Emergency Procedures for the Academic Library: Crafting a Policy that Works

Karen Nourse Reed
Middle Tennessee State University

INTRODUCTION
Most every academic library has an emergency procedures plan; why take a second look at it? Thinking about disasters is not exactly a fun way to spend one’s day! Unpleasant of a topic as it may be, a strong emergency procedures plan is a responsibility for academic libraries who receive hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of visitors in a day. As library personnel leave or retire, and as life throws new emergency concerns our way, these plans need fresh eyes to update them to meet the demands of today’s academic libraries.

A LOT AT STAKE
James E. Walker Library at Middle Tennessee State University is located 35 miles southeast of Nashville in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The town is located within “Dixie Alley”, an area of the South prone to violent tornadoes. In 2009, a tornado rated EF4 struck the town, killing two people.

While the former 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.

TIPS FOR REVAMPING YOUR EMERGENCY PROCEDURES PLAN
- Identify motivated staff to form a committee.
  - Analyzing library policy for areas of improvement is not for the faint of heart! Ideally members of this committee should be personally vested in the goals of the project. At Walker Library, several of the interested committee members were recent hires; some of these employees came from campuses which 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 a tired old document: a properly implemented plan could save lives.
  - Once the need for a plan overhaul gathered steam, additional committee members were easy to recruit: department heads, librarians, a member of the information technology department, as well as members of the Service Desk who are stationed in the library’s lobby and are the building’s “eyes and ears”. The facilities manager for the library chaired the committee and provided her expertise on the existing policies as well as emergency contacts on campus.
- Evaluate holes in the current plan.
  - Committee members met regularly to begin the arduous 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.
  - Rather than recreate the plan from scratch, campus partners with similar building hours and functionality were identified; this collaboration allowed the committee to simultaneously create a stronger plan as well as strengthen ties across campus.
  - Craft a plan that works for your library’s needs.
    - In reevaluating 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 adopt this idea by setting up a volunteer network of emergency responders who would be responsible for clearing areas during fires or tornadoes. The committee also decided to create portable emergency responder kits for each of the responders (see below). In all, the committee decided on which emergencies were most likely for our campus and crafted policy accordingly.

WHAT GOES IN A LIBRARY EMERGENCY KIT AND WHY?

Our emergency bags contain:
- Notepad with pen
- Medical/ dust mask
- Several pairs of disposable vinyl gloves
- Hand sanitizer
- Mini flashlight with extra batteries
- CPR mask (one-time use)
- Lanyard
- Emergency poncho
- Large garbage bag
- Documentation

Why were these items included:
- The notepad is for recording any important details in an emergency situation.
- A dust mask will help in the event of a fire or biohazard threat.
- Gloves prevent the transmission of blood-borne pathogens.
- Hand sanitizer disinfects hands and surfaces.
- Flashlights are needed in power failures, particularly during earthquake or tornado threats.
- CPR-trained personnel can assist in the event of cardiopulmonary distress.
- The lanyard keeps the CPR mask and flashlight with the user in a mobile, hands-free position.
- The poncho is to be used in the instance of a fire emergency when it is raining outside.
- Many uses including: keeping an injured person warm; covering a window in the event of an active shooter; as an additional rain poncho.

IMPLEMENTATION
- Roll out the plan.
  - 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 welcome to attend an excellent ALA webinar on campus security: “How to Respond to a Security Incident in Your Library (ALA Editions Workshop)” by Dr. Steve Albrecht.
  - The year-end library personnel meeting was a prime opportunity to introduce everyone to the new and improved plan. Everyone received a basic discussion about the new emergency procedures, but responders received a separate, in-depth training.
- Follow up with drills.
  - Our plan’s roll out 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 kits (clearly identifying others of their role), they successfully cleared their areas, personnel gathered outside 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.

KEEP THE BALL ROLLING
- Maintain a point person for emergency procedures.
  - After the emergency procedures plan was revised and rolled out to the library faculty and staff, the committee’s work was done. The committee disbanded, and oversight fell to Walker Library’s facilities manager. Within 6 months of implementation of the new procedures, however, this key person retired. How do we keep the ball rolling?
  - It is important to have multiple people trained on the emergency procedures in the event of losing the point person. We are currently recruiting a new facilities manager who will have this role as part of their duties. In the meantime, our dean is filling the key role of point person on emergency procedures.
  - Perhaps most importantly, our emergency responders are prepared in the event that our emergency plan has to be activated.

CONTACT
Karen N. Reed
Assistant Professor
James E. Walker Library
Middle Tennessee State Univ.
Murfreesboro, TN
(615)494-6441
karen.reed@mtsu.edu

www.PosterPresentations.com