills, train derailments, air pollution) or civil unrest (a shooting in the library, or the current opioid epidemic).

The purpose of this article is to promote the role of libraries as partners in disaster response, and provide tools so you can start to think about what to do in your own facilities and community in times of crisis. While I will discuss how to prepare your facility in advance for dealing with a crisis, my main focus will be on the library's role in the community after a disaster. The partnerships you form now with elected officials, emergency responders, and other local volunteer groups will form the basis of a coordinated response to a community crisis.

Stafford Act

I first want to call your attention to the **Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act** which now designates libraries as "essential services." This is a federal law designed to bring federal natural disaster assistance for state and local governments in carrying out their responsibilities to aid citizens. Prior to this, FEMA's list

included facilities for police, fire, emergency services, medical care, education, utilities and other essential community services, but not libraries.

Section 403 of the Stafford Act authorizes FEMA to provide federal assistance to meet immediate threats to life and property resulting from a major disaster. The act allows for the provision of temporary facilities for schools and other essential community services, when it is related to saving lives and protecting and preserving property or public health and safety. Libraries are now eligible for temporary relocation facilities during major disasters and emergencies under the FEMA Public Assistance Program.

An Untapped Community Resource

Libraries are vital information hubs, and in the aftermath of a disaster, take on an even greater community role, providing free access to technology and essential information. This is a new, expanded role for libraries, and libraries should embrace that challenge.

Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) are facilities that are prequalified ahead of time by FEMA. Most libraries cannot serve as an official DRC which are expensive to set up and staff. FEMA simply does not have funding and resources for this. However, libraries have served as unofficial DRCs through many a storm, and librarians have worked alongside of FEMA and emergency responders, supporting their services and providing assistance through all kinds of natural and man-made disasters. It is a natural role they assume in the community.

Here in New Jersey, Hurricane Sandy in October 2012, was a reminder to municipal, county, and state officials that libraries are valuable assets in disaster response, and serve as gathering place for the community in an emergency. After a disaster, libraries serve multiple roles in the community--as a gathering place, respite and recovery center, technology and information hub, and as headquarters for local volunteer groups.

Public libraries are a natural gathering place for people after a disaster because of the multiple roles they assume and because they are located in practically every community. Most importantly, their services are trusted by all, even non-users

Libraries offer respite from the storm for many reasons, such as safe and secure buildings, comfortable seating, flexible spaces, heating and air conditioning, public rest rooms. They serve as the communications and information hub for the community, and have well-equipped tech labs offering access to the Internet, free Wi-Fi, email, fax, photocopiers, and land lines. Libraries remain one of the only truly public spaces left in most communities, so they are a natural gathering place for information updates. After a crisis, many have served as temporary headquarters for FEMA, government agencies, relief workers, even the military. Volunteer groups have used the library as a distribution center for relief agencies for food and coat drives.

Community Resiliency

Libraries are critical to building a resilient community, one that bounces back quickly after a crisis. After a disaster, the library helps people and small businesses get back on their feet, and back to their lives. By offering all of these services, libraries help restore a sense of normalcy to the community, a return to a routine for adults and children amidst all of the chaos. Embracing this role is another way libraries continue to evolve to meet needs of community, and are valued as an essential community service.

Information First Responders

One of the primary needs after a disaster is for accurate information, and that's exactly what librarians are trained to provide. Librarians offer critical services to support police, firefighters, and medical personnel. They have worked right alongside of FEMA personnel, local officials,

and emergency responders, supporting their services and providing assistance throughout a disaster and recovery.

Librarians are trained to deliver accurate information in a variety of formats and settings and are good at problem-solving quickly. Most importantly, the public views librarians as more approachable than government agency staff. A 2018 Knight Foundation poll and a 2018 Gallup poll shows that the public trusts librarians more than the news media (78% to 33%). Among 18-35 year-olds, that trust shoots up to 87%. The public views librarians as knowledgeable, trusted in the community, helpful, and approachable. People know that librarians will help them find information without judging their motives. Even the paraprofessional and support staff is dedicated, and know their customers well since many live in the community themselves.

It is important to stress that librarians serve in the capacity of second responders who support first responders. The objective of second responders is to quickly enable people to get back to work, back to their lives, and ensure recovery of community's economic life. Identifying and empowering second responders helps make the difference between a lasting disruption after a crisis, or a quick return to daily life. Libraries play critical role in making this happen. Furthermore, libraries continue to play a role long after a disaster is "over," and their role in the community extends much longer than any other organization.

Emergency management will leave the scene once the emergency is over. Government agencies pack up afterwards once forms are filled out and aid is distributed. But libraries having staying power in the community, and assist people in the community months, and sometimes years, after the crisis abates.

Facility Preparedness

Here are some suggestions on how your library can prepare for a disaster, as well as actions you can take afterwards during the recovery. Remember that your response to a disaster is scalable. There is always something you can do no matter how big or small the library and staff.

Pre-Disaster

- Build a cache of disaster supplies, and a network of people that work in libraries to help you with salvage.

- Stock extra extension cords & power strips to meet demands

- Identify staff who will serve as your library crisis team

- Update a disaster plan for your own facility

Post-Disaster

- Suspend all library fines & fees

- Move furniture around to accommodate crowds and power users

- Help FEMA enter data into spreadsheets

- Document community-wide street closures

- Use Twitter or Facebook to post locations of food and hot water, and any other official information from emergency management and local elected officials.

- Run food and clothing drives out of the library

- Set up a website with disaster recovery resources

- Make sure you have paper copies of resources to hand out

- Run children's' programming so adults can take care of their work and affairs

Working with Emergency Management

Emergency management and elected officials may not always be aware of the important role that libraries play in community resiliency. Librarians must take the initiative to approach emergency management and tell them what libraries have to offer. Ask if the library director or designated staff can join their conversations about risk assessment, mitigation, and preparedness planning. Request to be incorporated into county, state and local preparedness activities. Start by establishing a primary point of contact at the local emergency management office. Request a seat at the table in planning meetings, planning scenarios, briefings and updates. Realize that this partnership must be sustained—that training, outreach, communication are an ongoing process.

Emergency responders and elected officials must realize the importance of getting the library – an essential service - open quickly after a disaster. They can help by prioritizing the restoration of power, clearing debris, and doing minor repairs around the library facility. It is necessary that the library remain high on their priority list, so that you can open your doors to provide services to the community as quickly as possible. Work on a plan together. Additional funding is not needed and should not be an obstacle in your partnership efforts. What is required is staff time for meetings. If it's a regional or statewide partnership effort, then travel must be included.

The Incident Command System

It is the library's responsibility to contact emergency management, and to establish and nurture those relationships before a disaster strikes. To do so, you must learn to use their terminology. Emergency management has its own default language when disaster strikes called the

Incident Command System (ICS). The **ICS** is a standardized approach to the command, control, and coordination of emergency response providing a common hierarchy within which responders from multiple agencies can be effective. FEMA offers a free online course (https://training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/icsresource/.) The beauty of the system is that it is scalable, applicable to a small or large area incident (which is their word for "disaster"), and all emergency responders understand it. I highly recommend you at least become familiar with the terminology.

Working with Volunteers Active after Disasters--Voad

The Red Cross is desperate for VOlunteers After a Disaster (VOAD). But to volunteer, you have to be trained or they cannot use your help. This is why we recommend that your library disaster response team receive Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training (https://www.ready.gov/community-emergency-response-team). Contact your local emergency management office to see when they offer the course locally.

Citizen Corp (https://www.ready.gov/citizencorps) is another regional volunteer team you should locate in your region, and get to know. These are the people that will come into your library and clean out the mud. They are willing to help with the dirty work. If you find them working in your community after a disaster, offer the library as a place for them to meet, and get some coffee and snacks.

Other volunteers in your community include faith-based groups and nonprofits that are active after a disaster. Offer space in the library for their food and clothing drives. This is how you build a whole community support team in times of great need.

Social Media and Emergency Response

A strength of most librarians is facility with social media and technology. Social media has proven very adept at covering disasters (https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2018/04/16/social-media-and-emergency-preparedness). When Sandy hit New York and New Jersey, people took to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to post and share images of the storm. People in the affected areas used social media to connect, share, and collaborate on their disaster recovery efforts. Local folks also used social media to keep up with news reports, and even made use of mapping sites to keep track of open gas stations and food and supply distribution centers. Thousands of photos of storm damages were posted to Flickr.

Social media is now considered so vital before and after a disaster that it is integrated into all emergency preparedness and communications efforts. The public expects it and the public is using it. They are not waiting to be told what to do, but are actively posting what they know and seeking what they don't know, taking matters into their own hands. Websites, email, and even paper, will continue to be important resources for the public for information updates, but in a time of crisis librarians need to push out urgent messages directly into the social media world, make sure people are getting accurate information, and direct the public to their vetted online resources.

Targeted Giving

One more area where librarians could be helpful after a disaster is with the coordination of targeted community giving, which is basically an Amazon site that is set up like a bridal registry Wish List. The idea is to get donations of things that the community really needs after a disaster. While sending money is actually preferred by relief groups, many people are uncomfortable

with that, and want to feel like they are actually donating something that will make a difference.

Unwanted donations which pour in from all over can be a hindrance instead of a help. In fact, they can be detrimental to the rescue process because emergency responders and volunteers often have to get rid of all the unwanted junk before they can actually get to people and the supplies they really need.

Tip List for Librarians

To conclude, here are the steps you can take to help your community recovery after a disaster:

- Put a committee together to write a disaster plan.

- Run through a tabletop exercise. FEMA has a number of disaster practice scenarios on their website. Practice at least once a year.

- Plan for the reopening of your facilities so that you can help your community. Of course, if your building is severely damaged, like those in Texas during Hurricane Harvey, this may be impossible.

- Investigate how you would resume some critical operations in another location.

- Identify and contact your Regional Response Network to arrange an agreement should you need help with salvage supplies, materials, and even extra staff.

- Establish community connections BEFORE a disaster strikes, and maintain those connections so they don't forget about you when the time comes. Make sure emergency management and elected officials know what resources the library brings to the table, and how you can help them after a disaster.

- Learn the Incident Command System so you can speak the language of emergency management.

- Make contact with local community volunteers who are on the CERT teams and Citizen Corps, and local faith-based and non-profit groups. Get trained yourself.

- Let the community know to check your Facebook page and Twitter account after an emergency. You will be keeping those up-to-date with alerts from local officials and emergency management. Put together a social media team for this. Remember to direct people back to your website and online resources.

Know that the day after a disaster, the public will be at your door. Be as ready for them as you can. Think about ways to make your spaces flexible to accommodate crowds.

And keep in mind that your staff may be personally affected by a disaster. They need permission to take care of themselves and their family first. Also, there are people who do well in an emergency situation and people who do not. Consider your staff's own mental health before asking them to deal with a community in distress.

And finally, check out the Librarian's Disaster Planning and Community Resiliency Toolkit, designed to help libraries in New Jersey and across the country to be better prepared to accept the new mantle of responsibility being thrust on them as a safe haven in times of crises. (https://www.njstatelib.org/services_for_libraries/resources/disaster_planning/).

In the end, all disaster response is local. Your local library can be a port in a storm when needed most, and it can be a true lifesaver when all of you work together with emergency management and elected officials to offer a wealth of coordinated services to a community in need.