

Libraries and Crisis: Second Responders but First Line of Defense

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Dr. Sharon Strover, University of Texas at Austin

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The 2017-2020 time frame has demonstrated a great deal about how our social institutions respond to crises. Libraries, one of the central institutions in small as well as large communities, had significant, often ‘unsung’ roles whether facing hurricanes, fires, flooding or Covid-19. Our research documents the libraries’ responses in these difficult times and finds that certain actions enable them to be “ready” for disaster and to contribute to their communities’ resiliency. Indeed, preparing for and disasters and then aiding local constituencies is baked into many operational plans. In this they constitute a type of first line of defense for their communities. Their local information role underscores the significance of projects such as Community SecondNets, the IMLS-funded project developing extended Internet capabilities useful for libraries facing disaster circumstances.¹

First, libraries’ roles in communities go well beyond loaning books, the somewhat dated image of libraries’ primary purpose. Libraries are information first responders, providing physical and intellectual places for safety and local support and repair in communities in times of crisis. A core service of libraries is Internet connectivity and assistance: library-based computers, internal WiFi, and Internet connectivity are heavily used among patrons, and that use escalates after a disaster. For example, when disasters involve destroyed housing, displaced people, non-functioning power, communications, transportation or water infrastructure, large agencies providing aid and insurance appear on the scene. Red Cross and FEMA and many other similar organizations, however, expect to interact with people using databases and electronic forms. However, the constituencies frequently most in need of their help are either unequipped or poorly equipped to navigate agencies’ bureaucratic demands. In such cases, libraries triage local residents’ needs and provide the human and digital literacy interface allowing people to work with aid organizations. One librarian described the aftermath of one hurricane to us:

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Every time somebody needed to do something with Red Cross and you all know they had to figure out ‘what the document [do] I need to give? How do I get that document how do I get it scanned? How do I get it sent to them online?’ And so we spent a good portion of our day every day helping people do whatever they had to do it as far as getting claimed and getting to FEMA the Red Cross. Even though they're sitting right there in that building....

In her 2019 *Atlantic* article, Deborah Fallows characterized libraries as “*second responders*” for the way they provide these emergency services (Fallows, 2019). She especially demonstrates the significance of libraries’ partnerships with or support for other local organizations who join with them in providing services as diverse as community kitchens, medical services, and simply opportunities for groups to be together to share painful, emotion moments as they weathered the emotional toll of disastrous circumstances. Our research underscores the ways that libraries keep track of local people in need, sometimes phoning to check in on them, or alerting them to emergency services or even donations that could be useful to people in distress. Their intermediary roles in a plethora of community responses during crises can generate a long list indeed.

The COVID-19 disaster highlights digital divides throughout the country, illustrating in many cases the extent to which communities depend on libraries for Internet resources, both connectivity and expertise. A recent ALA survey of libraries across the nation reports that 60% of their respondents anticipate their clients’ greatest needs will include computer and Internet access, and an equivalent percentage anticipates patrons requiring help with government forms and programs, doubtless filed online (ALA, 2020). Both reflect escalated needs for connectivity and for streamlined capabilities to respond to various service needs. Libraries partnering with schools, clinics, colleges and other anchor institutions as second responders and installing dual use, wide area wireless networks, create important redundant communications capability to expand inclusion and strengthen community resilience against disasters.

As one timely example, we can examine the impact of the pandemic. The COVID-19 epidemic closed most US libraries temporarily, and as many reopen, their resources will be in high demand, particularly their Internet connectivity. Indeed, during this closure period many

libraries reported maintaining their Wi-Fi access (which often extends outside the physical library building) so that people could use it even if the library was closed; K-12 school children around the country sought library and other sources of bandwidth to complete their schoolwork once schools around the country closed in March. To signal that such uses of federally-funded connectivity was sanctioned, the FCC specifically declared that “schools and libraries that are closed due to the coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak ... are permitted to allow the general public to use E-Rate-supported Wi-Fi networks while on the school's campus or library property” (FCC, 2020). The situation for rural libraries serving smaller communities is generally more precarious because they typically lack reliable and high quality bandwidth, and the communities themselves are often older and poorer compared to metro regions (Swan et al, 2013; USDA, 2015; Whitacre, 2019). At the same time, smaller and rural community abilities to deal with the epidemic are limited, with information about the epidemic’s local presence being disorganized, and testing and tracing capabilities poor (Novack, 2020).

Second, because there are few alternative free or low cost Internet alternatives in smaller and rural locations – and in urban regions as well – libraries have outsize importance for digital divide-related and connectivity goals (Jaeger et al, 2006; Real, Bertot and Jaeger, 2015). Previous research on hotspot lending programs illustrates they can be effective methods for libraries to extend Internet resources (Whitacre, 2019; Strover, 2019; TIPI, 2020). During the pandemic, the hotspots that many libraries loaned out for home-based connectivity proved to be invaluable. Sharing online connectivity resources broadly becomes doubly significant, particularly for lower income populations, in times of crisis that may impair conventional Internet connectivity in communities. Countless stories from 2020 document the central role that library connectivity played in assisting with homework gap problems once educational services pivoted to remote learning. FCC Commissioner Starks recently drew attention to the beneficial uses of library hotspot lending programs for addressing remote learning needs (Starks, 2019).

Third, in general, libraries need to plan beyond whatever unique disaster their communities may face in the moment, especially inasmuch as recurrence is highly possible. Hurricane- and flood- and fire-prone regions know that disasters may occur on a yearly basis. Along the Gulf Coast of the country, for example, hurricanes, high winds and flooding recur with

regularity. These occurrences mandate preparation so that libraries – and their assets, print and electronic and human – are available to local users. In an ongoing study, we inventory the preparations libraries have made for response before, during and after hurricane-related disasters. These are often framed as phases of (1) mitigation and preparedness, (2) response, and (3) recovery (Prestamo, 2018). There are both social and material qualities involved in all of these phases. We periodize the actions of libraries in our Gulf Coast research in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Libraries Responses in Crisis Phases

Preparation/Mitigation

- Emergency kits; have materials on hand to deal with mold or other material damages
- Get “portals” ready to take information
- Ready the library - detach electronics, cover computers, etc.
- Get stuff off floor, wrap computers, backups
- Have a protocol ready and known to all
- Make sure you have good communication with city/county
- Have inventory in order (for future insurance assessment) - have pictures of things in the library
- Get training you might want/need
- Establish a network of regional librarians to share ideas, status, etc.
- Check out generators – are there back-up sources of power?
- Figure out how people hear about things in the library so that they can be updated

Response During Disaster

- Take care of yourself
- Possible volunteer roles or assignments with recovery efforts, e.g., community food banks, volunteer reception center, etc.
- Some locations may *require* library staff to help with city/county capacities
- Self-care: tending to one’s own personal emergencies

Recovery Phases

- Reestablish library communications systems, including Internet connectivity, faxes, printers
- Assess damage and make reports, inventory, etc.
- Communication center – information hub, contact lists
- Possible operational adjustments: waiving fines, procedures for accepting overdue materials, etc.
- Support people coming into the library: physical amenities (a space devoid of mosquitos and debilitating heat, for example); information; news and updates on disaster status
- Facilities social services , FEMA, and other assisting organizations
- Invisible work: social support
- Reach out to patrons with status information

Information and communication technologies are particularly significant in the post-disaster phases because local constituencies will necessarily interact with several recovery organizations such as Red Cross or United Way, insurance and other governmental organizations. For example, there may be extensive interactions with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), requiring spaces to confer with representatives, downloading and completing FEMA forms, and printing and scanning various quasi-legal documents. Human aid in managing these operations is significant, particularly in rural regions. Figure 1 summarizes some major functions libraries adopt in coping with disasters based on our research in the Gulf region. These phases illustrate the range of roles and activities that are typical in a disaster time frame. We note as well that that time frame for coping with disasters encompasses planning ahead of time, response during the disaster, and a lengthy period of time after the disaster. For example, we saw people using the library for hurricane-related assistance related to Hurricane Harvey a full two years after the hurricane hit.

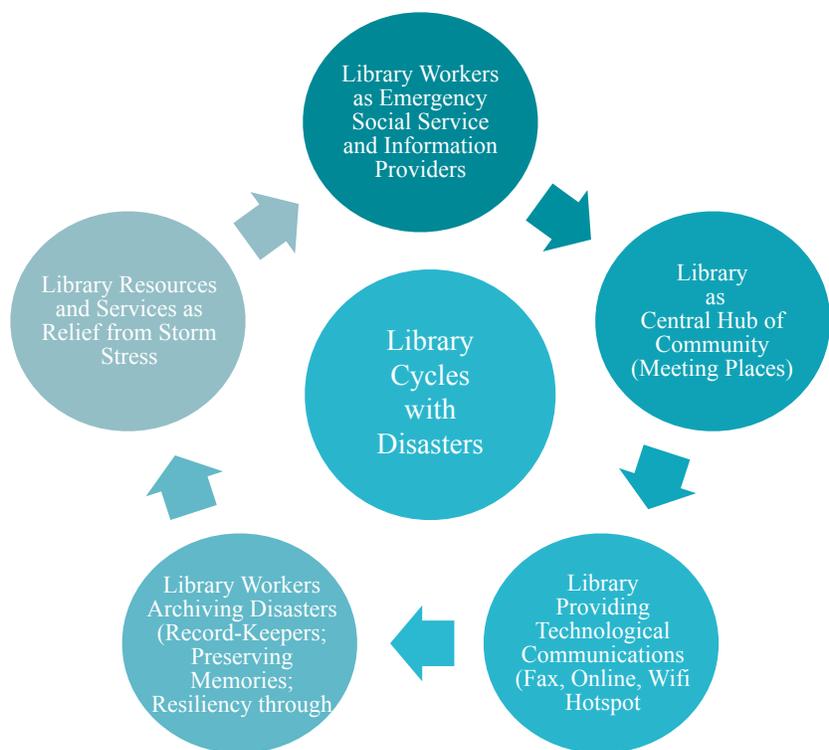


Figure 1: Findings on Library Responses to Disasters

Broader considerations also are at work. Outside of disasters, libraries face challenges in the robustness of their connectivity. Using Texas as an example, many libraries lack high quality Internet connectivity. As of 2019 the Texas State Library and Archives (TSLAC) reports that 70% of libraries in the state do not meet the FCC speed recommendations (Figure 2). For libraries serving communities under 50,000 people, the FCC standard is 100 Mbps or greater (FCC, 2014). About 23% of reporting Texas public libraries did not even meet the FCC’s minimum definition of broadband for individual households (25 Mbps download). **The 116 libraries that did not meet this minimum standard serve over 4 million Texans.** Assessing and strategizing for improving broadband in the future must be a priority for these institutions (TSLAC, 2020). Those improvements serve libraries in non-disaster as well as disaster moments.

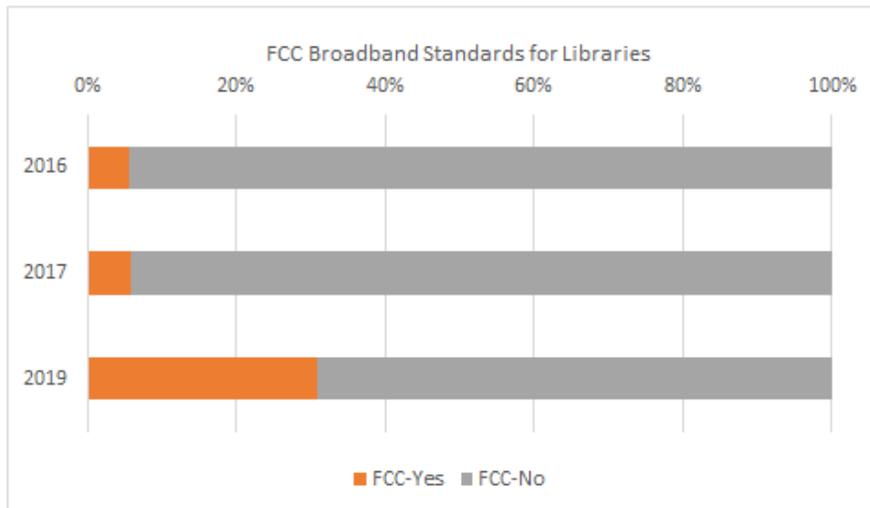


Figure 2: Texas Libraries and FCC Broadband Standards Source: TSLAC, 2020

A more subtle but equally important quality concerns the library’s role as social infrastructure. As developed by Eric Klinenberg (2018), social infrastructure refers to the physical conditions that allows people to develop social relationships or social capital. The quality of “place” in the library builds face-to-face interactions. Libraries have readings, story-time for children, offer meeting rooms for community clubs or organizations, host small classes, and lubricate a wide ranging array of activities within their communities. The librarian’s own role as a listener is an important component of this social quality. These are not captured in statistics about circulation or periodical subscriptions; however, the bonds that people foster in libraries are real and add to the texture of communities. Social qualities fostered by libraries requires attention to the interior (and sometimes exterior) spaces. We found, for example, that some libraries sought to make wi-fi access more comfortable for after-hours patrons by setting up outside patios that allowed them to use the wi-fi network. Inside the library, a meeting room of sort some is a huge asset. Indeed, the important role of the library as a community, physical place and as a site for connectivity underscores their role as neighborhood library access stations.

This brief summary conceptualizes disaster response as a system. The library interacts with many entities, and it either coordinates or is part of a coordinated system entailing staff as well as volunteers who work together in a web of relationships in order to heal a locality. There are profound differences in the capabilities of small and large libraries, and they face different levels of autonomy and resources. However, whether big or small, libraries have important roles in supporting local community resilience in disasters.

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