Here, there and everywhere: Disasters and public libraries

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Abstract

In communities throughout the world, public libraries are familiar anchor institutions. Besides offering equal access to wide varieties of resources, services and programs, libraries provide safe spaces, and serve as havens, an oasis of calm for anyone who arrives at their doors. In all types of settings, library staff are becoming more involved in disaster planning and disaster management. This is particularly apparent in the public library arena, where even the facility itself may become an important component of disaster response and relief activities. From natural disasters like earthquakes, tornadoes, fires, floods and hurricanes to those that are human-made, including civil and social unrest, public libraries are often at the forefront in terms of providing support and some semblance of stability to communities. This support can take many forms, such as providing a central community hub, with information and telecommunications access or temporary shelter and/or school classrooms, meeting space for first responders and relief efforts, and as a dispensary for all sorts of supplies. Perhaps most importantly, public libraries are in a position to provide a beacon of hope for normalcy during troubled times.

Background

The Disaster Information Management Resource Center of the U.S. National Library of Medicine (2016) defines a disaster as "an occurrence such as a hurricane, tornado, storm, flood, high water, earthquake, drought, blizzard, pestilence, famine, fire, explosion, building collapse, transportation wreck, terrorist event, bioterrorist event, pandemic, power failure or other similar natural or man-made incident(s)." As one of the impacts of global climate change is a heightened

risk for natural disasters (Van Aalst, 2006); almost every day there is an account of some type of weather-related disaster occurring somewhere in the world. There are daily news reports of varying degrees of civil unrest, from social turmoil to outright war with the concomitant devastating effects, somewhere in the world as well. As societies cope with these challenges, public institutions are increasingly being called upon to assist with all types of disaster planning and management efforts.

In many communities, public libraries are familiar anchor institutions; in fact, there are more than 320,000 public libraries worldwide, 73% of which are in transitioning and developing countries (Gates Foundation, 2016). Public libraries are so ubiquitous in the United States that in some rural areas, there is more readily available access to a public library than to a health clinic (Flaherty, 2013). Given their service mission and philosophy of open and equal access, public libraries are in a unique position to aid communities during times of adversity.

Public Libraries and Disaster Response
Natural Disasters

If we consider the types of natural disasters types that can affect communities, they are varied in type as well as severity, and can be somewhat regionally dictated. For instance, very generally speaking, on the east coast in the United States, hurricanes are a major threat while tornadoes are more common in the mid-west and wildfires and earthquakes are a concern in the western part of the country. Worldwide, in the past 20 years, the most common natural disaster has been flooding, which accounts for 43% of all recorded events; second is storms (28%) and third is earthquakes (8%) (World Economic Forum, 2016). Effects of these occurrences can range from minor interruption of services to catastrophes which require closure and relocation or rebuilding.

There are myriad examples of the positive role public libraries have played during all types of natural disasters. In the United States, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) now includes public libraries as an essential service (Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, amended 2011); this designation has been demonstrated and validated in many cases of disaster response. For instance, during Hurricane Katrina, dedicated library staff slept on cots at the library for weeks so that they could reinstate services as quickly as possible (Dickerson, 2007). Eight years later when Hurricane Sandy hit the East Coast, public libraries in the region were vital community centers. They provided internet access, assistance with forms and with registering for relief aid, bathrooms where people could clean up, financial planning seminars, electrical outlets for charging phones, meeting areas for relief workers, and most of all moral support (Rose, 2013). When a devastating earthquake and subsequent tsunamis hit Japan in 2011, librarians responded heroically, providing information and creating libraries at shelters when libraries were destroyed (Suzuki & Miura, 2014). Public librarians not only serve during times of disasters, but are an integral part of rebuilding post-disasters. When the collapse of a mall led to total destruction of a public library in Ontario in 2012, the staff response was to use the opportunity as a catalyst to improve services and better respond to community needs (Stewart, 2014).

There are many logistical considerations, of course, during all types of disasters with regard to keeping the library up and running. These include: is the structure safe, is the electricity working, can essential personnel make it to work, and so on. A disaster plan can help to outline different scenarios and how to respond to varied circumstances. Even if the library can't provide "regular" services, such as resource lending and programs, if possible, the provision of a safe community space can be an important component of resilience and rebuilding.

Social and Civil Unrest

While the majority of literature pertaining to public libraries and disaster response focuses on natural disasters, public libraries are also aiding in community response to human-made types of disasters. These can range from social and civil unrest and protests to mass shootings to terror attacks to riots and war, with all the concomitant effects. For example, in the U.S., after a white policeman shot an unarmed black man, in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, there were weeks of protests, and at times, violent riots; a state of emergency was declared and the National Guard responded (Castillo & Ford, 2014). The public library stayed open, providing services and support (Berry III, 2015) and played a leading role in communication efforts and promoting community resilience and a return to stability (Chiochios, 2016). When a similar event occurred in Baltimore, Maryland in 2015, and riots rocked the city, all the library branches remained open, providing an oasis among looted storefronts (Rosenfeld, 2015). After a mass shooting in Aurora, Colorado in 2012, the library was integrally involved in offering support to a stunned and reeling community (Bateman, 2016). Increasingly, public libraries are being called upon to offer support to refugees and displaced persons all around the globe. So even if the disaster may have occurred in a distant region, public libraries may be dealing with the results locally.

Responses for service provision demand the same considerations as service provision during natural disasters, such as ensuring staff safety. Planning, preparation, and coordination with other social service agencies can ease the process. One thing is clear, disaster response is moving from public library staff acting as defenders and preservers of cultural artifacts, to becoming integral members of essential service teams in times of crisis.

Summary

One need not look far to find examples of extraordinary efforts by public library staff worldwide to provide services to communities in times of disaster, whether those events are naturally or human-induced. As one of the few community resources that are truly open to all with equal access, public libraries are indispensable. Our efforts to ensure public library staff are involved in disaster planning and response are imperative and it is clear that these efforts can pay dividends in the long run in terms of community stability, resiliency and recovery.

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