

Public Library Partnerships with Local Agencies to Meet Community Disaster Preparedness and Response Needs

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the initial findings of the first phase of a study funded by San Jose State University, USA to provide insight regarding how public libraries can be more involved in community-wide disaster planning, strengthening their role as core members of their communities' disaster preparedness and response infrastructure. The first phase of the study involves a nationwide survey of public library directors and library staff who are involved in coordinating disaster planning for their institutions. A survey was carried out during December 2014 and January 2015 to explore what public libraries can bring to community-wide planning efforts and the types of partnerships that are possible. The findings will provide library leaders with valuable insight on how to proactively engage in dialogue and planning with

their local emergency management community. The second phase emerging from the research will involve follow-up in-depth explorations of the exemplary disaster planning models.

Keywords

Public libraries, community engagement, emergency management community, disaster preparedness, disaster response

INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are not traditionally viewed as part of the ISCRAM community. However, public libraries are examples of information systems and local networks that contribute to community engagement (Dudley, 2013) that are emerging as key players in the crisis response community. Much of the work done to date by library and information science scholars and professionals regarding libraries and disasters focuses on the preservation of collections and protecting other physical assets of cultural heritage institutions (IFLA, 2013). However, public libraries now respond to a wide range of ongoing and emerging needs (ALA, 2015) which include helping communities cope with the unexpected – such as disruptive events, disasters and emergencies. In their evolving and multiple roles, public libraries can play a critical part in building the resilience that could help individuals, families, and the whole community recover from disasters more

rapidly. As disasters are often local events, local organizations such as public libraries are critical in responding to them. As community and information hubs public libraries are well situated to engage in strengthening community resilience efforts in disasters (Bishop and Veil, 2013).

Disasters precipitate an increase in communication and present complex information environments. One of the most important aspects of disaster communication is that of reaching the target population in a severe and often chaotic situation. Therefore, disaster communication has to be customized not only to the situation but also to the population. When natural disasters strike, the information needs of a community can shift rapidly. One of the roles of a library is to understand the diverse community information needs of the local populations and to know how to best meet these needs. Libraries are a vast resource of local resources and knowledge that can complement local emergency services. In their educational, informational and recreational roles, public libraries are involved in a multitude of community engagement activities and are well suited to aid in disaster planning. As a trusted community resource, public libraries are in a unique position to engage in community-wide disaster preparedness and response planning efforts, ensuring that partnerships and plans are in place before a disaster strikes in order to strengthen community resilience.

An exploratory study gathered data from libraries in two states in an effort to learn more about whether libraries are involved in community-wide disaster planning. According to Zach (2011), the investigators found that the libraries were not incorporated into local emergency management plans, and libraries were “rarely considered when emergency planning took place” (p. 407). Zach (2011) suggested that libraries need guidance regarding how they can play a broader role in planning for responses to community crises. Several scholars have studied how public libraries respond to disasters, yet little is known about whether public libraries proactively engage in community-wide disaster planning, and if so, what is the nature of those partnerships.

PURPOSE

The “Disaster Preparedness and Response: How Public Libraries Can Partner with Local Agencies to Meet Community Needs” study funded by XXX, USA involves a nationwide survey of public library leaders. The study is being carried

out to provide insight regarding how public libraries can be more involved in community-wide disaster planning, strengthening their role as core members of their communities' disaster preparedness infrastructure. It examines how library leaders can motivate other agencies to include public libraries in local disaster and community resilience planning. The study explores the types of partnerships that are possible, as well as what public libraries can bring to community-wide planning efforts; and will provide library leaders with valuable insight on how to proactively engage in dialogue and planning with their local emergency management community. In addition, study results will help members of the emergency management community consider new ways to involve libraries in their disaster preparedness and response activities. They will better understand how they can leverage the resources of libraries in disaster planning efforts. Findings will provide insight into how public libraries are involved in community-wide disaster planning and identifying libraries that are exemplary models. The study will gain an insight into the disaster preparedness and response practices of a whole range of libraries from small rural libraries to large urban libraries. The research questions are:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Are libraries involved in local disaster preparedness and response activities? If so, what roles do they play?

Has the library attempted to get involved in local planning in the past, but faced barriers to participation? If so, was the nature of those efforts and what barriers were encountered?

What local agencies does the library partner with as part of their involvement with emergency preparedness efforts? What is the nature of those partnerships? How were those partnerships initiated?

METHODOLOGY

A survey (Appendix 1) aimed at public library directors and library staff who are involved in coordinating disaster planning for their institutions was created in the online platform Qualtrics. Lists of public libraries are available in various publications, however, none give a complete list of current public library directors. To reach the survey population, an email which outlined the purpose of

the study and included the link to the online survey, was sent to 1) the executive directors of state library associations and to regional chapters listed in (<http://www.ala.org/groups/affiliates/chapters/state/stateregional>) and to 2) the presidents of state libraries listed in (http://www.imls.gov/programs/state_libraries.aspx).

The email requested the two groups to distribute the survey via their association and state library email lists, websites and social media tools, to public library directors in their associations and in their states. Informed consent was included in the online survey. Respondents were asked if they would be willing to be contacted at a future date for follow-up in-depth explorations of the exemplary disaster planning models. The survey was available from December 2014 to January 2015.

DATA ANALYSIS

To date, 502 responses have been received from individuals in 34 states. Data collection and quantitative and qualitative data analysis is ongoing. The roles played by libraries in disaster preparedness and response, the types, nature of collaborations with the emergency management community and barriers encountered are being analysed. Comparisons will be made between states, and differences in disaster preparedness and response to types of disaster e.g. hurricanes will be explored. Qualtrics is being used to analyze the quantitative data. Open-ended responses to the survey questions are being manually coded and themes identified. Further qualitative data analysis will be carried out using NVivo software.

FINDINGS

The findings below are based on the analysis to date. As data collection and analysis is ongoing and incomplete, frequencies of responses are not given in this preliminary report.

Library personnel

Respondents were asked if the library had a member of staff who was responsible for disaster preparedness and response. The library director is the person most cited. Other personnel taking on this role include, the facilities manager, disaster

response team coordinator, preservation specialist and business manager.

Types of disaster

Respondents were asked if the community had experienced a disaster. The main disasters experienced include: severe flooding, hurricane, severe snowstorm, severe tornado, wildfire and earthquake. Other disasters mentioned are ice-storm, wind-storm, extended power outage and school shooting.

Roles played by libraries

Respondents were asked to describe the role the library played in disaster preparedness and response, the actions the library took in response to a disaster e.g. offered new services, new activities, implementation of plans. The main roles played by libraries in disaster preparedness and response include (in descending of frequency):

- Providing shelter and providing a safe meeting space for people to relax and engage in activities
- Providing access to the Internet and computers to reach family and friends during a crisis
- Information center, online and in-person
- Warming and cooling center
- Charging center for electronic devices
- Emergency Operations Center / Incident Command Center
- Providing food and water
- Providing Federal Emergency Management (FEMA) training
- Assisting with completion of FEMA and insurance forms

One library plans to fill a gap in the community's lack of a safe space:

"the community needs a new library and has no real "safe shelter". The building committee decided that in order to get a new library, which has been in the working for twenty-five years, we would make it a Library/Safe Shelter and build it to meet FEMA specs. By building this library, we were hoping that the citizens of XXX would be more welcome

if the two buildings would be combined into one. The new library will be constructed to meet FEMA 361 guidelines which include windows and doors. Our new library is to deflect a 2" 4" wood board traveling at speeds of 250 miles/per/hour"

Another library director highlighted the important role her library played by providing access to technology:

"the coordinators of the fire fighting battle were in our library 24 hours a day (we have daylight all the time in the summer), using our broadband and their computers and our telephone"

One respondent described this innovative preparedness initiative:

"we are the designated place that the local school will relocate students to if the school becomes non-habitable, we also recently offered to host "block parties" to facilitate the creation of informal neighborhood responders (know your neighbor)"

Collaborations with other agencies

Respondents were asked about collaborations in disaster preparedness and response between the public library and other agencies. The most frequently listed agencies are (in descending order of frequency):

- Red Cross
- Fire Department
- County Emergency Management
- Sheriff / Police Department
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- City Emergency Management Department
- Emergency Operations Center
- State Emergency Management Agency
- Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT)

One respondent highlighted an initiative to investigate possible collaborations "the library received a state Community Innovation Challenge grant to explore and

implement systems for working with town agencies in emergencies."

Collaborations also take place with more than one agency, as in this example:

"for more than ten years I[public library director] have served on a regional multi-agency bioterrorism response committee whose other members represent public health, public safety and emergency preparedness agencies"

Initiation of collaboration

Respondents were asked who initiated the collaboration between the public library and other agencies. Collaborations are initiated by the (in descending order of frequency):

- Library
- City
- County Emergency Management
- FEMA
- Red Cross
- Fire Department
- Police Department

Here are a couple of examples:

"the xxx emergency management agency initiated the contact in this instance...we offered to assist the community with signing up for the emergency response system, promoting the registration at the library and via social media"

"the County started a Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) which involved all departments and agencies. Then we were contacted by the directors of Emergency Preparedness which is part of Fire and Rescue to work on a more developed plan"

Nature of collaborations

Respondents were asked about the nature of collaborations between the public library and other agencies. Many respondents stated that they are receiving training with the collaborating agency, for example are undertaking preparedness

training with FEMA. Some responses need clarification (will be followed up in Phase 2), in particular, when “training” was mentioned, does this refer to “training” of community members or to library staff. The main purposes of collaborations are to provide:

- A meeting space e.g. for FEMA, Red Cross
- Information
- Shelter
- Food and water
- Access to the Internet with others in the community”

Collaborations include education initiatives, use of the library’s physical space and library transport:

[The librarian] *“participated as trainer in 2-year FEMA grant sponsored program to teach Resiliency skills in the community”*

“we are the site in the community where the Red Cross will set up operational headquarters in times of need”

“we assist with staffing of the Emergency Operations Center using the incident command system. Our vehicle is used to transport materials for sheltering the homeless in an emergency and being considered for use in a hazardous materials situation”

Nature of barriers

Participants were asked about the nature of the barriers to collaborative efforts. Generally, libraries are not seen as a potential partner for disaster preparedness and response. Many respondents stated that the emergency management community and city officials did not initially understand the value that a library could bring to disaster preparedness and response. However, as one respondent replied, “with time and education, the barriers fell by the wayside.” Communication difficulties between agencies with different levels of expectation and scheduling/availability were noted as the main barriers. Respondents highlighted:

“we are not seen as a potential partner, so your research will be useful in creating a realistic set-up and broaching folks”

“trying to be collaborative but at the same time being responsible for our own facilities and staff”

“we had to continually put out the word what services we could provide, there is always a concern that we have adequate number of Spanish speakers”

LIMITATIONS

This study relied on the executive directors of state library associations and regional chapters, and the presidents of state libraries to distribute the survey.. Although the survey instrument was clearly divided into two sections “disaster preparedness” and “disaster response”, it is clear that some respondents had not distinguished between the two sections “preparedness” and “response” as answers to questions were repeated in both sections.

NEXT STEPS

The survey was closed on January 31st; analysis of the first phase of this study is ongoing. The second phase of the study emerging from the findings of the survey will involve follow-up in-depth explorations of the exemplary disaster planning models, including interviews with public library directors, as well as leaders of emergency management agencies that partner with those libraries. Exemplary practices will be broadly shared so other public library directors can learn from their experiences and be inspired to engage in collaborative disaster planning. It will also explore further the nature of collaborations between libraries and the various agencies and the barriers that have hindered collaborations.

CONCLUSION

The first phase of this study provides preliminary data and insight into how public libraries are involved in community-wide disaster planning, strengthening their role as core members of their communities’ disaster preparedness infrastructure. From the initial findings, it is evident that public libraries are increasingly involved in community's disaster preparedness and response efforts and are forming partnerships with the emergency management community and other agencies. Findings from the completed analysis will be presented to library

leaders and relevant local agencies to encourage further collaborations involving public libraries in community planning and engagement.

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APPENDIX 1: SURVEY

Disaster Preparedness and Response: How Public Libraries Can Partner with Local Agencies to Meet Community Needs

Names of researchers

Christine Hagar, PhD

April Anderson

The purpose of this study

Although many public libraries have disaster plans in place to protect their own collections and employees, few are engaged in collaborative preparedness and response efforts to meet community needs following a disaster. Several scholars have studied how public libraries respond to disasters, yet little is known about whether public libraries proactively engage in community-wide disaster planning, and if so, what is the nature of those partnerships.

The purpose of this study is to provide insight regarding how public libraries can be more involved in community-wide disaster planning, strengthening their role as core members of their communities' disaster preparedness infrastructure. If you decide to participate in this study, you will complete a few questions about your involvement, if any, in disaster preparedness and response. Please read through the following information about your rights as a research participant. If you agree to take the survey, please hit the agree button at the bottom of this page.

By participating in this study, there are no direct foreseeable risks anticipated other than those normally encountered in your daily life. There are no foreseeable benefits anticipated. There is no compensation for participation in this study. Although the results of this study may be published, no information that could identify you will be included. Your responses will be coded and kept in a password protected computer. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may quit the survey at any time without negative consequences. You can also choose not to answer any survey questions that you do not wish to answer. No service to which you are otherwise entitled will be lost or jeopardized if you choose not to participate in the study or quit partway through the study.

Agreement to participate

Please select from the choices below. If you click agree, it is implied that you have read the information above about the research, your rights as a participant, and give your voluntary consent. Please print out a copy of this page and keep it for your records.

- I agree to participate in the research.
 I do not agree to participate in this research. (Respondent will be taken to the end of the survey).
- 1) Please give the name of your library and the state e.g. Howtown Public Library, IL.
 - 2) What is your position in the library?
 - Director
 - Assistant Director
 - Other (Please State)
 - 3) Does your library have a member of staff who is responsible for managing disaster preparedness and response?
 - Yes, please state the job title.
 - No.
 - 4) Has your community experienced a disaster?
 - Yes
 - No, please answer the questions in the “Disaster Preparedness” section only. (Respondent will be taken to Q6)
 - 5) If yes, what type of disaster?
 - Earthquake
 - Hurricane
 - Severe Tornado
 - Severe Flooding
 - Wildfires that have destroyed land and/or homes
 - Snowstorm
 - Terrorist Attack
 - Other (please state)

Disaster Preparedness

- 6) Is the library involved in the community's disaster preparedness efforts?
 - Yes
 - No (respondent will be taken to Q13)

- 7) Please describe briefly the role the library plays in disaster preparedness e.g. offers new services/ new activities/ has a plan to implement during a disaster.
- 8) Has the library collaborated with other agencies e.g. the emergency management community, Red Cross, in disaster preparedness efforts?
 - Yes, please state the names of the agencies.
 - No
- 9) Who initiated the collaboration/s?
- 10) Please describe briefly the nature of the collaborations.
- 11) Did you encounter any barriers during the collaboration/s?
 - Yes
 - No
- 12) Please describe briefly the nature of the barriers.

Disaster Response

- 13) Was the library involved in the communities' response to the disaster?
 - Yes
 - No (respondent will be taken to the end of the survey)
- 14) Please describe the role the library played in the disaster response, the actions the library took in response to the disaster e.g. offered new services, new activities, implementation of plans etc.
- 15) Did the library collaborate with other agencies e.g. the emergency management community, Red Cross?
 - Yes, please state.
 - No
- 16) Who initiated the collaboration/s?
- 17) Please describe briefly the nature of the collaboration/s?
- 18) Did you encounter any barriers during the collaboration/s?
 - Yes
 - No
- 19) Please describe briefly the nature of the barriers.

20) Please add any other comments here about your experiences in disaster preparedness and response efforts

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete the questionnaire.

Are you willing to be contacted at a later date to discuss further your involvement in disaster preparedness and response?

If yes, please state your name

Your email address