Chapter 70
Beyond the Collection:
Emergency Planning for Public and Staff Safety

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ABSTRACT

It is inevitable that library staff will need to respond to natural disasters and emergency situations – often with little or no advance warning. An important part of emergency planning is addressing public and staff safety prior, during, and immediately following emergencies. All libraries need to develop a comprehensive emergency plan with clear, consistent, and concise policies and procedures for staff. The plan needs to provide detailed instructions for all types of potential emergency situations and should be periodically re-evaluated and updated to address new concerns or when new information or resources become available. This chapter will discuss the process of creating an emergency plan for public and staff safety, including reviewing resources, consulting with experts, developing new policies and procedures, and disseminating the information to staff.

INTRODUCTION

In July 2012, the local Binghamton National Weather Service issued a tornado warning for our community and the surrounding area. Within minutes, library staff at Binghamton University Libraries received a text message from the University Communication and Marketing Office that a potential tornado was headed directly towards the University and that it was necessary to immediately take shelter in a safe interior place away from any windows. Soon after the text notification, library staff could hear the loud outdoor siren, followed by a garbled voice presumably providing instructions on what to do for people on campus.

After taking a moment to comprehend the potential disaster about to occur (a tornado warning had not occurred in our area of Upstate New York for some time), staff at the main library started directing patrons to exit the library and proceed to the ground floor of the building (the main library is contained within a larger building complex). Since it was summer, we had fewer patrons and staff than we have during our busy academic year so the evacuation was quick and orderly.

Several staff members went outside to listen to the message being broadcast via the outdoor notification system. We thought important information was being conveyed about a possible tornado, which included additional safety instructions. We later learned that the outdoor siren and voice message are only meant for individuals who are outside and "not intended to be heard by people inside the buildings on campus" (Binghamton University, 2012). The instructions were to go inside (same information provided by the text notification). So, in actuality, the staff should not have exited the building during a tornado warning and potentially placed themselves in harm's way. Fortunately, a tornado did not occur in our immediate area; though a tornado touched down on the ground about 50 miles west in Elmira, New York.

During and after the evacuation of the library caused by the tornado warning, library staff asked numerous questions: Should we lock the doors? Should we walk through the four floors of the building to ask people to leave? Should we keep people from coming in or returning to the library during the emergency? Should we stay to protect the library collection, patron's belongings left behind, or computers in our Information Commons from possible theft? What if patrons refuse to evacuate? Would we need to remain behind since there were patrons still in the library? Patrons also asked questions: Should they take their belongings? Where should they go to be safe? Was the library closing?

Library staff posed so many different questions, questions resulting from years of ever evolving procedural changes that it became obvious that significant clean-up of documentation and subsequent clarification was needed. Clearly, policies had changed numerous times and had not been conveyed consistently among staff and across locations. Misinformation was everywhere. Old procedures were interfiled with new procedures, gaps were found in what were thought to be complete and specific directions for staff to follow in the wake of an emergency.

Even though staff developed and worked with established general procedures for years on how to evacuate people from the library, it was clear that in the moment of this actual emergency, library staff were not clear on what to do or how to do it. The evacuation procedures focused on leaving the building for a fire not on seeking shelter inside the building from a severe weather condition like a tornado with high speed winds. We had not taken into account different types of emergency situations that would require different types of evacuation.

In addition to this emergency, Binghamton University Libraries have dealt with other natural disasters and man-made emergency situations. In this region, we regularly encounter severe weather, particularly during the winter months when there can be blizzard conditions. In 2006, we endured an historic flood resulting in millions of dollars in property damage in the surrounding neighborhoods. The 2006 flood was supposed to be the "once in every hundred years" storm but it happened again in 2011 – just five years later. The 2011 flood forced the closure of our Libraries' branch in downtown Binghamton (5 miles away from the main campus) for over a year because the custom HVAC system had been destroyed. These past severe weather storms and floods have significantly affected the Libraries' daily operations and heightened concern about personal safety, and preserving our collections. Another concern arose due to the need to temporarily relocate collections, services and staff, which created the need for additional emergency training and posed new challenges. After finding themselves in new environments, the relocated staff members would need to be informed of specific emergency procedures for their new locations.

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