



Hurricanes and Libraries: Emergency Management Activities

The [Information Use Management & Policy Institute](#) at Florida State University has been awarded a grant to examine how libraries, responders and communities have united to better prepare for and recover from hurricanes. Public libraries can play an important role in each phase of hurricane season's lifecycle. One way of dividing the hurricane lifecycle is offered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in a guide entitled "[Producing Emergency Plans.](#)" The guide identifies four primary phases of the emergency management as: *mitigation, planning, response, and recovery.* To provide librarians with a better appreciation of the scope of activities which could surround a comprehensive hurricane preparedness program, each of those phases are briefly explained.

Hurricane preparedness is not a single event. It is a set of interrelated activities, which extends from the initial design of the library structure, through the recovery and rebuilding efforts to reestablish the library as a fully functional community asset. Activities within this emergency management chain of events include:

Mitigation – Mitigation refers to reducing the impacts a hurricane will have on library collections, services and on the communities the library serves. Recent studies, as "[The 2004 and 2005 Gulf Coast Hurricanes: Evolving Roles and Lessons Learned for Public Libraries in Disaster Preparedness and Community Services](#)", indicate that during hurricane events, libraries may become rescue and recovery centers. Public libraries may provide vital community services, supporting the public's need for information, communication, internet connectivity, and also assists in the coordination of recovery operations in the local area. In order to offer hurricane continuity of service and meet emergency demands, public libraries' service and facilities infrastructure need to be carefully planned to resist the impact of hurricanes. The [Disaster Mitigation Planning Assistance Website](#) provides a wealth of information for cultural institutions, including libraries, museums, historical societies and archives, providing recommendations that will help mitigate damage to collections in the event of a disaster.

Planning – Planning is essential to assuring a high level of readiness and in addressing the crises conditions that surround an emergency event, such as a hurricane. Public libraries need to be at the table as local emergency responders develop and refine disaster plans. Within the public library, the preparation of informative documents, policies, online and web based services/resources, and operational plans that identify the emergency procedures are critically important. Such plans allow an organized and efficient reaction during a time of crisis. Such internal planning also helps librarians communicate and coordinate with responders at the local, state, and national levels. Librarians may wish to check out the

disaster response plans and other emergency planning materials offered on the [California Preservation Program website](#).

Response – This segment of the chain begins with the notification that a hurricane strike is imminent and continues through the event, until the end of the emergency. During this period of time, the library’s exterior and interior assets must be secured and protected from the impending danger. The library may be transformed to enable emergency service provision. This means securing necessary resources, reallocation of staff and increased flexibility. The public library will become an active emergency organized to meet the high demand for communications, services, and support activities required by the emergency response teams and the public’s need for crisis information. A good example of a [Library Disaster Response Plan](#) is provided by the Cornell University Library.

Recovery – Recovery is the period after the hurricane event where the library and community begins to react to the aftermath of the events and takes initial steps to return to normal operations and services. Library damages must be identified, assessed, and repaired. The library must assist the community to do the same with homes and business repairs. The [Disaster Recovery for Public Records Custodians, Archives and Libraries website](#) offered by the State Library of Florida provides many recovery related resources in the areas of records recovery, storage, media repair, and provides general conservation advice. [Lyrasis](#) (formerly SOLINET] offers [classes](#) and training for library staff, [preservation services](#), [consulting](#), and recovery related [electronic resources and library products](#). The [Lyrasis corporate brochure](#) provides an overview of what [Lyrasis](#) can offer you and your library.

As we learn from these experiences, the knowledge gained must be used to improve how the library can better prepare for future emergencies. A formal assessment of how the library and staff survived the disaster can help identify how the library can better serve the community in the future should a similar disaster occur.

How You Can Help: Do you and your public library have experience assisting your community prepare for and recover from a hurricane? How do these above phases compare to your experiences? Please send an email to Charles R. McClure charles.mcclure@cci.fsu.edu with any thoughts you may have. By offering and describing your preparedness and response efforts, and related experiences, you will help to identify a set of best practices that will help all libraries and communities more effectively work together during emergencies situations. See our [project summary](#), [LibraryJournal.com article](#), or [radio interview](#) for further information.
