

# The use of the public library for emergency management response and recovery

**W**ithin an Australian context, an analysis of the use of public libraries for disaster or emergency, preparedness, response and recovery is, to my knowledge, very minimal. It seems that the 'professional' agencies most directly involved in dealing with disaster have their own specialist channels of communications, information sources and network of agencies.

The thrust of Australian emergency management is to hand back to the community responsibility for their emergency planning, response and recovery. A good example of this is the Victorian Country Fire Authority's 'Community Fireguard' program, which empowers the community to manage its own vulnerability and planning. If the community views the public library as an important function, ought it be relevant as a partner in the community's emergency planning, response and recovery?

What would emergency planners, responders and recovery managers expect to be provided from the public library? Would it provide data on past events such as river or flood heights, details of contaminated sites, details of historical events of hazards pertinent to the district? Would its network of community resources be useful to responders and recovery managers?

Studies from the UK have shown that this source has also been an overlooked resource but in some situations the public library has significantly contributed to the enhancement of disaster response and recovery. As each disaster is different, so to were the responses provided by the public libraries in the UK. Libraries were seen as part of the community and somewhere to meet and go which is a valuable part of community bonding and reconstruction. As the case of the Lockerbie disaster demonstrated, the library was designated as the centre for the community liaison office. The community liaison team was established as the community's 'one-stop' approach to all local authority and non-emergency services. The library was also set-up as the base for the relief fund. These roles were well outside their traditional services but, to be part of a community, the library must be seen to share the experiences of that community and contribute to its new life. At Lockerbie

ongoing liaison was maintained between the library and the community support staff. This ensured that information continued to be made available to the community and that material was obtained for an archival collection. This archival process forms part of that community's memory and in some way forms part of the community's memorial function.

In the case of the Hillsborough football stadium disaster, the Hillsborough community library was used as a community 'helpline'. Volunteers and library staff answered calls concerning a range of matters, such as

- people anxious about relatives or friends
- social workers from other areas tracing survivors on behalf of families
- people who were at the match wanting to trace survivors
- injured survivors tracing those who had rescued them or people they had met in hospital etc.

The public library also played a significant role in response to the 'Towyn floods' in Clwyn, Wales. The library was set up to act as a central coordination point for the welfare services and as an advice centre for both public and professional use. It also played many other roles. Some of these and other examples revealed by Marilyn Dover in her publication *Civil Disasters: the role of public libraries following a crisis in the community* (1993), show that public libraries are and can play a vital part within the community.

Within Australia the only notable role undertaken by any public library to my knowledge is the Newcastle Regional Library, with its documentation and collection of data on the Newcastle earthquake. However, to a large degree this was a latent result of a decision of what to do with the money raised by the disaster appeal. Ken Granger (1998) challenges the Australian library community to collect information on the local experience of disaster events. He believes that these libraries are well equipped to seek, organise and maintain the eclectic range of material that is of value to a wide range disaster researchers and emergency planning in their pursuit of disaster preparedness. He also regards that the local library to be a social and cultural

focus in the community and is ideally suited to focus local studies, especially given that disasters are invariably defining monuments in a community's history.

The question that arises from this is: why are Australian public libraries not playing any role in disaster planning, response or recovery?

To answer this question I think that perhaps public librarians within Australia seldom think beyond their traditional role. To compound this situation emergency planners may also find it difficult to think beyond the traditional response agencies and the social and welfare agencies.

It is also difficult for Australian public libraries undergoing privatisation and enlarging municipal districts due to rationalisation to think beyond traditional services. This is especially difficult when finances are being reduced.

On the disaster planning and response aspect, there has not been one public librarian attend any disaster course conducted at the Australian Emergency Management Institute in the last ten years. This may be a reflection of the various nominating authority's inability to tap into the wider community. Perhaps to overcome a perception that public libraries have little or no role to do with disaster planning, response or recovery, local emergency managers could seek more active partnerships within this sector of the community. This partnership between librarians and planners would enhance community participation and commitment. Libraries and librarians can be used as a resource for planning data, a resource for community participation and even a focal point for the community's social and cultural history. I would very interested to hear if emergency planners have and do use their public library for any emergency management role.

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Editor

## References

Dover M. 1993, *Civil Disasters: the role of public libraries following a crisis in the community*, Library Association Publishing, London.

Granger K. 1998, 'Local history as a key to understanding disasters', *incite*, Vol 19 (6) p. 14.