

The 2004 and 2005 Gulf Coast Hurricanes: Evolving Roles and Lessons Learned for Public Libraries in Disaster Preparedness and Community Services

Paul T. Jaeger
Lesley A. Langa
Charles R. McClure
John Carlo Bertot

SUMMARY. In the aftermath of the 2004 and 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes, public libraries played many important roles in their communities, though ensuring access to vital information may have been the most critical service. This article explores the participation of public libraries in the recovery of their communities, the implications of this involvement for the place of public libraries in society, and lessons learned and

Paul T. Jaeger, PhD, is Assistant Professor, College of Information Studies, the University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742 (E-mail: pjaeger@umd.edu).

Lesley A. Langa, MA, is Research Associate, Information Institute, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306 (E-mail: lesleylanga@gmail.com).

Charles R. McClure, PhD, is Frances Eppes Professor and Director of the Information Institute, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306 (E-mail: cmclure@mail.fsu.edu).

John Carlo Bertot, PhD, is Professor and Associate Director of the Information Institute, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306 (E-mail: jbortot@fsu.edu).

[Haworth co-indexing entry note]: "The 2004 and 2005 Gulf Coast Hurricanes: Evolving Roles and Lessons Learned for Public Libraries in Disaster Preparedness and Community Services." Jaeger, Paul T. et al. Co-published simultaneously in *Public Library Quarterly* (The Haworth Information Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 25, No. 3/4, 2006, pp. 199-214; and: *Dealing with Natural Disasters in Libraries* (ed: William Miller and Rita M. Pellen) The Haworth Information Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc., 2006, pp. 199-214. Single or multiple copies of this article are available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service [1-800-HAWORTH, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST). E-mail address: docdelivery@haworthpress.com].

Available online at <http://plq.haworthpress.com>

© 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1300/J118v25n03_17

recommendations for public library disaster planning. As this article demonstrates, public libraries successfully provided a range of disaster preparedness and recovery services that were not provided and could not have been provided by other government agencies. doi:10.1300/J118v25n03_17 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Public libraries, information access, disaster preparedness, internet, computers, disaster recovery

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the course of the 2004 and the 2005 hurricane seasons, the Gulf Coast was battered by a series of tropical storms and hurricanes, many of them major. The shattering impacts of Katrina were the most widely recognized, but a parade of storms—Charley, Dennis, Ivan, Rita, and Wilma, among others—left scars across the states along the Gulf of Mexico. In a little more than a year, Florida alone was hit by eight hurricanes and two tropical storms. These storms affected every part of the Gulf Coast, and a number of communities were hit by multiple storms. Public libraries across the region were playing numerous important roles in their local communities before, during, and after the storms, roles that were not only significant to their patrons, but also served to demonstrate the continuing value of public libraries in service to the community in times of crisis.

The public libraries of Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas filled a variety of roles in their communities, as they prepared for coming storms, endured the storms, and worked to reassemble their communities after the storms. While the authors recognize that libraries in many other states also responded to the hurricanes by assisting evacuees, providing support to damaged libraries, and filling other needs, this paper focuses attention specifically on the libraries in the Gulf Coast states.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The data in this article are drawn from multiple sources. First, the majority of the data for this article was drawn from the 2006 Public Libraries and the Internet study (Bertot, McClure, & Jaeger, 2006). This survey

sampled 6,979 public libraries based on three library demographics—metropolitan status (roughly equating to their designation of urban, suburban, or rural libraries), poverty level of their service population (as derived through census data), and state in which they resided. The survey received 4,818 responses, with a response rate of 69%. While completing the survey, 3,887 responding libraries answered the following qualitative question: “In the space below, please identify the single most important impact on the community as a result of the library branch’s public access to the Internet.” Respondents were able to write as long a response as they desired to the question, and answers ranged from a length of fewer than five words to several paragraphs. This open-ended question provided the most information from the study related to public libraries and hurricanes.

Second, the authors conducted dozens of interviews with public librarians and state library officials along the Gulf Coast regarding their activities, roles, and services in relation to the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005. In all, the authors interviewed dozens of librarians—individually or in small groups—serving a wide range of communities. Further data were provided by some state library organizations that had collected information from libraries affected by the storms.

Through these sources of information, libraries provided detailed accounts of their activities throughout their communities related to the storms. Unless otherwise noted, quotes in this paper are from the qualitative responses to the survey or other information collection activities by the researchers. No alterations have been made to the quotes to correct for minor problems with spelling or grammar, and any such errors in the content are not noted to preserve the original impact of the quotes.

Along with these two streams of data, the authors reviewed professional library literature for further examples about the roles libraries played in the course of the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons. Reports from state and regional library journals in the Southeast collected and documented the roles of public libraries after the 2004 and 2005 hurricanes from states along the Gulf Coast from Texas to Florida (Block & Kim, 2006; Choate, 2005; Eberhart, 2005; Fialkoff, 2005; Leboeuf, 2006; LJ News, 2005; McCoy, 2005; Meraz, 2005; O’Connell, 2005; Rogers, 2004). These materials supported the findings of the research reported here and added important examples of libraries contributing to the community.

THE ROLES OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE EYE OF HURRICANES

A key finding from the 2006 Public Libraries and the Internet study was that the Internet access provided by public libraries in states along the Gulf Coast was of tremendous importance to their communities (Bertot, Jaeger, Langa, & McClure, 2006). The libraries generally described four major roles for the public library Internet access in communities after a hurricane:

1. Locating and interacting with missing, evacuated, and displaced family members and friends;
2. Downloading and filling out Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) forms and insurance claims;
3. Checking for news and updates about conditions in the communities that were evacuated; and
4. Trying to find information about the states of their individual homes or places of work, including checking news sites and satellite maps (Bertot, Jaeger, Langa, & McClure, 2006).

These roles illustrate the importance of public access computing and Internet access in public libraries in the event of natural disaster or other type of crisis. However, the data from the study and the other sources of information also demonstrate that the roles of public libraries in helping their communities deal with the hurricanes extend far beyond the impact of Internet access.

The ways that Gulf Coast public libraries helped their communities cope with the impacts of the 2004 and 2005 hurricanes were wide-ranging and vital. Based on all of the sources of data gathered for this article, these public library roles in their communities before, during, and after the hurricanes include:

1. *Helping communities prepare*—creating and distributing emergency preparedness guides, both printed and web-based; conducting disaster information workshops; and running volunteer coordination programs.
2. *Providing emergency information*—staffing emergency operations centers and public works; answering phone calls; answering email questions; conducting interactive chat services; handling communications in and out of the city; creating community contact centers for community members to re-establish contact; and addressing

- inquiries from other parts of the country and from around the world about the conditions in the area or about particular residents.
3. *Giving shelter*—running and staffing shelters for evacuees both in library buildings and in other buildings; providing city employees and relief workers with places to sleep; and housing city command centers for disasters (i.e., police, fire, public works).
 4. *Providing physical aid*—cooking and distributing homemade meals; distributing water, ice, meals ready to eat (MREs), tarps, and bug spray; registering people with the “blue roof program”; providing hook-ups to recharge electronics and communication devices; filling water bottles; letting people use library refrigerators for food and medication; and unloading truckloads of relief supplies.
 5. *Caring for community members in need*—assisting with the completion of FEMA, insurance, and other paperwork; caring for special needs and elderly evacuees; working as translators for evacuees; running day camps for children when schools were closed and for children of city employees who had to work unusual hours; holding programs in shelters; providing library materials to evacuees in shelters; establishing temporary libraries in shelters; and sending bookmobiles to devastated areas.
 6. *Working with relief organizations*—assisting FEMA, Red Cross, and Army Corps of Engineers personnel in their duties; providing meeting spaces for relief and rescue personnel; providing FEMA, Red Cross, National Guard, and Army Corps of Engineers personnel with a place to meet with residents; providing relief personnel a place to use the Internet, email, and telephones; giving temporary library cards to relief workers; and helping FEMA personnel identify local areas that suffered major damage.
 7. *Cleaning up the damage after the storms*—securing city buildings before storms; checking structures for damage; cleaning up debris; and restoring damaged government structures.

These efforts occurred across libraries throughout the region, employing their Internet access and many other resources to assist their communities in hurricane recovery in numerous ways. The hurricanes affecting the Gulf Coast in 2004-2005 created important new roles for public libraries and public librarians in communities.

In Florida particularly, the number of hurricanes created significant familiarity with how to help local communities deal with hurricanes. According to Judith Ring, the Florida State Librarian, “there isn’t a single county that wasn’t affected” by hurricanes in the 2004 hurricane

season alone (Rogers, 2004, p. 15). In response to the Public Libraries and the Internet survey, one librarian wrote, "During hurricane season, we have found that hurricane victims used libraries to get in touch with family and friends." Another librarian wrote, "In times of crisis (hurricane aftermath) we were there to provide connectivity to the outside world; reaching out to such entities as FEMA, Insurance companies and loved ones, etc." The tone of the responses from Florida libraries reflected a familiarity with hurricanes not evident in responses from other Gulf Coast states that have had to deal with the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons (Bertot, Jaeger, Langa, & McClure, 2006). In fact, after the 2004 hurricane season, one writer already described the public librarians of Florida as being "familiar with securing their buildings and collections, then waiting for storms to pass" (O'Connell, 2005, p. 4).

THROUGH THE STORMS

Below is a selection of the responses from the research conducted by the authors as provided by the libraries. These particular responses were chosen because they more eloquently and succinctly explain the events and the roles of the libraries, but the experiences related in these quotes are typical of other libraries. The origins of the quotes are not provided and any identifying place names were removed because the responding libraries were guaranteed anonymity in their responses.

We closed for four days due to staff being assigned to Emergency Management to run shelters, distribute food, water, ice, assist FEMA and Red Cross . . . Librarians assisted in running the shelters, cooking and serving meals, and caring for residents.

Library staff assisted with water and ice distribution. Library staff worked the information phone bank. Library staff assisted with FEMA paperwork and answered calls for information. Library staff worked at 'refuge sites' during two storms.

We were the City's Command Center, housing police, fire, public works and city manager for three days. They slept on cots and had FEMA-supplied food and water. The library was never without power, so the officials were able to use our phones, TV and computer resources throughout the storm.

We have a large number of displaced people who are coming to rely upon the library in ways many of them never expected. I've had so many people tell me that they had never been to a library before they had to find someplace to file a FEMA application or insurance claim. Many of these people knew nothing about computers and would have been totally lost without the staff's help.

Library staff have staffed phones at the [Emergency Operations Center] and at the volunteer reception area; handed out tarps; helped register people for the blue roof program with the Army Corp of Engineers and FEMA; helped hand out water/ice/Meals Ready to Eat; provided programming support at a Hurricane Camp for County employees' children and volunteered at regular shelters and the Special Needs Facility.

The Library's parking lot was used to unload tractor-trailer loads of water and meals ready to eat for the distribution center in the county . . . Relief workers were encouraged to use the library to keep in touch with family and friends through email . . . The Library provided a FEMA team with local maps and help in locating areas that potentially suffered major damage from the storm.

As these quotes demonstrate, public libraries helped their communities in numerous ways.

These quotes, however, fail to convey the expansiveness of library efforts. After Katrina and Rita, libraries in Texas were "inundated" with evacuees seeking to use materials, access the Internet, and even seek shelter (Meraz, 2005, p. 90). Librarians in Houston, Texas, created a library in the Houston Astrodome for evacuees to use; the collection included over 10,000 books, 28 computers with Internet access, and 12 computers for children to use (Meraz, 2005). In the Cajundome in Lafayette, Louisiana, the local library created a computer center and branch library for evacuees (LJ News, 2005). One Mississippi library completed 868 FEMA applications for patrons in a single day (Fialkoff, 2005). In Louisiana, some libraries that survived the storms purchased additional computer stations and provided free copying, printing, and faxing to aid evacuees (Choate, 2005). A library in Baton Rouge housed the relief workers who came to the city because hotels were filled with evacuees (Block & Kim, 2006). Across the Gulf Coast, libraries stayed open more hours than normal, worked with more patrons than they had

ever seen, and coordinated the recovery of individuals, families, and communities (Block & Kim, 2006; Eberhart, 2005).

Library networks, library organizations, and state libraries also were keenly active in responding to the crises. The State Library and Archives of Florida worked with public libraries throughout the state in coordination efforts to assist libraries in disaster areas, even providing a clearinghouse of information for recovery and relief efforts after each storm <<http://dlis.dos.state.fl.us/DisasterRecovery/>>. The Southeastern Library Network (SOLINET) responded to Katrina by creating a website <<http://www.solinet.net/Disaster>> to match goods and services needed at libraries to donors and contributors (Fialkoff, 2005). The Texas Library Association created a program to provide cash and material donations to libraries in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama (Meraz, 2005). At the national level, the American Library Association has been actively involved in recovery efforts and held its 2006 national conference in New Orleans (Kniffel, 2006). These are just examples of the efforts of librarians, libraries, and library organizations.

The single largest contribution to supporting the libraries of the Gulf Coast was announced in June 2006. In a joint effort, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provided \$12.2 million, the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund provided \$5 million, and the Institute for Museum and Library Services provided \$500,000 to support and rebuild the libraries of the Gulf Coast. These funds will finance the construction of temporary library facilities, the reconstruction of damaged or destroyed libraries, and the addition of computers and other technologies in the rebuilt libraries (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2006).

THE INTERNET AND THE AFTERMATH

One of the most striking aspects of the information collected for this article was the impact of the ability of libraries to provide Internet access to survivors, evacuees, and relief workers. While a number of the important roles played by libraries, such as providing shelter and distributing food, were also played by other government agencies and relief organizations, the provision of access to computers and the Internet was a wholly unique and immeasurably important role for public libraries. This access proved vital in several different ways, as the Internet was a means to reach necessary insurance and employment information, e-government information and services, email, and news sources, as well as a means to locate missing loved ones.

In a number of communities, the public library was the only place where Internet access was available after the storms passed. "In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we were the only source of Internet access to the FEMA and other websites needed by those who needed it." One librarian described the overall situation as, "The Internet was the only means for displaced persons after Katrina to get information they needed. We were flooded with patrons needing Internet access. More and more people come to the public library every day for email, on-line services, job searching, etc."

The use of the Internet to contact FEMA was the most frequently cited service that libraries provided to their communities. FEMA aid forms can only be completed online and require certain levels of software. In some communities, public libraries were the only places where people could get online and access FEMA forms. One librarian reported, "our staff helped customers file over 45,000 FEMA applications [and] insurance claims."

Along with FEMA forms, insurance claims and employment applications frequently had to be completed online as well. These claims and applications were also essential to people who stayed through the storms and to evacuees. As one librarian explained, "our public access computers have been the only source of communicating with insurance carriers, Federal Emergency Management Agency and other sources of aid."

From an emotional standpoint, one of the greatest impacts of the Internet access provided by public libraries related to searches for lost family, friends, and pets. As one librarian stated, "our computers were invaluable in locating a missing family." Searches were conducted by patrons and by librarians helping them to locate evacuees and search for information about those who stayed behind. The Internet access also allowed patrons to have "contact with family members outside of the disaster area," "communicate with family and friends," and "stay in touch with family and friends due to lack of telephone service."

For those who were evacuated or displaced, the Internet access in public libraries provided the only window through which to see what had happened at home. "We had about 100 Katrina refugees using our computers to check on family members and friends who had been evacuated to other places. They also used our computers to file FEMA applications and check on their homes." The Internet access provided by public libraries was also critical to the relief workers who came to some communities, as these relief workers had no other means of communicating except via email with their organizations.

The significance of public access to computers and the Internet in public libraries has never been more pronounced than in the aftermath of these hurricanes. As one librarian poignantly summarized the situation, “For that time—the computers were a Godsend.”

NEW PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The roles played by public libraries in their communities after the hurricanes seem to have changed the perceptions of libraries in many areas affected by the hurricanes. In no small part, this results from the fact that libraries were able to provide essential information and a range of services to those in need. “Public access to information was the most important service the library provided in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.”

In some communities affected by the storms, normal public use of libraries seems to have increased since the hurricanes. One librarian wrote, “Since Hurricane Katrina, our computer needs have increased significantly.” Another librarian asserted, “The library is becoming better known in our small community as a center for information of all types, especially since Hurricane Katrina.” A large portion of this increase in usage is due to an influx of new patrons who had not previously used the library. As a librarian explained, the storms “brought in a new group of library patrons who had never used the library before. This has been especially true since Hurricane Katrina destroyed the MS coast.”

Some research has raised questions about the ability of public libraries in various locations to provide vital assistance in a crisis (Harris, Wathen, & Chan, 2005; Matthews, 2005; Will, 2001). However, it is clear that public libraries provided invaluable information and support to communities and individuals affected by the recent seasons of major hurricanes. Not only did public libraries serve a range of important functions in their communities before, during, and after the storms, but also some of the important services they provided have continued to be of great importance to the new users of the library.

The significance of the role of public libraries in coping with the destruction of the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons has not been lost on librarians themselves. Librarians have interpreted the response of libraries to these extraordinary events as “breath-taking” (Fialkoff, 2005, p. 8) and “at the heart of providing support to hurricane victims” (Meraz, 2005, p. 90). As providers of support and relief in times of crisis, one

commentator asserted, “Librarians may not be glamorous, we don’t make a lot of money, but you gotta have us” (Choate, 2005, p. 19).

DISASTER-PREPAREDNESS LESSONS FROM THE GULF COAST

The lessons from the 2004-2005 hurricane seasons for public libraries are myriad. Since forecasters expect the current increase in hurricane activity to continue for years to come (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2006), increased discussion, planning, and preparation about the role of public libraries in such situations needs to be expanded. One of best sources for initial planning in disaster preparation and response is dplan <<http://www.dplan.org>>. This site, prepared by the Northeast Document Conservation Center, provides a broad range of advice and tools to assist in disaster management planning and related activities. Information provided at this site can assist public libraries to develop their own disaster preparedness plan. Such a plan is essential for Gulf Coast states but may also be needed by public libraries in other states for different types of disasters. If they have not done so already, Gulf Coast public libraries must develop a plan for disaster preparedness.

A second lesson is the importance of the state library in assisting public libraries to prepare for a hurricane, supporting their efforts during the crisis, and providing follow-up assistance after the storm. The state library can collect summary data that documents the role of public libraries in the disaster, as was done by the State Library of Florida. Further, it can help inform public libraries and the public as to the role of libraries in such a disaster. The state library can also serve as a clearinghouse for disaster preparedness information, such as making libraries aware of good disaster plans, models for how local libraries can coordinate efforts with local government, and coordinating training related to disaster preparedness. In addition, the state library has the ability to coordinate library services during a hurricane with other state agencies.

Another lesson for local public libraries is to recognize their importance as a community resource in hurricane disaster preparedness. Conversations with Gulf Coast public librarians clearly indicated that the librarians were very surprised by how important the library would be in serving the various roles that have been detailed above in this paper. Recognition of the importance of these roles is a key step to then informing local governing boards, government officials, and residents of what

the public library can do to mitigate the effects of a hurricane disaster in a particular community. Disaster preparedness—whether for hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, terrorist attacks, or other types of crises—provides a significant opportunity for the public library to demonstrate its value and importance to the community and its residents.

A further lesson is that public libraries may not be able to rely on immediate outside support after a disaster. In the wake of the problems following the landfall of Katrina, the federal government has made a number of efforts to improve its ability to respond by acquiring better communication and information technologies and by establishing better tracking systems for supplies. However, experts anticipate that federal government responses “will probably still lag in several important areas” (Arnone, 2006, n.p.). A clear lesson from the affected communities during the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons is that public libraries should be ready to do as much as possible to help their communities survive and recover from a disaster without relying on immediate outside support from the federal government. As the federal government may or may not be prepared and able to help your community in the aftermath of a disaster, your library needs to be ready to do everything it can independently.

Finally, additional research and study into the roles of public libraries in disaster preparedness need to be done. There is a paucity of such research currently available to public librarians and this lack of information hinders successful disaster preparedness. To a certain degree, the findings presented here have not been widely recognized, have been brought together by piecing different information sources together, and offer a perspective on new and evolving roles for public libraries that requires additional investigation. This paper suggests a host of additional research questions that require attention and investigation.

NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study’s findings, and review of additional efforts, point to a number of recommendations to move the public library community forward in preparing to cope with future disasters. These include the need to:

- Involve public libraries directly in disaster planning initiatives. To a large extent, the study showed that public librarians and their libraries often engaged in their relief efforts by accident or through ad hoc efforts, not by design. Given the infrastructure and community presence of public libraries, including them in disaster planning

efforts prior to disasters would benefit both the community and disaster relief efforts.

- Clearly define the roles of public libraries in disaster situations within the community. Within the context of community-wide disaster planning, it is important to define specifically the roles that the public library and librarians would play in providing relief and recovery support. This would avoid duplication of efforts, but also enable librarians to engage in training efforts that provide necessary skills, expertise, and practice.
- Provide public librarians with disaster preparedness, relief, and clean-up strategies. Librarians do not typically receive training in hurricane (or other types of disaster) preparedness. The ground zero preparations, plans, resources, and other activities that may occur prior to, during, and after a hurricane (or other disasters) are not well known among public librarians and are unlikely to be taught in schools of library and information science. Thus the state library, regional networks (such as SOLINET in the Southeast), and other organizations may need to rethink the need for such training, the frequency with which it is offered, and the various methods by which such training can be provided.
- Include public librarians and public libraries in disaster training exercises. Community disaster agencies periodically engage in mock or staged training exercises that help prepare emergency service providers for disaster situations. It is important for public libraries and librarians to be included in these exercises so that they too may practice and prepare for relief and clean-up efforts.
- View public library technology infrastructure as critical to disaster recovery and protect it to ensure operability. Public libraries over the years have invested in their technology infrastructure—which includes both wired and wireless Internet access and public access computers (which may include laptops). This infrastructure can be a tremendous asset in times of emergencies, and should be incorporated into community plans.
- Fund public library disaster relief and preparation efforts. Public librarians and libraries by and large offered their services, resources, and assistance without either funding or mandate. They simply stepped up and stepped in. All these efforts, however, were not without a real cost in terms of time, resources, and other tangibles and intangibles. As communities consider public libraries as part of the larger disaster and emergency system, they will need to consider funding libraries for engaging in these efforts.

By including public libraries and librarians in community planning efforts from the onset, those in need will more likely receive efficient and effective service, assistance, and support in the aftermath of disaster.

NEW ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Public libraries quietly performed an extensive array of services for refugees, evacuees, and survivors of the major storms across the Gulf Coast in 2004 and 2005. "Libraries are, after all, one of the few arms of government that really work" (Fialkoff, 2005, p. 8). This statement was proved countless times in countless communities in the aftermath of Charley, Frances, Jeanne, Ivan, Dennis, Katrina, Rita, Wilma, and the other storms. Katrina may be the most well-known event nationally, but communities from the southern tip of Florida to southern Texas have been severely affected by a number of different storms.

After each storm, people in the affected areas turned to public libraries for many kinds of support and refuge. While all of the forms of aid given by librarians and their libraries proved important in their communities, other government agencies can provide shelter or food or a roof tarp. No other form of government, however, had the public access computers, the Internet access, and the dedicated professionals to turn information into a vital tool for finding the lost, searching for help, requesting aid, and beginning to recover. A librarian in Louisiana explained the immense personal value of libraries by stating, "When you connect someone with his mother and he didn't know whether she was dead or alive, that's important" (Eberhart, 2005, p. 25). Without public libraries, how many thousands of people would still not have been able to fill out FEMA or insurance forms? Apply for a new job? Find displaced loved ones or missing pets? Know what happened in the hometown they had to leave?

For many years, public libraries have been an assumed public good with funding provided to them being primarily viewed as a necessary expense to ensure public access to information and educational materials (Buschman, 2003). However, the changes in government philosophy and policy since the 1980s have altered the political climate for libraries, and many governments now require libraries to provide justification for the funding they receive and the benefits that they offer to their communities (Buschman, 2003; Missingham, 2005). In a political climate where libraries are often asked to justify receiving any amount of public funding,

the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons have provided, perhaps, one of the best justifications that can be made.

The experiences of public libraries across the Gulf Coast embody many of the community service ideals that libraries strive to fulfill. However, the same experiences merit reflection, as well. Library professionals and researchers need to consider the roles that libraries were able to fill in their communities in times of genuine crisis, what they mean for the education of future librarians, training of current librarians, advocacy for library funding, coordination with other government agencies, relationships with individual patrons, and relationships with entire communities. Being a branch of government that works in times of crisis is an enormous accomplishment, but it is also a serious responsibility. Libraries in other regions of the country, facing other types of disasters, should be ready to perform in the same way the libraries of the Gulf Coast have in the past two years. The issue is how to do so. There is a sizable difference between planning and performing in a crisis.

A key aspect of public libraries across the country becoming better prepared to ensure vital information access and numerous other services during a disaster will be studying Gulf Coast libraries, what they did well in crises, and what might be improved. The 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons have shown that it is possible for public libraries to respond successfully to a range of crises. A responsibility of all library professionals and researchers is to work toward being ready to serve communities in times of any crisis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The 2006 *Public Libraries and the Internet* study was funded by the American Library Association and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. We extend the sincerest gratitude to the thousands of public librarians who made the effort to complete the survey. We also thank all the public librarians and state library officials who participated in the other research related to this paper.

REFERENCES

- Arnone, M. (2006, June 5). Storm watch 2006: Ready or not. Federal Computer Week. Available: <<http://www.few.com>>.
- Bertot, J. C., Jaeger, P. T., Langa, L. A., & McClure, C. R. (2006). Public access computing and Internet access in public libraries: The role of public libraries in e-government and emergencies. *First Monday*, 11(9). Available: <<http://www.firstmonday.org>>.

- Bertot, J. C., McClure, C. R., & Jaeger, P. T. (2006). Public libraries and the Internet 2006: Survey results and findings. Tallahassee, FL: Information Use Management and Policy Institute, available at <<http://www.ii.fsu.edu/plinternet>>.
- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2006). Gulf libraries are building back—and better. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Available: <<http://www.gatesfoundation.org>>.
- Block, M. & Kim, A. (2006). All (librarian) hands on deck. *Library Journal*, 131(5), 22-25.
- Buschman, J. E. (2003). Dismantling the public sphere: Situating and sustaining librarianship in the age of the new public philosophy. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.
- Choate, J. (2005). From the president. *Louisiana Libraries*, Fall 2005, 19.
- Eberhart, G. (2005). Katrina's terrible toll: Librarians rally to provide information for a devastated Gulf Coast population. *American Libraries*, 36(9), 14-25.
- Fialkoff, F. (2005). Government that works: A defining moment for public libraries. *Library Journal*, 130(16), 8.
- Harris, R., Wathen, C. N., & Chan, D. (2005). Public library responses to a consumer health inquiry in a public health crisis. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 45(2), 146-154.
- Kniffel, L. (2006). You have to see it for yourself. *American Libraries*, 37(5), 9-13.
- Leboeuf, M. C. (2006). Ill winds: Hurricanes and public libraries along the Gulf Coast. *Public Libraries*, 45(3), 58-63.
- "LJ News." (2005). Libraries damaged, librarians respond, after hurricane's fury. *Library Journal*, 130(15), 16-17.
- Matthews, G. (2005). Disaster management: Sharing experience, working across the sector. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 37(2), 63-74.
- McCoy, M. J. (2005). The forces of nature or dancing with the three ladies. *Texas Library Journal*, 81(4), 142.
- Meraz, G. (2005). In times of trouble. *Texas Library Journal*, 81(3), 90.
- Missingham, R. (2005). Libraries and economic value: A review of recent studies. *Performance Measurement and Metrics*, 6(3), 142-158.
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. (2006). NOAA: 2006 Atlantic hurricane outlook. Available: <<http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/outlooks/hurricane.shtml>>.
- O'Connell, H. (2005). Weathering the storms: Hurricanes impact Florida libraries. *Florida Libraries*, 47(1), 4-5.
- Rogers, M. (2004). Hurricanes in FL: Floods in wake. *Library Journal*, 129(17), 15.
- Will, B. H. (2001). The public library as community crisis center. *Library Journal*, 126(20), 75-77.

doi:10.1300/J118v25n03_17