Disaster Management and Continuity Planning in Libraries: Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Libraries are taking on new roles in a disaster and with that comes strategic responsibilities beyond traditional asset recovery activities. In the past, library disaster plans have emphasized recovery of materials. Here, the emphasis is on continuing business operations. Libraries have become the centers of communication for their communities in a crisis. This article will demonstrate the essential role of libraries before, during and after a disaster, both short term and long term and how to get a seat at the table with community planners by demonstrating the functions that are critical to recovery. A literature review and case study are used to develop these recommendations. A critical success factor is to use a disaster preparation methodology that includes a business continuity plan.

KEYWORDS:
Business Continuity, Business Impact Analysis, Contingency Planning, Continuity of Operations Plan, COOP, Gulf Coast, Hurricanes, Katrina

INTRODUCTION

In August of 2005 Hurricane Katrina unexpectedly and in a spectacular fashion threw libraries along the Gulf Coast of the United States, especially public libraries, into the national spotlight as they assisted an unprecedented number of displaced users in finding shelter, locating loved ones, filling out FEMA forms, applying for unemployment, making insurance claims, replacing birth certificates and driver’s licenses, and much more. It became apparent to everyone, at least within the Louisiana library community, that previous iterations of disaster plans were not sufficient to cope with a disaster of this magnitude. Until now, most disaster planning for libraries was built around securing buildings and physical collections — collection preservation, collection recovery, collection replacement. There were no manuals detailing how to work in a situation in which all public infrastructure was seriously damaged or non-existent. Having a list of phone numbers of emergency services such as fire and police was useless when these entities were under water and/or disabled as well. Likewise, having a list of staff home phone numbers was useless when landlines were down and the staff scattered across five states. Here are some of the critical lessons learned as a result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. Those lessons are:

1. Existing emergency plans were inadequate.
2. Business (i.e., library service) continuity—both how to keep the libraries open immediately after the disaster and how to maintain the continuity of library business—was not a feature of prior public library disaster planning.
3. Traditional lists of staff home phone numbers or other electronic contacts were inadequate. Landlines were down and communication was effectively cut off.

4. *The fact that even people that had never been library users came to public libraries for assistance cemented the role of public libraries in a disaster* (Hamilton, 2011, p.43).

What made Katrina substantially different from previous disasters along the Gulf Coast was one significant thing – the Internet. As more and more services especially local, state and federal governmental services were made available via the Internet and in some cases available only on the Internet, libraries became *de facto* centers of communication for their communities on a daily basis. Library staff expertise with the management and use of electronic records and documents fundamentally changed how libraries communicate with and serve the public before, during and after a disaster. Because of the Internet, during a disaster libraries become an essential link to the world outside of the disaster zone. This began to take shape as far back September 11, 2001 when libraries stepped into new roles and established new models of service for citizens in the aftermath of a disaster. Libraries were able to update their websites with information for their clients and get email reestablished while moving the base of operations to a different site outside of the destruction zone (Eng, 2002). Similarly, in 2005, libraries along the Gulf Coast quickly adapted to what was happening around them whether or not they were directly impacted and shifted their priorities of service to meet the numerous and essential needs of evacuees and other responders.

This article examines and validates the important roles traditionally performed by public libraries prior to the year 2000 and still performed today, as well as the additional roles now being played as demonstrated by rapid changes in technology and recent natural disasters. These duties include providing 24/7 Internet access; updating websites and blogs to keep officials and the general public up to date on all relevant, local information; facilitating computer centers for business continuity to continue to meet established community expectations; initiating access to information for citizens to locate and communicate with loved ones; and command centers for FEMA and local officials. But the duties also include those traditional services that libraries have always provided such as shelter, storytelling (for displaced children), reference assistance, etc. that provide a sense of normalcy.

Rather than recovery of collections, this article focuses on continuity of operations plans (COOP) so that libraries can continue to meet the needs of their communities in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. Although specific events such as hurricanes will be mentioned, the overall goal is to show how libraries can prepare themselves to take on whatever roles are needed by their specific communities after a crisis of any kind. Emphasis is on how to deal with specific disruptions to service, such as an influx of evacuees, displacement of staff, loss of power or damaged libraries, regardless of whether the causal event is a hurricane, tornado, flood, man-made disaster, etc.

Using a businesslike approach, we will discuss and examine disaster management solutions for libraries including several methods of developing service continuity plans. It is the premise of this article that, as more government, social, and business services are available to users only via online, while at the same time broadband adoption remains inconsistent nationwide, libraries will become, over time, more critical to all citizens, but especially underserved and vulnerable populations, as centers of communication providing access to information and normalcy in a disaster.

**CONTINUITY OF OPERATIONS PLANNING**

**Creating a Plan**

Jones (2011) identifies five steps to creating a continuity plan:
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