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SUPERSTORM SANDY RECOVERY

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Our Libraries Were Ports in the Storm



By Marian R. Bauman
Director, Neptune Public Library
& Randy Bishop, former Mayor, Neptune

So, when disaster strikes, where do you go? After Sandy, people went to their local libraries. In fact, libraries throughout New Jersey served their communities as ad hoc disaster recovery centers, whether at their facility or out in the field, like in Neptune. Even though they may have sustained great damage to their own buildings, librarians rallied and were in the forefront of providing services and information to those in need, and respite from the storm.

Unless under water or without power, New Jersey libraries were open. Residents received access to computers and free wireless to conduct business; to contact relatives or their insurance companies; find tree removal specialists; fill out FEMA forms; or just to power up their devices and warm up. Libraries were ports in a storm.

The New Jersey State Library in partnership with the National Network Libraries of Medicine, LibraryLinkNJ, and the New Jersey Library Association organized a statewide disaster planning and recovery summit in May titled Ports in a Storm: the Library as Community Partner in Disaster Response, which convened 125 attendees. The goal of the summit was to bring medical and public librarians together with the emergency planning community, first responders, public health workers and community-based and faith-based groups with disaster-related responsibilities and provide a forum for discussing roles libraries and information

professionals can play in supporting future disaster preparedness, response and recovery efforts.

Library personnel in Neptune demonstrated the ingenuity and commitment of library staff members in many coastal communities.

In the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, Neptune Mayor Randy Bishop knew that residents of Shark River Hills, the hardest-hit section of Neptune, would need assistance. He asked the Neptune Public Library, specifically Outreach Librarian John Bonney and municipal staffer Michele Narciso to help.

He wanted to use the Library's mobile computer lab in a tent located right at the Shark River Marina. The Office of Emergency Management (OEM) provided a vehicle to generate electricity and serve as a WiFi internet node, set up a tent with tables and chairs, and kept it warm with a propane heater. John brought not only the library computers, but extension cords, and extra power strips for people to charge their cell phones, tablets and iPads and plug in their laptops.

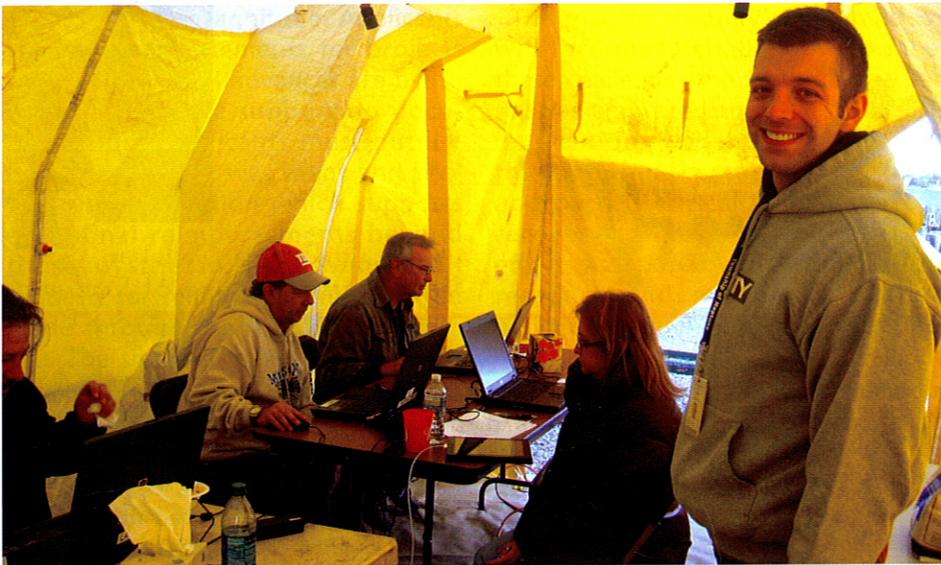
On their first day at the site, Bonney and Narciso walked within a three block radius of the Shark River to deliver flyers to make residents aware that help with applying for FEMA assistance was just down the road. Most area streets were blocked by fallen trees and downed wires. In many cases it was several weeks before residents of Shark

River Hills could get out of their neighborhood with their vehicles. They could, however, walk down to the water and get help in the yellow tent.

In addition to the original two staff members, volunteer Beth Miller (who lives in Shark River Hills and is the manager of the Ocean Township branch of Monmouth County Library), Neptune Library staffer Jenn Martino, and library director Marian Bauman also worked to assist the residents who came to the tent. Many of them did not know how to use a computer or navigate the internet, so volunteers actually sat with them and filled out their online forms.



Ocean Township Branch Manager Beth Miller, Senior Librarian John Bonney and Neptune Library director Marian Bauman in front of the OEM vehicle that was providing electricity and WiFi to the tent.



Neptune Senior Librarian John Bonney helps Shark River Hills residents file FEMA applications and deal with insurance issues.

The tent became their link to the township. Residents either didn't want to leave their homes or couldn't navigate out of The Hills. Most of their cars were damaged and they had no power. While Bonney and the other volunteers helped with FEMA applications, setting up new email accounts, filing insurance claims, and emailing messages to family and friends; Narciso directed contacts with municipal departments and got answers about bulk-pickup, mold remediation, condemnation of unsafe dwellings, water distribution, and availability of garbage bags. She even lent her personal phone to residents so they could call family or their insurance companies, as her mobile carrier was one of the few working at the time. She also coordinated with some of the cleanup volunteers that began to trickle into the township, including Amish youth who came to help residents with trash removal each day.

Many other local groups stepped right into the void left by Sandy. Boat owners brought free water, batteries and clothing to distribute to residents. The Hamilton Methodist Church came with huge tureens of hot soup and crackers and they served everyone who was helping, including public works employees, Office of Emergency Management (OEM) staff, library volunteers, and residents with no power or food. Shark River Hills Fire Company set up grills and cooked hot food, as did many residents who didn't want to discard food that was thawing in their freezers. PTO members from Summer-

field School helped go door to door passing out food packages and information from the township.

The Meals on Wheels program administered through the Senior Center was in desperate need of volunteer drivers to drop off food and check on homebound seniors. Library staff members made sure that the fragile residents had cold bag lunches until their power was restored and they could heat up their meals. In several cases, this meant walking up eleven flights of stairs to deliver food, as the elevators were not working. Following the storm, library staff also helped cook

and serve food at the Senior Center, which had a generator and kitchen. Donations poured in from local grocery stores anxious to help with the relief efforts. Police, Fire, First Aid and OEM personnel were eating all of their meals there, as no food vendors in town were open.

Meanwhile, back at the municipal building, library and municipal staff were helping by manning the phones in Town Hall 24/7 for the first week. Reference librarians entered FEMA data to help track all of the hours expended in dealing with the storm, as they were familiar with spreadsheets. As information came in, street-closures were tallied by librarians. Some staff worked at the High School transportation center during the height of the storm, helping document the individuals evacuated from shoreline areas.

Up until Superstorm Sandy, the Neptune Public Library was seen primarily as a place to check out books and movies. After the storm, it's now clear to our residents that our library staff are more than just bookworms!

To see how libraries play a vital role in community disaster response and recovery see: Public Libraries & First Responders: Partners in Emergency Response at www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZUEChx174g and photos of New Jersey libraries assisting in the recovery at www.flickr.com/groups/njlasandyrecovery/. ▲

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