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## Abstract

When people have nowhere to go, the place they often think of first is the public library. This is true most days of the year for homeless individuals. But it is especially true for the general public in the wake of natural disasters such as the recent storm Sandy. Libraries want to help community members in whatever ways they can, whether that is an information need or a warm and dry place to spend several hours. However, in the wake of severe storms libraries themselves are often struggling to deal with whatever Mother Nature decided to do to them. At the same time they are trying to offer basic services to help people, they must also try to solve any problems that have arisen so that they can continue to meet the needs they can.

## Topic Explanation

I have chosen to discuss the effect that major storms have on libraries and how they must react after the fact. I am focusing on Hurricane Sandy, but what I am discussing would apply in the wake of any major natural disaster.

This topic relates to the course learning goal: "Understand the role of libraries, archives, museums, and other information service organizations in society". The general role of a library is to provide for whatever needs of its patrons it can. Information needs are the ones for which librarians are trained to provide, but often the true need of a patron is simply for a warm, dry place to spend a few hours that does not require any kind of monetary commitment. The library, is one, if not the only, place in a community where one can go and not spend any money; no obligation (e.g. movie theaters) or encouragement (e.g. coffee shops) is present. While homeless

individuals take advantage of this on a daily basis, people from all walks of life flock to libraries in the wake of natural disasters when they are faced with a lack of power in their own homes. Often libraries have power back before neighborhood homes do. And even if the library has no power, as long as natural light is enough to see by and the library is allowed to be open, people can spend their time reading the many books and periodicals found on library shelves. By being a place of refuge, libraries fulfill their role of providing for the needs of the community in whatever way they can.

I chose this topic because I saw an article in School Library Journal on February 13<sup>th</sup> about mini-libraries that have been set up to take the place of libraries that have been closed since Sandy due to flooding. It made me think about how big of an issue the flooding that is common with these big storms would be for libraries, and how that would affect their ability to provide for the information needs of their patrons. They could lose collections forever as a result of floods. These materials would no longer be available to meet the information needs of patrons. Also, general needs would not be met because unless the flooding was very minor chances are the library would be closed and therefore not available as a place of refuge for storm victims. Flooding is a serious problem if it happens in libraries, and it can happen even with more insignificant storms than those such as Sandy. As a student circulation assistant at my university's library I got to help put paper towels between pages of books to aid in the drying process after the basement of the main library flooded after a small storm. Flooding could happen at any time to any library, and it is of special concern with major storms such as Hurricane Sandy.

This article also got me thinking about how the libraries must react after storms. At the same time they are trying to do damage assessment they must also be a place for people to come

who have lost their home (even just temporarily due to no power). This very difficult task they must complete fulfills libraries' role in society of filling whatever needs of patrons that are appropriate for them to fill.

## Issue Summary & Recent Developments

In the wake of natural disasters, libraries are faced with the same problems that everyone else is: flooding, downed trees on the property, etc. However, libraries are often the first place people think of to go when they are faced with no power in their own homes and want to go somewhere else. Libraries are often among the first places in a community to have power restored because they are often situated in high-priority areas or areas with a lot of residents. And as long as the library is allowed to be open, people can at the very least read the books and periodicals that are there. This typical situation proved true in the wake of Hurricane Sandy.

In many cases, damage due to a storm is minimal so as soon as power is restored it is business as usual for the library. This majority of libraries can become a source of refuge for people who do not have power in their homes yet or have been forced out temporarily due to flooding. Many libraries, such as the Princeton Public Library, throughout northern New Jersey were able to open the morning after Sandy came through (October 30<sup>th</sup>). 75-80 percent of the area was without power at this point, but the libraries had their lights on. People flocked to the libraries in advance of the opening time, adults planning to hunker down with their laptops and other Wi-Fi devices while keeping their cell phones charged. Others watched the movies that most libraries chose to show to entertain families. Libraries planned last-minute craft programs and story times to keep kids entertained. They turned on TVs so people could keep up with the latest updates on storm recovery. Teenagers organized board game tournaments with library staff permission (Bayliss). The school library on Manhattan's Upper West Side opened up as a

child-care center on Friday, November 2 for parents who had to return to work. And often libraries had to do all this with minimal staff due to impassable roads or inoperable public transportation. Dealing with the extra people may have created a stressful time for the librarians, but they see it similarly to a South Orange, NJ librarian: “We’re always a shelter for the community. We’re doing what we always do.” Regardless of what they are facing, libraries must be as available to their patrons as they can be, and in the wake of Hurricane Sandy many libraries came up with several ways to do so.

However, “business as normal” after power restoration is not always the case for libraries in the areas that were hardest hit by the storm. Water damage due to flooding was a major issue of Hurricane Sandy. Three branches in Queens had water damage of 3-5 feet so could not reopen with the rest of them on November 1st. The NYU Medical Library suffered due to flooding on two of its three floors (including a basement). The 11,000 volume collection in the basement was written off, and the damaged books on the main floor were freeze dried in an attempt to save them. As of December 5, that library had not re-opened (Warburton). Some areas of New York City were extremely hard hit by Sandy so some branches are not open yet (yes, now in March) due to water damage. The library staff realizes this is a problem, so worked to come up with a solution. A mini-library has recently been opened by Urban Libraries Unite in front of several Queens and Brooklyn branches to make up for the fact that the branches have been closed due to flooding since the storm (Schwartz). They offer mostly children’s books, that are not expected to be returned, to please families who often rely on the library for books for their children. Library officials hope this effort shows that while the library may be closed, the library staff still cares about the community. This also helps them to maintain their ability to provide for the needs of their patrons even when the library itself is closed to the public.

## Conclusion

In the wake of natural disasters, libraries are often the first place people think of when they have nowhere else to go. No monetary commitment is necessary, and the library is often early on the list of places to which power is restored. The libraries try to do their best at providing basic services for patrons to keep them entertained. After all, it is their duty to fulfill their role of providing for the needs of the community in whatever way(s) they can. However, libraries are not immune to the flooding that every other building faces, so often must struggle to both meet these needs and deal with their own problems. But no matter what, they must provide for the needs of their patrons.

I think it is amazing what the libraries were able to do in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. The fact that many were able to open up so quickly and with so many different things for people to do to fill time was impressive. The idea to have the mini-libraries in front of libraries that are still closed was a very good idea in my opinion. Both of these examples show how committed libraries and librarians are to serving the needs of society.

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