

COOPERATIVE AND REGIONAL DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

by Connie Brooks

The purpose of this brief account is to relate how my attitude toward disaster preparedness has evolved over the years from the simple conviction that every institution should have a disaster plan to the idea that, in many cases, the best way to achieve that goal is through cooperative disaster preparedness. This account will not stress the importance of disaster preparedness. Hearing Sally Buchanan talk about the recent fire at the main branch of the Los Angeles Public Library should be emphasis enough. Nor will it tell you what should be included in a written disaster plan. There are ample sources, such as The Disaster Plan Workbook prepared by the Preservation Committee of the NYU Libraries, to help you with that.

Let me explain what I mean by the terms "cooperative disaster preparedness" and "regional disaster preparedness." "Cooperative disaster preparedness" occurs any time two or more institutions join forces to improve some aspect of their disaster preparedness. Although cooperation can take many forms, cooperation based on geographic proximity is probably the most common. "Regional disaster preparedness" occurs when a systematic attempt is made to involve all institutions of a certain type within an area in cooperative disaster preparedness.

My involvement began when I was asked to write a disaster plan for the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. I approached that task in what I imagine is a very typical way. I examined bibliographies on disaster planning, read a few books and articles,

obtained copies of other institutions' plans, and started to work on a plan of my own. Hilda Bohem's Disaster Prevention and Disaster Preparedness and Peter Waters' Procedures for Salvage of Water-Damaged Library Materials were my Bibles. After awhile, I began to realize that disaster preparedness is more than writing a disaster plan; it is also implementing the plan and keeping it up-to-date. I began to feel overwhelmed and didn't progress as quickly as I had expected. One day, Mark Cain (who at that time was chairperson of the Preservation Committee of the University of Texas General Libraries) and I discovered that we both were working on disaster plans. Although the Humanities Research Center is not part of the General Libraries, they both are part of the University of Texas and both are located on the same campus. Mark and I agreed to work together on a basic document that could be tailored to meet the individual needs of the two institutions.

Our cooperation was a success, and a basic plan was finished within a reasonable length of time. Mark wrote the introductory narrative, I developed the salvage procedures, and each Preservation Committee member worked on a different list of available resources. The regularly scheduled committee meetings lent urgency and impetus to the completion of the many individual tasks necessary to finish a written plan.

Mark and the Preservation Committee then adapted the document to fit the General Libraries, which consists of many branch libraries, has both circulating and non-circulating collections, and embraces such diverse institutions as the Barker Texas History Center and the Undergraduate Library. I molded the plan to fit the Humanities

Research Center, which is a non-circulating library of special collections housed primarily in one building (its Iconography Collection is located in a separate building).

Both Mark Cain and I left Texas before we tackled those elements necessary for disaster preparedness that come after writing a disaster plan, such as training the disaster teams, keeping stockpiles of emergency supplies replenished, and regularly renewing the contacts for outside help.

There are many benefits to this type of cooperation, most of them obvious. It avoids unnecessary duplication of effort at almost every step of the way -- the written plan, the implementation, and keeping the plan up-to-date. Sharing the burden of establishing contacts for emergency supplies and services can have benefits beyond the elimination of redundant telephone calls. It is easier to gain support if you are telephoning on behalf of more than one cultural institution and if the people you are calling have not been irritated by receiving calls from every institution in the area. In addition, joint purchasing of emergency supplies can reduce costs.

If several institutions have adopted the same fundamental plan, it becomes more feasible to set up joint training sessions in salvage procedures. In the aftermath of a large disaster, it would be easier to integrate volunteers from another institution into the salvage operation if they have received the same training as your staff members.

There are less tangible benefits to cooperation, as well. The old adage that two heads are better than one pinpoints one of these. Also, cooperation can keep people progressing on a task that otherwise might

be placed on a back burner. Finally, an often overlooked benefit is that cooperation on disaster preparedness can encourage communication between the staff of different cultural institutions about other matters as well.

This is not to gloss over the negative aspects of cooperation. Cooperation can be very time-consuming, and it is important that it not be attempted when the difficulties outweigh the benefits. It is essential that someone assume ultimate responsibility, or matters may become bogged down forever in committee. Also, keep in mind that it is more important to have a simple plan in place than to have the perfect plan in preparation. If necessary, implement a simple plan while working on a more elaborate one.

There is one last thing I'd like to pass on from my experience at the Humanities Research Center -- the importance of continuity. It is fine to have disaster preparedness be the primary responsibility of one person, especially if that's what it takes to keep things moving ahead. However, it is important to keep enough people involved that there can be a smooth transition of responsibility if necessary.

When I accepted a position with the New York State Library to coordinate a statewide program for the conservation and preservation of library research materials, my perspective about disaster preparedness broadened.

Since there are thousands of cultural institutions in New York State (according to statistics compiled in November 1985 by the New York State Library, there are 7,596 libraries alone), it seems sensible to approach disaster preparedness on a cooperative basis. This does not represent original thinking. The following are recommendations

excerpted from the March 1986 draft of Our Memory at Risk--Preserving New York's Unique Research Resources: A Report and Recommendations by the New York Document Conservation Advisory Council*:

- Draft and promulgate State regulations or guidelines for preparation of a disaster plan by local governments and by libraries, historical societies, museums and other chartered institutions holding unique research resources.
- Designate and assist at least one institution in each Reference and Research Library Resources System region to provide emergency assistance to other agencies and repositories in the event of a disaster, and provide State support for such assistance.
- Develop and maintain regional disaster preparedness plans.

There are several concepts embedded in these recommendations. One is that cooperative disaster preparedness need not be limited to a single type of cultural institution, such as libraries. The foundations for this approach already exist in New York State. First, the New York State Office of Cultural Education includes library, archival, museum and historical services, so the organizational structure itself facilitates cooperation between different types of cultural institutions. Second, ties between the State Archives and the State Library were strengthened by sharing the sponsorship of the New York Document Conservation and Administration Training and Planning Project that produced Our Memory at Risk. Third, although the program I coordinate is administered through the Division of Library Development in the New York State Library, it is not limited to

* The New York Document Conservation Administration and Training Project was a two-year (1984-1986) project, partially funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, jointly administered by the New York State Library and the New York State Archives, which culminated in a major conference and draft report, Our Memory at Risk: Preserving New York's Unique Research Resources, May 1986.

libraries, but also awards grants to other agencies, such as archives and historical societies, for the preservation of library research materials. Thus, the scene already has been set in New York State for cooperative disaster preparedness that could cut across the lines dividing different types of cultural institutions.

I believe that cooperation between different types of institutions is healthy in general and can have particular benefits for disaster preparedness. In fact, in time of need, geographic proximity may become much more important than what type of cultural institution is nearest. This would especially be the case if there were a general emergency such as a flash flood, earthquake, hurricane, or tornado, and communication and transportation became difficult. The basic procedures and equipment needed for the salvage of cultural materials are basically the same for a museum as for a library.

The second concept implicit in the recommendations made in Our Memory at Risk is that it can be beneficial for a state agency to have a role in disaster preparedness. In several states, including Iowa and Wyoming, statewide recovery plans have been implemented through the State Library. Advantages to this approach include the fact that the State Library already has well-established connections with libraries throughout the State, that it can provide a central location for information distribution, and that it may have funds to help support the endeavor.

State involvement may take at least two basic forms. In one, the State itself is the region and takes a very active role in the developing and implementing of disaster plans. Rhode Island is a good example of this. In another, and the Our Memory at Risk

recommendations suggest this approach for New York State, the State helps designate regions (and at least one institution) within each region to provide emergency assistance. In some cases, it is practical for regions to organize across state lines, as is the case in the document "Disaster Planning in Delaware Valley Cultural Institutions."

Because New York State is very large and diverse, and the logistics of dealing with a general emergency could vary widely from Upstate New York to Downstate New York, it seems sensible to establish regions within the State. The regions proposed in Our Memory at Risk are the nine Reference and Research Library Resources System regions. Their advantages as regions for disaster preparedness include the fact that they already are well-established and have effective systems for information distribution to their member libraries. However, these are only recommendations; the final course for disaster preparedness in New York State has not been set.

In conclusion, I hope what I have said has shed a different light on the way you think about disaster preparedness and will encourage you to approach it cooperatively.

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