Libraries to the Rescue

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ABSTRACT

Emergency management professionals over the years have realized that preplanning and coordination is essential when mounting an effective reaction to a natural disaster. During Hurricane Katrina, professionals learned that preplanning and preparation must include a plan for responding to the unexpected. Chesterfield County, VA learned this lesson in 2011 during Hurricane Irene when unexpected events required adjusting the plan. The amount of damage caused by Irene was minimal compared to Katrina but the impact of responding to unexpected needs was just as compelling. During Irene and other natural disasters that followed the Chesterfield County Public (CCPL) became a key component in meeting unexpected needs mass care and communications. CCPL can now serve as an information hub, double as a daytime relief shelter and participate in mass feeding if necessary during emergency situations. Selected library branches are also be used as overnight relief shelters when the activation of a standard sized shelter facility is not warranted.

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2011, Hurricane Irene was one of several storms that turned out to be a busy Atlantic region hurricane season. Many storm watchers predicted Irene would be manageable, unfortunately, Irene turned out to be more than many communities could handle causing over fifty deaths and over $15 million in personal and real property damage. According to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned (2006) many communities learned during this event they needed a plan for the unplanned.

The natural response to most emergencies is more reactionary than preplanned. Hurricane Katrina changed that mind set on a national scale allowing smaller disasters like Irene to be viewed as a laboratory of destruction that is easily analyzed by local emergency management professionals who want to improve local emergency management practices.

Haddow and Bullock (2006), found that over time, emergency management practices include a variety of preplanned approaches based on local oddities and the unpredictability of natural and man-made disasters and events. Today, as populations have expanded beyond generally accepted boundaries and the conditions that create disasters (both natural and man-made) have increased, changes and adjustments in emergency management practices to ensure responses are effective have improved but still need work.

Initial approaches to emergencies were based on basic civil defense measures. Hurricane Katrina, perhaps more than any other natural disaster, identified the inappropriateness of basic reactionary approaches. Although many resources were made available during Katrina, the lack of preplanning and challenges with cross-agency coordination sent emergency management professionals at local and national levels scurrying for better solutions after the event with everyone committed to making

changes before the next major event occurred. In short, Hurricane Katrina demonstrated the need for changes in emergency management practices at all levels when preparing for and responding to a natural disaster including, planning for the unplanned.

All disasters vary in degrees of destruction. Hurricane Irene's impact on Chesterfield County, although small in comparison top most hurricanes, was the direct cause of hundreds of blocked roads, wide spread power outages, dozens of destroyed homes and one death, all unexpected events at the time. Irene did not have the magnitude of some storms, but it was more than enough to throw local residents and community leaders into a tail spin and scurrying for responses.

At the time, Chesterfield County employed a standard emergency management approach that placed the primary responsibility for the community's response on police, sheriff and fire departments. Other agencies with the requisite equipment and skill, such as Parks and Recreation were charged with clearing roads and debris from public roadways and structures.

While not a first responder or a department with skill and equipment in debris cleanup, Chesterfield County Public Library (CCPL) staff were called upon to work with local emergency management personnel, throughout Hurricane Irene to shelter displaced residents, distribute meals and disseminating disaster information and updates to community residents, all actions that had not previously been tried by the county. This extemporaneous role was so successful that CCPL emerged as a key player in the local response to Hurricane Irene.

The lessons learned by CCPL staff and managers, Chesterfield County Emergency Management leaders and other county leaders created an innovative shift in emergency management reaction in Chesterfield County government. CCPL professional staff combined with their information resources and strategically located facilities became key elements in the response to human needs during Hurricane Irene. As mentioned previously, while leaders cannot preplan for every contingency, they can review response strategies used during and after past events and evaluate the effectiveness of the tactics actually applied to develop alternative ways to respond; or in other words, improvise.

This paper will review the history of emergency management and practices associated with disaster management in place today. Specific emphasis will be placed on defining the key strategies used and recommended for use by municipal government that led to CCPL becoming more involved in their county's mass care practice. An overview of the operational outcomes of the experience is also included.

Additionally, this chapter will review the modes of operation among emergency responders that tend to exist in emergency management situations and their general effectiveness for enacting local process change. We will also briefly review the National Library of Medicine's recommended approach of define roles that can be adapted by public libraries in shaping the local emergency management landscape.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

History of Emergency Management

A natural disaster is any event that severely disrupts essential community services; power, water, transportation and communications. The interruption of any or all of these services can affect the health and economy of local communities, or an entire country and impact a community and its residents before, during and after it has completed its course. Communities typically prepare and implement natural disaster management plans that manage the effects of a disaster in four general areas; prevention, preparedness, relief and recovery.

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