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Optimizing Library Services — The Natural Role of the Public Library in Emergency Management

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Introduction

Since 2006, often to the surprise of local municipal leaders and emergency management professionals, public libraries have been acknowledged for their efforts in providing unofficial emergency support service to victims of man-made and natural disasters. The value of their actions has only recently begun to be evaluated and there is still much to be learned, but the anecdotal media stories are positive.

The Library and Librarians Natural Role in Emergency Management

According to **Comfort** (Comfort 2002), most emergency management professionals tasked with mounting a response to an emergency or natural disaster prefer to address mitigation within limits of acceptable risk. This means that emergency management professionals plan to only incorporate those staff and resources that are known to them to get the job done effectively without adding to the tragedy. Unfortunately, emergency professionals rarely consider the services of the public library and/or librarians as an acceptable risk.

Following the disastrous 2006 Hurricane Katrina response, according to the Executive Director of the **Mississippi Library Commission, Sharman Smith** (Perlman, 2006), a public library represents a safe place for most people. They are generally well-constructed buildings and their locations are known to most of the community. Couple this with fast internet access and it is no surprise that the library is the place many residents turn to during a local emergency. Customers use the public library and its librarians as their own personal command center to survive on a normal day, so adapting library services to meet the needs of customers seeking help after an emergency or natural disaster is just part of the job.

Rose (Rose 2013) states that a lesson that has frequently gone unnoticed during most emergency situations since Hurricane Katrina is that public libraries, a trusted provider of information and technology access, especially e-government, are the most logical agency to incorporate locally into the emergency management response process. Although the federal government failed at helping people after Hurricane Katrina, small-town libraries in and on the edges of the devastation operated normally, providing temporary daytime shelter, information, and basic human aid to residents who confidently flocked to the facilities day in and day out. The local nature of the response that libraries provided, without emergency management support or acknowledgment, reached communities and members of those communities more effectively than national or state-level responses.

The Library's Capacity to Render Assistance

Although libraries are not typically designated as an essential service by their local jurisdiction, because of the public libraries emergency response during Katrina, the **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)** has designated libraries an essential service. FEMA changed their internal policy in 2011 (Library Journal 2011) to allow libraries to be eligible to receive temporary relocation assis-

tance funds from FEMA during emergencies and natural disasters. FEMA's acknowledgment that libraries are an essential service is a common-sense change. The fact that most emergency management agencies rely on other departments' resources to mount an emergency response should encourage local government officials and municipal managers to consider a similar acknowledgment in the status and funding for their local public libraries. According to research, more consistent ongoing regular funding would not only be welcomed by the customers day in and day out, but would also be an investment in a future emergency or natural disaster response.

The Local Emergency Management Structure

Depending on the locality, local emergency management officials are either uniformed public safety officials, a division within public safety, or a stand-alone department manager. Given their responsibility to coordinate staff and resources with other agencies, emergency managers maintain an extensive network of partnerships that allow them to run a comprehensive program based on FEMA plans and tactics designed to help local agencies mount a response. The **Federal Emergency Management Agency** (April 22, 2015) has defined five mission critical areas to be used by the local emergency managers when mounting an emergency response.

These mission critical areas include: prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery. Within these five-emergency management mission critical areas, FEMA has also defined seventeen Emergency Support Functions (ESFs) to guide local actions in a general response to a large emergency or disaster. ESFs ensure that no matter who is responding or shows up to offer assistance, the local plans will have familiarity and continuity from community to community. The ESFs also help emergency managers logically group people and resources for interoperability, or to match up, to ensure maximum effectiveness when mounting a response. Each of the ESF areas is assigned a coordinating agency or department who is responsible for management and oversight during activation. All state and local emergency operations plans follow this same structure.

The Naturally Occurring Roles of the Library in Emergency Situations

Given the independent, unheralded success that public libraries have had in rendering assistance since Hurricane Katrina, it is logical to want to know what libraries are doing to be successful in their response. According to **Brobst, Mandel, and McClure** (2012), library managers and information officials generally engage in one or more of eight naturally occurring service roles when responding to an emergency or natural disaster. These self-explanatory roles include Safe-Haven, Normal Service, Coordinate Disaster Recovery, Cultural Organization Center, Information Hub, Evacuee Resource, Improvise, Manage Oral Histories.

A quick comparison of the ESFs and the library roles indicates that public libraries are capable of filling resource needs in several of the FEMA ESF areas; however, the most natural fit for the public library is ESF Mass Care. ESF Mass Care (FEMA April 22, 2015) addresses the non-medical mass care, emergency assistance, housing and human services needs of individuals and/or families impacted by natural or human-caused disasters. Of the eight naturally occurring roles that libraries have used during emergencies, the four roles that are the most aligned with the ESF Mass Care are described below in short anecdotal examples.

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Safe Haven

In 2015, **Ferguson Municipal Library** faced community turmoil due to the riots that engulfed Ferguson, Missouri (Library Journal, 2015). Sensing the fear and concern of the community, the library remained open throughout the trying time, conveying the importance of the public library as a safe place for all county residents.

Coordinate Disaster Recovery Center

In 2007, **FEMA** noted that immediately after a disaster they are always looking for locations to set up emergency centers where people can fill out forms and receive recovery information. In 2007, the **Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (MBLC)** and **FEMA** implemented a project to place libraries in the center of disaster recovery (Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, 2008).

Information Hub

According to **Dankowski** (2015), Katrina caused 35 percent of the libraries in Louisiana to close at one point, however, the overall number of visitors to libraries immediately following the storm fell only 1 percent. Although not designated as an essential service, local leaders recognized that many libraries were the center of information during the recovery locally.

Evacuee Resource

In June of 2012, wildfires drove about 1,000 residents from their homes to wait out the fires in a temporary **Red Cross** evacuation center in Loveland, Colorado (Weiss, 2012) community — ten miles North of Fort Collins. Staff from the **Poudre River Library District** in Fort Collins dispatched staff, laptops, and a projector to the **Red Cross** shelter in Loveland to provide information updates about the fire. Staff eventually expanded the initial service to include story times for restless kids.

These four examples are only a few of the dozens that demonstrate the capacity and natural ease of public libraries to render relevant assistance to victims of emergencies and natural disasters. A key element of all of the examples is the flexibility of the library staff and the library facility to participate out of a sense of duty.

The fact that they were known to the community and the emergency services they rendered are typical of routine library services reinforces their natural importance to the process of emergency response.

The Role of Serendipity in the Library Response

Most disaster responses unfold in a positive manner. **Deborah Bunker** (2006) at the **University of Sydney** Business School in Sydney, Australia found that while those in command and control positions in emergency management use official information to manage disaster response and recovery, it is not always the most successful approach. She discovered that the serendipitous use and generation of information by first responders, emergency workers, and the public was more useful to those caught up in the disaster than the information coming through official channels.

This pattern fits the public library's unofficial approach over the past decade. The circumstances that led to the disasters in Missouri, New York, and Louisiana referenced above all resulted in tragic devastation. However, the fact that local public libraries were undamaged, staff and leaders were available and able to fulfill the customers' expectation that public libraries would be able to render the assistance they sought, was surprising as well as helpful.

Conclusion

Libraries are typically well built and can accommodate large crowds. This makes them a logical resource for use during an emergency response. In the past decade, during disasters of all kinds around the country, residents have been known to gravitate to the library after a

disaster assuming assistance will be available. Customers tend to see the library as a clearing house of many services. When victims of an emergency or natural disaster, library customers assume that they will receive the needed help at the library from library staff.

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Recommended Readings

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