

## Chapter 68

# Two Fires and a Flood: Lasting Impact on a Public Library, Its Staff, and Community

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores the ongoing path toward disaster preparedness taken by Los Alamos County Library System. The library system has experienced three disasters since the year 2000, the Cerro Grande Fire; a cloudburst that sent water pouring through the library's skylight, and the Las Conchas Fire. The author tells the stories of these disasters, and their impacts on the library, its staff and community, with some emphasis on the emotional impacts. These stories and the lessons learned from them are interwoven with the steps and missteps in the writing of the library's disaster preparedness manual and the ongoing need to keep preparedness efforts active. The importance of forming supportive relationships with colleagues in the local government and with regional library cohorts, and the magnitude of the role the library staff, collections and facility already had in the community, a role that expanded in the recovery process, are highlighted.*

### INTRODUCTION

Los Alamos County Library System (LACLS), a small- to medium-sized library system in northern New Mexico serving 25,000 people, has experienced three disasters since the year 2000, two wildfires and a flood. These disasters have been classified as anthropogenic, as the climate in the southwestern U.S. has become hotter and drier, more prone to extreme weather events, and less forgiving of human error. They have been small-scale disasters when considered in the light of wars, famine, and hurricanes; at the same, they have had a lasting impact on the library, its staff, and its community. They continue to come up in conversations daily, as if they had happened yesterday. The community's awareness of its vulnerability and of the chronology of disasters – from the shock of the event itself, to the unleashing of forces that people are powerless to stop, to the stages of recovery, both physical and emotional, to the realization that continuing preparedness is a necessity, is now an accepted part of the LACLS environment.

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Los Alamos, New Mexico, birthplace of the atomic bomb and home of Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), known for nuclear weapons research – this in itself sounds like a disaster waiting to happen, conjuring up images of mushroom clouds, radiation leaks and explosions. But in fact, the disasters that have impacted LACLS have all arisen from the fact that it is located in the tinder-dry Southwest. Los Alamos County has two small population centers: the town of Los Alamos, with a population of about 12,000; and the smaller bedroom community of White Rock, with a population of about 6,000. LACLS, composed of a main library (Mesa Public Library) in Los Alamos and the White Rock Branch Library, serves a total of 25,000 patrons, and about 7,000 workers per day commute to LANL from elsewhere in northern New Mexico. Both people and nature played a role in the genesis of each of the three disasters. The two wildfires affected the entire area, whereas the flood only affected Mesa Public Library. All were intense experiences for library staff. The Cerro Grande Fire, as a result of which over 400 families lost their homes, produced environmental devastation and emotional trauma for residents, and placed library staff in an active listening role; staff were suffering themselves while also trying to help patrons. The cloudburst that poured through the library skylight in 2005 resulted in flooding and extensive water damage to the collection and facility while sparing the patrons any trauma. The Las Conchas Fire in 2011 did not burn through the town, but it did demonstrate to staff and community how the library could fulfill its role as an information center in a time of great need.

## **BACKGROUND**

No two disasters are identical. There are differences in the degree of surprise; sometimes there may be advance notice. Thanks to modern meteorology, there are often warnings prior to the arrival of tornadoes and hurricanes, although their intensity may not be as expected; the approach of wildfires is also often known in advance. Other disasters, such as burst pipes and earthquakes, give no time for preparation. There are differences in the magnitude of disasters, with pandemics encompassing entire countries, and explosions demolishing perhaps only one building. To the people affected, a disaster, whether large or small, has a lasting impact on their view of the world and their place in it. To an affected library and its staff, disasters, even small-scale ones, are not soon forgotten. Priorities are shifted, and the library's view of its place in its community is forever changed.

Literature that is specific to disasters and libraries tends to be practical in nature. There are detailed monographs (Halsted, Clifton, and Wilson, 2014; Kahn, 2012) containing complete guides and checklists for disaster preparedness, response, and recovery; as well as numerous instructive journal articles on steps libraries can take to write a disaster preparedness manual. Wilson, Yowell and Holst (2009), for example, have written a very concise guide covering all the basic steps in creating such a manual. In addition, there are websites specifically for libraries that contain many resources to help in the creation of a disaster preparedness manual (Lib2Gov, 2013; Northeast Document Conservation Center, 2006).

Another focus of this literature consists of case studies, with lessons learned following unexpected fires, floods, earthquakes, and storms, explaining in detail how these occurrences affected a particular library. Articles on these topics are very valuable, as they provide specific steps that should be followed when disasters occur, and give the reader insights as to what the involved library staff wishes they had known prior to needing to confront the immediate and long-term aftereffects of the unfortunate events. These articles generally center on methods for restoring the library facility and its collections. Although

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