
Volume 14
Number 4
*Emergency and Disaster Preparedness and
Response (Winter 2008)*

July 2014

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Recommended Citation

Kern, K. (2014). It's An Emergency: The Portland State University Library Flood. *OLA Quarterly*, 14(4), 11.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1220>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

It's an Emergency:

The Portland State University Library Flood

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On the first of November, 2004, I arrived at work to find an alarming note on my desk. "Call Terry Rohe," then Acting Director of the Library, "immediately," it said, "it's an emergency." I called at once to learn that there was water pouring into the library's basement through the west wall. I walked quickly across the Park Blocks to the Branford P. Millar building—my office in Technical Services is located in another building—and once inside ran down the steps to see what had happened.

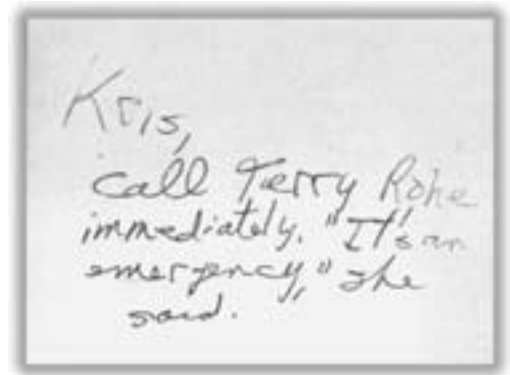
There was indeed water running down the wall, with an accumulation of one to two inches in the book stacks closest to the wall. The ceiling tiles appeared to be soaking up water as well.

What was most heartening, though, was the sight of a dozen or so library staff already busy rolling out plastic sheeting, cutting it to size for the shelf range and pulling it over the shelving. In no time, all potentially affected bookshelves were covered with sheeting!

It turned out that the combination of a long stretch of dry weather, a sudden downpour, aging drains and tree roots conspired to create the ideal conditions for this basement flooding to occur.

Lessons Learned

Preparedness matters. The library maintains emergency supplies in a garbage can on all six floors of the library, including a roll of plastic sheeting that is stored with the supplies. For this emergency, sheeting was brought from several floors in order to cover the number of shelves necessary to protect the books from potential water damage. Having adequate equipment read-



ily accessible to remove the standing water (commercial grade wet vacs), fans, floor dryers, and possibly a dehumidifier is also important.

Library shelving with the four inch gap between the floor and bottom shelf saved books from soaking up water from the floor. It's never a good idea to place library materials directly on the floor—emergencies do happen.

Teamwork is critical to an effective response. Having staff trained in emergency response and knowledgeable of the emergency supplies' locations means your response and recovery can be timely and appropriate.

Basements are inherently problematic locations for collections. There are numerous instances where collections stored in basements have suffered flood water damage—University of Hawai'i at Manoa and Colorado State University are examples of flash flooding that affected hundreds of thousands of volumes (CSU) and thousands of rare maps (UHM). Given time to respond, the University of Iowa was able to move its vulnerable collection from the basement to upper floors and protect it from rising flood waters from heavy rains. 