

Public Librarians' Response To Hurricanes:

Lessons, Issues and Strategies



Community Disaster Response: the Role of Public Libraries
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Before the Storms

In August of 2005, I had been Louisiana's State Librarian for only 60 days when Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana. While Louisiana had been through hurricanes before, we were not prepared for anything like Katrina or Rita. The aftermath of those storms took us completely by surprise.

Hurricane Katrina made landfall August 29, 2005, hitting Southeast Louisiana.

Katrina

On the Sunday before Katrina, my deputy and IT staff went into the State Library to shut down all the computers, close doors and "batten down the hatches" as best we could. State employees were told to stay home for two days. That was the extent of our preparations. We had been through this before and nothing had happened....the sky was blue all day... not a cloud.

By Monday we thought we had "escaped" again with only major wind damage and power outages. Then the levees broke. It was unbelievable. You know the rest from CNN.

What about the libraries? When we got back in to the State Library on Thursday, we immediately pulled together a task force and made a list. Our reference and IT staff members created a website of resources for evacuees. Our library development staff got on the phone and began calling all libraries south of Interstate 10.

We were unable to get in touch with anyone. Only email on our Blackberries worked; cell phone coverage and landlines were mostly down. We had a few library directors' home/cell phones and we tried these. We started a spreadsheet of libraries and their status. Our Services for the Blind and Physically Handicapped staff got on the phone and started trying to call their users in the southern part of the state. Communications were less than sporadic for several months...even landlines did not work well. We started getting donations of books and computers and calls from all over the country asking about the status of libraries. We posted the information we had to our website.



Less than a month later, Hurricane Rita struck Southwest Louisiana, where thousands of Katrina evacuees had fled. The September 24 storm had been a Category 5 and the 4th most intense Atlantic hurricane ever recorded, although by landfall it had become a Category 3 storm.

Rita

While we were routing books and computers to the libraries that were open and were serving evacuees, we got the word that another hurricane was on its way. This time the libraries evacuated in the southwestern part of the state. One of our library directors drove her bookmobile with all the computers to the parking lot of another library further north. This director lost four of her five library buildings to Rita.

In the days after Rita, we discovered that three library systems in the middle part of the state had no Internet access. Their T-1 lines ran through the public library in Lake Charles, which was without power for almost three weeks. We located the facilities manager of that library at his son's house in Memphis and began the process of trying to get a generator into the Calcasieu Library...hard to do when there was no one to keep it filled with gas. It also raised all sorts of liability issues. Meanwhile, we contracted with a wireless Internet company to try to install satellite dishes in the three parishes with no Internet. They were only able to get one library up and running – one that had no branches. In the parishes that had branch libraries, they were never able to get the satellite to work properly.

Rita also caused major reflooding in New Orleans, and parishes all along the coast were affected by the storm surge.



After the Storms

Immediately following the storms, one third of the public libraries in Louisiana were closed. Through the hard work of State Library staff, dedication of public library staff and supporters across the state, libraries began to reopen immediately. Even though 35 percent of our public libraries were closed, our overall number of visitors was down only one percent, indicating citizens continued to seek essential library services.

The State Library

The State Library of Louisiana quickly dedicated an area of our web site as a central place for information pertaining to disaster recovery, up-to-date resource information and information about the affected parishes to be used by librarians and citizens.

The State Library managed and distributed thousands of donations of money, books, materials and computers. We also negotiated significant discounts from vendors, securing continuation of critical services despite financial hardship.

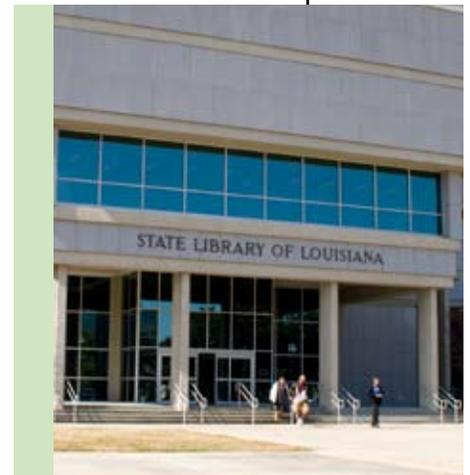
We requested and received about 400 donated computers and laptops. These were distributed to public libraries that were assisting thousands of evacuees as well as hurricane-affected libraries. We facilitated the donation of four bookmobiles/temporary facilities for areas where libraries had been destroyed.

We worked with First Book to help that group distribute 1.5 million new books to schools and libraries in Louisiana. As a result, we were presented with the First Book Hero Award.

We worked closely with SOLINET and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to secure funding for temporary facilities, tech mobiles, staff and materials for the hurricane-affected parishes. Through this effort, over 12 million dollars has been distributed to public libraries in Louisiana and Mississippi.

Since some libraries could not accept donations on their own behalf, the State Library set up a donation opportunity through the Louisiana Library Foundation. Donors could provide the LLF with a letter explaining to which parish they wanted the money directed. More than \$75,000 in private cash donations was distributed to the hurricane-affected libraries through this program.

We worked closely with the American Library Association to provide critical recovery information to ensure that their annual conference was held in New Orleans. This conference brought 15,000 visitors to the city over a five-day period and was the first major convention after the storms.

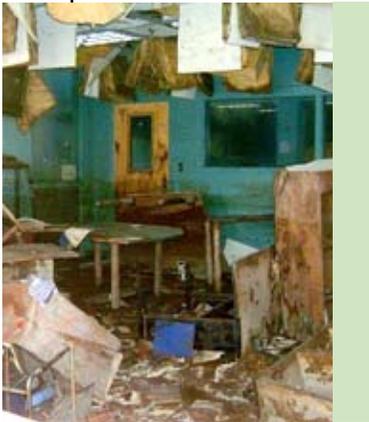


Other Actions

- Kept reminding State and local government officials of the role public libraries played in assisting evacuees.
- Paired affected libraries up with organizations that wanted to "adopt" a library.
- Prepared a booklist for children affected by hurricanes. Topics included adapting to change, moving, new school, reassurance, courage, friendship, sadness, loss, resilience, hope, death, death of a pet.
- Organized the receipt and storage of interlibrary loan materials that libraries outside Louisiana were trying to return to libraries in affected areas.
- Solicited vendor discounts for affected libraries. Both Gale and EBSCO offered access to a variety of databases for public library use. 3M offered six kiosks (sturdy computers that can be set up in malls, bus stations, etc.) for public use, and Tutor.com offered several libraries a subscription to their online tutoring services for the remainder of the fiscal year. OCLC and SOLINET both discounted services and credited funding back to the libraries.
- Established back-up Internet access for libraries.
- Sent one librarian to FEMA headquarters for two days to assist with reference, information gathering and explaining Louisiana infrastructure to FEMA representatives.
- Worked to identify blind and physically handicapped users who were displaced or no longer able to receive books on tape.
- Took over answering email inquiries sent to Ask Louise. Ask Louise is a website on the state government home page that allows anyone to ask a question about state government services; it is not generally staffed by librarians. We routed all inquiries to this site to our Louisiana Department and they answered all questions for about a month.
- Hosted New Orleans Public Library e-mail and web servers until they were ready to take over operations.
- Provided temporary office space to Office of State Museum staff, New Orleans City Park staff and New Orleans Public Library staff.

The Public Libraries

Traditional disaster planning was often inapplicable. The focus had to be on business continuity rather than on preservation of collections. *Information* was the critical need during the emergencies.



Lon Dickerson, Director of the Jefferson Parish Library wrote an article "Building from Disaster: Lessons from Hurricane Katrina" for *Alki: The Washington Library Association Journal* (citation, March 2006, 22:1, pp. 16+).

Mary Cospers-LeBoeuf, Director of the Terrebonne Parish Library wrote an article, "Ill Winds: Hurricanes and Public Libraries Along the Gulf Coast" (citation: *Public Libraries*, May/June 2006, p. 58+)

These articles explore the following:

- Most libraries increased their hours, remaining open late into the evening, and opened specially on the Labor Day holiday. Libraries around the state issued library cards to the evacuees, allowing people to check out books and magazines. Library staff visited shelters, bringing books and magazines for evacuees to read and presenting story times for the children at the shelter.
- At the libraries, meeting rooms were turned into computer rooms. As many computers as possible were added throughout the libraries to give evacuees access to the Internet. Evacuees checked web sites to locate other members of their families, checked their e-mail, filed for insurance, and filled out FEMA forms online. Staff was on hand to help those who did not know how to use a computer.
- In some libraries, staff even provided food and drink to the evacuees waiting to use their services. Several directors commented that their staff acted as a sounding board for people to talk about their experiences, letting evacuees talk as long as they wanted and just listening.
- Libraries in Louisiana have also welcomed workers from out of state to use their computers and materials. Even FEMA workers flocked to the public libraries to use the computers.
- At libraries whose physical facilities were affected by the storms, the directors and their staff worked tirelessly to get their libraries up and running for residents returning to their homes. In addition, many of the staff lost everything, including their own homes.
- At Washington Parish Library, the director worked with local officials and the National Guard to remove the very large tree that destroyed the headquarters – eventually, it was removed courtesy of the local paper mill that sent their large crane and paper mill employees to cut up the tree and lift it out of the building.
- The Jefferson Parish Library director returned to the main library on the day after Katrina, and did not leave, setting up generators and camping out in the library with other members of his staff as well as parish officials. They worked not only to assess the damage to the libraries, but also to help other agencies in the parish, even to the extent of distributing food for the Red Cross, and cooking at the library for parish employees. The entire staff worked many long hours beginning the long process of cleaning up the libraries.



- The New Orleans Parish Library staff hit the ground running, immediately setting up an online blog for library employees to check in and let everyone know where they were and that they were okay. The State Library had been hosting their web site since Katrina, and several employees used part of an office at the State Library. [They also immediately contacted the Munters Company to remove and stabilize the irreplaceable City Archives from the basement of the Main Library.](#) New Orleans Public Library's staffing situation still needs attention: they are still short staffed and have not reached pre-Katrina levels. Their situation is helped by the Gates Foundation, because with the modular facilities, the Gulf Coast Libraries Project provides funding for staff for those three new temporary facilities, as well as for Mid City and King branches, the first temporary facilities at NOPL.
- The Plaquemines Parish Library at Belle Chasse was used by parish officials during Katrina, with the field across the street from the library used as a helicopter landing site. The library reopened its doors within a few days of the storm, setting up computers for anyone to use, even though the building suffered significant damage during the storm with seven skylights blown off. As soon as the staff was allowed back in the parish, they came to work and immediately began to clean and remove water-damaged books. They even pulled up water soaked carpet, and the director was on the roof helping nail down plywood to seal off the skylights.
- The St. Bernard Parish Library director immediately began to work with FEMA and parish officials to determine what would be done with the library, which was under water.
- The roof of the Golden Meadow branch of the Lafourche Parish Library was blown off during Hurricane Katrina – the staff quickly removed the books and furniture to another building. During Hurricane Rita, that building was again badly damaged.
- The Terrebonne Parish Library staff worked tirelessly to help the thousands of refugees who evacuated to the parish, filling their meeting room with computers and having many staff there to help. They went to the shelters several times each day, bringing reading materials and presenting story hours for the children. After Hurricane Rita, they also had to rescue whatever books and materials they could from two of their branches, which were destroyed.
- The Vermilion Parish Library had much the same experience as the Terrebonne Parish Library. After Hurricane Rita, two of their branches were destroyed, and another was badly damaged. Library staff went to these branches as soon as possible to assess the damage and to salvage whatever materials they could. Again, some of the staff's homes had been destroyed or badly damaged from Rita.
- Calcasieu Parish was an evacuation center for many people from Hurricane Katrina, and then had to evacuate for Rita. The library lost one branch building, and all are now open again.



Gustav & Ike - The Test

Four days before Gustav, we activated the State Library emergency plan. We linked up the library's "disaster website". We posted a link to the Governor's emergency site on our website. We created a blog to be used by any library in the state needing to disseminate information about its status, damage, staff instructions. This turned out to be heavily used. We moved some materials to the interior of the building and covered the stacks near the windows in the special collections area. We updated our list of contact information. Those of us with Blackberries made sure we had staff PIN numbers entered in case regular cell service was not available. We had a new head of IT and we had just installed the backup server in Monroe the week before Gustav and had made major improvements to our IT infrastructure.

Critical systems were tied in to backup generators.



Generator power

In preparation for hurricane season 2008 the IT department had 2 new AC power circuits run to our server room with 2 APC (brand) uninterruptible power supplies (UPS) plugged into each circuit. These new circuits were linked to the building's backup generator, which previously ran the security system and lighting only. Because of this, when 95% of Baton Rouge was without power and nearly all of state government was without Internet and email, the State Library never went down.

State Library servers were equipped with redundancy systems with interchangeable components.



Server room

We upgraded and replaced a number of core servers on our network. In doing so, we purchased industry standard Dell 2950 servers with plenty of redundancy and made sure the servers had interchangeable parts in them. This was to ensure that if a core server went down we could use a non-critical server's part to get the core server back up and running without delay. One wall of our server room is entirely glass and faces south. We unplugged the second (redundant) power supply from each running Dell server during hurricane Gustav in case the first power supply failed. We unplugged less critical servers and stored them in a different, more secure, section of the building. Had we lost our server room, we could recover core services without having to overnight new servers or parts.

Multiple backup devices were created and stored in several different physical locations.



Backups

We used both backup tapes and inexpensive external hard disk drives for backups in case we needed to restore lost systems quickly. These backups were kept in 3 places: a fire-proof safe onsite, on the second partition of each core server and at an offsite location. We covered all possible areas within the server room in plastic in case of window breakage so water damage would be less likely to destroy servers running critical services.

Located a backup server in a safe location further north.

Backup server

The State Library had long had a backup DNS and database authentication server in Vermilion Parish, which is southwest of Baton Rouge. After Katrina, we realized we needed a backup site further north. We worked out an agreement with the public library in Monroe, LA; we would pay for a portion of their Internet connection in return for hosting a State Library server. Luckily, we had just installed and brought up the server the week before Gustav. This site remained functional throughout both Gustav and Ike.



Immediately brought up and publicized a pre-prepared Disaster Web Site.

Disaster website

Within 72 hours after Katrina, the State Library brought up a website of useful links for evacuees and libraries. Later, we revised the site and we initiate it any time an emergency takes place. There are 4 parts to the website:

1. General disaster planning links
2. Immediately before the emergency – e.g. links to road closings, shelters, etc.
3. Links to assist after an emergency – links to FEMA, food stamps, locate relatives, etc.
4. Links for long term recovery

We continually maintain parts 1 and 4 and only use parts 2 and 3 if needed.



Thinking creatively, staff boosted our WiFi power, providing Internet access to state officials.

Wireless Access

For five days after Gustav, downtown Baton Rouge (that's all of state government) was without power. Fortunately, library staff are especially creative. One of our network administrators who lives near the State Library (and who was himself without power) came in and put an additional router in the front lobby of the library. This not only allowed the public, state workers and emergency personnel to access crucial Internet sites for rapid response from our parking lot, it also allowed our network administrator to be able to work on our network via wireless communications from the safety of his home. We had state officials parked in our parking lot and on the street accessing our wireless.

Even though we were without power, we opened the State Library to the public on the Friday after Gustav when everything else in downtown Baton Rouge was closed, including all of the public libraries in the parish. We extended our network so that we could run 15 laptops off a portable generator and even had a portable air conditioner that we borrowed from the neighboring Louisiana State Museum.

These are the high points on how the State Library stayed up and running throughout hurricane Gustav. However, the most impressive thing that was done was the preparation just in case our building was leveled. Thankfully these preparations were not needed and we remained operational the entire time.



Lessons We Learned



Recommendations for a State Library Agency:

Keep one living document to track information from different libraries, listing who provided information, who received information, and date. Put someone in charge of keeping the information up to date. This is critical to provide information to lawmakers who are in a pinch and looking to provide disaster relief to specific areas.

Choose a spokesperson to deal with ALA (who will field inquiries) and perhaps an additional person to post to the national electronic discussion lists on a periodic basis.

Recommendations for public libraries:

Have a written disaster plan and procedures in place. Concentrate on business continuity rather than collections recovery. After an emergency, the value of libraries lies in their ability to connect patrons to loved ones, help them find information and establish some normalcy in their lives. While books are important, in the immediate aftermath, these other services take on a higher priority.

Begin updating personnel records and contact information three to six months before the official start of hurricane season.

Have copies of insurance policies available. Know where to find staff time sheets and payroll information.

Have copies of disaster recovery services contracts and/or memorandums of understanding available.

Have a detailed inventory of library buildings, collections, and furnishings, with photographs of the libraries "before" any storm.

After the Disaster:

- Take detailed "after" pictures and keep them available.
- Prepare a list of major needs, with cash donations at top of list.
- The public library response must be coordinated with other local emergency management services. Maintain year round, good relationships with parish officials and entities so that you are at the table for all pertinent discussions.
- Prepare to provide reports hourly, daily, weekly and monthly for the next three months at a very bare minimum.
- Prepare to volunteer to work extended hours at your library and at hurricane evacuation shelters where you can provide library services.
- Prior to a storm, brief your staff on what might be expected from them, such as extended hours, a shift in duties, and so forth.
- Keep news agencies aware of your status by issuing official media releases. In your release speak about your website or central spot where someone can find more information, give telephone numbers on how to contact the director or other administrators; one to two things that the Library needs; and how someone can give, volunteer, or provide any assistance that may be needed. Keep it straight forward and simple and ensure that the entire staff speaks with one voice and does not provide conflicting information.
- Establish a temporary card policy for evacuees. In the policy stress how long the card is good for, request any forwarding addresses/telephone numbers that an applicant can give, and do not forget about evacuees who may come in from other surrounding states.

