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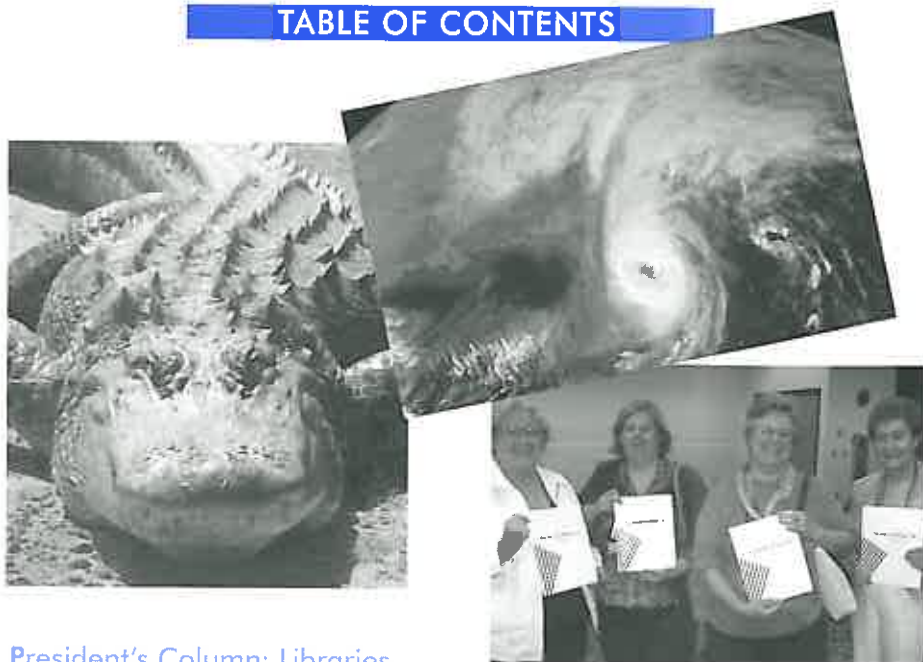
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Highlights of the 2009 FLA Annual Conference • The Perfect Storm: Budget Cuts
Hurricane Preparedness and Response for Florida Public Libraries

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Correction:

In the Fall 2008 article "Desperate Times, Desperate Measures: The Great Depression and Florida Libraries," the captions for the Homestead Library and the Coral Gables Women's Club were reversed on pages 6 and 7.

Hurricane Preparedness and Response for Florida Public Libraries:

Best Practices and Strategies

By Charles R. McClure, Joe Ryan, Lauren H. Mandel, John Brobst, Charles C. Hinnant, Jordon Andrade, and John T. Snead

Since 2000, fifty-one hurricanes or other severe storm systems have impacted the state of Florida, resulting in over $64 billion in damage and 149 related fatalities.[1] Historically, more hurricanes hit Florida than any other U.S. state.[2] Florida public libraries have responded by taking steps to better prepare for these emergency situations and to better serve their local communities during times of disaster.

In support of their communities, public libraries have adapted their service roles to provide their communities with emergency support and to assist hurricane victims. Public libraries across the state have opened their doors to help get evacuees much needed information, assisted in obtaining government assistance for those in need, and aided individuals in locating family and friends. Until now, there has been no systematic effort to organize and assist all Florida public libraries in providing improved hurricane planning and response services.

Grant Funds Hurricane Preparedness Project

In response to this need, the Information Use Management & Policy Institute (Information Institute) at Florida State University (FSU) received a grant from FSU's Florida Catastrophic Storm Risk Management Center to assist public libraries in helping their communities better prepare for and recover from hurricanes. The Information Institute is identifying best practices and strategies from public libraries in disaster-response situations so others may learn from their experiences. Leveraging this informa-tion is especially important given the limited information about hurricane and disaster preparedness available to public librarians. While the project's emphasis is on determining how a public library can help its community, the project also identifies practical steps taken by libraries to better prepare for hurricanes and other disasters.

Initial site visits with Gulf Coast libraries and interviews with library managers and emergency responders have led to preliminary findings regarding public library emergency response services roles and the importance of partnerships with local, state, and federal agencies when responding to hurricanes and disasters. Preliminary findings also show that a number of Florida public libraries are effective team members that work with various government agencies preparing for and responding to hurricanes and other disasters. The project draws on collaboration with public library managers, the State Library and Archives of Florida, SOLINET, emergency responders, and others to develop training and resources to assist Florida public librarians in helping their communities.

Libraries Respond to Hurricanes

Since 2004, the Information Institute has collected data describing Florida and Gulf Coast public libraries' roles and services in hurricane/disaster preparedness and response.[3] These data show that a number of public libraries are partners in local hurricane/disaster preparedness and response teams; that they contribute a range of skills and knowledge to handling information management and communication prior to, during, and after such storms; and that the public recognizes the public library as a trusted and effective government agency.

After the 2006 hurricane season, eight major areas emerged in which libraries played a key role:[4, 5]

- Helping communities prepare before the storms

- Providing emergency information after the storms

- Providing shelter

- Providing physical aid

- Caring for community members in need

- Working with partner government and relief organizations

- Cleaning up damage

- Providing continuity of services, stress reduction, and restoring normalcy

Libraries provided these services throughout Florida and the Gulf Coast region, employing trained staff, library resources, Internet access, and many other resources to assist their communities in hurricane preparedness and recovery.

Emergency Management Roles and Responsibilities

As part of the current project, Information Institute staff collected various plans, services, and activities that demonstrate public libraries' engagement with hurricane preparedness and response activities and interviewed over 150 library staff, emergency-response personnel, and others. Also, the project team met with various local and state officials to understand better the local and situational factors affecting public libraries' ability to provide hurricane preparedness and response services successfully. Preliminary findings from this project suggest a range of public library hurricane service roles and responsibilities, as well as the value of building a response network.

- **Ensure library continuity and restoration:** Plan for and take actions to ensure continuity of library operations and services after a hurricane.

- **Extend normal library services in abnormal times:** Restore hope and re-establish a neighborhood government presence by offering stress reduction,

"The project's efforts will equip public libraries to respond more successfully to hurricanes and other disasters and, in partnership with other agencies, mitigate some of the damage and destructions that these hurricanes bring to the state."

a return to normalcy, and family relief services, both inside the library and through outreach efforts.

- **Be a community communication hub:** Offer emergency responders and the public reliable, secure means of communication during disaster recovery.

- **Offer E-Government service and support:** Provide access to E-Government via technology; locate information, resources and benefits; aid in completion of forms; and link residents and E-Government agencies together.

- **Be a community information hub:** Offer to residents, evacuees, and emergency managers accurate information to prepare for and recover from hurricane threats.

- **Be a community organizer and meeting place:** Help organize community services and provide meeting facilities and office space.

- **Support small business recovery:** Assist small businesses in finding the information and support they need to reopen for business.

- **Serve as a point of distribution (POD):** Manage and distribute meals, sandbags, ice, tarps, etc.

- **Provide on demand emergency services:** Respond to requests from emergency management or local government and improvise new activities without respect to traditional library roles.

- **Go where locally assigned:** In many Florida counties, all government personnel register with county emergency personnel managers for hurricane assignment.

These service roles begin to describe a menu of possible activities in which a public library might be involved. Clearly, not all public libraries can assume all of these service roles. But depending on resources, local government and community needs, and the library's relationship with emergency providers, some of these service roles may be especially appropriate for an individual library. These service roles are currently being further defined and made operational for use by individual libraries.

Strategic thinking about which hurricane service roles a specific public library can adopt may improve community hurricane preparation and response efforts. These role descriptions may also be useful for library directors when explaining to potential partners what public libraries have done and can do related to community hurricane response, keeping in mind that "...local governments don't think of you as an emergency provider, but people do."[6]

Building a Response Network

Before disaster strikes, library managers have an opportunity to focus on what they can control and manage: preparing the library facility and staff, finding partners to help, and pre-coordinating emergency response activities as much as is reasonable. The team approach has been proven to yield rewards greater than individual, independent efforts by a single agency. A library manager noted, "If I can build a relationship with directors of [local, state, and federal] agencies, it brings credibility of libraries to the table."[7]

The first step in managing hurricane response partnerships is to gain a better awareness of what each potential partner does in community hurricane response. Discussions need to be open and frank about the resources necessary to provide services and meet partner needs with a range of local emergency responders and others.

The next step is to pre-coordinate what the library can contribute, what the library needs from each partner, and how library activities can mesh with other partners' activities. The library and its partners should prepare and test these new arrangements prior to an emergency. Working out the details in advance saves time, significantly improves response, and results in forming bonds of trust and understanding.

After a storm strikes, it is useful to assess what worked, what didn't, and then determine what else can be done to better assist the community. In initiating these collaborative efforts, keep in mind that making arrangements to aid each other and to coordinate these activities takes time, and that what is possible may vary from location to location due to local situations and library-county policies.

Multi-type Library Cooperatives (MLCs), the State Library and Archives of Florida,
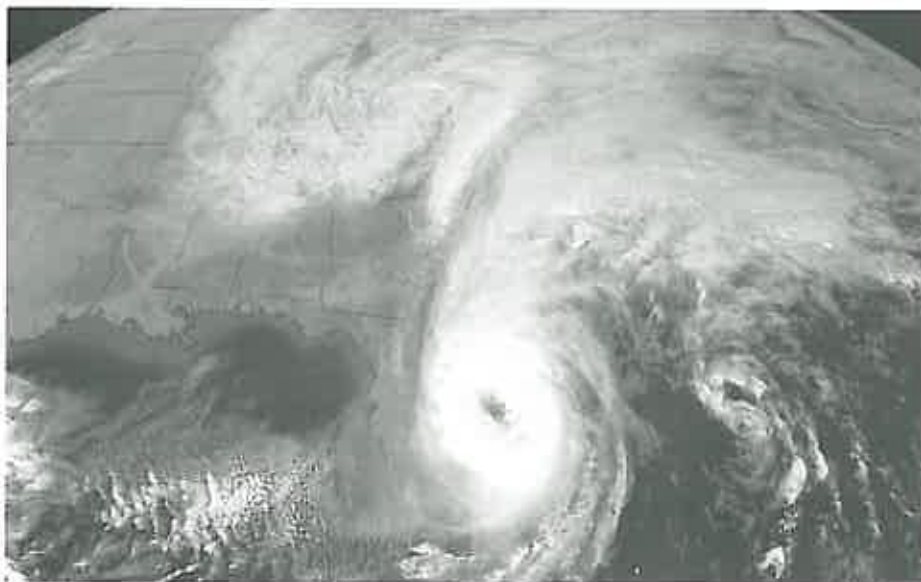
NOAA satellite image of Hurricane Wilma October 24, 2005 (available from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hurricane_Wilma_200510241815.jpg)

"While the project's emphasis is on determining how a public library can help its community, the project also identifies practical steps taken by libraries to better prepare for hurricanes and other disasters."

large library systems, libraries adjacent to hurricane-affected libraries, library vendors, SOLINET, and others can all make significant hurricane-response contributions. The key, however, is for the public library to (1) clarify relationships, responsibilities, and activities with other community, state, and federal emergency agencies prior to a hurricane, and (2) understand which of the above service roles it has the capacity and knowledge to offer to its local community.

Project Products

Ongoing project activities, including the development of a Web portal and training sessions, will ease the disaster response burden on Florida public librarians, improve the state's overall disaster preparedness and response, reduce the public's risk, and contribute successful strategies for mitigating the impact of a hurricane/disaster on a local community.

Web Portal

One important aspect of this project is assuring that the information, resources, and best practices are available to all public libraries. With that in mind, project staff members have been developing a Web portal that will serve as an easy-to-use resource for librarians. The portal contains valuable information on all aspects of hurricane preparedness, such as guidance on developing effective hurricane plans, integrating efforts with governmental agencies, and identifying best practices for public librarians. This portal will be a dynamic, content-rich Web site that delivers timely and relevant information to librarians, including emergency information, Web-based resources, and informative Web links across multiple resources. Interactive features will help promote collaboration and information exchange as libraries prepare for and react to emergencies, as well as promoting more effective communication with the emergency response organizations that serve local communities.

The Web portal is currently available at http://www.ii.fsu.edu/hurricanes. The site will undergo continuous development and updating to provide the latest information available. Employing the Web portal approach provides the capability to consolidate and organize numerous resources in an easy structure while providing timely and relevant content.

Training Sessions

Project staff members are assessing how libraries can best provide hurricane preparedness and response services in light of available skills and capacities at the library. At the same time, the Information Institute is developing statewide training sessions for public librarians and local officials, so that the findings from the project can made available to the broader library and government communities. The training sessions will focus on ways libraries and other agencies can better collaborate, enhance their skills, and provide targeted services for hurricane preparedness and response.

Florida librarians will have opportunities to attend training sessions conducted by the Information Institute at each of the Multitype Library Cooperatives (MLC) throughout the state as listed in Figure 1. Additional training opportunities are being identified and will be posted on the Institute's Web site when available.

Benefit to Florida Libraries and Florida Residents

Many Florida public libraries already provide a range of useful services and activities in

Hurricane Preparedness and Response Training Sessions in 2009		
Tentative date	Location	Contact
April 13	Panhandle Library Access Network (PLAN), Panama City Beach, FL	http://www.plan.lib.fl.us (850) 233-9051
April 14 & 16	Northeast Florida Library Information Network (NEFLIN), Orange Park, FL	http://www.neflin.org (904) 278-5620
April 17-18	Central Florida Library Cooperative (CFLC), Maitland, FL	http://www.cflc.net (407) 644.9050
April 24	Tampa Bay Library Consortium (TBLC) Tampa, FL	http://www.tblc.org (813) 622-8252
April 22 & 23	Southeast Florida Library Information Network (SEFLIN), Boca Raton, FL	http://www.seflin.org (877) 733.5460
April 27	Southwest Florida Library Network (SWFLN), Fort Myers, FL	http://www.swfln.org (239) 745-3720.

Figure 1: Training Schedule [Note: Times and dates may change]

preparing for a hurricane or disaster, in spite of the lack of guidelines, recommendations, or best practices available to assist them in these roles. Libraries involved in the provision of disaster services have learned by doing, and there has been no systematic effort to share what was learned at these individual libraries with all Florida public libraries.

The dissemination of best practices, service roles, and other information via the project Web site should be an important contribution. The project's efforts to develop plans, guidelines, service roles, and best practices will equip public libraries to respond more successfully to hurricanes and other disasters and, in partnership with other agencies, mitigate some of the damage and destruction that these hurricanes bring to the state.

Next Steps

Project staff continues to analyze findings from the various interviews, focus groups, and meetings that have occurred. These previous and ongoing discussions will result in the following:

- **Expanded Web site.** The project Web site will continue to expand and develop to include more and better organized information resources that will benefit public librarians as they prepare for and respond to hurricanes. In addition, interactive Web 2.0 tools will be tested and incorporated.

- **Detailed service roles.** The service roles described earlier in this paper will be detailed specifically in terms of how these roles can be accomplished, the resources needed to provide these services, and the type of training and knowledge needed by library staff to successfully provide the service roles.

- **Customized local information online templates.** Project staff members are developing "brochures" that individual

public libraries can customize via a basic template to provide a range of local information for residents, emergency providers, and evacuees.

- **Visibility for the role of public libraries in hurricanes.** While many public librarians are very much aware of the role they play in hurricane preparedness and response, other community members, local and state government officials, and non-government emergency groups are not. The project will continue to bring local, state, and national attention to the important roles libraries play in hurricane preparedness and response.

- **Training.** In addition to training sessions established at all six Multi-type Library Cooperatives in the state (see Figure 1), further training will be offered and made available online via the project Web site through various instructional modules and webcasts.

- **Extending project partners.** There has been wide interest in the project from many public libraries in the Gulf Coast, as well as in states along the Atlantic coast. Project staff intends to identify additional partners to participate in the project and to determine the extent to which the project can be transferred to other states with a history of hurricane disasters.

These outline some of the major steps that project staff will be taking in the near future. A presentation at the 2009 Florida Library Association annual conference will provide an additional update. The interest in this project from many individuals and organizations has been significant, and the staff expects to continue to expand and improve the products and services that will result from the project.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, "List of Florida Hurricanes," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Florida_hurricanes.

2. Jerry D. Jarrell et al., "The Deadliest, Costliest, and Most Intense United States Hurricanes from 1900 to 2000," NOAA Technical Memorandum, NWS TPC-1,(2001), http://www.aoml.noaa.gov/hrd/Landsea/deadly/index.html.

3. Information Institute, Florida Electronic Library Five-Year Evaluation 2003-2007. (Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University, Information Institute [for the State Library of Florida], with others).

4. Paul T. Jaeger et al., "The 2004 and 2005 Gulf Coast Hurricanes: Evolving Roles and Lessons Learned for Public Libraries," *Public Library Quarterly*, 25 (2007): 199-214.

5. John Carlo Bertot et al., "Public Access Computing and Internet Access in Public Libraries: The Role of Public Libraries in E-government and Emergency Situations," First Monday, 11 (September 2006), http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1392/1310.

6. Interview with library manager, October 11, 2008.

7. Interview with library manager, October 15, 2008.