
Library disasters: Are you prepared?

By Susan C. George

Begin your emergency planning now!

Be prepared! It's a phrase we all know, but in terms of library emergency planning and management, just how prepared are we?

Even a cursory look at the published library literature indicates a number of articles that discuss all types of emergencies befalling libraries. The most frequent are fire and/or water, but earthquakes and other natural disasters, theft, pests, and even asbestos have been reported. What does all this mean? It clearly shows that any library is susceptible to a variety of potentially serious disasters. *Any library* is the operative phrase—the risk exists for any library, regardless of age, material of construction, or even security. In a recent survey compiled for the ACRL CLIP Note series,¹ it is clear that the majority of academic libraries that responded believe they are not adequately prepared to deal with most types of disasters; in fact, most academic libraries do not believe they are even adequately educated about what disasters exist, much less how to manage them. In fact, some libraries responded that their preparedness would be tried when they experienced a disaster!

We have all seen the pictures and read the horror stories in the literature—the results of a library disaster (regardless of the origin)—and we have all expressed sympathy, empathy, or outrage that the library and/or the staff have suffered. Indeed, after the Midwest floods, the earthquakes in California, and other disasters, we have been quick to offer assistance, ensure the safety of personnel, and manage recovery of the library and its collections. A recent ar-

ticle even documented how to deal with the emotional trauma faced by the staff after an earthquake. All this assistance provides a morale boost to the community and library staff and often there is material benefit to the library itself. However, our willingness to provide assistance to those libraries and their staff who suffer a disaster says nothing about our preparedness in our home library. The attitude of waiting until a disaster strikes and then learning from the experience is not reasonable.

What to do

There are some specific ways to begin the emergency planning and management process; they require a commitment of time and energy by all library staff. The recommendations include:

- Understand that some risks to the library, staff, and users do exist. This is the first rule and it is universal. No library is without danger of some sort, no staff or user population is riskless! Libraries are not identical in their construction or location, so the dangers are not identical; but every library is at risk from some potential danger that will adversely affect the library, its contents, staff, and users. There is also a warning within this understanding—do not create risks!
- Find the risk(s) present in your library. This means a commitment of time and energy to make a detailed examination of the library and what dangers exist. These dangers can result from the construction or the arrangement of the library or they can result from external forces over which you have absolutely no control. Identifying these risks can be simplified by conducting a hazard analysis of the library. This tool points out the risks, whether they are insufficient electrical outlets, unsecured

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better means,
the first
five years
of our work
might have
been reduced
to two..."*

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bookstacks, overcrowded (and potentially unsafe) work areas, light fixtures not reinforced for safety, ceiling tiles that can fall, etc. As additional assistance, involve building maintenance staff, library staff, and someone from the local fire department; the more eyes, the better. Another consideration is a regular inspection schedule of the risks to insure that further deterioration has not occurred.

- Once the risks are identified, become educated. Search the library literature for articles that document the type of risks you face and learn from the experience of others; sponsor or attend emergency preparedness workshops or seminars; consult local emergency management officials.

Make a list, check it twice

After becoming educated, determine what risks can be mitigated and to what degree they can be mitigated. This is important both for the short-term and the long-term solution; some risks can be corrected quickly and with little

expense, others may take more time and money, and some may never be solved. A running list of risks and their solutions should be created; this documents what still needs correcting and eventually what cannot be corrected. These last-named risks, those that are beyond your resources, also need to be documented. In total, you then have a document which clearly details what has been done to reduce dangers and what cannot be corrected; this documentation can prove invaluable should a disaster strike and insurance coverage become a part of the recovery process.

- Fix/correct the risks for which you have available financial resources and correct them as soon as possible. There is no sense in doing the survey and then not acting promptly!

- Throughout the entire analysis, involve the local fire department and the local emergency coordinator for your town. They can be invaluable resources of information about what is already in place for a major disaster (such as an earthquake or tornado) and their expertise can be of definite benefit in the planning process. In addition, send them a copy of your analysis, pointing to the dangers that cannot be mitigated; this information will assist them in assisting you, should the need arise. Also, strongly recommend that they visit your location in order to know where the library is and what types of special equipment they might need should their services be required.

- Educate all library staff, including student assistants, to the dangers that remain and what procedures are in place to ensure human safety. Take advantage of local emergency courses available to you—fire extinguisher operation, CPR, first-aid, etc. Also, and just as important, educate staff as to what they should *not* do in an emergency.

- Make certain adequate signage exists locating emergency exits and where users/staff are in relation to safety. Adequate signage also means current and up-to-date diagrams of the library and its contents.

- Designate a space in which to locate emergency supplies and educate staff as to its location and contents. At a minimum, supply flashlights; for a more complete list of useful items to be on-site available, see Table I. In addition, when excess library space does not exist or, if it does, it is minimal, a central location somewhere within the organization should be assigned as a disaster closet/area. This allows storage of many needed items and in bulk

Table I. Disaster kit

Disaster kits contain the supplies necessary to begin dealing with an emergency. The disaster kit for this library is located _____. It contains the following items:

- Flashlight, with working batteries (1)
- Pad of 81/2 x 11 paper (1)
- Pencils (1 box)
- First aid kit
- Paper towels (3 pkgs)
- Scissors (1 pr)
- Cheesecloth (1 roll)
- 32 gal. plastic bags (1 box)
- Plastic bucket with handles (1)
- Freezer wrap (1 roll)
- Extension cord, 25–50 ft (1)
- Plastic gloves (1 pr)
- Toothbrush (1)
- Newsprint (1 roll)
- Record-keeping forms (1 pkg)
- Fan (1)
- Plastic tape (2 rolls)
- Plastic sheeting (1–2 rolls); specs = 4.5 mil, 20 ft. x 100 ft roll (2000 sq ft); polyethylene; Adams Plastic (#A-20-100)

quantities. As an example of the contents of a disaster closet, see Table II.

- Prepare a disaster plan for each library location and include the results of the hazard analysis; the plan then becomes a blueprint for the salvage effort.

Prepare a disaster manual

- Prepare a disaster manual, including the disaster plan and the hazard analysis results. The manual should contain the following sections/information:

- 1) A list of disasters, by type, which pose a danger to your library, and how you are prepared to deal with each. This should also include the specific risks you cannot correct and how to respond to them.

- 2) A list of what is contained in your local disaster closet/area and what can be obtained elsewhere in an emergency. This may include locations on campus (central and larger) or local businesses that have supplies or equipment you might need.

- 3) A list of local emergency-knowledgeable individuals should include on-campus experts and local or state emergency officials.

- 4) A telephone tree of library staff to contact when a disaster/emergency strikes should be arranged so that staff in closest proximity to the library are the first called (with the expectation that they will respond).

- 5) An accurate floor plan of the library which details emergency exits and what equipment/staff are located where.

- 6) A bibliography of library articles discussing disaster-recovery practices used by others.

- 7) A record-keeping form to identify individual volumes which are damaged or destroyed. The completed form will be absolutely necessary if the insurance company becomes involved in a settlement process.

- 8) A recovery workflow should also be included. This document specifically details the steps to take once a disaster occurs and the manpower, supplies, and space needed for the salvage process.

- Make certain a copy of the manual is easily accessible to any staff member (including student assistants) and that everyone know its location. Also give a copy of the manual to the library administration, local emergency officials, the fire department, and anyone else who could be considered an expert or resource. As added insurance, each staff member should have a copy of the manual at home.

Table II. Disaster Closet

The Disaster Closet is located _____ in the library. It is the central storeroom for equipment and supplies needed immediately to begin salvage activities. The items listed below will be found in the closet. Smaller quantities of some of these items are also included in the Disaster Kits.

- Plastic bags, 32 gal (1 case)
- Heavy duty flashlights, with batteries (6)
- Regular flashlights, with batteries (4)
- Extension cords, 100 ft. (2)
- Extension cord + utility light (1)
- Milk crates (12)
- Freezer wrap (24 rolls)
- Rubber gloves (6 pair)
- Work gloves (12 pair, 6 of which are leather)
- Unprinted newspaper (1-50 lb roll)
- Paper, 8 1/2 x 11 (6)
- Pencils (6 boxes)
- Paper towels (2 cases)
- Scissors (6)
- Plastic sheeting (2 rolls); Specs = 4.5 mil; 20 ft. x 100 ft roll (2000 sq ft); polyethylene; Adams Plastic (#A-20-100)
- Plastic tape (6 rolls)
- Wet-dry vacuum (1)
- Fans (2)
- Wastebaskets, 32 gal. (10)
- Rubber boots (4 pair)
- Brooms (2)
- Raincoats (4)
- Portable dehumidifier, 20 pint (1)
- Industrial first aid kit (1)
- Surgical gloves (1 box)
- Methyl alcohol (1 gal)
- Cotton mops, 16 oz (2)
- Pails, 10 qt. + wringer (2)
- AM/FM transistor radio (1)
- Sponges (12)
- Cloth towels (1 bag)
- Cheesecloth (1 box)
- Clipboards (4)
- Tape recorder (2)
- Blank tapes (8)



Be prepared for disaster! Water damage like this can happen when you least expect it.

- Strongly recommend that your institution create a Disaster Committee or Response Team. The members can be appointed or volunteers; but all should be interested in preservation of library materials. Do not ignore other risk management experts on campus; they can be valuable additions to the group.

The above list is not exhaustive; you may need to tailor it to your situation. Neither is it anecdotal; it was developed during and after experiences here at Dartmouth and continues to be refined and expanded to accommodate changes in the environment, resources available, and technological advances in disaster planning and management.

Now that you've read the article, the question you may be asking is: why is this important to me? The answer is: because an emergency, regardless of extent, may visit your library. Being prepared, even marginally, can reduce the danger and increase security and safety.

Note

1. Susan C. George, comp., *Emergency Planning and Management in College Libraries*, CLIP Note # 17 (Chicago, Ill.: ACRL, 1994).

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Emergency manual available

Emergency Planning and Management in College Libraries, ACRL CLIP Note #17, compiled by Susan C. George, is a 146-page guide to preparing your library for almost any disaster, from earthquakes to salvage procedures. It is available to ACRL members for \$25.95, nonmembers \$28.95. Send your order to: Hugh Thompson, ACRL, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611-2795 or call (800) 545-2433, press 7.

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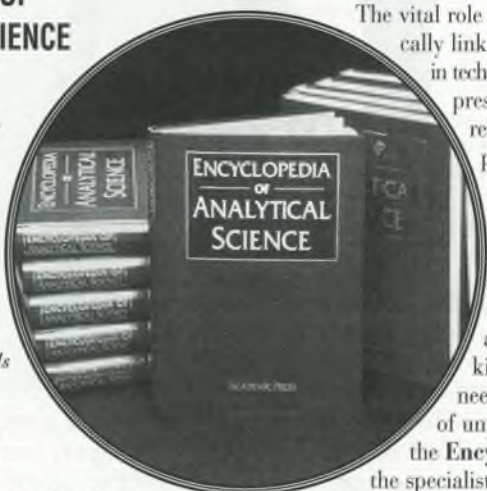
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