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Michelle Malizia  
*National Network of Libraries of Medicine, South Central Region*

Karen Vargas  
*National Network of Libraries of Medicine, South Central Region*

Rebecca Hamilton

Deborah Littrell

Cynthia Olney

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## Connecting Public Libraries with Community Emergency Responders

by Michelle Malizia, Rebecca Hamilton, Deborah Littrell, Karen Vargas, & Cynthia Olney on April 26, 2013

The Monday after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, the director of a rural public library situated about 70 miles inland arrived at her library to find a woman sitting in the parking lot, in tears. As a Katrina evacuee, this woman only had her car, her dog, and the clothes on her back. She waited for the library to open, trusting that it was one place in town that would welcome strangers.

Disasters, defined by the Suburban Emergency Management Project<sup>1</sup> as events that are somewhat widespread and intense enough to overwhelm affected areas to the extent that they need external intervention, can send victims fleeing to distant localities, forcing communities to quickly accommodate and relate to large, unfamiliar groups. The library literature is full of examples of public libraries rising to the challenge, helping large influxes of residents or out-of-towners who seek their services in the wake of disasters. Public librarians adopt many different roles<sup>2</sup> to meet community needs. To do so, they must quickly assess changing user needs during disasters and adapt their services on the spot.<sup>3</sup>

While victims know, or quickly figure out, that libraries can provide necessary assistance to them during disasters, the emergency management community has slowly come to understand the value of public libraries as disaster response resources. In fact, the first formal recognition of public libraries as essential community organizations came in January 2011 when the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) decided to make libraries eligible for temporary relocation during major disasters and emergencies under the FEMA Public Assistance Program.<sup>4</sup>

FEMA's recognition of public libraries is a first step, but this awareness now needs to extend to other groups that respond to disasters, including healthcare professionals, public health workers, and mental health counselors who work with disaster victims. Likewise, public librarians should hone their

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knowledge of online resources that can aid these disaster response workers—either in providing the workers with information that will help them or the disaster victims they assist.

### **Supporting Emergency Response Roles of Public Libraries**

The National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM) is one organization that is well-positioned to be a liaison between public libraries and emergency responder groups. Coordinated through the National Institutes of Health's National Library of Medicine, NN/LM is a network of organizations which includes all types of libraries, public health departments, and community-based organizations.<sup>5</sup> Its mission is to improve access to quality health information—particularly National Library of Medicine resources—to both health professionals and the general public through promotion, training, and increased access to technology. NN/LM has eight network offices located in medical libraries throughout the United States, which lead the network in pursuit of its mission. In recent years, NN/LM has initiated services to address the health information needs of users during disasters.

One NN/LM network office has, by necessity, paid particular attention to disaster preparedness among its libraries. That network office serves the South Central Region (NN/LM SCR), coordinating a particularly disaster-prone area comprising Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. NN/LM SCR network members have faced tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, the Oklahoma City bombing, and environmental disasters, including the BP oil spill. These events have caused network members in the region to forge a well-functioning system of support which allows them to help each other provide continuity of service in times of disaster. While this support system is strongest among health sciences and hospital libraries, public libraries need to be involved as well.

NN/LM SCR has its share of public library network members and recognizes that they can be key partners in helping to improve access to health information to consumer groups, so NN/LM SCR staff decided to reach out to public libraries in the region specifically in relation to disaster response. Inclusion of more public libraries in the network would expand NN/LM SCR's reach in helping emergency responders and the general public with disaster response. Additionally, the public libraries could gain credibility with emergency management agencies, emergency response groups, and health professionals by becoming affiliated with a National Library of Medicine program.

In 2009, the NN/LM SCR network office initiated a project to explore ways to support the emergency response of public libraries in the region. While it targeted those libraries that faced an almost continual stream of emergencies—coastal public libraries—the lessons learned about supporting this group of public libraries could be generalized to public libraries facing other types of disasters.

The first step in the project was to form a partnership with the state libraries in the two states in the region that faced hurricane threats—the Texas State Library and Archives Commission and the State Library of Louisiana. Representatives from both state libraries worked with NN/LM SCR in all phases of the needs assessment and action plan.

### **How NN/LM SCR Assessed Public Libraries' Needs**

NN/LM SCR began its project with a needs assessment because, as public librarians who have experienced community disasters will attest, well-intentioned but misguided assistance in times of disasters simply adds stress to an already difficult situation. The NN/LM SCR team wanted to provide assistance that would provide support, not increase stress.

NN/LM SCR worked with a program evaluation consultant to design and conduct the needs assessment, which took place in two phases. The first phase involved telephone interviews that lasted one to two hours with library directors and staff in managerial or reference positions. The second phase consisted of advisory group meetings with public library directors, at which the NN/LM SCR project team requested feedback about strategies it had developed based on information gathered in phase one. The advisory groups provided feedback about proposed services and added other suggestions.

The State Library of Louisiana and The Texas State Library and Archives Commission helped NN/LM SCR identify public libraries that stepped up to help their communities through disasters caused by Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Ike. State library representatives gave an enthusiastic endorsement to the project, which helped NN/LM SCR garner participation from public library staff for both the interview and advisory groups. Representatives from both libraries helped to plan and attended the advisory group meetings and agreed to seek ways to work with NN/LM SCR to implement strategies in their states.

The telephone interviews and advisory groups involved twenty-nine library directors, library managers, and reference librarians from eighteen libraries in Louisiana and Texas. The communities served by these libraries ranged in size from less than five thousand to more than two million users.<sup>6</sup> Some libraries in the sample were damaged badly by hurricanes and their staff members talked about recovering along with their communities. Other libraries were not damaged directly by these particular storms, but instead served waves of evacuees that sought refuge in their communities.

The interviews were summarized and thematically analyzed to identify the needs of public libraries. To validate the analysis, findings were presented to the advisory groups, which had both public librarians who participated in the interviews and those who did not. Their feedback indicated that conclusions drawn by the project team were valid. Based on information gained in the needs assessment, the NN/LM SCR developed and is pursuing the strategies described ahead.

## Promoting Public Libraries to Emergency Responders

In the interviews, public librarians' descriptions of their assistance to their communities showed that they were highly resourceful and effective. Yet at the time of the storms, few of these libraries had formal roles to play in their counties' or cities' emergency response. In the needs assessment, some librarians said their response to the hurricane caught the attention of city leaders, and the library directors have since joined the emergency preparedness teams. However, most believed that their resources needed to be promoted more broadly to emergency responders of all types. They believed that working with NN/LM SCR, with its connection to National Institutes of Health and the National Library of Medicine, would enhance their profile among healthcare providers and emergency responders.

This request aligns beautifully with NN/LM SCR's role in locating and promoting resources to its user population.

As it hones its message to these groups, NN/LM SCR plans to promote the following public library qualities that make them highly valuable to disaster response:

- **Library staffs are skilled at assisting the general public in locating information.** The everyday task of being a public librarian demands a combination of customer service, information search, and technology skills. Public librarians serve all who pass through their doors—a user population that ranges vastly by age, cultural background, literacy and technology skill levels, even mental health status. During the hurricanes, evacuees sought help with Internet searches for relatives, FEMA forms, community services, and information about the flood status of their neighborhoods. These evacuees were emotionally burdened with anxieties, grief, and mental issues that required a great deal of sensitivity from library staff. The interviews with public librarians showed how they rallied all of their resources to help hurricane response: bilingual staff helped translate signage, technologically savvy workers entered evacuees into a statewide database, and youth librarians entertained frightened children.
- **Librarians are masters at mobilizing and distributing information.** The public perceives public libraries as the hub of community information, so it was almost instinctive for public librarians to respond to community disasters by pulling together information for evacuees and community residents in troubled times. Some library staff members went to great lengths to compile information. One librarian said the staff, feeling like spies, volunteered at emergency phone banks organized by emergency assistance agencies in hopes of finding more contact information for the evacuees.
- **Public libraries are a comforting place for disaster victims.** Public libraries belong to the public, so they take public service quite seriously. The libraries from the project sample that were not directly hit by storms worked at providing a safe, welcoming space for everyone. One library was attached to the

building used as the shelter; and the library director commented that, if the shelter was the evacuees' bedroom, then the library was their "living room." The libraries in our sample that were damaged by the storms worked toward restoring some level of operation within days of the storm, with the goal of bringing a sense of normalcy to the community. In one coastal parish in Louisiana, the public library was the first and, for a long time, the only organization open at night after the storm. Public libraries in the sample also became bases of operation for organizations providing service to disaster victims, including school districts, to enroll displaced children; banks, to open accounts for victims to receive FEMA money; and home stores, to provide workshops on power tool use. One public library in this project served as a location for mental health professionals to meet with storm victims who were returning home after evacuating for Katrina.

- **Multi-purpose spaces in public libraries can be adapted for many uses.** Librarians in this needs assessment gave examples of how they converted different spaces in their libraries to accommodate the needs of disaster victims. One public library turned a new meeting room into a makeshift computer lab. Another public library served as housing for emergency responder groups, a staging area for volunteers, a nursery for children, and a location for public showers.
- **Most public libraries are wired.** Many public libraries now have Wi-Fi connections that can be accessed from their parking lots when their buildings are closed. Some public libraries also offer videoconferencing and satellite conferencing, which emergency responder groups can use to hold meetings among workers in dispersed areas.
- **Libraries serve more than local residents.** Out-of-town victims and emergency responders may not be aware that public libraries extend service beyond local residents. Library cardholders do receive special privileges, such as remote access to some databases or the ability to borrow books, but public libraries extend many services and support to users without screening for place of residence. The services described in this article, including reference assistance, computer use, and Wi-Fi access, was provided to whoever came to the public library after the storms.

## **Other Support**

Along with promoting public libraries to both emergency responders and healthcare providers, the NN/LM SCR project team developed other strategies to help public libraries build capacity to serve the needs of both consumers and health and emergency response professionals. NN/LM SCR will work with the state libraries to develop and promote the following strategies, all of which have been endorsed by the public librarian advisory groups:

- **Networking opportunities with emergency responders.** NN/LM SCR offers funding for events called “Community Preparedness Days,” which are similar to health fairs for community residents but feature exhibits from community preparedness and response organizations. A number of such events have been held in the South Central and other NN/LM regions and public librarians who ran the events said they believed the projects raised awareness of their role in community disaster response among emergency responder groups. The event allowed public libraries to work with planning committee members and exhibitors representing emergency management agencies, community-based preparedness organizations, and hospitals. Consequently, representatives of these organizations became aware of how well public libraries can meet the needs of disaster victims.
- **Providing training on consumer health information resources.** The National Library of Medicine has an extensive free consumer health database called MedlinePlus<sup>7</sup> that includes information that could help disaster victims to both plan for and respond to disasters. The public librarians in this study said that, shortly after hurricanes, evacuees and residents needed information about first aid, vaccinations, and insect bites. In the longer term, residents in affected areas needed information about environmental issues related to home repair, such as mold remediation. Some disaster victims needed health information in Spanish and other languages, all of which can be located by visiting MedlinePlus.
- **Providing mental health information to public librarians.** Unlike healthcare and mental health professionals who are taught how to set emotional boundaries with patients, such training is seldom offered to public library staff. Library directors in this study said their staff members found themselves mentally and emotionally drained from helping streams of evacuees for weeks on end. In collaboration with a social worker or healthcare provider, NN/LM SCR will develop some type of educational program, such as a webinar or tutorial, called “Mental Health for Librarians during a Disaster,” to help librarians provide professional reference services to the public without crossing professional boundaries or burning themselves out.
- **Providing printed information during emergencies.** Public library computers were in demand in the aftermath of storms, particularly because FEMA applications were online. Many of the evacuees had low technology skills and required assistance from library staff. Consequently, public librarians said that printed handouts containing health information would have been more useful than electronic health information because they needed to use computers for information that was only accessible online. NN/LM SCR will work with the state libraries to ensure that the public libraries will get MedlinePlus patient handouts when they are unable to print this type of information themselves due to power or Internet outages.



- **Networking assistance to obtain support from network members.** Public libraries can contact NN/LM SCR at any time when they need help locating answers to medical reference questions for their users. To increase convenience of this service to public libraries when they may be stretched during community disaster response, NN/LM SCR plans to develop a graphic that could be placed temporarily on a public library's website, referring users to the NN/LM SCR toll-free number when a disaster is imminent or in the aftermath. Librarians that call the toll-free number, or refer a user to it, will be directed to a medical library in the NN/LM SCR network that has agreed to answer medical reference questions for the public.

## Conclusion

This evaluation study focused on the needs of libraries in a specific location responding to a specific type of disaster, but many of the findings can be generalized to other situations. For example, a 2011 article described the Springfield (Mass.) Public Library's (SPL) response to a tornado that hit in May 2011.8 SPL's activities bear similarities to the response of the public libraries who participated in this project. NN/LM SCR believes that the strategies it developed to support coastal public libraries may benefit their other public library network members in other parts of its region. Through strong partnership with the state libraries, NN/LM SCR will assist public libraries to build capacity to meet the needs of their users and advocate for them as a key resource to those facing emergencies and disasters. PL

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