

Developing a Rural Model for a Regional Disaster Planning Network: a Case Study in Southwestern Kansas

INTRODUCTION

In 1995, The Kansas Disaster Recovery Assistance Network (K-DRAN) was created by the Kansas Library Network Board in order to meet the goal of "preparing for disasters that threaten information resources."¹ At that time, the state of Kansas was divided into three semi-autonomous regions for faster response to emergencies.

During the summer of 1997, Michael Kelly, Curator of Special Collections at Wichita State University, and Whitney Baker, a consultant from the Preservation and Conservation Studies Program at the University of Texas at Austin, laid the foundation for one region's response efforts. The network, named "D-RISK" (Disaster Recovery in Southwestern Kansas), was designed to incorporate all repositories of paper-based collections in south central and southwestern Kansas, including historical societies, county records agencies, libraries, and museums.

The creation of D-RISK was met with some formidable challenges. First, with the exception of Wichita (population 500,000) and a few other cities, the region was mainly rural and sparsely populated. D-RISK encompassed thirty-five counties; a drive across the region from east to west would take at least six hours on a clear, spring day. Given such a large geographical expanse, there was legitimate concern about the network's ability to respond quickly to disasters that might be located hours away from a large population center. Additional challenges for the D-RISK team included overcoming a lack of regional preservation and conservation expertise and a dearth of financial support. Despite these weighty concerns, a successful regional coalition was developed that could serve as a model for other rural networks.

RESEARCHING MODELS

Published and electronic resources were consulted in order to research models for rural disaster planning. Although the conservation literature provided many

accounts of institutional, regional, and statewide disaster planning endeavors along the East and West Coasts, there were few substantive published references to regional efforts in the rural areas of the Midwest and West.²

To supplement these few printed and electronic sources of information, the preservation consultant solicited advice from five representatives of statewide disaster planning committees and one representative of a regional disaster response network. Most of these states were located in the Midwest and West and were comprised of large areas of rural expanses similar to Kansas. Each contact was asked ten questions about network organizational structure, publicity venues, membership requirements and benefits, sources of funding, and effective rural response.

The collective results of the interviews highlighted a trend of cyclical interest in disaster planning, culminating in an active period of cooperative programs in the late 1980's and early 1990's. The interviews seemed to indicate that for the Midwestern and Western states in question, statewide preservation programs have shifted their efforts in other directions and rural response is no longer a priority. While somewhat disappointing in that no completely successful examples of regional response were found, the interviews were helpful in targeting potential problem areas and likely successes for the southwestern Kansas network.

SURVEYING NETWORK PARTICIPANTS

Based on the results of the literature search and the interviews, the D-RISK team devised a simple list of ten questions. Information was requested about the prior existence of a disaster plan, prior training of staff in disaster planning, types of damage that had occurred in the institution in the past, and interest in having D-RISK offer different types of workshops. In total, 378 questionnaires were mailed to all public and academic libraries, museums, historical societies, county and district clerks, county emergency management coordinators, registers of deeds

and county treasurers (fig. 1). The results of the survey, based on a response rate in the first three weeks of 33%, indicate that over 80% of the institutions did not have a disaster plan (fig. 2). 73% of respondents expressed interest in attending workshops, especially on salvaging techniques and writing a disaster plan.

The questionnaires were accompanied by a letter explaining the goals of D-RISK and its free membership policy. The letter also provided a simple definition of a "disaster plan," in order to clarify that D-RISK's focus was not on evacuation of staff and visitors from a stricken building, but rather on the preservation of records materials housed therein. In addition, the packet sent to each institution contained a flyer advertising the first disaster preparedness and salvage workshop.

The first D-RISK workshop, which was led by Tom Claeson of the Amigos Bibliographic Council, Inc., was held at Wichita State University in September 1997. Funds from a local private donor enabled five representatives of smaller institutions to attend. Participants in that two-day event, including a librarian from a small town that had been leveled eight years earlier by a tornado, returned to their institutions with greater confidence and undampened enthusiasm.

Since the first workshop, members of the Wichita Area Library Association have sponsored other similar workshops for librarians and curators in the Wichita area. Additional classes have been planned for other areas in the region. Because many questionnaire respondents indicated an interest in attending workshops on other preservation topics, a class in simple book repair is being planned for the future.

CREATING THE NETWORK

In order to ensure the effectiveness of D-RISK over time, a "top-ten" list of recommendations was devised in order to erect an enduring organizational structure, liaison with regional organizations and county emergency agencies, recruit potential members, and cultivate regional expertise. Each goal was designed to be achievable in light of the geographical, financial, and expertise limitations facing the network. These goals, which could easily be adapted for use in other regions, were to:

1. *Form a rotating board of elected officials*, each serving 2-3 year terms. This board should represent a cross-section of institutional types and locations. One person should serve as the chair. To solicit board members, D-RISK should tap into the list of former workshop participants.
2. *Follow up with participants in disaster workshops* by sending a postcard to remind institutions to regularly update their plans and to request a copy of disaster plans to keep on file.

3. *Encourage regional associations* to host workshops based on questionnaire responses. These associations might include library networks, genealogy groups, and museum organizations.
4. *Cultivate regional and local sources of funding* to host workshops and purchase disaster supplies. This goal recognizes that Kansans are generally fiercely independent people who are more likely to donate money or supplies to a regional or local effort than to a statewide one.
5. *Research the main venues of communication in the region and advertise events via these means*. For example, libraries, museums and county agencies usually publish newsletters or maintain listservs that might be willing to feature short articles on disaster preparedness.
6. *Create a simple website* to act as a central clearinghouse of information. The site could include a calendar of upcoming events, names of regional contact persons (with links to their email addresses), sources for disaster supplies and services, examples of working disaster plans, simple preservation tips, and links to other sites of interest.
7. *Encourage every institution to purchase and maintain a minimal cache of disaster supplies*. For network members in rural areas, the list should focus on supplies one could obtain at a hardware or discount store.
8. *Establish three to four centralized holding areas* for copies of institutional disaster plans to ensure that no institution will be caught with its only copy inside a destroyed building.
9. *Create sub-regional phone/fax/email trees* to relay information in time of emergency.
10. *Liaison with county agencies and the Kansas Division of Emergency Management* to provide contacts and simple handouts for these offices to keep on file.

CONCLUSION

The establishment of D-RISK, despite significant initial limitations, has been encouraging. The creation of the network was met with great enthusiasm and every workshop has been well attended. By the end of the project period, the southwestern Kansas network was firmly established. Its practical approach towards disaster preparedness, supplemented by input from regional and statewide networks in the West and Midwest, serves as a practical model that can be successfully adopted in other rural areas.

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NOTES

1. Walter, K. 1996. *Plan for Preserving Information Resources in Kansas*. Topeka: Preservation Committee, Kansas Library Network Board.

2. A particularly helpful resource, despite its focus on the needs of academic libraries in Florida, was DePew, J. "Statewide Disaster Preparedness and Recovery Program for Florida Libraries." *Occasional Papers 185*. Champaign: University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science.

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