



Loss Control TIPS

Technical Information Paper Series

Innovative Safety and Health SolutionsSM

Why Your Library Needs An Emergency Preparedness Plan

Introduction

Librarians and library directors are used to dealing with crises and emergencies: budget cuts, censorship efforts, “difficult” patrons, and the day-to-day challenges of operating a publicly supported, highly visible, heavily used service in a building generally open to the public. Still, many fail to acknowledge, understand, or plan for the biggest, most costly, and most serious crises of all: emergencies or disasters that could shut down their libraries for weeks or months—or even *forever*. Consider these examples:

- In July 1996, a suspicious fire caused \$10 million in damages to Pratt Institute and destroyed the school’s multimedia center.
- An arsonist’s fire gutted the Danbury (CT) Public Library in February 1996, causing at least \$4 million in losses.
- Another arson fire destroyed the library at Langley Air Force Base in July 1996, causing more than \$4 million in damage.
- Flooding damaged many libraries in July 1996, including a newly renovated school library in New Bethlehem, PA (entire collection destroyed).

Because of potential water damage to collections, fire and flood are the most visible and serious threats, but other emergencies are important, too.

- At the Salt Lake City Public Library in March 1994, a man armed with a gun and a bomb held library staff and patrons hostage until he was shot and killed by police.
- The Panama City Beach (FL) Library lost its roof to Hurricane Opal in October 1995.
- Hurricane Opal cut off power to the Panhandle Public Library System for several days.
- Computer problems caused the on-line catalog at the New York University School of Law Library to be out of service for a week.

Trends in Library Emergency Planning

Were these libraries prepared for these events?

- The Salt Lake City Public Library, where the hostage situation took place, has evacuation plans (practiced regularly), personal safety programs, an established relationship with the local police, and training programs to help staff deal with special patron situations. Library staff were able to clear the



library quickly, and were able to make rational decisions quickly, even in a desperate situation. An established plan made the difference.

- An arson fire which destroyed most of the Danbury Public library might have been prevented if the book drop, where the arsonist dropped burning material, had been isolated from the building, or had been adequately protected against fire. The book drop opened directly into a carpeted area inside the library.
- After suffering major flooding, one Midwestern library lost all back periodical issues, plus books and equipment, and remained closed for a month; staff were unable to “even guess” at the number of volumes lost or what the eventual costs would be. An emergency plan might have helped mitigate this disaster.

However, many librarians fail to prepare their facilities adequately for emergencies. Consider these statistics:

- In a survey reported by the Regional OCLC Network Directors’ Advisory Committee (RONDAC) in 1991, only 19% of the libraries surveyed had disaster response plans. Seventeen per cent were “working on them.” Sixty-four percent had no disaster response plans at all.
- A survey by AMIGOS in 1992 showed that 179 of 239, or 75%, of libraries surveyed had no plans, despite the fact *25% of them had experienced some disaster during 1992.*

Why Plan for Emergencies?

Disaster can strike at any time. Although most think of disasters as naturally occurring events such as hurricanes or earthquakes, other events or conditions can have disastrous effects. Also, unrelated events can combine to produce disastrous results. After one library’s roof collapsed during a fire, five days of rain ruined whatever had been left inside.

Having an Emergency Preparedness Plan (EPP) allows you to make decisions about emergency response and recovery *before* an emergency situation develops, when you are best able to make difficult decisions. Pre-planning allows for better prevention, better response, and better recovery. Should a disaster strike, the actions taken in the first minutes and hours can make all the difference to health and safety of staff and patrons, to how much of the collection, equipment, and facilities can be salvaged, and to how soon—or *if*—normal operations can be resumed.

Insurance does not fully cover the cost of disasters and emergencies. The costs of property damage and “business interruption” can normally be offset by adequate insurance, but *uninsured* losses can also occur, such as loss of employees (injury, disability, death, quitting); cost of temporary equipment and facilities for use during recovery; loss of patron good will; loss of business relationships with vendors; delayed accounts payable and receivable; increased insurance costs; increased costs following recovery and restoration; replacement, restoration, and recovery costs not adjusted for inflation; severance pay; unemployment insurance costs; impaired communications with patrons, employees, or vendors.

Consider, too, the effects of disasters on the community, including your suppliers. Will your library’s programs and services be compromised if an essential supplier is knocked out of business by a tornado or other disaster? How long could your library maintain operations without its main suppliers? Do you have a plan for alternative sources? Will your library be able to meet all of its commitments?

What Is an Emergency Preparedness Plan?

An Emergency Preparedness Plan is the development, documentation, testing, evaluation, and implementation of policies, procedures, organizational structure, information, and resources that a library can use to *assess* potential hazards, develop and prepare appropriate *responses* to those hazards, and develop and prepare strategies for *recovery*. While Emergency Preparedness Plan objectives may differ from one library to another, they almost always are directed toward protection of *people*, protection of *property*, and preparation for the library to resume normal *services* as soon as possible. An Emergency Preparedness Plan generally encompasses these areas:

1. *Emergency Planning Process*. First create a written policy statement to guide and support the entire Emergency Preparedness Plan. Then, define the organizational structure and the roles and responsibilities of EPP participants. Appoint an Emergency Coordinator; appoint and charge the Emergency Preparedness Planning Team; appoint alternates and backups, and begin documentation.
2. *Emergency Preparedness*. The primary objective of Emergency Preparedness is to have a plan ready to properly position the library to respond to, and recover from, an emergency. An essential step in the preparedness process is *Hazard Identification and Risk Evaluation*, through which information is gathered to create and support the plan.
3. *Emergency Response*. The objectives of Emergency Response include protecting life; ensuring safety and health of library staff and users; limiting and containing damage to collections, facilities and equipment; stabilizing operational, service, and public impacts of an event; and managing and communicating information about the emergency.
4. *Emergency Recovery*. The important elements of a plan for Emergency Recovery include recovery analysis and planning; damage assessment and salvage operations; recovery communications; and employee support.

Creating the Library Emergency Preparedness Plan

Each library has special needs that must be fully addressed within its own Emergency Preparedness Plan. Review your facilities, staff, services, products, and processes carefully to create the best Emergency Preparedness Plan for *your* library. Consider the environment. Is your library in a high-rise building? Have an appropriate evacuation plan ready. Is your library in an older, unsprinklered building? Be ready for extensive fire and water damage from fire department hose streams, should a fire occur. Is your library in a flood plain, or in an area prone to hurricanes? Be ready for water damage.

Creating a comprehensive Emergency Preparedness Plan for your library may seem at first to be an overwhelming task. However, an EPP is nothing more than a series of documents, tasks, teams, and processes (unified, of course, by the library mission statement, the EPP policy statement, and the guidance and support of upper management). Thus, the process can be easily broken down into several sections, each with its small component parts. Tackle them one at a time, and in a logical order, and you will end up with a working plan.

Don't underestimate the possibility that disaster could strike *your* library at any time. Be prepared. Start developing an Emergency Preparedness Plan *today!*

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