

## Disaster Planning for Your Library

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Disaster -- you never think it is going to happen to your library, but sometimes it does! Will you know what to do when you open the library on Monday morning and discover a pipe has burst directly over your reference collection? Will you be prepared? Who will you call? What items in your collection have the highest salvage priority? Do you have necessary supplies on hand to begin salvage operations? If you have a good disaster plan in place (and you know where to find it) then you may be in a position to begin answering these questions, and more.



In the face of large-scale disasters like Hurricane Katrina, which devastated libraries in Louisiana and Mississippi this past August, some may wonder why disaster planning matters. What difference does a plan make when you're looking at total destruction? How do salvage priorities help you if there's nothing left to salvage? While the F-4 tornado that destroyed Norris Public Schools on May 22, 2004 proves that large-scale disasters do happen to Nebraska libraries and media centers, the fact is most of us are more likely to experience disasters involving isolated water or fire damage.

To give you an idea of the types of disasters Nebraska libraries "just like yours" have had to deal with in recent years, we contacted a handful of Nebraska librarians who we knew were "disaster veterans." We've recorded their stories below.

### Creighton Health Sciences Library

Shortly after midnight on Sunday, June 1, 1997, Jim Bothmer, Director of Creighton Health Sciences Library, got a phone call from a campus public safety officer. The officer had discovered a broken water pipe on one of the library's upper floors, and a considerable amount of water had already accumulated on the library's first floor. When Jim arrived on the scene, he found water up over the bottom shelves of the library's stacks. In the end, over 1,800 journal issues

(including complete runs of some titles) were damaged, along with numerous books. The total recovery cost (which included salvaging what they could and replacing what they couldn't) was in excess of \$34,000.

So how did Creighton Health Sciences Library handle this disaster? According to Jim, they had no disaster plan in place at the time and "[they] were not prepared." Staff spent the rest of Sunday taking wet items off shelves and laying them out (probably incorrectly, Jim says in retrospect) in hopes they'd dry.

In what Jim now deems a mistake, he waited until Monday morning to contact the University's Risk Management Office. Risk Management quickly referred Jim to a company that specializes in cleaning and disaster recovery, and he was able to begin faxing them information immediately. Company representatives arrived at the library a short time later to begin the salvage process, which involved shipping many items to an out-of-state facility to be freeze-dried. Surprisingly, Jim said, they were very lucky with their salvage rate, especially considering the fact that material that had been wet since Saturday evening didn't receive professional attention until Monday.

One important lesson Jim learned is that there is a very short window of opportunity during which damaged materials can be salvaged — which is why it's important to have a disaster plan in place ahead of time. "Get a plan and review it periodically—run through your plans and procedures," Jim advises. Knowing who to call in different situations can save time and save collections.

Today, Creighton Health Sciences Library has a disaster plan that includes the names and numbers of contacts, along with basic procedures. They also keep equipment and supplies on hand, such as flashlights, plastic sheeting to cover stacks in case the roof leaks, and even a bullhorn. Primary responsibility for keeping the plan up-to-date and making sure equipment and supplies are still available and in working order has been assigned to a specific staff member.

## Reinert/Alumni Library, Creighton University

“Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink.”

Whether it comes from broken pipes inside the library or from heavy rains and flooding outside, water seems to feature prominently in many library disasters. Creighton University’s Reinert/Alumni Library can attest to this, having experienced two such water-related disasters. The first involved a leak of contaminated water from a bathroom and the second occurred during a campus construction project when water leaked into the library’s archive storage room.

Overall, Debra Sturges, Head of Access Services at the Reinert/Alumni Library, reports being satisfied with their response to both disasters. She acknowledges, however, that the first disaster, which involved contaminated water, provided valuable lessons for the future. They had not anticipated the need for protective clothing and have now purchased some to be used in case of a future disaster.

During both incidents the library had a disaster plan in place, and staff pitched in to get materials out and packed for shipping to be freeze-dried very quickly.

Dealing with the agency that provided salvage service went better the second time around for the library. Better communication with the company resulted in better trained managers to oversee the project involving damaged archival materials. The library learned to make sure someone with conservation experience was on hand managing the project.

Michael LaCroix, Director of the Reinert-Alumni Library, says it really does make a difference having the disaster response plan in place. His best advice for other libraries is, “Have one! Have one! Once you experience one and have the plan in place you’re ready.”

## Crete Public Library

It’s not only academic libraries that need to prepare for disasters. Smaller libraries confront catastrophes too. Lisa Olivigni, director of the Crete Public Library, probably wishes all she’d had to deal with

was plain old water. Instead, her disaster involved sewage. It began on a Sunday evening. Due to a year-long highway project going on in front of the library, crews had ripped out concrete and dug a big hole. The hole was covered, but a heavy rainstorm proved too much for temporary sewage lines that hadn't been secured. Sewage backed up through the library's downstairs toilets, flooding the meeting room, the director's office, and the "old book room" where older books and historical items were stored.

Lisa found out about the disaster right away – a part-time employee happened to be in the library at the time and called her – but disaster response couldn't start in earnest until Monday morning when the city's insurance representative came out to survey the damage. He immediately hooked the library up with a Lincoln company that did disaster/waste clean-up, and before the day was done a crew was on the scene and hard at work.

The basement carpet was a total loss. Magazines stored on lower shelves in the basement meeting room were lost. And so, ultimately were the contents of the old book room. Lisa recounted that the staff's initial reaction was to remove everything from the old book room, but the clean-up company advised against it. They believed running a desiccant machine would dry everything out and take care of the problem. Unfortunately, it didn't. After the company removed the desiccant machine, library staff noticed white mildew spots beginning to appear on the books. By then, however, it was too late to do anything—the contents of the room had to be discarded.

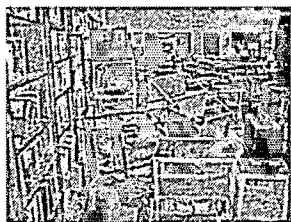
Prior to this disaster Crete Public Library had standard emergency procedures in place (e.g., what to do if there are people in the library at the time of a tornado or flood) but none of their planning addressed destruction of this magnitude. Now that they know what can happen when water or worse backs up into their basement, they have installed a sump pump as a proactive means of preventing a recurrence.

When asked what major lesson she took away from this experience, Lisa replied that she would never again leave material on the shelves to dry; in hindsight, the library staff would have stood a better chance of salvaging the contents of the old book room if they'd followed their own instincts, as opposed to the advice the clean-up company.

When asked what advice she would offer to other librarians, Lisa pointed out that there are many things you don't have control over, especially if your library building is old. If your collection includes old and valuable items, however, she suggests keeping them someplace other than in the basement or on low shelves!

## Norris Public Schools

We have already discussed some real life library disasters, but what about those library disasters that are almost too devastating to imagine? Nancy Martin, Media Specialist at Norris Public Schools, dealt with just such a disaster in May of 2004 when a F-4 tornado destroyed Norris Public Schools in Firth, NE. This disaster was of such large proportions that even well thought out library disaster planning manuals couldn't address everything. Losses from this disaster included 27,000 volumes from the elementary, middle, and high school media centers, complete loss of school buildings, and destruction throughout the surrounding area.



When a disaster isn't isolated to just your library, you may not be in charge of how the clean-up process is handled. Contacting a company to salvage library materials was out of the school's hands and the responsibility of the insurance company overseeing clean-up.

Communication proved to be a major problem during the Norris disaster. Nancy recommends having a list of cell phone numbers of administrators and others so you can communicate effectively during and after the disaster.

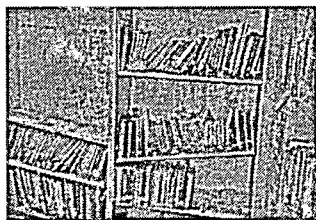
Losses at Norris were all very different. Skylights in the high school media center were blown out and parts of the collection were left in 2 feet of water. Thirteen thousand books were lost. The middle school library building was not destroyed, but books were still lost since no one could reach the media center due to surrounding destruction. Materials were left exposed to dampness in a non-air-conditioned area. This, coupled with high May temperatures, led to the destruc-

tion of 4,000 books. In the elementary school, the sprinkler system came on and didn't stop until the well was drained, resulting in the loss of 3,000 books.

Nancy was lucky the school could salvage an inventory of their library through a card catalog and data left unharmed on a school server. This inventory made it easier and faster for materials to be replaced by the insurance company. Nancy was also thankful the school had insured materials for full value. They received \$400,000 in replacement costs to help cover media center materials for all three schools.

These are just a sampling of recent disasters Nebraska libraries have faced. Even though these disasters were different in terms of the type of library affected and the number and kinds of materials destroyed, each offers valuable lessons for the rest of us.

1. In a disaster, being able to communicate with other staff is important. Make sure that staff contact information is up-to-date and readily available to those who need it. Copies of this contact information should be available not only in the library, but also off-site.
2. Investigate companies that provide disaster recovery services before you need them. If you're not sure, call and ask if they have experience working with library and archival materials. Keep company names and numbers on hand so you can call quickly if disaster strikes. Also, if you have a company picked out, talk to them before any disaster strikes to let them know what you expect.



When contacting a company to request services, be sure to specify that you need someone on site with conservation experience, not just workers to pack material for shipment.

3. Think about what materials and equipment you should have access to in case of various disasters. Have some materials on hand: Flashlights, plastic sheeting, protective clothing, and a recording pad at the very least.
4. Know ahead of time how to handle materials damaged in a disaster.

This will give you the confidence you need to question the methods of clean-up crews if they don't seem right to you. It can also help you get a head start on the clean-up process if you don't have professional help right away, or if you're tackling it on your own.

You can find many disaster planning web sites and books to learn about best practices for handling a variety of scenarios. We have listed a few places below that you can begin your own research.

- SOLINET Disaster Mitigation & Recovery Resources - SOLINET provides a number of services to its member libraries, but also has many links available on their web site to help anyone learn more about Disaster Preparedness and planning--  
[http://www.solinet.net/preservation/preservation\\_template.cfm?doc\\_id=71](http://www.solinet.net/preservation/preservation_template.cfm?doc_id=71)
- AMIGOS network in Texas provides a number of resources on its web site, disaster recovery companies, as well as a FAQ on Preservation. <http://www.amigos.org>
- Web Junction's Focus on Disaster Planning and Recovery for Libraries provides a collection of resources your library may find helpful in planning and managing a library disaster.  
<http://webjunction.org/do/DisplayContent?id=11514>
- The Nebraska Library Commission, [www.nlc.state.ne.us](http://www.nlc.state.ne.us), also has items on disaster planning and recovery that librarians can borrow from the collection. Search the OPAC using the subject headings **libraries and safety measures**.

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