

Chapter 23

Disaster Management and Continuity Planning in Libraries: Changes Since the Year 2000

Rebecca Hamilton

State Library of Louisiana, USA

Diane Brown

State Library of Louisiana, USA

ABSTRACT

Since the year 2000 libraries' concepts of disaster management, contingency planning and the role of libraries in a major disruptive event have changed dramatically. Libraries have gone from an emphasis on protecting and restoring collections and facilities to an emphasis on service continuity. Although broadband adoption nationwide remains disproportionate at best, the advent and widespread use of the Internet and e-government mean that libraries have become the centers of communication for their communities in a crisis. This chapter will demonstrate the essential role of libraries before, during and after a disaster, both short term and long term and how to get a seat at the table with community planners by demonstrating the functions that are critical to recovery. In order to fulfill this community role, a library first needs to be prepared with its own business continuity plan.

INTRODUCTION

In August of 2005 Hurricane Katrina unexpectedly and in a spectacular fashion threw libraries along the Gulf Coast of the United States, especially public libraries, into the national spotlight as they assisted an unprecedented number of displaced users in finding shelter, locating loved ones, filling out FEMA forms, applying for unemployment, making insurance claims, replacing birth certificates and driver's licenses and much more. It became apparent to everyone, at least within the Louisiana library community, that previous iterations of disaster plans were not sufficient to cope with a disaster of this magnitude. Up until this point, most disaster planning for libraries was built around securing buildings and physical collections--collection preservation, collection recovery, collection replacement. There were no manuals

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detailing how to work in a situation in which citywide public infrastructure was seriously damaged or non-existent. Having a list of phone numbers of emergency services such as fire and police was useless when these entities were under water and/or disabled as well. Likewise, having a list of staff home phone numbers was useless when landlines were down and the staff scattered across five states. In a nutshell, this chapter will work forward from basic critical lessons learned as a result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. Those lessons are:

1. Existing emergency plans were inadequate.
2. Business (i.e., library service) continuity—both how to keep the libraries open immediately after the disaster and how to maintain the continuity of library business—was not a feature of prior public library disaster planning.
3. Traditional lists of staff home phone numbers or other electronic contacts were inadequate. Landlines were down and communication was effectively cut off.
4. *Community expectations and the fact that even people that had never been library users came to public libraries for assistance cemented the role of public libraries in a disaster* (Hamilton, 2011, p.43).

What made Katrina substantially different from previous disasters along the Gulf Coast was one significant thing -- the Internet. Over the years, as more and more services especially local, state and federal governmental services were made available via the Internet and in some cases available only on the Internet, libraries became *de facto* centers of communication for their communities on a daily basis. Library staff expertise with the management and use of electronic records and documents and more sophisticated BlackBerries and cell phones fundamentally changed how libraries communicate with and serve the public before, during and after a disaster. Because of the Internet, during a disaster, libraries of all types became an essential link to the world outside of the disaster zone. This began to take shape as far back September 11, 2001 when libraries stepped into new roles and established new models of service for citizens in the aftermath of a disaster. Libraries were able to update their websites with information for their clients and get email reestablished while moving the base of operations to a different site outside of the destruction zone (Eng, 2002). Similarly, in 2005, libraries along the Gulf Coast quickly adapted to what was happening around them whether or not they were directly impacted and shifted their priorities of service to meet the numerous and essential needs of evacuees and other responders.

The goal of this chapter is to examine and validate the important roles traditionally performed by public libraries prior to the year 2000 and still performed today, as well as the additional roles now being played as demonstrated by rapid changes in technology and recent natural disasters. These duties include providing 24/7 Internet access; updating websites and blogs to keep officials and the general public up to date on all relevant, local information; facilitating computer centers for business continuity to continue to meet established community expectations; initiating access to information for citizens to locate and communicate with loved ones; and command centers for FEMA and local officials. But the duties also include those traditional services that libraries have always provided such as shelter, storytelling (for displaced children), reference assistance, etc. that provide a sense of normalcy.

This chapter is not an overall approach to disaster planning for libraries nor will it deal with recovery of collections. Rather, the emphasis will be on continuity of operations plans (COOP) so that libraries can meet the needs of their communities in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. Although specific events such as hurricanes will be mentioned, the overall goal of the chapter is to show how libraries can

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