

Build It And They Will Come: Libraries and Disaster Preparedness

by Harlan Greene

The telephone rings in the dark. As you reach to answer it, you see that your bedside clock reads 3:30 A.M. An unfamiliar voice tells you that the building next to your library is on fire. The caller wants to know what to save in the few minutes before the library roof ignites.

What do you do?

- A. Roll over and go back to sleep assuming it is all a bad dream?
- B. Make a hasty decision that will affect you, your institution and your colleagues for a long time to come?

Or:

- C. Reach for your disaster plan, tell the caller what the plan recommends saving in priority order, make a phone call to summon your recovery team, and proceed to the library?

Faced with such a scenario, all of us, no doubt, would wish that it were just a bad dream. But statistics in North Carolina show that, unfortunately, it is more likely to be answer "B." North Carolina libraries are experiencing more and more disasters, ranging from major floods, hurricanes, and fires to smaller man-made ones such as acts of vandalism, weekend plumbing leaks, surprises in bookdrops, or mold blooming in summer-closed school libraries. Most North Carolina libraries have not prepared an alternative "C"; they have failed to develop a plan to deal with the complex, costly, and confusing issues that arise in a disaster. Why so?

It may be that library directors, school administrators, and other resource allocators think that a disaster could never happen in their library, or they do not realize the value of a disaster plan as a management tool. Some believe that, if hit by a disaster, they and their staff instinc-

tively would know what to do, or that an emergency procedures statement would offer sufficient guidance. Still others may admit that they need a disaster plan, but never find the time and money to do it. Whatever the reason, the results are the same: libraries will suffer, lose, and pay more if they do not have a plan for disaster preparedness and recovery.

Perhaps if librarians better understood what a versatile management tool a disaster plan can be, it would be more competitive for staff time and attention. A disaster plan tells more than how to salvage damaged materials. Because it is based on a diagnosis of the library's particular situation, it can prevent damage from happening in the first place. Obvious physical threats to the collection and bad practices are often identified and corrected in the course of planning at little or no cost. The assessment that the staff makes also is a valuable tool for persuading resource allocators that policy changes and improvements in the facility are needed, even if they cost money. And because disaster planning involves all levels in the library, it can bring out hidden talents in staff and result in team building. Couple this with the fact that disaster planning will save an institution time and money in a crisis, and the arguments for it are compelling.

How difficult and time-consuming is it? Disaster planning takes a moderate, not a major amount of time and staff resources. It often codifies practices that have been pursued on an ad hoc or occasional basis. At a minimum, a library can prepare its own disaster manual using one of the planning aids listed in the special pull-out Primer and Resource Guide in this issue. Hiring a consultant to help in planning may be an option for better-endowed libraries. Most, however, find it more productive and cost-effective to send one or

two staff members to a disaster planning and/or recovery workshop sponsored by national, regional, or state organizations (consult the Resource Guide for more information). These frequently are subsidized to keep the cost as low as possible. Participants get the guidance they need to assess their library's strengths and weaknesses, a profile of responses to disasters large and small, and guidance in assembling resources ranging from locally purchased supplies to national firms specializing in disaster response. The product is a manual, usually loose-leaf, that easily can be updated and replicated in many copies for distribution to staff members to keep at home and work.

Hands-on training in disaster recovery is particularly valuable. A combination of lectures and hands-on practice teaches

*... the higher the
technological format,
the slimmer the chance
of recovery.*

staff members how to deal with materials under conditions that replicate a water-related disaster. They learn not only how to handle, pack, and control materials ranging from damp to soaking wet, but also which materials demand attention first and what the likely outcomes of damage to each type of material will be. For example, clay-coated or shiny papers such as those used in art books will fuse into an irreparable lump if allowed to remain wet for over four hours, while most other books demand attention within twenty-four to

forty-eight hours. And the higher the technological format, the slimmer the chance of recovery. A book is usually easier to save than a computer tape or disc.

Whether staff work alone or in conjunction with a consultant or a workshop, they will address a similar package of issues when putting together a disaster plan. The process always includes *a survey of current conditions* to see where the hazards are. Staff examine the building from the outside in and from top to bottom. Librarians are used to seeing buildings only from the parking lot, and only during working hours. They also should see what goes on nights and weekends. Employees walk around the premises to see if any wood is rotting, if bricks are loose, if shrubbery is climbing the walls, or if vents are uncovered. Neighbors need to be looked over to determine what hazards they pose. If the building next door is a fire hazard, or if the office above the library's computer room has a 100-gallon fish tank, their problems may soon be the library's.

An interior inspection is just as vital. Staff must check everywhere: basements, attics, closets, and machinery and air conditioning rooms. These off-limits areas often hold trash, old boxes, even combustibles. The search should include a trip to the roof to look for standing water, plugged drains and gutters, or loose roofing materials. Even familiar offices and stacks deserve attention. Plants and coffee cups bring liquids next to computer equipment and vital paper records. In the stacks, book shelves may not be bolted to floors, enticing vandals to play a game like dominoes; and poorly loaded book trucks can result in spills that severely damage books.

Facilities management policies are another aspect of the current conditions survey. Do all staff members know how to turn off water, electricity, or gas? Do they know who has keys to which areas, how to get them, or who to contact in an emergency? Are the right kinds of fire extinguishers placed throughout the library? Does the computer area, for instance, have an extinguisher which will not damage equipment with water or corrosive residue? Is computer data regularly backed up and stored offsite? Is there a policy on trash removal, locking up at night, and unplugging heaters or fans and coffee pots? Do staff supervise repairmen closely? They should; statistics show that contractors' operations such as welding or roof repair are major causes of library damage.

Once current library conditions and policies are surveyed, the information gained will suggest *taking precautions against the most likely disasters*. For example, if a library is housed in a wooden structure with no smoke detection or sup-

pression systems, the staff may want to investigate installing such systems, or at least inviting the local fire department in for a tour and advice. Those institutions located in a flood plain or in basements should take steps against flooding. School libraries that are closed over the summer may need extra surveillance to make sure that air is circulating sufficiently and that humidity levels are within a safe range. Libraries near the coast are especially vulnerable to hurricanes: they need to stockpile plywood to cover windows, plastic sheets to cover ranges, generators, and buckets to catch water *before* hurricane season comes.

Clearly, disaster preparedness flows into disaster response. The two issues merge in *salvage priorities*, a ranked list of the library's most valuable assets. Much thought and discussion are appropriate at this point, for it is difficult to think clearly in a time of crisis.

The staff sometimes believes that the most expensive objects are the library's most valuable. One rare book library with a first edition of Audubon insured at over a million dollars thinks differently, however, because the work is insured and there are other copies in the world. Its own financial records, with lists of donors and members and employee information are a higher priority. Saving such material will allow the library to conform with federal mandates and enable it to set up in "business" and remain fiscally sound after a disaster.

The library's mission offers a way of helping to make difficult choices. What was the library founded for? Who are its main supporters and patrons? If the library exists mainly to support an undergraduate program, staff may decide that general collections are more important to the institution than special collections. A public library with a strong local history collection may decide, however, that rare materials are its top priority. Often overlooked, but critically important, is the library's shelf list; where intellectual control of the collection and documentation of insurance losses is a high priority, the shelf list belongs at or near the top of the rescue list.

Every department ranks its records and materials by their importance to the library's mission; it is then usually up to the director to put those in priority order. The process of ranking often inspires a library to copy and store off-site some of those records determined to be vital, thus removing them from danger in the first place and assuring their survival. Even though prioritization is difficult, it avoids the worst-case scenario: employees rescue replaceable material like *National Geographic* magazines while invaluable records perish.

A prioritized list of assets is only one set

of information recorded in the *Disaster Manual* which is the product of planning. The book should be handy at the library, and copies should be at the home or in the cars of key personnel, so that it is always available. The manual, usually loose-leaf (to allow for changes and easy photocopying) and in a water-resistant binder, should include vital information but should not be so overloaded as to make its use difficult. Typically, it contains a section of emergency phone numbers (work and home) of staff and others, such as people who control building access; plumbers, electricians, and insurance agents; as well as information on what to do immediately in the case of flood, fire, or other emergency. Crucial information such as the location of the main electrical, water, and gas turn-offs belongs here, preferably keyed to a map.

The manual also should contain guidelines about how to handle, pack, and move damaged materials, as well as information on where help and materials can be found. This ranges from the library's own cache of disaster response supplies to a list of national firms who, for a fee, offer help in major disasters (see the Primer and Resource Guide). The manual should include information about the library's insurance coverage, if any.

A major disaster clearly calls for professional outside help. Most disasters are small to moderate in size, however, and must be faced by employees with the library's own resources or the help available from state or regional preservation organizations (see Primer and Resource Guide). And unfortunately, there is no foolproof disaster plan. Unforeseen things will always happen, and it does not pay to try to devise a response to every possible situation. That would bog down planning, and make an overly bulky and complex manual. Every disaster plan has to be revised regularly as circumstances change, collections are shifted, and employees come and go. Writing the plan is the middle, not the end, of the project; the learning that the staff undergoes while planning should be integrated not only into the pages of the disaster manual, but also into the library's own operations.

It may be difficult to put into practice all the wisdom gained in planning. But a positive aspect of disaster planning is that it is not an "all or nothing" process. Every step taken — whether cleaning drains, replacing old extension cords, raising books off the floor, stockpiling disaster supplies, or knowing where the utility cut-offs are — has a good effect and is a step in the right direction. By comparison, failure to plan actually increases a library's chances of sustaining costly damage. An ounce of prevention is well worth a pound of cure: that is the lesson of disaster preparedness.