Be Prepared:

Writing a Practical Disaster Manual

Sharon Holderman

Introduction

Heritage Preservation conducted a study in 2005 and found 80% of institutions did not have staff trained in disaster response or a disaster plan that included collections.[1] Having a well-constructed, thoughtful disaster manual can minimize the impact of a disaster and reduce recovery time. All libraries, whether they already have a disaster plan, use their larger organization's plan, or have no plan at all, can benefit from writing a library-specific, practical disaster manual. Writing this manual is not simple: it requires extensive preparation for multiple hypothetical emergencies, and it must address the wide range of materials found in libraries like books, journals, photos, archives, computers, and special collections. However, such a manual can be tailored to address a library's exact circumstances and serves as an effective tool for disaster training. A manual can also help reduce recovery time by providing salvage instructions. It is not ideal to begin learning the salvage process while trying to manage other post-disaster chaos like facility damage, service relocation, and potentially hazardous conditions.

The beginning of Fall Quarter 2010 was delayed at The Ohio State University's Agricultural Technical Institute (ATI) due to a tornado. The tornado hit six days prior to the first day of class, but luckily it did not destroy any structures on the ATI campus nor was anyone injured. However, difficulties related to power outages and fallen trees closed campus for four days, which delayed the arrival of students and ultimately postponed the start of school. ATI as an institution had a disaster plan to help manage the emergency, but that plan did not contain any specific information about the library. Although our library was not damaged, it became clear that we needed our own manual for emergencies. We knew writing a disaster manual from scratch was going to be a long, involved process, but we realized we would have been completely unprepared if the tornado had damaged the library. The first step was to determine why we needed a disaster manual:

- Take preventative measures to avoid/minimize disaster damage
- Train all staff for emergency situations, especially our student employees since they often work evenings with no full-time staff on location
- Purchase supplies for during and after a disaster
- Assign responsibilities for disaster recovery
- Learn procedures for salvaging library items

Below is the basic outline of our manual and the questions we addressed in each section. The entire disaster manual is online: http://ati.osu.edu/library/aboutus/reports.shtml.

Before an Emergency

Not all disasters can be avoided, but careful planning can minimize the impact they have on your library.

It is important to be proactive about safety equipment, library policies, and preventative measures in order to help reduce damage and stress after an emergency. Some points to consider:

- Research - What are other libraries doing to prepare for a disaster? What have other libraries learned from their disasters? What resources are available to help you get started[2,3,4]?

- Disaster Response Team - Who should be on the team? Who will head the team? Who should respond first (may depend geographically on home address)? What special training will the team need? Who will be involved from outside the library (police, fire, maintenance, etc.)?

- Exits - Are there exit signs at each door, and are they properly lit? Does each exit have evacuation and severe weather maps, and are they correct? Do emergency exits have functioning door alarms?

- Fire extinguishers - Who does the annual inspection of fire extinguishers? How often are they inspected? Are they logically located? Is the number appropriate for the library space?

- Alert systems - Are the fire alarms easily accessible? Do they notify emergency personnel (police and/or fire) or will library staff need to do that via phone? Are staff members subscribed to an area alert system via text or email? Should the library have a weather radio?

- Disaster supplies - How many staff need supplies? What supplies are appropriate for the geographical area (hurricanes, blizzards, earthquakes, tornados, etc.)? Are the supplies for during an emergency, after an emergency, or both? Should some supplies be kept off-site for recovery?

- Library catalog - Is your catalog backed up off-site? How will you obtain a list of collection inventory if your library is unusable (no electricity, no internet, etc.)?

- Important documents - If your library was damaged, what documents would be irreplaceable? Do you keep these documents located off site digitally (external hard drive, CD, Google Documents)? Are there physical copies protected from fire or water disasters?

- Storing the disaster manual - Where should the disaster manual live digitally and physically? Can it be accessed by key personnel if the library is damaged? What if there is no internet or electricity available?

During an Emergency

It is not always possible to use a manual in the midst of an emergency. However, the manual increases the chances that decisions are made in a calm, logical manner, which reduces the stress on library staff. Organizing this section of the manual by disaster type makes it easiest to find helpful information in the least amount of time. While it is impossible to address every eventuality, focusing on either high probability or high impact scenarios is strongly recommended:

- Weather (blizzard, hurricane, tornado, flood, etc.) - What is the evacuation plan for various types of weather? Should special precautions be taken to prevent rain and flood damage to the collection? Will the library close or stay open as a haven for stranded patrons and staff?

- Fire - Where are the nearest fire alarms? Will the doors be locked or left unlocked upon evacuation? After evacuation, where will staff members meet to account for everyone? Is there a sprinkler system that will cause immediate water damage to library items?

- Facility emergencies (leaking water pipes, broken sewage lines, etc.) - Do you have access to shut off the water? If not, who do you call, and what is that number? How do procedures differ for clean water versus sewage water?

- School shooter - What is the best course of action if the shooter is in the library? What if the shooter is nearby but not in the library? Is there a place in the library that offers cover where bullets cannot penetrate? How do you notify others and police of the situation?

- Bomb threats - How and when do you notify police? Who else should you notify? Do you evacuate or wait for police to do so?

After an Emergency

During the stress of recovering from an emergency, it can be extremely difficult to manage facility cleanup, collection salvage, and continuation of services or staff assignments without

prior planning. A disaster manual should address these issues to make recovery and salvage more efficient.

- Maintaining communications - How will you communicate with relevant personnel, library staff, and patrons regarding services, damages, etc.? How will you manage your website and social media? What if you are at home, do not have electricity or internet? Who will communicate with the local media?

- Securing the facility - If damage forces the library to close, how will security be maintained to assure everyone's safety? How can you protect broken and missing windows to avoid animals and damaging weather?

- Assessing damages - How will you evaluate the extent of the damage and determine what needs attention first? How will you document the damage (photos, videos, written descriptions, etc.)? What other professionals and personnel need to be involved?

- Restoring services - Which services are essential to restore immediately? Can you offer services in a temporary location? Can other libraries help?

- Salvaging materials - What are the salvage priorities? How do you clean items that have soot, ash, water, mold, or other damage? Where would you conduct cleanup? Are there outside vendors you may need to contact?

Supplementary Resources

Supplementary information, the kind that would be included in an appendix, varies widely between different disaster manuals, but its contents are so valuable and address the specific needs of an organization that it is worth addressing. The items in the appendix can be used at any time before, during, or after a disaster.

- List of contacts
  A hard copy list of contacts is essential to have during all facets of an emergency and should include all phone numbers, email addresses, home addresses, and websites as appropriate. Contacts can include library staff, "in case of emergency" contacts for staff, administration personnel, police/security, area libraries that can help, local media outlets, vendors for salvage, listserv addresses, etc. Since the manual is usually a staff-only document, you may want to include logins for voicemail, social media, updating the website, etc.

- Library floor plan
  This can be helpful for library staff members as well as maintenance and emergency staff. Not only can it depict where technology, collections, and equipment are located,

but it can show water pipes, HVAC units, breaker panels, and other maintenance information.

- General list of inventory
  This list should not include collection items because that should be available from the catalog. This list includes computers, phones, printers, furniture, décor, etc. This information becomes valuable when determining insurance claims and replacement needs. It is too difficult to rely on staff members' memories during the stressful process of recovery.

- Necessary forms
  One copy of each form allows copies to be made as needed. These forms may cover damage assessment, staff leave, manual checkout, telephone messages, salvage processing, etc.

- Salvage supplies list
  Most libraries will not keep salvage supplies on hand because hopefully they will never be needed. This list of supplies is a quick reference to determine what you need to purchase so salvage can begin quickly. Specialty supplies can be researched ahead of time to determine the approximate cost and where to purchase them.

Training

All library staff members, including student employees, should have disaster training. Not all staff members may receive the same training, especially if some have leadership roles with the Disaster Response Team. A practical disaster manual serves as a very effective training tool, especially for what to do during a disaster. There are many methods of disaster training, and typically a combination is most effective.

- Review of the manual
- Tests, quizzes, surveys
- Emergency drills
- Peer training
- Scenario training
- Salvage practice

Once you have a disaster manual in place, it should be reviewed on an annual basis to account for new staff, facility changes, and updated technology. It took almost a year to write ATI Library's disaster manual, but the library is now much more prepared for emergency situations. The manual was well-received by the library staff and ATI's administration. Before the manual was finished, we had followed the University of Akron's advice[5] and emptied the bottom shelves of our stacks during a shifting project. This allows 15 to 17 inches of water in that room before the water reaches any books. Less than a year later, an HVAC unit froze and exploded, spouting water into our library. The water reached the stacks but was below the 17-inch threshold, so none of those items were damaged. Luckily that is the extent to which our

disaster manual has been tested. However, saving any items in a small collection has already made the disaster manual well worth our time and effort.

Sharon Holderman (holderman.11@osu.edu) is Library Director at the Ohio State University's Agricultural Technical Institute.

---

[1] "Heritage Health Index Executive Summary." *Heritage Preservation*. Last modified October 24, 2011. http://www.heritagepreservation.org/HHI/execsummary.html.

[2] Field *Guide to Emergency Response*. Washington D.C.: Heritage Preservation, 2006.

[3] Todaro, Julie. *Emergency Preparedness for Libraries.* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009.

[4] Wilkinson, Frances, Linda Lewis, and Nancy Dennis. *Comprehensive Guide to Emergency* Preparedness *and Disaster Recovery.* Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries, 2010.

[5] Calzonetti, Jo Ann and Victor Fleischer. "Don't count on luck, be prepared: Ten lessons learned from the 'great flood' at the University of Akron's Science and Technology Library." *College & Research Libraries News* 72 (February 2011): 85.