Chapter 9

Safety Doesn’t Happen by Accident: Disaster Planning at the University of Pittsburgh

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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2012, events on the University of Pittsburgh’s campus in Oakland prompted concerns about personal safety and the disaster plan for the library system. These disquieting events, coupled with the need to re-write the outdated ULS disaster plan, hastened planning efforts that had begun that very spring. Through discussion of the re-writing of the disaster plan for the University of Pittsburgh’s University Library System (ULS), this chapter will educate readers on library safety concerns and potential resources that can be explored and built upon to better prepare for disasters and emergency situations. The lessons learned from this planning process will likely mirror situations other libraries find themselves in and offer guidance on where to turn and how to educate staff.

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2012, events on and near the University of Pittsburgh’s (Pitt) campus in Oakland prompted concerns about personal safety and the disaster plan for the library system. A shooting incident occurred at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, resulting in two deaths, seven injuries, and a lockdown of the surrounding area including campus buildings. Additionally, over the span of February, March, and April of that year, approximately 145 bomb threats were made to the University. This caused a multitude of evacuations at all hours of the day, a heavy drain on Pitt Police resources, and seriously disrupted university operations.

These disquieting events, coupled with the need to re-write the outdated University Library System’s (ULS) disaster plan, hastened planning efforts that had begun that very spring. Preservation staff had most recently written a disaster plan for the ULS in 2000; while small updates and verifications were conducted each year, the plan needed to be reconceived as a whole to bet-
ter serve the library system’s needs. As an initial information-gathering step, preservation staff met with many library departments and staff groupings to discuss how to better protect its collections as well as solicit feedback for the disaster planning process. Overwhelmingly, staff were more concerned about personal safety and protocols than with further training or prevention measures for saving on-site physical collection materials. Staff repeatedly requested that emergency protocols and actions be included in the new disaster plan.

The broadened scope of this resulting disaster plan required that extensive resources be consulted on personal safety and emergency protocols; ultimately, both internal (within the university) and external resources have been instrumental in preparing ULS staff for emergency situations to the best of their abilities. Internally, the University of Pittsburgh Police as well as the Department of Environmental Health and Safety have provided a wealth of plans, protocols, educational documents, and training opportunities. Externally, the Alliance for Response Pittsburgh chapter (sponsored by Heritage Preservation), along with its connections to local emergency management professionals, has been key in forging necessary alliances with other Pittsburgh-area cultural heritage institutions and providing free training opportunities. These external connections may prove valuable in the event of a city-wide disaster and this cross-collaboration is vital no matter how small the calamity.

Through discussion of the re-writing of the disaster plan for Pitt’s library system, this chapter will educate readers on library safety concerns and potential resources that can be explored and built upon to better prepare for disasters and emergency situations. The lessons that ULS staff have learned from this planning process will likely mirror situations other libraries find themselves in and offer guidance on where to turn and how to educate staff.

A TUMULTUOUS SPRING

On March 8th, 2012, a Thursday afternoon, John Shick entered the lobby of the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic (WPIC) and opened fire. Therapist Michael Schaab was killed and seven others were injured; the gunman was killed by bullets from the University of Pittsburgh Police. Shick fired from two semiautomatic handguns right before two o’clock in the afternoon (Rubinkam, Matheson, Loviglio, & Farrar, 2012). Early inaccurate reports stated there was a second shooter and a potential hostage situation that led to additional panic. Twitter feeds from people hiding inside the building, from witnesses on the street, and from people in contact with those hiding gave rise to the confusion since very few knew the accurate details. People could only speculate on what they heard or barely saw; thus reports varied widely for most of the afternoon until the police secured the situation and informed the media outlets. Heavily armed police and SWAT team members kept people back from the building, from witnesses on the street, and from people in contact with those hiding gave rise to the confusion since very few knew the accurate details. People could only speculate on what they heard or barely saw; thus reports varied widely for most of the afternoon until the police secured the situation and informed the media outlets. Heavily armed police and SWAT team members kept people back from the building, from witnesses on the street, and from people in contact with those hiding gave rise to the confusion since very few knew the accurate details. People could only speculate on what they heard or barely saw; thus reports varied widely for most of the afternoon until the police secured the situation and informed the media outlets. Heavily armed police and SWAT team members kept people back from the building, from witnesses on the street, and from people in contact with those hiding gave rise to the confusion since very few knew the accurate details. People could only speculate on what they heard or barely saw; thus reports varied widely for most of the afternoon until the police secured the situation and informed the media outlets. Heavily armed police and SWAT team members kept people back from the building, from witnesses on the street, and from people in contact with those hiding gave rise to the confusion since very few knew the accurate details. People could only speculate on what they heard or barely saw; thus reports varied widely for most of the afternoon until the police secured the situation and informed the media outlets. Heavily armed police and SWAT team members kept people back from the building, from witnesses on the street, and from people in contact with those hiding gave rise to the confusion since very few knew the accurate details. People could only speculate on what they heard or barely saw; thus reports varied widely for most of the afternoon until the police secured the situation and informed the media outlets. Heavily armed police and SWAT team members kept people back from the building, from witnesses on the street, and from people in contact with those hiding gave rise to the confusion since very few knew the accurate details. People could only speculate on what they heard or barely saw; thus reports varied widely for most of the afternoon until the police secured the situation and informed the media outlets. Heavily armed police and SWAT team members kept people back from the building, from witnesses on the street, and from people in contact with those hiding gave rise to the confusion since very few knew the accurate details. People could only speculate on what they heard or barely saw; thus reports varied widely for most of the afternoon until the police secured the situation and informed the media outlets. Heavily armed police and SWAT team members kept people back from the building, from witnesses on the street, and from people in contact with those hiding gave rise to the confusion since very few knew the accurate details. People could only speculate on what they heard or barely saw; thus reports varied widely for most of the afternoon until the police secured the situation and informed the media outlets. Heavily armed police and SWAT team members kept people back from the building, from witnesses on the street, and from people in contact with those hiding gave rise to the confusion since very few knew the accurate details. People could only speculate on what they heard or barely saw; thus reports varied widely for most of the afternoon until the police secured the situation and informed the media outlets.
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