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Taking a second look at emergency procedures plans

Collaborations for safety

An emergency procedures plan is often the sort of policy that gets put into place and then promptly forgotten. After all, who wants to think heavily about a disaster (natural or man-made)? It can be a morbid way to spend one's day. Unpleasant a topic as it may be, emergencies (by definition) come without warning—considering the myriad aspects of emergency response are of little comfort after the fact. A strong emergency procedures plan is a basic responsibility for academic libraries, which receive hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of visitors in a day. Even the best plan needs to be revisited from time-to-time to reflect changes in policy, organizational structure, or possible new threats.

One academic library in Tennessee recently completed a full revision of its emergency procedures policy. James E. Walker Library at Middle Tennessee State University is located 35 miles southeast of Nashville in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Murfreesboro is the sort of sleepy town in which one could easily become complacent regarding the threat of a true emergency. That would, however, be a mistake. The town is located squarely in Dixie Alley, an area of the South prone to violent tornadoes. In particular, a tornado rated EF4 struck the town in 2009 killing two people.[1] While the current emergency procedures plan reflected this reality of a tornado threat, the plan needed to be updated to address contemporary security concerns of American university campuses; the plan also needed to be streamlined and made more accessible to employees.

James E. Walker Library at dusk.

Where to begin?

The need to reassess Walker Library's emergency procedures plan started with the introduction of fresh faces to the library. A new library dean, as well as several new faculty members, were hired in recent years. Some of these new employees came from campuses that had unfortunately experienced real-life activations of their campus emergency procedures plans. The importance of a strong, comprehensive plan was therefore recognized as much more than tired old policy to be filed away: a properly implemented plan could save lives.

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Once the need for a plan overhaul gathered steam, additional committee members were easy to recruit: department heads and librarians, the facilities manager, a member of the information technology department, as well as members of the service desk, who are stationed in the lobby and are the building's "eyes and ears."

Committee members met regularly to begin the task of analyzing the existing plan. Several holes were quickly identified: for example the fire emergency plan lacked much detail. Who would be responsible for clearing specific sections of the library? Where would people evacuate to, and what would be the procedure for reentering the library? How much of this information should be made public on the library website? The committee realized that by publishing policy online, this could potentially pose a security risk if the information were accessed by someone with nefarious intent. The committee opted to place the policy on a library Intranet, accessible only to employees.

An emergency kit stands ready for quick access.

Other improvements reflected past committee member experiences through the lens of what was needed at our particular institution. For example, in re-evaluating the fire policy, one committee member relayed his prior experience at another university whereby floor monitors were responsible for clearing areas in the event of a fire. The group decided to adapt this idea by setting up a volunteer network of emergency responders who would be responsible for clearing areas during fires or tornadoes. The bottom line was that the committee decided which emergencies were more likely to occur on our campus and crafted policy accordingly.

An opportunity for cross-campus collaboration

Rather than recreate the plan from scratch, campus partners with similar building hours and functionality were identified. The committee then reached out to these partners to examine their emergency response plans for possible tips. The most notable cross-campus partner was the university's recreation center. This facility had some commonality with the library in that it also experienced high traffic volume and had long hours of daily operation. The committee's chair met one-on-one with her counterpart at the rec center and compared plans. She found several areas in which the rec center had an efficient response or other good idea, and these suggestions were incorporated into the new library plan.

One such idea was the use of emergency kits. The rec center had strategically placed emergency kits with selected areas and staff throughout the facility. The library committee adapted this idea by creating portable emergency kits for each of the designated library staff responders. Contents of the kits were decided upon based on the rec center's kits as well as research at the fema.gov website.

In all, identifying campus partners was an important step in our process. Not only did this collaboration allow the committee to create a stronger emergency procedures plan, but it also strengthened ties across campus.

What goes in a library emergency kit, and why

Based on our research, the committee decided to purchase inexpensive but brightly colored drawstring bags to hold the emer-

gency kit items. The selected bags were yellow and clearly marked with "Emergency Responder" and the library logo. Besides being a holder of all of our designated items, the bags served another purpose: slung over the back of a library emergency responder, they quickly identified the wearer as an authority figure in an emergency. A drawstring bag may sound unremarkable, but in the event of a sudden emergency, such as a fire or tornado, it is imperative to quickly gain the attention of library patrons. It is hoped that the bags will clearly signal to others that the wearer is in charge and should be listened to.

The bags contained ten items. A notepad and pen was included so that responders can record any important details or information in an emergency situation. A dust mask was included to protect the wearer in the

Contents of the Walker Library emergency kits.

event of a medical, fire, or biohazard threat. Several pairs of disposable vinyl gloves were added to prevent the transmission of blood-borne pathogens. A small bottle of hand sanitizer was necessary as it disinfects hands and surfaces. A one-time-use CPR mask was included, but more costly CPR masks are available through the Red Cross and other suppliers. A mini flashlight with extra batteries was an essential item in the kits in the event of power failures. A lanyard held the flashlight and CPR mask in a convenient, mobile manner. An emergency poncho served several purposes; however the primary concern was that in the event of a fire, the sprinkler system would come on. Similarly, a large garbage bag was included

to serve many uses, but some of the possibilities were: keeping an injured person warm, covering a window in the event of an active shooter, and as an additional rain poncho. Lastly our kits contained several pieces of print documentation: building schematics, a library personnel phone directory (ours clearly identify CPR-trained personnel), and an abbreviated version of the emergency plans. None of this documentation is included on the public version of the library website for security reasons.

Roll out the plan and follow up

It took one academic year to fully develop the revised plan, create and distribute the emergency kits, and provide specialized training. Emergency responders were given CPR training, and all library personnel were invited to attend an excellent ALA webinar on campus security.[2] The year-end library personnel meeting was a prime opportunity to roll out the new plan. Everyone received a basic review of the new emergency procedures, but responders received separate, in-depth training.

Our plan's rollout culminated with an unannounced fire drill. This fire drill was timed and observed by the fire marshal in collaboration with the library's facilities manager. They were happy to find that the library's evacuation time had dramatically improved from prior drills. The most important metrics, however, were qualitative: responders remembered to wear their emergency kit bags (clearly identifying others of their role), they successfully cleared their areas, personnel gathered outside

pointments, text and video chat, phone, and email, patrons can choose the method that fits their needs. Email and text communication will provide the patron with a record of the exchange for future reference. Print instructions for commonly asked questions (these can be printed versions of online FAQs) are useful for people who need more processing time or have memory problems. A quiet, low distraction space away from the reference desk is needed for patrons with attention difficulties or for when the desk area is busy and noisy.

In the classroom, traditional lecture along with worksheets, videos (captioned), and active learning meet the needs of a larger range of learners. Slower pacing and repetition also aid a wide range of learners.

In selecting materials, consider the needs of the learning disabled. Instructional videos and documentaries are useful additions to course readings and a boon for students who learn better through aural means. We should all be aware of reader softwares and built-in database reader options. Alternatives to assigned textbooks and textbooks on the high school level can help students who need a different presentation or a slower start on a subject.

Libraries' web presence should be carefully evaluated with learning disabilities in mind. The webpage is the primary or exclusive access point for many patrons and needs to be as inclusive as possible. Common language should be used in favor of library jargon. Don't coin new brand names for catalogs and federated searchers. Brand names obscure rather than illuminate. As many students approach the website looking for books and articles, these words should appear prominently. The web presence should include instructional videos (including transcripts), tutorials, and written instructions.

While UDL was developed with semester course design in mind, its principles can benefit libraries. We are already putting in the effort to design our buildings, collections, services, and web pages. Considering the needs of the learning disabled will lead to a more welcoming and accessible library experience for all.

Notes

1. Melana Zyla Vickers, "Accommodating college students with learning disabilities: ADD, ADHD, and Dyslexia," www.popecenter.org/acrobat/vickers-mar2010.pdf.

2. Ronald L. Mace, "Universal design: Barrier-free environments for everyone," *Designers West* 33 (1): 147–52.

3. Selwyn Goldsmith, *Designing for the disabled* (London: RIBA Publications, 1976).

4. For more information about Universal Design for Learning, see cast.org.

5. Ibid.

6. Visit the National Center on Universal Design for Learning at www.udlcenter.org.

7. Gavin Reid and Shannon Green, *100 ideas for supporting pupils with dyslexia* (New York: Continuum). ♫

in their designated spots, and all employees were accounted for. In short, everyone knew what they were supposed to do and provided proper execution of the plan. The committee members felt a sense of accomplishment in seeing their year of work implemented correctly in a matter of minutes.

Conclusion

Overhauling the library emergency procedures plan is a laborious undertaking but one that can yield vast dividends. The task is a chance for library personnel across departments to come together for the safety of their co-workers, creating further cohesion. Cross-campus collaboration can strengthen the library's role as a partner and leader. Ultimately the knowledge of how to react in an emergency will lead to library employees feeling more secure in their work environment.

Notes

1. MTSU School of Journalism, "Good Friday Tornado," www.mtsujournalism.org/tornado (accessed January 12, 2015).

2. Steve Albrecht, "How to Respond to a Security Incident in Your Library (ALA Editions Workshop)," lecture, June 12, 2014. ♫