

Disaster Training: A Regional Approach

by Richard C. Baker

The first step in disaster preparedness is the preparation of a written plan that details for a particular institution the steps to take in an emergency. Such plans can take many forms but if they are to be effective in an emergency they must be kept simple and straightforward, preferably in outline form. In a crisis, people don't have time to digest detailed information or absorb theoretical concepts. What they need is essentially an aide-memoire to ensure that they take required actions in the appropriate sequence. During the disaster, important things are easily forgotten; a good plan will prevent that from happening.

Although many institutions have a written disaster plan in place, two other areas important to disaster preparedness are often left unaddressed: establishing personal contacts with local businesses whose goods or services might be needed, and training a team of people to be called should a disaster occur.

Training and contacting local businesses are both activities that are ideally suited to regional cooperation. With this in mind a two-day workshop was organized by the Worcester Area Cooperating Libraries (WACL) Disaster

Committee. WACL is a central Massachusetts consortium of twelve academic libraries whose parent institutions form the Worcester Consortium of Higher Education.

"Ark Building for Librarians - How to Salvage Books after a Flood" was the title of the disaster training workshop held on August 21 and 22, 1984. Forty-eight people from seventeen institutions attended the workshop which was funded entirely by the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities. For two days they were involved in a simulated disaster involving over four thousand wet and muddy books, periodicals, microforms, and photographs. The workshop was planned to be as total an experience as possible of what might be necessary in a real disaster - from cleaning, sorting, and packing damaged materials, through transporting them to a commercial freezer, to drying the materials by hand.

Because it is impossible to predict the nature or scope of an actual disaster, the training was designed to cover as many aspects of a real disaster as possible. Peter Waters' Salvage of Water-Damaged Library Materials is the standard manual on the subject and the one people are most apt to consult during a disaster. It was therefore decided the workshop should provide the participants with an opportunity to try all the procedures suggested in Waters' manual in a situation as close to real life as possible. That would provide people with an opportunity to evaluate the

requirements, uses, and appropriateness of various procedures in the context of a real disaster.

The workshop was held in the gymnasium and parking lot of Assumption College in Worcester. The first day started with registration, followed by talk by the workshop director, Richard Baker, on the background of disaster planning and the role of training in disaster preparedness. The group then went outside to the parking lot, where they faced a pile of four thousand wet, soggy, and dirty books, journals, microforms, and other media. The fire department, which had come to demonstrate the use of fire extinguishers and to allow participants to practice with their own extinguishers, obligingly hosed down the pile of books, giving them a further soaking. This graphically demonstrated the relationship of water damage to fire.

With guidance from the workshop director and the Committee members, the group divided into teams and began the arduous task of salvaging the mass of damaged material. Following the techniques described in Waters' manual, the participants tried different methods of cleaning the books, such as dipping them, clamped shut, in plastic garbage cans of clean water. Materials supplied to the participants included pads and pencils, freezer paper, and plastic milk crates. The rest of the day was spent, with a break for lunch, sorting, cleaning, wrapping, packing, and recording the material. As the milk crates were filled, they were

either wheeled into the gym on hand trucks or loaded on a rented truck for transportation to freezer storage. At the end of the first day, about one-quarter of the materials had been loaded on pallets in the truck and another quarter had been brought inside the gym for drying. Half the material was still outside in mud puddles. The amount of labor involved in salvaging books became apparent to all.

The final event of the day was the trip to the cold storage facility, where four pallets of book-filled milk crates were to be frozen overnight. Unexpectedly, during the trip, the milk crates bounced off the pallets and spilled their contents onto the floor of the truck. The crates had to be repacked before a fork lift operator could move them into the freezer (with the ice cream) at -20° F. The group had been warned to bring winter coats, but people shivered anyway as they toured the freezer. To finish the day, the participants posed for a group portrait in their winter coats under the summer sun on the steps of the cold storage building.

The morning of the second day the books were retrieved from the freezer. This time, more care was taken in loading the material in the truck, but it was to no avail, for when the truck was opened at the gym, the crates had fallen over again. The lesson was obvious to one and all. Extreme care is needed in packing a truck if further damage to the books is to be avoided.

The group then formed a human chain to carry the frozen books into the building. The morning was spent setting the books in front of fans, interleaving them with blank newsprint, and hanging them on lines to dry. The books that had been frozen were observed to see the effects of freezing and the rate of thawing. Sandwich wrapping paper had been used to wrap the frozen books instead of more expensive freezer paper; it did not hold up well as the books thawed and the paper got wet. While the books were drying, individual teams went outside and made thymol-impregnated paper (from the blank newsprint) for interleaving in the drying books to retard mold growth.

At the end of the morning, Richard Baker visited each team's work area with a moisture meter. The meter is designed to measure the moisture content of paper, with seven percent being "normal." The people in each group were asked to judge by feel if the books were dry enough to go back on the shelf without danger of mold growth. Most of the books people thought were dry still had a high moisture content; in some cases the meter reading went off the scale.

After cleaning up and having lunch, the group assembled for an evaluation session. There was a lively discussion about all aspects of the workshop. Suggestions were made about different ways of packing material, drying methods, and the appropriateness of the various procedures to different situations. Aside from the specific techniques

people had learned, the most important lesson for everyone seemed to be the need for a strong, clear line of authority and organization in an emergency situation. Without one person in charge and deputies with each team, things quickly degenerate into chaos. There was sufficient chaos in the workshop for the lesson not be lost on anyone. The problems caused by a large-scale disaster call as much for organizational expertise as for knowledge of specific drying techniques.

The workshop produced several concrete benefits. The first is that there are now forty-eight people in central Massachusetts who have some expertise in salvaging water-damaged library materials. They have seen first-hand the problems they are likely to encounter, and know some of the solutions. They are also available to help their neighboring institutions, should the need arise.

Another specific benefit to the group was the creation of a list of businesses and suppliers that could be called on in an emergency. It is difficult for individual libraries to contact businesses and try to explain their concerns regarding the salvage of damaged material. However, it is clearly better to do this in advance than be forced to do it in panic following a disaster. The workshop enabled WACL to approach businesses collectively and explain the reasons libraries were interested in their services or products. With grant money in hand, the committee was able

to purchase what was needed and explain the purpose at the same time. The resulting list of contacts, distributed to all participants, included names, addresses, and costs for rental of cold storage, refrigerator trucks (reefers), fans and dehumidifiers, and purchase of newsprint, thymol, freezer paper, and milk crates.

By training librarians in salvage techniques and establishing contacts with local businesses, the workshop provided the participating institutions with two of the three major elements in a disaster preparedness program. A mock disaster is an exercise ideally suited to regional cooperation. While writing a disaster plan must be done by individual institutions, training personnel and contacting businesses are better done collectively. A regional workshop such as WACL's can address the needs for training and contacts, and create a sense of team work and cooperation among area libraries. As several participants commented in the workshop's evaluation questionnaire, "All library personnel should be exposed to this training."

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