Chapter 3
The Natural Role of
the Public Library

WHY LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS?

Extreme weather events, natural disasters and unexpected natural or man-made community emergencies pose distinct problems for public policy theorists, political leaders, and practicing managers deciding how to mount a response. Preparing for a potentially deadly and destructive unexpected event or a natural disaster is a daunting task. According to Comfort (2002), most emergency professionals tasked with mounting a response to a natural disaster typically consider these events rare occasions and prefer to address mitigation along the lines of acceptable risk instead of applying more direct preplanned tactics. Experience has taught us that when extreme events or natural disasters occur and public agencies fail to respond promptly, directly and efficiently, the consequences are more severe. One assumes that the emergency manager in charge incorporates resources when determining acceptable risk to ensure a positive outcome. One seldom considered critical resource is the public library. With its iconic facilities, educated staff, and digital resource access, the public library already operates as a personal command center for customers seeking data, services, and resources to survive on a normal day. During unexpected extreme events, the library is frequently the unsung hero for the majority of the community in crisis.

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Within the five emergency management mission areas, there are seventeen Emergency Support Functions (ESFs) that guide actions in a general response to a large emergency or disaster. The National Response Framework put out through FEMA, outlines the ESFs at the Federal level. The National Response Framework also serves as the guiding document for state and local emergency operations plans, ensuring that resource requests and information sharing moves through all levels of government. Among the seventeen ESFs, the most natural fit for libraries is Emergency Support Function #6: Mass Care. It is through this function that human service needs promote the delivery of service and the implementation of programs to assist individuals, households and families affected by an incident. In this scope, emergency assistance includes providing recharging stations, collecting and providing information on victims or property to family members, providing temporary child care, and assisting in expediting the processing of new benefits claims.

Librarians perform similar tasks on a daily basis; making it a natural choice for emergency management personnel to enlist their aid during disasters. Emergency management should engage library staff in a developing role or relationship because their skill set may not always be known to public safety officials. Short term recovery needs that are housed under mass care including feeding, information needs, filling out paperwork, and temporary shelter parallel human services with public safety in the role of first responders. The only difference is first responders are regularly trained for emergency and disaster situations while human services, including libraries, are willing to help, but have not been invited to collaborate. Despite not traditionally being a contributing planned partner, libraries have organically helped as disaster needs arose in their communities.

Libraries must present their case to emergency management to show the benefits that their building and frontline staff can provide in disaster recovery. This was the case of Chesterfield County Public Library (CCPL) during Hurricane Irene (Mabe, 2016). The library director convinced the personnel working the emergency operations center that the libraries were their perfect partners. This relationship continues to evolve, due to a strong culture of teamwork and priorities that are well defined and consistent with the overall mission of the county. Norfolk Public Safety Director Jim Redick (2016) has suggested that the role ambiguity is replaced with role clarity. As the role of local human services continues to evolve, emergency management must engage these resources, specifically libraries, to provide whole community preparedness, response, and recovery.
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