

## ***Challenge for Libraries as Information Managers: Hurricane Preparedness and Response***

**Authors:** John Brobst and Lauren H. Mandel are Doctoral Candidates at the College of Information, Florida State University, and are Research Associates at the Information Use Management & Policy Institute.

The past decade saw heightened hurricane activity and more than \$150 billion in damage in 2004 and 2005 (Pielke, 2008). Libraries responded by taking steps to better prepare for the information needs of the libraries and their communities arising from these emergency situations. Libraries adapted their service roles in support of their communities to manage information services tailored to emergency support and assistance to hurricane victims (Bertot, Jaeger, Langa, & McClure, 2006; Jaeger, Langa, McClure, & Bertot, 2007; McClure, Ryan, Mandel, Brobst, Hinnant, Andrade, et al., in press).

There has been no systematic effort to organize and assist libraries toward providing information services related to hurricane/disaster planning and response. Reacting to this need, the Information Use Management & Policy Institute (Information Institute) at Florida State University (FSU) received a grant from FSU's Florida Catastrophic Storm Risk Management Center, *Hurricane/Disaster Preparedness and Response by Utilizing Florida Public Libraries* (Information Institute, 2008). This project is administered by Dr. Charles R. McClure (PI) and Joe Ryan (Project Manager). The project website is available at <http://www.ii.fsu.edu/hurricanes>.

**Emergency Management Roles and Responsibilities:** This research included collecting various plans, services, and activities demonstrating libraries' information management regarding hurricane preparedness and response and interviewing over 150 library staff, emergency response personnel, and others. Also, project staff met with various local and state officials to understand better the local and situational factors affecting libraries' ability to provide information services tailored to hurricane preparedness and response. Preliminary findings suggest a range of library hurricane/disaster information management roles and responsibilities, as well as the value of building a response network:

- **Be a community information hub:** Offer to residents and emergency managers reliable, secure means of communication during disaster recovery and accurate information to prepare for and recover from hurricane threats, including access to E-Government via technology and aid in completion of forms as well as assisting small businesses to find the information and support they need to re-open for business;
- **Extend normal services in abnormal times:** Restore hope and re-establish a neighborhood government presence by offering stress reduction, a return to normalcy, and family relief services, both inside the library and through outreach efforts;
- **Aid evacuees:** Respond to unexpected, temporary demand for information and services from hurricane evacuees;
- **Serve as a point of distribution (POD):** Manage and distribute meals, sandbags, ice, tarps, etc.;
- **Be a community organizer and meeting place:** Provide information management services, meeting facilities, and office space to community responders;
- **Provide improvised on demand services:** Respond to requests from emergency management or local government and improvise new activities without respect to traditional library roles, as well as registering with county emergency personnel managers for hurricane assignment; and
- **Ensure library continuity and restoration:** Plan for and take actions to ensure continuity of library operations and information services after a hurricane.

These service roles begin to describe a menu of information management activities in which a library might be involved. Clearly, not all libraries can provide all of these service roles. Depending on resources, local government and community needs, and the library's relationship with emergency providers, some of these service roles may be especially appropriate for an individual library. These service roles are being further defined and made operational for individual libraries.

**Project Products:** Ongoing project activities, including the development of a Web portal and training sessions, will ease the disaster response burden on librarians, improve the states' overall disaster preparedness and response, reduce the public's risk, and contribute successful information management strategies for mitigating the impact of a hurricane/disaster on a local community.

- **Web Portal:** One important aspect of this project is assuring that the information, resources, and best practices are available to libraries. A Web portal will serve as an easy-to-use resource for librarians. The portal will be a dynamic, content-rich Web site containing valuable information on all aspects of hurricane preparedness and response through a keyword-searchable database. As libraries prepare for and react to emergencies, this portal will help promote collaboration, information management and exchange, and more effective communication with the emergency response organizations that serve local communities. The portal is currently available at <http://www.ii.fsu.edu/hurricanes>.
- **Training Programs:** As part of a grant, this project includes development of training programs for librarians and local officials so that project findings can be made available to the broader library and government communities. The training program materials will focus on ways libraries and other agencies can better manage information related to hurricane/disaster planning and response through collaboration, skills enhancement, and provision of targeted information services for hurricane preparedness and response.

**Benefit to Libraries and Local Residents:** Many libraries already provide a range of useful information management services and activities in preparing for a hurricane or disaster, yet there are no guidelines, recommendations, or best practices available to assist libraries with these roles. Libraries involved in the provision of disaster-related information services have learned by doing, and there has been no systematic effort to share what was learned at these individual libraries across libraries and other government agencies. The coordination, management, and integration of information resources via the project Web site is an important contribution. The project's efforts to develop plans, guidelines, service roles, and best practices equips libraries with the information management skills to respond more successfully to hurricanes and other disasters and, in partnership with other agencies, mitigate some of the damage and destruction that these hurricanes bring to the Gulf Coast and Southeast regions.

#### References

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