



Sheltering in the Stacks

With the right plan in place, your library can be a lifesaver in times of need

By Michele Stricker, Associate Director, Library Support Services,
 New Jersey State Library

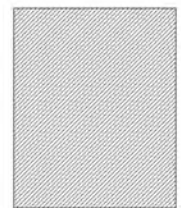


Adults shared space with children at the Princeton Public Library.

When disaster strikes, where do you go? After Hurricane Sandy wreaked havoc throughout the state in late October 2012, people went to their local libraries. The day after the storm passed, New Jersey libraries rallied, and were the places residents flocked to as they began to put their lives back together. Libraries, even those without power, were pressed into service as ad hoc Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs), providing a respite from the storm for shattered communities.

An Untapped Community Resource According to the official FEMA definition, a Disaster Recovery Center is a readily accessible facility or mobile office where people can go for information about disaster assistance programs. DRC's must be prequalified by FEMA, and are often located in schools, malls, municipal facilities, and senior centers—any place that can accommodate crowds. Not every library can serve as a cer-

тифициed DRC since FEMA has limited financial and staffing resources. However, libraries have served as unofficial community DRC's during storms and other emergencies. Librarians have worked right alongside FEMA personnel, local officials and emergency responders, supporting their services and providing assistance throughout a disaster. It is a natural role they assume in the community without any official mandate.





Libraries all over NJ served as havens from the storm and stayed open for extended hours

well-equipped with internet, free Wi-Fi, email, fax, photocopiers, and land lines. After many a crisis, libraries have served as temporary headquarters for FEMA, government agencies, relief workers, and even the military. It's no wonder people flock to libraries after a disaster. Their services and resources are trusted by all, even by non-library users.

Information Providers According to the American Red Cross, the number one need after a disaster is for accurate information--exactly what librarians are trained to provide. They know how to deliver authoritative information on multiple platforms, both in-house and at a temporary location. Furthermore, the general public views librarians as trust

Incorporate libraries into your state and local preparedness exercise scenarios, and action plans.

Hurricane Sandy reminded municipal, county and state officials that libraries are valuable assets in disaster response, and serve as a rallying point by offering a welcoming refuge for displaced citizens. Located in every community, libraries are a natural gathering place for people after a disaster because of the many roles they play in the community. They are a safe haven, an information and technology hub, and serve as a headquarters for local volunteer organizations that distribute food, clothing and supplies. They have secure buildings, comfortable seating, flexible spaces, heat and air conditioning and rest room facilities. Their tech labs are

worthy, approachable, knowledgeable, and customer-service oriented. Many library staff live in the community and know their customers personally.

The New Jersey State Library stresses that librarians serve in the capacity of second responders, who support first responder such as firefighters, police, and medical personnel. We do not advocate that librarians rush in alongside emergency personnel. The objective of the second responder is to enable people meet their personal needs, so they can return to work. Libraries continue to play a role in local disaster recovery long after the disaster is "over." Emergency teams withdraw once the crisis recedes. Government agencies pack-up and leave once forms are completed and aid distributed. But libraries are still assisting people affected by Sandy today, two years later.

Social Media for Emergency Response

After Sandy, people inundated Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube with information and images of storm damage. People used social media to connect, share, and collaborate on their disaster recovery efforts, and to keep up with local news and alerts. Largely because of Sandy, social



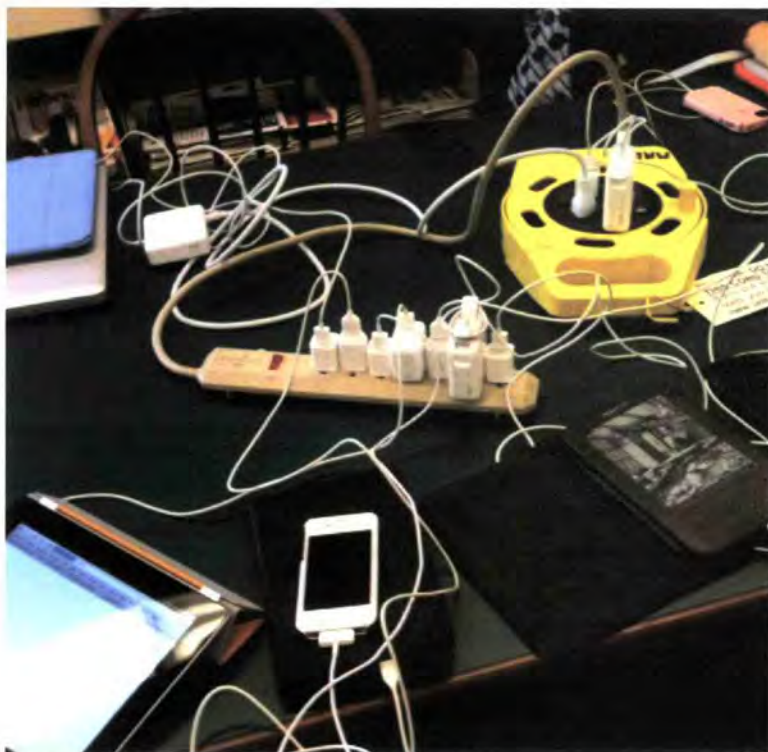
At the Burlington County Library's Evesham Branch, the number one emergency call made after Sandy was from people who needed to plug medical equipment in to stay alive.

media is now integrated into all emergency preparedness and communications efforts. The public will not wait

for official information from municipal officials and emergency management. They are actively posting what they know, and seeking what they don't. Websites and email will continue to be important resources for the public, but in a time of crisis, and the resulting communications noise, urgent messages need to be pushed out directly into the social media world. Social media is a tool particularly well-suited to librarians who are information professionals trained to recognize vetted sources, and early adapters of new technologies.

Virtual Operations Support Teams (VOST)

Let's strategize about a new partnership between local officials, emergency responders, and librarians. The Virtual Operation Support Team (VOST) is a relatively new concept in emergency response, and perfect for the librarians' skill set. Administered by trained volunteers who are recruited from within the community, VOST effectively makes use of social media tools to help get information to those officials and first respon-



Every available aisle and corner was put to good use at the Maplewood Public Library.

ders who might otherwise be inundated by the sheer volume of data generated during a disaster.

A VOST is activated locally, regionally or statewide to perform specific functions during a disaster, wherever emergency responders need extra support. The team leader reports directly to officials and emergency management within the affected area. An increasing number of emergency managers use social media to share updates and information, but few have the staff, resources, or the time to keep up with the constant and over-



What to do when the power is out? The Lodi Public Library had lots of old fashioned board games to keep kids occupied.

whelming flow of information during a disaster. Even small, local disasters can stretch the resources of an emergency response team, leaving the public with unanswered questions or incorrect information from unofficial sources. Consider establishing a VOST in your community. Professional training is available.

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Neighbors came to the Middletown Public Library to warm up and help themselves to free coffee.

What You Can Do After Sandy, many local officials and emergency responders recognized the many contributions libraries made to their community's recovery, and are now ready to work with librarians to prepare for future emergencies.

If your local library is not aware of the importance of their role in disaster recovery, approach them to open a discussion. You can help educate librarians about risk assessment, mitigation, and preparedness planning. Incorporate libraries into your state and local preparedness exercise scenarios, and action plans. Start by establishing a primary point of contact at the library and give them a seat at the table at your planning meetings. Include them in briefings and updates. Realize that in order to sustain this partnership, training, outreach, and communication are part of an ongoing process.

Recognize the importance of getting your library open quickly after a disaster (restoring power, clearing debris, doing minor repairs), so that they can provide essential services to the community. Work on a plan together. The library has always been there for the community, but it can truly be a lifesaver to a community in need. 📖