Be Prepared: Disaster Planning and Recovery

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Moderator: Leslie Goldstein

Speakers:

Leslie Goldstein, Branch Librarian, New York Institute of Technology

Romaine Ahlstrom, Head Reader Services, Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

Gretchen Karl, Head of Collection Maintenance, Getty Research Institute Library

The session opened with moderator Leslie Goldstein’s introduction to the topic. Goldstein, a Branch Librarian for the New York Institute of Technology, experienced a disaster involving the library’s roof and burst steam pipes during a winter storm that prompted her to suggest this session. Goldstein introduced Romaine Ahlstrom and Gretchen Karl, founding members of the Steering Committee for the Los Angeles Preservation Network. Both Ahlstrom and Karl were staff members at the Los Angeles Public Library’s Central Branch when it experienced the worst library disaster in history. On April 29, 1986 LA Public Library’s Central branch was set on fire by an arsonist and burned for over 6 hours damaging 800,000 volumes.

Goldstein’s presentation, Be Prepared, outlined the various considerations and elements of a disaster plan. To accompany her talk, she has created a web page called “Be prepared” with links to other websites on disaster planning and a bibliography of disaster related materials. The web site can be found at:

http://iris.nyit.edu/library/beprepared.htm

In her presentation Goldstein stated that disaster response should take into consideration prevention and preparedness, response, recovery or the resumption of normal operations, review and updating of disaster plans. A disaster plan should also include operational contingencies based on the lack of basic services, such as electricity, gas, and phone. She also stressed preventative preparedness by thoroughly surveying the building and collection for potential hazards both internal and external, keeping up on building maintenance, and regularly cleaning the collection and shelving.

Goldstein also suggested that a floor plan should also be drawn up including salvage priorities. She recommends that the first items to be salvaged should be those materials that are irreplaceable and integral to your institution’s mission. For example, rare or unique materials, photographs, works on nitrate film, or art works. Next should include collections that are critical to your institution such as core collections, reference materials, microfilm masters just to name a few. Third should be basic collection materials, followed by replaceable materials such as serials. Last on the priority list should be those materials that can easily be discarded, such as ephemera. The floor plan should be reviewed and updated annually along with your building and collection survey and building insurance.

Goldstein emphasized that preparedness is key in disaster response. Make sure your staff has adequate training to respond to a disaster. Review the plan with them. Provide specialized training such as how to use fire extinguishers or handle damaged materials. Make sure everyone is familiar with the lines of authority, list of vendors, and where supplies are stored. Make sure your staff has copies of the disaster plan both at work and at home. Make sure your plan is communicated and reviewed by other departments in your institution and contingencies are established for their help in the event of a disaster.

When disaster strikes, Goldstein recommended the following course of action. Mobilize staff through established lines of communication and responsibilities. Next contact other departments within your institution that are part of your response team. Ensure the safety of your staff by inspecting the building with a health and safety officer once the disaster has been contained. When it is safe to enter the building, stabilizing the environment. Humidity levels should be below 35%. Next assess the extent of the damage, take notes and document with photographs the condition of the collection. Can the clean up be handled in-house or is it too extensive for your facilities? Once a decision has been reached locate your emergency supplies and begin sorting and salvaging materials. Freeze or air dry materials within 48 hours to prevent mold growth. Separate and box materials by format and extent of damage. Mark boxes clearly and keep a master list of items removed. In case of a mold outbreak, consult with a mycologist and quarantine effected materials. Before returning materials to the effected area, have the area and the HVAC system cleaned. Once materials are back on the shelves, continue to monitor them for mold. Once the disaster has past, spend time evaluating your response procedures and revise your disaster plan.
In closing, Goldstein stated that even with the best preparation and planning disasters are stressful experiences for all concerned. Be sure to consider the psychological effects of disaster fatigue on you and your staff. Build staff morale by creating a sense of teamwork such as starting the work day with a meeting to address the daily needs, taking frequent breaks, and providing snacks.

Next Romaine Ahlstrom recounted her experiences with the Los Angeles Public Library’s Central Branch fire of 1986. As mentioned this fire was and remains the worst library disaster on record. At the time, Ahlstrom was the Head of Rare Books and Collection Development for the LAPL Central Branch. She recounts that the LAPL Central Branch was in the process of drawing up renovation plans as it had outgrown its 60-year-old library building when an arsonist set fire to the stacks on April 29, 1986. The stacks area contained old style shelving; four units tall stacked one top of another which allowed the fire to burn between floors. Despite the valiant efforts by the fire department, the library burned for over six hours. While the firemen tried to minimize damage by covering some areas with plastic, at the end of day, over 800,000 volumes were damaged.

The outpouring of help from the community was staggering. 11,000 volunteers showed up to help. Local businesses provided the workers and volunteers with food and beverages for breaks. Document Reprocessors, a salvage company, also arrived on the scene with special double walled boxes for them to use to pack out the collection and ship to cold storage. 400,000 books were damaged beyond repair and were tossed. Remaining 400,000 items were packed, in boxes, the boxes were marked with the call numbers, placed on pallets and shipped to three different sites in and around the Los Angeles area where they would remain frozen for three years until they could be thawed and dried in a temporary building.

In the midst of packing out the library, Ahlstrom recounts that a second disaster took place. Another arsonist set fire to the music collection and virtually all 25,000 items from the music room were discarded. She said in retrospect that some of these materials could have possibly been saved but lack of time and mental exhaustion in dealing with the larger disaster prevented them from being able to give much attention to this smaller one.

In the end Ahlstrom said they were able to recover nearly all of the 400,000 items and after three years the library was able to function somewhat from a temporary facility. To keep up morale the library made and distributed T-shirts to their staff. Virtually all the staff members of the Central Branch were retained through this process, some working in other branches and others in the temporary facility. The community supported them too with a save the books campaign that raised 10 million dollars towards their renovation. In 1993, after seven years, they were finally able to return to the newly renovated Central Branch.

In closing Ahlstrom advised to do the best disaster preparation you can, to keep your systems, such as sprinklers and alarms up to date, and to hope is never happens to your library.

The third speaker Gretchen Karl discussed the formation of the Los Angeles Preservation Network. This network developed from a meeting of the Southern California Archivists Association in the wake of the LAPL Central Branch disaster. Karl recalls that they initiated training sessions for the handling of wet materials at the Huntington Library. At the session they soaked books and packed them out for freezing. Tables were set up and everyone attending practiced. Attendees also learned the proper technique for air drying materials.

These techniques proved valuable when the Getty experienced a disaster. In 1994 Karl recounts that the Northridge earthquake toppled shelves and broke pipes and sprinkler heads in the Getty. To handle the 200 wet books, empty offices were used for interleaving and air-drying. 100 books were packed out, frozen and air-dried at a later date. Some of their photograph collection was water damaged, but fortunately the boxes took the brunt of the water and they were able to air-dry the photos.

Karl’s advice is to build confidence in your staff that they can handle disasters. She stresses practicing salvaging techniques to get an idea of what you can handle in house and to see what the results are like. Karl brought with her many examples of items that had been wet and air-dried that session attendees were encouraged to come up and examine.

A brief question and answer period followed, recounting other stories of disaster experiences.

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