



Making the Case

The following is an extended argument drafted by Joe Ryan <jnryan@mailier.syr.edu>, Project Manager, Hurricane/Disaster Preparedness and Response by Utilizing Florida Public Libraries Project, Florida State University, Information Institute <<http://www.ii.fsu.edu/>> for why public libraries should be viewed as an “essential service” in a community’s response to hurricanes. Should you produce one of these for local use please e-mail a copy to Joe Ryan so that he can improve this draft for others.

Making the Case for Public Libraries as Essential Disaster Services

Objective: To convince county emergency management, local government and key utility providers that public libraries are “essential services” in disaster recovery. Local government, emergency management and key utilities agree to quickly restore public libraries to service after a disaster so that the public library can do its part in the community’s response to disaster.

Why matters: Locally public library managers will be able to get quick access to their facilities for damage assessment, public libraries will be able to reopen sooner because debris will be cleared faster, minor repairs accomplished quicker; electricity, telecommunications and other utilities will be restored sooner and library personnel will be assigned on an emergency basis to libraries rather than scattered to other emergency tasks. Federal agency (i.e. FEMA) “essential service” designation enables public libraries to be reimbursed for costs on par with other responders.

The case: Public libraries have fulfilled a variety of roles essential to disaster recovery including:

- **Safe Haven:** The public library is the community’s living room and study before and after a storm with safe, secure buildings, relaxing space, light, air conditioning, bathrooms and comfortable chairs. Open public libraries re-assert government presence in communities and provide hope.
- **Normal services:** The community counts on normal library service before and after the storm, be it book DVD or Internet use, reference or family programming. Normal service reduces stress, returns normalcy, and offers recreation and distraction in a time of great need. Some libraries offer specific responder family services allowing responders to do their job with less worry about their families.
- **Disaster Recovery Center (DRC)** The public library offers community a DRC whether a FEMA designated DR or not. The library becomes a place to prepare residents for a DRC visit. The library may serve as a Point of distribution (POD) for hot meals, tarps, ice, sand and other essentials. The community uses the library to meet and make sense of what just happened to them.
- **Information Hub** The community counts on the library before and after a storm to offer access to copiers, phones, fax computers, WiFi, Internet and hurricane preparation and recovery information and assistance.
- **Cultural Resource Coordinator:** In some communities, the public library may serve as a liaison between county emergency management (EM) and the community’s cultural institutions (CIs) from aquariums, museums and zoos. A useful way to manage community assets in a crisis.
- **Evacuee Resource:** Every year evacuees must leave their homes to escape hurricane threat. Sometimes evacuees may come to our town in great numbers. The public library is one of a team of community organizations that respond to evacuee need. Evacuees



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count on the nearest public library for a safe haven, normal service, disaster recovery center, and emergency

information hub.

- **Improvisation:** The public library, its facilities and staff, are part of a team of disaster responders. The community counts on the public library during a disaster to improvise and do whatever is needed as directed by emergency management and local government.

For further discussion of public library hurricane roles see: <http://www.ii.fsu.edu/hurricanes/>. Since the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in 1992, Miami-Dade (FL) County government has agreed to restore three county services as soon as possible after a hurricane: police, fire and public libraries. Local governments and Federal agencies could learn from these experienced disaster responders and move public libraries to essential disaster service status.

Next Steps: The public library suggests that county emergency management, local government and key utility providers meet to explore ways that the public library can better assist the community in its hurricane response.;