

U.S. Public Libraries: Early Responders in Times of Disaster



Waveland [MS] Public Library, Hurricane Katrina, September 2005

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No carpet, damaged walls, & dangling ceilings didn't lessen public expectations at Bay St. Louis [MS] Public Library. Open spaces, available workspace, free photocopies, free faxing, free public computers, and lots of customer service helped thousands of Katrina victims.

ISSUE: Public libraries are essential in disaster response.

OVERVIEW

- Proven assets in community disaster preparedness and response
- Multiple disaster preparedness and response roles
- Demonstrated responders to disasters

COMMUNITY ASSETS

- Located in every U. S. community (more public libraries in U.S. than McDonalds)
- Known locations and services trusted by all residents (even non-users)
- Trained, dedicated staff familiar with community
“Established lifetime relationships with community members, trained to handle public with courtesy and professionalism.”
- Standard, well-equipped facilities with open areas and meeting spaces
“...ideal configuration for post-disaster services. Central meeting room, reading rooms with comfortable furniture, tables for filling out government forms and desks where information can be gathered by emergency workers.”
- Information and services delivered in variety of formats and settings
- Well-defined customer service policies and practices

ACTION NEEDED

- **Revise FEMA rules** to reflect role of public libraries in providing essential pre and post disaster services.
- **Revise FEMA rules** to permit FEMA funding of temporary facilities for public libraries damaged in a disaster. (FEMA, 9523.3 [7.A.1])
- **Support public library capacity** to insure readiness.
- **Require inclusion of public libraries** in local, state, and national disaster readiness planning, training, and response deployment.



Kiln [MS] Public Library, September 2005

“...the lawn was a staging area for free medical clinic and shower facilities. Government agencies and insurance companies used library space to meet and assist victims...”



Cedar Rapids [IA] Public Library (center), 2008 Flood

ACTUAL ROLES PLAYED BY PUBLIC LIBRARIES AFTER DISASTERS

Safe Haven – Serve as “community living room” – Safe, secure buildings; relaxing space; light; air conditioning; bathrooms; comfortable seating.

“Public spaces designed to handle large numbers, easily identifiable with parking and green spaces ideal for medical clinics, feeding centers, etc.”

Normalcy – Represent a sense of routine for adults and children amidst chaos; provide hope; re-establish government presence; reduce stress; offers recreation; provide sense of place.

Disaster Recovery Center – Act as aid distribution point; volunteer coordination center; place for multiple jurisdictional coordination; gathering place for information updates and community response coordination; map distribution; etc.

“So many people showed up to help and so many people needed help, the library established the “Bible” to link the two groups.”

Information Hub – Offer variety of communication mechanisms (Internet, e-mail, fax, telephone, photocopiers, etc.); accurate, reliable information; information/referral services; ability to deliver information in a variety of formats and environments.

“Thousands of homeless residents used library computers to register for state and federal assistance, FEMA trailers or EBT cards for purchasing emergency food and clothing.”

Resources for Evacuees – Open doors as welcoming refuge, information center, and sense of normalcy in remote communities to which individuals relocate.

“For those who were not computer literate, librarians were “life-lines” to government services. Easy to sit and reassure elderly persons unfamiliar with computers and keyboards. Vital to keeping state/federal registration processes moving smoothly and keeping frustration to a minimum.”

Temporary Headquarters – Host media, FEMA, government agencies, aid workers, military, etc.

Improvisation, Creativity and Flexibility – Respond and adjust quickly to community needs regardless of primary mission.

“With no school, no air-conditioning and no television and with parents concentrating on recovery, children’s programs in libraries, shelters, and feeding centers provided welcome reprieves for children and adults alike.”

For additional information

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