

Chapter 48

Surviving Sandy: Recovering Collections After a Natural Disaster

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a case study on how the New York University medical archives, located in New York City, recovered from Superstorm Sandy and resumed operations. The importance of having the right tools, such as a disaster plan and business continuity plans, are emphasized. With the right tools, institutions can recover from disasters of most magnitudes. Experiences shared in this chapter include working with a disaster recovery company, implementing digital technology to provide access to library and archival collections, and utilizing social media and other Web 2.0 technology to improve communications between staff and patrons. These experiences will assist archivists, curators, and special collections managers in preparing for and recovering from a major disaster.

INTRODUCTION

On October 29, 2012, New York City experienced the deadliest hurricane to occur in the northeastern region of the United States in forty years, and the second-costliest storm after Hurricane Katrina. While most of the storm's devastation occurred in New York and New Jersey, the storm created high wind gusts as far west as Wisconsin and as far north as Canada, and induced water levels to rise from Florida to Maine (Porter, 2013). The storm caused one hundred and eighty-six deaths in the U.S., Canada, and the Caribbean. By the time Hurricane Sandy reached New Jersey, it was downgraded from a hurricane to a post-tropical cyclone; however, the unusually large storm was dubbed "Superstorm" Sandy by the media. Recovery costs for damages caused by Superstorm Sandy are in the billions (Sharp, 2012).

The effects of Superstorm Sandy on the New York University (NYU) medical archive, and the response and recovery of collections and services impacted by the storm are presented here. The main branch of the NYU Health Sciences Library was also greatly affected by the storm. The consequences of the storm on the library, however, will only be addressed generally in this chapter. Details on the recovery of library

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collections and services are documented by my colleagues Neil Romanosky and Fritz Dement (2013), and by Bob Warburton (2012). The recovery and restoration of the library will also be described as a separate case study due to be published in 2015. Topics included in this chapter are the medical archive's efforts to recover historic collections submerged under flood water, adjustments to the archive's service model, and the use of Web 2.0 technologies to bolster communication between staff and patrons. This case study also offers "lessons learned" that will be useful for special collections managers, archivists, and historic museum curators to plan, manage, and recover from a disaster on a small or large scale.

BACKGROUND

Increasingly, libraries and archives are experiencing greater catastrophic emergencies as a result of natural disasters. According to hurricane experts, the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico have begun to spin off more frequent and destructive hurricanes than in previous decades, with the number rising in 1995, and increasing every year thereafter (New York City Office of Emergency Management, 2014). In 2012, Superstorm Sandy produced record high storm surges, and brought gale force winds up to eighty-five miles per hour (Sharp, 2012). The storm caused power outages in fifteen states, and cut electricity to more than eight million homes for weeks. The storm also flooded essential transportation tunnels and completely halted public transportation in multiple states for days. It also damaged oil refineries, and caused widespread gas shortages in New York and New Jersey. The fuel shortages resulted in gas rationing and long lines of cars waiting for gas unseen since the 1970s (Hu, 2012).

It is difficult for institutions to be prepared for every single disaster. Disasters often happen unexpectedly, and may occur overnight or during the weekend with little or no staff present. Natural disasters also vary in size and scale. Even institutions in hurricane prone areas, such as the University of Southern Mississippi, which are accustomed to dealing with hurricanes were unprepared for the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina when it hit the gulf coast in 2005 (Wall, 2006). The same was true for the New York University Langone Medical Center (NYULMC). In 2011, Hurricane Irene caused widespread flooding and 7.3 billion dollars in damages in the northeast region (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2011). Although situated in a flood zone, the medical center and library were untouched by Hurricane Irene. On the other hand, the record-breaking storm surges from Superstorm Sandy quickly flooded the medical center in a matter of hours. Staff at institutions outside of flood zones or hurricane corridors may think themselves safe, but many disasters are caused by deteriorating infrastructure including water main breaks or leaky roofs. Disasters can also be man-made, such as fires stemming from faulty electrical systems or terroristic attacks. There are, however, steps that every library, archive, and museum can take to mitigate damage from any disaster.

Disaster preparedness and disaster plans are essential for archives, cultural institutions, and libraries with special collections containing rare and historical items. Collections in institutional archives are often unique to that institution, making these materials extremely difficult, if not impossible, to replace. Certain historical items, such as photographic prints and parchment, are especially prone to damage by water and high humidity resulting from a flood. Most special collections managers know they should have a disaster plan in place. The process of developing, testing, and updating one, however, is deemed a low priority when the chance of being hit by a major disaster seems remote. A 2004 Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections revealed that 70% of archives, and 78% of libraries did not have an emergency plan. After Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, the number of articles documenting

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