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PUBLIC LIBRARIAN'S GUIDE TO DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Planning Ahead to Protect Your People, Building, and Services

Disasters can affect any library, whether it's a fire, severe storm, power outage, water leak, technology failure, or another unexpected event. A little preparation can make a difficult situation easier to manage, help protect staff and patrons, and reduce damage to the building, collections, and equipment. Start with a few essential steps to prepare your staff, protect your resources, and keep your community informed when an emergency occurs. A clear plan helps everyone understand what to do, who to contact, and how to begin recovering when something goes wrong.

Where to Start

Start by reviewing your library's current emergency procedures. Identify your highest-priority risks, check which preparations are already in place, and choose the next steps that will help your library respond effectively.

1. Know Your Risks

Every library faces different risks depending on its location, building, and community. Think about what is most likely to affect your library. What could interrupt our services, damage our building or collections, or put people at risk? Consider:

- Severe weather, including tornadoes, high winds, hail, and winter storms
- Fire, smoke, or extended power outages
- Water leaks, flooding, or damage to the roof or plumbing
- Technology failures, cybersecurity incidents, or loss of internet access
- Building damage, hazardous conditions, or an unexpected closure

2. Make an Emergency Plan

A written plan gives staff a place to turn when quick decisions are needed. If your library already has one, take time to review it. If not, start with a simple document and build from there. Make sure staff know:

- How to report an emergency and contact emergency services
- Where to go during an evacuation or severe weather emergency
- How to account for staff and patrons, as appropriate
- Who makes decisions about closing the building and reopening
- How staff will receive instructions if normal communication methods are unavailable

Keep emergency procedures and contact information easy to find, including when the library's computers or internet are unavailable. Review the plan with staff and update it when responsibilities, contact information, or building procedures change. Ask yourself: If an emergency happened today, would everyone on staff know what to do first?

3. Protect Your Building and Collections

A few precautions can reduce the likelihood of preventable damage and help your library recover more quickly when an emergency occurs. Walk through your building and look for:

- Signs of leaks, water damage, or drainage problems
- Boxes, supplies, or equipment stored where they could block exits
- Collections or important records stored near plumbing or other potential water sources
- Emergency exits, fire extinguishers, and safety equipment that need attention
- Areas where computers, electrical equipment, etc. could be vulnerable

Make sure important digital files are backed up and that you know how to access them if your primary systems become unavailable. Identify collections, records, equipment, and supplies that would be especially difficult to replace. Ask yourself: What would be hardest to replace, and what can we do now to better protect it?

4. Prepare for a Service Interruption

A disaster may prevent your library from opening for a day, a week, or longer. Thinking ahead can help you decide which services matter most and how to communicate changes. Consider:

- How you will notify patrons about closures and reopening updates
- Which communication methods you can use if your website or internet is unavailable

- How staff will communicate with one another
- Which services could continue remotely or through an alternate location
- Where staff can find essential records, contact lists, and operating procedures

Identify the services your community relies on most, then plan how to restore those services if an emergency interrupts normal operations.

When Disaster Strikes

People come first. Follow emergency procedures and instructions from emergency responders. Evacuate or shelter as directed, and do not put yourself or others at risk to save library materials or equipment.

Once the immediate danger has passed:

- Notify the appropriate library leadership and emergency contacts.
- Keep people out of damaged or potentially unsafe areas.
- Document damage when it is safe to do so.
- Contact qualified professionals for building hazards, electrical concerns, water damage, or other specialized needs.
- Consult a collections preservation professional before attempting to salvage materials affected by significant water damage, mold, smoke, or other hazards.

Avoid entering a damaged building or handling contaminated materials until the area has been determined safe. Quick action can help limit further damage, but safety must come first.

Make Preparedness Ongoing

Disaster preparedness is most effective when it becomes part of regular library operations. Set aside time to review procedures, update contact lists, check emergency supplies, and connect with local emergency management officials about risks in your area. Build these tasks into your library's routine so staff stay familiar with the plan and know where to find the information they need.

The best time to prepare for a disaster is before one happens.