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## On Why Library Workers Are Well-Suited to Serve During Disasters

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## On Why Library Workers Are Well-Suited to Serve During Disasters

### Abstract

Since 2015, staff at the Palm Beach County Library System have actively applied their skills and knowledge to participate in emergency management in preparation for and during disasters such as hurricanes. Library staff, along with their knowledge, skills, and experiences are invaluable in helping communities face and recover from devastation.

### Keywords

emergency management, disaster, recovery, embedded, embedded librarian, knowledge management

## **On Why Library Workers Are Well-Suited to Serve During Disasters**

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Since 2015, the Palm Beach County Library System has embedded its librarians in governmental and non-governmental agencies in order to position itself as the community's hub for information and research. During its initial pilot project, two librarians were embedded with the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) as Information Specialists in the Operations Section. Over the next two years, however, the Library's involvement grew to include other areas of the EOC and for the first time on a large scale, library staff served in emergency shelters during Hurricane Irma in 2017. The increased responsibilities placed on the library and its staff during disasters marks a positive change in how the library relates to the patrons it serves and reiterates the library's role as essential to the functioning of a community as it responds to disasters.

The Palm Beach County Library System's foray into disaster management is only a few years old, but already encompasses a wide range of experiences and responsibilities that will continue to move the organization towards better aligning itself with the community's needs and help it gain a more prominent role in Palm Beach County civic life.

Library staff serving as, or in close proximity to, first responders is not unique to Palm Beach County. Florida's "State Emergency Management Act"<sup>i</sup> lays out the responsibilities of various jurisdictions as it relates to emergency management and disaster recovery, and as a result, county libraries, as departments within government, have defined emergency roles. Hernando<sup>ii</sup>, Sarasota<sup>iii</sup>, Hendry<sup>iv</sup>, Citrus<sup>v</sup>, and Taylor<sup>vi</sup> counties, for example, have personnel and pay policies specific to service during state emergencies.

This paper explores the collaboration between the Palm Beach County Library System and other governmental and non-governmental agencies in response to natural disasters. As public library staff are increasingly asked or mandated to perform duties more akin to those of first responders, it is imperative that a discussion ensues around what those duties are and what challenges libraries are likely to face. It is also important to recognize how the skills developed by library staff are beneficial and sometimes crucial to the overall operation of disaster recovery. Libraries, now more than ever, have the opportunity to demonstrate why a seat at the table is not only justified, but can make a difference between life and death.

### **Emergency Operations Center**

The Emergency Operations Center is the central command for all operations related to emergency incidents. Palm Beach County Library System staff serve in various capacities at the EOC, all of which require extensive understanding of knowledge management systems, the ability to synthesize and repackage large amounts of information to be communicated to staff and administration, the skill required to conduct an effective reference interview, and experience archiving principles and practices. While disasters are few and far between, library staff who are deemed "EOC-essential" must complete hours of FEMA and WebEOC incident/crisis management software training in addition to monthly/periodic meetings with EOC staff in order to be adequately prepared for disaster activation.

All library staff serving in the EOC during activations are scheduled to work during one of two shifts, 12 hours each, running consecutively 24 hours a day. At a certain point during a hurricane (the most common reason for disaster activation in Palm Beach County), staff must remain onsite 24 hours a day until dismissed by County Administration.

In Palm Beach County, the first two librarians embedded with the EOC were Operations (OPS) Section Information Specialists. These positions were created in an effort to ensure the delivery of sufficient and consistent situation status information to the EOC OPS Section Chiefs during a disaster event. In Palm Beach County, OPS Section Chiefs are the County Administrator and Assistant County Administrator. During activation, the OPS Section Chiefs have a demanding cycle of meetings, briefings, conference calls, news conferences, and other operational duties; making it nearly impossible to personally deliver every piece of situation status information coming from disparate sources outside and within the EOC. Facing this reality, the Information Specialist role was created to aid in the collection, maintenance, and analysis of situation information for the benefit of the OPS Section Chiefs who are tasked with the overwhelming role of leading the entire disaster response effort.

The following skills were sought for library staff fulfilling the OPS Information Specialist role: excellent research skills, strong interpersonal communication and comfortability working with all levels of management and staff, listening and note-taking skills, and ability to handle sensitive and confidential matters.

OPS Information Specialists' responsibilities include:

- Regularly liaising with Planning Section Chief, the Situation Unit Leader, Operations Section Branch Leaders, Public Information Officer, and the Emergency Manager;
- Regularly reviewing the Incident Action Plan (IAP), Situation Reports (sitreps), weather status from the National Weather Service, damage assessment data, and WebEOC status boards;
- Constantly comparing newly acquired information with established information and identify any significant deviations between the two;
- Providing regular, brief verbal updates (every 30 min if possible) to the OPS Section Chiefs;
- Facilitating the Operations Section Chiefs' timeline by reminding them of scheduled / upcoming events, meetings, and/or conference calls, and assisting in gathering requisite materials and information;
- Preparing/editing brief reports or correspondence;
- Verifying information via telephone or handling incoming calls.

Beginning in 2016, the Palm Beach County Library System was asked to provide additional staffing at the EOC, and by 2017, librarians served as Documentation Unit liaisons and as a Resource Unit Deputy.

Librarians who we reported to the Documentation Unit were responsible for performing or supervising others to:

- "Develop hard copy and electronic filing systems
- Instruct EOC personnel of these systems and inform them how to access their libraries
- Initiate collection of documents, data, maps and other records, both hard copy and digital, in accordance with the guidance provided in the Documentation Unit Job Aid records from all activated sections and units, partner agencies and external entities involved in the incident..." (Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan<sup>vii</sup>)

This position, much like the OPS Section Information Specialist, requires strong interpersonal and research-oriented skills in addition to knowledge of archive principles and knowledge management systems. Every document related to the disaster activation – from memoranda to drawings to press releases, and most importantly to end-of-the-day situation reports – was archived in order to maintain an

historical record of the disaster, to keep other sections apprised of all incidents, and ultimately, to seek reimbursement from FEMA.

The Resource Unit Deputy worked hand-in-hand with the previous two roles, namely monitoring WebEOC incident management software. The person in this position ensures that all requests for resources are accurate (e.g. quantities of supplies, personnel, teams, crews, aircraft, and equipment), that the timeline for completion of the request is reflective of its urgency, and that the request has been acknowledged and assigned to the correct section.

The Resources Unit maintains a system for keeping track of the current location and status of all assigned resources and maintains a master list of all resources committed to incident operations. Resources must be categorized by kind and type (capability and capacity), and resource status must be tracked continuously to manage them effectively during an incident. The skills required to be successful in this position include information management, an understanding of database structure and taxonomy, and the ability to pull together multiple sources of information in order to effectively deliver the right resources when they are needed.

### **Emergency Shelter Work**

The nature of work during and after disasters – no matter where it occurs or what duties are involved – is unpredictable, physically and mentally taxing, and may fall well outside a staff member’s blue sky job description or level of comfortability. This is especially true for work in an emergency shelter. Before training could commence in 2017, Hurricane Irma was predicted to make its way to Palm Beach County as a Category 5 storm. Floridians had little time to prepare, and staff were quickly activated and assigned to 17 Palm Beach County schools turned shelters. For approximately 72 hours, more than 17,000 residents called these shelters home, serving as a refuge for those who had to evacuate.

Library staff collaborated with other County department staff and School District, Fire/Rescue, Sheriff’s Office, and Red Cross employees and volunteers to maintain all aspects of the shelter. The hours were long, the physical work was hard, and the conditions were mentally stressful. Many staff members reported being exhausted after being relieved of duty when the hurricane passed. However, staff proved that library work is invaluable and applicable in even the most dire of circumstances. Library staff provided children’s and family activities; advocated for language access; worked with and responded to the needs of individuals with disabilities, persons experiencing homelessness, and those who are battling addictions; provided information services to shelter residents, many of whom were also library patrons, and in one case, saved a child’s life by using the Heimlich maneuver learned on the job at the Library.

Palm Beach County Library System Director Doug Crane asked the question, “Can we be heroic?” in his column for the employee newsletter<sup>viii</sup> a month after Hurricane Irma. His answer was clearly “yes”. What can be gleaned from the Hurricane Irma experience is that public library work, regardless of where it occurs or under what conditions, can be heroic, and that we should continue to apply what we learn and do in the library setting to emergency situations or anytime our communities face impending catastrophe.

### **Post-Hurricane Recovery**

It doesn’t take a Category 5 hurricane or disaster of similar scope to dislodge a family from stability. Many residents during Hurricane Irma lived without power for days and relied on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to replenish food stocks. Once library service was reestablished, staff provided an air-conditioned building for families to rest, and for some time after that, aided patrons in applying for government assistance. As Library staff are becoming an integral part of the disaster/post-disaster effort,

some staff are being trained to perform additional recovery-related duties (e.g. distribution of food and water) while others are being assigned to focus on reopening library buildings. There are many examples of libraries serving in a recovery capacity. Post Hurricane Sandy, Mid-Atlantic and New England residents sought library services following the devastation wrought on the Northeast<sup>ix</sup>. Libraries played an important role after wildfires spread through parts of California<sup>x</sup>. Even when disasters such as mass shootings occur, the public library can play an important role in community recovery efforts, as was the case in Parkland, Florida<sup>xi</sup>.

## Lessons Learned

The role that the Palm Beach County Library System and its staff play in addressing disasters will continue to evolve. With a solid base of knowledge and experience established in the library profession coupled with additional training specific to handling disaster situations, the importance of library work can be applied to emergency management. Librarians have been taking their skills outside of the library and into the community in the form of outreach, book mobiles, and homebound patrons. It is time to recognize how valuable our professional skills can be in the EOC as well. These skills are vital to the health of our patrons and communities, and that they can be wielded to help our communities thrive during good times and also during disasters.

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<sup>i</sup> FLA. STAT. § 252 (2018)

<sup>ii</sup> *Emergency Pay*. Hernando County, 01 June 2018,

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<sup>iii</sup> *Guide for New Employees*. Sarasota County Human Resources, July 2018, [https://www.scgov.net/mwg-internal/de5fs23hu73ds/progress?id=zqInVWVWdjLfd20jDaJ7816zn9j\\_DS7fOd0tRTq0a-o,&dl](https://www.scgov.net/mwg-internal/de5fs23hu73ds/progress?id=zqInVWVWdjLfd20jDaJ7816zn9j_DS7fOd0tRTq0a-o,&dl), Accessed 10 February 2019.

<sup>iv</sup> *Hendry County BOCC Human Resources Policy Manual*. 24 October 2012,

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<sup>v</sup> *Employee County*. Citrus County Board of County Commissioners. August, 2016,

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<sup>vi</sup> *Personnel Policies*. Taylor County Board of County commissioners, 01 October 2014,

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<sup>vii</sup> *Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan*. Palm Beach County Public Safety Department Division of Emergency Management, 2016,

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<sup>viii</sup> Crane, Douglas. "Can We Be Heroic?" *Check It Out* (Oct. 2017): 1. Print.

<sup>ix</sup> Rose, Joel. "For Disaster Preparedness: Pack a Library Card?" *NPR*. 12 August 2013,

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<sup>xi</sup> Albanese, Andrew Richard. "'There's No Dress Rehearsal for This Kind of Thing'." *Publishers Weekly*. 02 May 2018, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/76196-pla-2018-spotlight-there-s-no-dress-rehearsal-for-this-kind-of-thing.html>, Accessed 15 February 2019.