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Shawna Gandy
Oregon Historical Society Research Library

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Don't Go It Alone—

Building Networks for Collaborative Emergency Preparedness

by **Shawna Gandy**
*Reference Archivist,
Oregon Historical Society
Research Library*

Are you too short on time and low on resources for emergency preparedness? Overwhelmed by all you think you need to know and do? Don't go it alone—collaborate!

When it comes to emergency preparedness and response, collaboration is not only helpful, it's necessary. When the real test comes, the networks you have developed with your colleagues at work and with other professionals, as well as with emergency responders, will make a critical difference.

In large-scale disasters, libraries and other cultural organizations can be forgotten amidst pressing human needs. But as most emergencies involve water, and moisture rapidly triggers mold growth, time is of the essence! By working in advance with emergency responders, you can literally get your institution on the map so that when help is available, responders will know what to do to safeguard precious materials and reduce interruptions in service.

Working together with kindred institutions has a number of advantages. First, you can each benefit from the collective knowledge and resourcefulness of the group. Second, if you are organized and sufficient in number, you are more likely to attract the attention of trainers and other support services. Third, you can share the expense of collectively stockpiling supplies and when the time comes, share the physically demanding work of disaster recovery. Last, and perhaps most importantly in the long term, you can work together to increase public awareness of and appreciation for your organizations, their special needs, and their value to the community.

Don't think you have to be an expert to be a collaborator. If you have not yet formulated a disaster plan, you're not alone. A recent comprehensive nationwide survey, the Heritage Health Index, found that 80

percent of U.S. collecting institutions such as libraries and archives, museums, and historical societies, have neither a disaster plan in place nor staff trained in disaster response. In the Western states, the numbers are even higher. Your first step could be to reach out to someone else who is equally unprepared and seek help together.

Examples of collaboration abound in the library world. I'll tell you about the one that got me started with disaster planning, and plant some ideas for how you could form your own coalition.

The Portland Area Library System (PORTALS) was created fifteen years ago to collectively increase services in the face of dwindling resources and sweeping yet expensive technological changes. After a marriage of seven years, the consortium partners realized the need to collectively plan for and respond to emergencies, and the Disaster Response Group (affectionately known as DIRG) was born. In 2001, the PORTALS Council passed a mutual aid agreement stating that participating institutions "maintain a current disaster preparedness plan and participate in mutual recovery aid when needed." This simple promise of mutual support, along with the dedication of a core of interested library staff, has sustained the continuing efforts of the DIRG.

Support and encouragement takes many forms. The PORTALS-DIRG has sponsored numerous workshops and tabletop exercises, developed a Web site with information links and a disaster plan template, and negotiated a cold storage agreement. In its eight years of existence, DIRG has helped its members to be better prepared to respond to disasters, and has heightened awareness of many preservation issues.

You can create alliances in your own area of the state by tapping into existing networks or by creating new connections



with neighboring libraries and cultural organizations. For example, if you belong to a group of local librarians, you could start by inviting a speaker from the fire department or by sponsoring a May Day event to encourage members to take one step toward disaster preparedness. (See the bottom of page 10 for a link to more information about May Day events.) Follow up with participants to recruit partners for mutual support.

Collaboration, however, does not need to be limited to libraries alone. Other cultural organizations and collecting institutions, such as museums, historical societies, and municipal archives, have similar needs and concerns. Consider inviting them to your library or paying them a visit to see what you can do together. If you are in a sparsely populated area with limited access to resources, you may need to make an extra effort to find partners in your county or region to reach a critical mass of participants. Look in your local phone book or contact a statewide professional organization or agency such as the Oregon Museums Association or the Oregon Heritage Commission for suggestions.

Oregon is a large state with varied geography that creates different challenges and risks for different regions. Coastal communities face the threat of tsunamis, while inland areas may worry about the danger of wildfires. Wherever you are, you should identify the risks and get to know those locally responsible for emergency preparedness and response. Here's where those of you who are in smaller communities may have an advantage over urbanites – you are more likely to know your first responders and even be on a first name basis with them. Take advantage of your close community connections.

Don't know who your first responders are? Try the blue pages in the phone book for

police, sheriff, fire, and emergency response departments. Not sure what to say? The Heritage Emergency National Task Force has great ideas on their "Working with Emergency Responders" poster, including talking points and suggested events. You may order a poster from Heritage Preservation or download a smaller PDF version from their Web site.

In time, you may find it advantageous to formalize your emergency preparedness alliance. This will help provide continuity in the face of changes in staffing and other commitments, and may also be a mechanism for gaining financial support. In the case of PORTALS, the mutual aid agreement provided the original impetus of the Disaster Response Group. The momentum gained in eight years of collaboration under the PORTALS umbrella fuels DIRG's continued work of mutual support and educational outreach. For more information about DIRG and helpful information on emergency preparedness, visit the OLA Library Preservation Roundtable Web page.


Finally, get in touch with other groups, such as the OLA Library Preservation Roundtable and the Oregon Heritage Commission, to make your presence known. They may know of additional

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resources to assist you with your efforts, and they are also interested in tracking the readiness of the state's cultural institutions. The federal government offers support to local and statewide planning and assessment programs through grants and initiatives such as Connecting to Collections, sponsored by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).

Emergency preparedness and response is not rocket science, and as you'll learn in this issue, there are many places to turn to for information and assistance. In large part, it's an exercise in community building. You can't do it alone. And you don't have to! 

References

Heritage Emergency National Task Force, "Working with Emergency Responders: Tips for Cultural Institutions," poster, 2007.

Putting Cultural Heritage on the Map: A Discussion about Disaster Management and Cultural Heritage. *Conservation. The Getty Conservation Institute Newsletter*, 23 (2008): 10–15.

Stevenson, C. G. Working Together: Case Studies in Cooperative Preservation. *Report for the Commission on Preservation and Access*, September 1991. <http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/wktogthr/wktogthr.html>, accessed 8/13/2008.

DON'T GO IT ALONE

Resources

A Call to Action on May Day, Society of American Archivists
<http://www.archivists.org/mayday/index.asp>

Heritage Preservation
<http://www.heritagepreservation.org>

IMLS Connecting to Collections
<http://imls.gov/collections/index.htm>

OLA Library Preservation Roundtable
<http://www.olaweb.org/mc/page.do?sitePageId=63278>

Oregon Heritage Commission
<http://www.oregon.gov/OPRD/HCD/OHC/>

Oregon Museums Association
<http://www.oregonmuseums.org/>

Western States and Territories Preservation Assistance Service
<http://www.westpas.org/>

Examples of Collaborative Efforts

Boston Cultural Emergency Management Team
<http://www.nedcc.org/cemt/cemt.htm>

California Preservation and Disaster Networks
<http://calpreservation.org/about/networks.html>

