

Chapter 2

Emergency Preparation for the Library and Librarian

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The importance of libraries' involvement in disaster response was highlighted in the US in 2010, when the Federal Emergency Management Agency changed its policy to recognize libraries as essential community organizations in areas impacted by a disaster, thus making them eligible for temporary relocation funding in times of disaster or emergency. With this recognition, libraries were acknowledged in the US for their potential to play a major role in disasters. The American Library Association (2013) in its Policy Manual "urges governments at all levels to acknowledge and support the essential role local libraries play in providing e-government and emergency response/recovery services, and to include libraries in relevant legislative or other policy actions" (Hagar, 2014).

For any disaster role played by the library, there is a sense of discomfort felt by all staff members who performs this role. Although the disaster related role in most instances is only slightly different, it is still outside normal circumstances in the day-to-day realm of library service. To ensure they are prepared to perform as expected it is crucial that the library staff be included in all relevant emergency management planning, process, and programs so they can provide input in the development of their own role regarding how the library can best serve their local community during a disaster.

Through first-hand accounts of librarians living through Hurricane Katrina and other more recent natural disasters, librarians always felt they could do something more but are generally not included in any local formalized planning or training related to the emergency management response. Because of the lack of training and orientation, they were either underutilized or relegated to waiting for the storm to pass (Halsted, Clifton, & Wilson, 2014). If library staff in any of these situations had been CERT trained as a baseline and then been included in local emergency exercise practices, not only would they have been better able to serve storm victims, they would have flourished in their own role.

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For most libraries, a general knowledge of these essential skills is needed to feel comfortable in a disaster response. Additionally, knowledge of the characteristics of emergency communication practices, a basic understating of disaster psychology, and the ability to work with emergency management professionals helps to prepare the library to play an improved regular role in an emergency response.

The best way to combat the uncertainty and anxiety of being in a “required role” in an emergency management response is through training and exercise. With proper training, librarians can feel confident in the emergency response role they serve in their community as well as feel empowered to know they are helping residents return to a new version of post catastrophe normal. Fortunately, there are training programs that already exist through emergency management that library staff can take advantage of and Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training is an excellent place to start.

CERT TRAINING

According to FEMA (2011) CERT was first developed in the early 1990s in California as a strategy to develop a volunteer corps to respond to wildfires. Built on the platform of the incident command structure, the program trained members of the community to assist their own neighbors in basic first aid, search and rescue, disaster psychology, and preparedness planning. The program garnered more attention after the attacks of 9/11 due to President Bush’s call to action for volunteers. FEMA’s goal is to strengthen community safety and preparedness through increased civic participation.

The seven-week course is intended to provide whole community preparedness with neighbors helping neighbors. Since libraries are so entrenched in the local community, this course is the perfect baseline for educating library staff on emergency reaction. CERT training allows them to serve in their traditional assignment; but be aware of the hazards and vulnerabilities that may affect their areas during disasters and how to respond as a critical support team.

There is no doubt that customers flock to the library during whole community emergency situations. Many news articles have been published noting customers’ appreciation for the library and its staff in their times of personal need. Due to the success of CCPL’s new found emergency management capacity, library administrators and department managers agreed to enhance the library’s expanded role by participating in CERT.

A specialized version of CERT training was offered to CCPL staff by certified county emergency management personnel. The training covered disaster preparedness and emergency response including a mock disaster drill. While all library staff who participated in the training received a CERT certification obligating them to respond when called, an agreement to not mobilize the CERT trained staff away from libraries during disasters was put into place.

The CERT trained librarian has had a positive impact in Chesterfield County. Every CCPL manager and librarian completed the 20 hour courses. Keeping their interest was not a problem. Already highly educated, they are naturals at ingesting new information and keeping the information current. CCPL’s experience has been that once the librarians are engaged in this training they want to learn everything possible.

Community based preparedness encourages all community members to be prepared for and respond to the hazards that follow a disaster. Studies have shown that groups working together are more effective in the period following a disaster if they have been trained to respond. Further, if the training is intercon-

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