Chapter 71
The Library as Lifeboat

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ABSTRACT

According to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned (2006), emergency management professionals realized first-hand that preplanning and coordination is essential when mounting an effective reaction to natural disasters. This chapter describes how leaders in Chesterfield County, VA learned similar lessons in 2001 during Hurricane Irene. In comparison to Katrina the amount of damage caused by Irene was minimal but the impact on county leaders was severe. Based on lessons learned during Irene and an unexpected wind storm nine months later, Chesterfield County leaders now include the Chesterfield County Public (CCPL) in their official disaster relief plans. When activated, CCPL will serve as an information hub, double as a daytime relief shelter and participate in mass feeding if necessary. Selected library branches are available to be used as overnight relief shelters for mass care when the activation of a standard sized shelter facility is not warranted. These changes have made a notable difference.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the practice of emergency management has been more reactionary than preplanned. According to Haddow and Bullock (2006), the history of emergency management includes various approaches based on local oddities, the unpredictability of severe weather and natural disasters, man-made events and naturally occurring events. 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 that ensure a more effective response to natural disasters have emerged.

Initial approaches were founded on civil defense measures. But responding to natural disasters today has become more of a coordinated science. Hurricane Katrina, perhaps more than any other natural disaster, has identified the inappropriateness of reactionary approaches and civil defense precautionary measures when planning for and reacting to natural disasters. Although many resources were made available during Katrina, the lack of preplanning and challenges with cross-agency coordination sent emergency management professionals and local and national leaders scurrying for better solutions immediately 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.

In the fall of 2011 Hurricane Irene was one of several storms that defined a busy Atlantic region hurricane season. Although many of the storm watchers predicted Irene was to be manageable, the storm turned out to be more than many communities expected. The storm caused over fifty deaths and over $15 million in personal and real property damage. Although all hurricanes are expected to leave a path of destruction, Irene, like Katrina became for some communities a laboratory of destruction, easily analyzed by emergency management professionals looking to improve emergency management practices.

Hurricane Irene arrived in Chesterfield County early one Saturday morning in late August and stayed the night. During the storm's stay it was the direct cause of hundreds of blocked roads, wide spread power outages and destroyed dozens of homes. The storm also caused one local death. Irene did not have the magnitude of some storms, but it was more than enough to throw local residents and community leaders into a tailspin.

Chesterfield County at the time employed a standard emergency management approach based on an emergency response plan. The county's plan placed the primary responsibility for the community's response on public safety departments, while other public and private agencies (those with the requisite equipment and skill) were charged with clearing roads and debris from public roadways and structures.

Throughout Hurricane Irene, Chesterfield County Public Library (CCPL) staff working with local emergency management personnel, tried several innovative strategies related to sheltering and food distribution for disaster victims and disseminating disaster information and updates to community residents that had not previously been tried by the county. The strategies were successful and CCPL emerged as a key player or vital part of the Hurricane Irene emergency response in Chesterfield County, VA.

The lessons learned by CCPL staff and managers, Chesterfield County Emergency Management leaders and other county leaders brought about an innovative shift in emergency management at all levels in Chesterfield County government. Many now see CCPL, with its large professional staff, information technology resources, and moderate sized facilities as more of a key component in the overall emergency management process in Chesterfield County.

This chapter will describe the history of emergency management practices, including the current and emerging principles 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 other government agencies during disasters, and a review of emergency management principles currently in use today by Chesterfield County leaders. We will also outline factors that led to CCPL becoming more involved in their county's mass care practice, typically managed by Social Service staff and why the typical reaction was set aside during Irene. An overview of the operational outcomes of the experience is also included.

Additionally, this chapter will outline the emerging research related to how emergency management responses and responders can adapt and change to be better prepared for future events. Specifically, we will review the modes of operation among emergency responders that tend to exist in emergency management situations and their general effectiveness. We will also discuss how the National Library of Medicine's approach of encouraging local libraries to engage with local emergency management professionals in order to define a place for their library in the local emergency management landscape can be adapted by local public libraries. 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 ways to improve.

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