Chapter 55
Burst Pipes and Leaky Roofs: Small Emergencies Are a Challenge for Libraries

Gerald Chaudron
University of Memphis Libraries, USA

ABSTRACT

Libraries can face different kinds of emergency but planning for every contingency is an immense challenge. Overwhelmed with books and articles that focus mainly on the catastrophic events, librarians tend to place more emphasis on managing the risk of hurricanes and floods leaving then underprepared for the more mundane and common emergencies like burst pipes and leaky roofs. This chapter uses two case studies of small water emergencies to examine how each library managed those emergencies and what lessons were learned. They show that while both incidents were water-related, they were very different in terms of source, size, impact, recovery time, and frequency. Libraries should be planning for small disasters first, and then scaling up preparation to account for the larger events, rather than the reverse. More libraries may do such planning if they are preparing for a probable scenario rather than one that is only a possibility.

INTRODUCTION

The headlines are usually matter-of-fact rather than eye-catching because they are not considered front-page news by the media: “Waterville Public Library damaged by water from broken pipe,” “Still drying out after a leak, Tustin Library will remain closed for weeks,” “Leaking roof leads to mold at Eudora Welty Library,” “Water damage forces Bridgeton Library to improvise temporary location.” An internet search for reports of water damage to libraries in 2016-2017 found 22 news stories about public,school, and academic libraries affected by such an event. Since the exercise was not exhaustive, it is likely this number for the year is higher. What is interesting about the result as far as emergency planning is concerned is that none of the events were catastrophic. In other words, the source of the water was not a hurricane, flooding river or tsunami, which are the major disasters much of the literature focuses on when

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discussing how libraries should prepare for water emergencies. Instead the culprits were leaking roofs, burst pipes and malfunctioning sprinklers; small water emergencies that nevertheless have a significant impact on libraries across the country.

Librarians face a number of challenges in trying to ensure their collections remain intact and available for use. Much of the material they manage is made of paper and other natural products that are vulnerable to damage from environmental factors such as humidity, heat, light, mold and pests that can be exacerbated by manmade hazards including pollution and deliberate acts of destruction. While libraries continue to hold analog formats, they are moving increasingly to digital formats that have their own vulnerabilities. Every library should have a plan to cope with the inherent risks and many rely on literature produced in the last thirty or more years to create emergency or disaster plans. The handbooks and guides cover the gamut of possible emergencies and tend to use the more catastrophic events as the basis of their planning. This leads to the creation of plans designed to respond to the destruction wrought by a 100-year flood but give little assistance to coping with an overflowing toilet. The problem is, as Enrico Quarantelli points out, there is often little correlation between risk assessment and disaster planning, and whether a disaster is managed well (Quarantelli, 1988, p. 374). This is because a risk is a potentiality not an actuality, that few risks are realized and fewer still necessitate an immediate response (Quarantelli, 1998, pp. 256-257). This chapter suggests that libraries and library scientists tend to overlook the risk posed by the more mundane sources of water damage as they focus on the more disastrous ones. The consequence is that small water emergencies are more frequent than they should be and have a greater impact as a result.

The Chinese philosopher Laozi wrote 2,500 years ago that "nothing is softer or more flexible than water, yet nothing can resist it." It is that very flexibility that makes water the most significant threat to libraries (International Records Management Trust, 1999, p. 8). Libraries must be prepared for all types of water emergencies but few librarians, fortunately, have to deal with catastrophic events during their careers. Yet the odds are poor about avoiding the small-scale water emergencies that are a constant threat and most libraries will sustain damage from them (Dawson, 2009, pp. 4, 10). Because such damage can be quite extensive, these events are still disastrous in their effects on the collections, infrastructure, staff and finances of the institution involved. Buildings old and new require running water, fire prevention systems and waste water disposal and all this water makes our buildings vulnerable to incursions, and the larger the building, the greater the vulnerability. Compounding the problem is human fallibility that leads to design faults or delayed or incomplete repairs that create flaws in the tightness of the building envelope. Once released into a space, water will run wherever it can to find its lowest level. Assuming the source of the water can be found, discovering where it went and then drying the space out can be a lengthy and possibly expensive exercise even if the incursion seems minor. The demands on staff during the actual disaster can be great, causing stress and throwing everyone off-balance but the recovery can be worse as the adrenalin subsides and the reality of cleaning up and assessing and repairing the damage is faced. Finally, there is the financial impact of the disaster. Funds designated for other purposes are redirected and budgets are strained, which is especially difficult for many institutions living with tight or diminishing incomes and rising expenditure.

This chapter will examine small-scale water disasters and, using case studies experienced by the author, show how easily such emergencies occur, the extent and quality of disaster planning and whether it addressed the actual risk, what might have been done to mitigate or even prevent the disaster, and how the disaster was handled when the water started to flow. But the disaster is not over when the water stops,