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# INFORMATION NEEDS IN A HURRICANE GUSTAV EVACUATION SHELTER: REFLECTIONS ON A LIBRARIAN'S VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

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## Introduction

For three years following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, residents of the Gulf Coast enjoyed a reprieve from serious threats. But in 2008 Hurricanes Gustav and Ike confirmed that massive evacuations are now a reality of hurricane season. A consequence of such large evacuations is the establishment of hundreds of shelters across the country. Opportunities exist to improve information assistance and information dissemination in hurricane shelters. Information professionals can help by conducting research and documenting their experiences in shelters. This article discusses observations of evacuees' information needs at a Hurricane Gustav shelter in Knoxville, Tennessee, and details the resources and methods that volunteers employed in response to those needs. This article is written from the perspective of a librarian who volunteered during the shelter's five-day operation. The experience resulted in useful insight and practical recommendations for assisting evacuees with information needs in shelters.

## Literature Review

Disaster-related library literature has focused almost exclusively on library collections and facilities (McKnight and Zach 2007), but an emphasis on services during community-wide disasters is growing. Since 2001, increasing numbers of articles document the ways that librarians provide services to evacuees and affected populations in the aftermath of disasters (Fletcher 2006; McKnight 2006; LeBoeuf 2006; Clareson and Long 2006; Dawson and de la Peña McCook 2006; Dickerson 2007; Thomas and Davis 2006; Albanese, et al. 2005; Dempsey 2005; Bertot and Davis. 2006; Matthews and Wiggins 2001; Novacek 2001; Block and Kim 2006; Ellis and Shambra 2008). Ongoing interest in disaster-related services generated during the 2005 storms can be seen in current LIS (library and information science) projects such as the National Library of Medicine's oral history project (Featherstone, et al. 2008), the Florida State University hurricane project (Ouder 2008), and the IMLS-funded evidence-based training materials project (McKnight and Zach 2007). Thus far only two articles have focused in detail on providing information in disaster shelters (McKnight 2006; Fletcher 2006).

McKnight (2006) reports four case studies of librarians' efforts following Hurricane Katrina, one being the creation of The Shelter Library which opened in September 2005 outside of a large Baton Rouge evacuation shelter. Vendors provided the trailer and resources, and local librarians and library school students from the Louisiana State University School of Library and Information Science (LSU-SLIS) provided assistance. The volunteers helped evacuees complete FEMA forms, locate loved ones, gather information on the status of their homes and neighborhoods, and request new documentation like driver's licenses or birth certificates.

Fletcher (2006) reports on her experience providing medical reference texts to shelter doctors at several Hurricane Katrina evacuation shelters in the Baton Rouge area. She discusses the selection of sources, methods of acquisition, and delivery of materials. She mentions the need to consider format, due to electrical and connectivity disruptions during disasters. She recommends several ways for hospital librarians to make their information skills known and available without waiting to be asked.

## Information Needs in Disasters

The 2005 *World Disasters Report* states that information is a form of aid and is needed by survivors as much as food, water, medicine, and shelter. It goes on to say, “Once fed and sheltered, disaster survivors are hungry for information on how to get back to work, how to participate in reconstruction, how to influence the recovery agenda of aid organizations and governments” (Walter 2006, 8). Despite this clear statement of need, the provision of information is often the most neglected type of aid, and organizations routinely focus on internal information gathering rather than on providing information to the people they are helping (Walter 2006).

Many disaster survivors will spend time in a shelter. Emergency and temporary shelters provide basics such as safety, food, water, sanitation and sleeping quarters. Yet, disaster survivors also require attention to higher psychological and sociological needs (Shaw 2001; Watson 2004). Barnes (2006) promotes a new way of imagining the disaster shelter with his “Home Away from Home” concept, which suggests that shelters should resemble a home-like setting. This model acknowledges the importance of basic needs and emphasizes “providing support towards individual and community resilience during a disaster” (Barnes 2006, 225). Barnes recommends that support systems, such as on-site care for pets, outlets for entertainment, and methods for responding to information needs, be layered into the existing sheltering methodology. He suggests that while some of these support activities may exist, they are not consistently or uniformly implemented across shelters. This article focuses on one type of support for those in evacuation shelters—the provision of information.

## Hurricane Gustav

Hurricane Gustav was the first major storm to threaten the Gulf Coast area since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 (NHC 2006; NHC 2007). The hurricane, hailed as the mother of all storms, headed toward the Gulf Coast on the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina (Schleifstein 2008). Gustav set in motion one of the largest evacuations in storm history. With memories of Katrina and the New Orleans flood still fresh in their minds, nearly two million Gulf Coast residents sought safety (Jindal 2008; Salmon and Hsu 2008; Nossiter 2008).

New Orleans Mayor, C. Ray Nagin, with hindsight of the tragedy that resulted after levee breaches left tens of thousands stranded, called for the city’s mandatory evacuation and activated the first use of the City Assisted Evacuation Plan for those unable to leave on their own (GOHSEP 2008). Nagin called for 100 percent evacuation of the city and reminded residents that there would be no assistance during or after the storm, nor a shelter of last resort (Williams 2008). By Saturday, August 30, approximately 20,000 residents had preregistered for the government-assisted evacuation program, and demand soon overwhelmed the system. The preregistration process was abandoned, and seventeen designated pick-up locations were announced. Buses took residents to the main bus terminal and to Louis Armstrong International Airport for transport to shelters in northern Louisiana and nearby states (Reid 2008). By Monday, September 1, more than 82,000 Louisianans (self-evacuated and government-assisted) were registered in more than 227 shelters across eight states (Jindal 2008; Kider 2008; Michelet 2008).

Knoxville, Tennessee, prepared to receive several hundred of those evacuees on Saturday, August 30; I volunteered online with the local Red Cross chapter and was told to be at the downtown shelter on Sunday by noon. One of two shelters in Knoxville, the downtown shelter was housed in the auditorium of a Baptist church. Approximately ninety New Orleans evacuees arrived by bus at 5:00 p.m. on Sunday. A handful of volunteers worked that evening, and several other volunteers joined the crew over the week. Our initial assignment was to register evacuees using a one-page form provided by the American Red Cross (ARC 2008). Other duties included talking with evacuees, answering questions, bringing concerns to the attention of the on-duty shelter manager, and assisting with tasks as needed.

## Examples of Information Needs

### Day 1: Sunday, August 31: “Where are we?”

Evacuees with only what they could carry—a small suitcase, a duffle bag, or in some cases a trash bag with their most basic belongings—waited in line to register. Their day had begun early that morning at one of the seventeen designated locations in New Orleans. Some evacuees mentioned that the group traveled from New Orleans by cargo plane and were told that they were flying to Memphis. Several individuals asked, “Where am I?” This is perhaps the most basic, yet essential of information needs—to know where one is.

Again that night a man asked, “Where are we?” I told him that he was in Knoxville, Tennessee. “Yes, I know,” he replied, “But where are we? Is this a church or a school auditorium? What is the address?” He wanted to inform relatives of his whereabouts. Realizing that others might have similar questions, I posted a sign with the church name, church address, and phone number. When I received the same question later, I asked follow-up questions. A woman asked about Knoxville’s location in relation to New Orleans—where it is on the map, how many miles apart are the two cities, and how long would a trip take by plane and by car. I created a poster with a hand-drawn map of the United States indicating the location of both cities and listed information about distance and travel time.

### Day 2: Monday, September 1 (Labor Day): “Is it flooding again?”

Monday morning Hurricane Gustav made landfall. Volunteers received many questions regarding the status of New Orleans and its levees. Near mid-day, church staff brought in a cable-equipped television. Dozens of evacuees gathered and began discussing the news reports. Unfortunately, national and cable news programs provided very little specific information. They broadcast footage of rooftops flying from buildings and reporters bracing themselves against the wind instead of useful information like street names, the status of particular neighborhoods, or updates by local officials. Mainstream media’s use of sensationalism at the expense of news is common in times of crisis; the “If it bleeds, it leads” adage is all too true (Dreier 2005; Cooper and Roter 2000; Slattey, et al. 2001). Several channels showed water lapping over New Orleans’ Industrial Canal levee yet failed to describe the extent of the flooding. Evacuees struggled to identify areas in the video footage. They blurted out questions like, “Where do you think that is?” and “Is that Almonaster Avenue?” hoping that someone would recognize the area being shown.

For residents who were in exile, television reports did little to provide details about the status of the city or its neighborhoods. Despite having access to cable and network news, evacuees continued to ask volunteers about the city’s condition and if the levees had again failed. I found myself in the strange situation of being a librarian without access to the resources needed to answer questions. I had no more information than those who inquired.

### Day 3: Tuesday, September 2: “So, what happened?”

By Tuesday most evacuees realized that catastrophic flooding had not followed Hurricane Gustav like it did after Hurricane Katrina. While relieved, they still had a great desire to learn more about what had happened in New Orleans. The remaining hurricane coverage, however, focused on parishes south and west of New Orleans that received major wind and flood damage. Evacuees eventually turned away from the news, perhaps because they had not received the desired information or perhaps because they wanted a reprieve from watching disaster coverage. Even so, evacuees continued to ask what I had discovered by watching the news, reading newspapers, and searching the Internet while at home.

After my shift on Tuesday I printed the recent online editions of New Orleans’ *Times-Picayune*. I returned to the shelter and posted them in a well-trafficked hallway. Evacuees filled the area to read the articles and discuss the findings. They appreciated being able to read the respected and familiar local paper and were reassured by seeing photos of recognizable landscapes still intact. I discovered that Direct TV was

broadcasting New Orleans' ABC affiliate WWL-TV through its Hurricane Information Channel. I recorded the live broadcasts on VHS tapes and took them to the shelter the next day. Again evacuees gathered to watch. The local New Orleans news provided detailed information important to New Orleans residents: neighborhood status, utility status, agency phone numbers, and updates from first responders and local government officials.

#### **Day 4: Wednesday September 3: *"I heard..."***

By day four, evacuees were relieved that New Orleans had not sustained major damage, but much remained unknown, and rumors spread quickly. People asked questions like: "I heard Walmart is giving out disaster assistance debit cards. How can I get there?" "I heard FEMA has set up a disaster center in the public library. Is that nearby?" Calls to the nearest Walmart and the main public library confirmed that these were indeed rumors. Reporting this finding to only the people who asked would do little to stem the spread of misinformation; so, I posted a sign in the hallway about these two inquiries and continued to add definitive answers as more questions arose.

#### **Day 5: Thursday, September 4: *"When can we go home?"***

As soon as evacuees knew that New Orleans had sustained little damage they began inquiring about a timeline for their return. By day five questions about returning home became nonstop: "When can we go home?" "Do you know when we are going home?" "It didn't flood. Why do we have to stay here?" Evacuees were eager to check on their property, reconnect with family, go back to work, and return to a normal life. The recent formation and projected path of Hurricane Ike did not help matters, and fears of an even longer stay were expressed.

I explained that volunteers had no information about the shelter's closing. I showed them the most recent edition of The Times-Picayune and other relevant articles from local news station affiliates (WDSU and WWL) that mentioned the city's lack of utilities, grocery stores, restaurants, and gas stations. I provided articles stating that Mayor Nagin's mandatory evacuation was still in effect and that the city was legally closed. By this time national and cable news was focused on the Republican National Convention; coverage of Hurricane Gustav consisted of old footage with little up-to-date information for evacuees.

#### **Day 6: Friday, September 5: *"How long will it take?"***

Evacuees and volunteers were informed by the shelter manager on Thursday afternoon that evacuees would leave on chartered buses early Friday morning. Signs were posted at both entrances to inform those who were off-site at the time of the announcement. This news brought a noticeable sense of relief. Inquiries now focused on the trip home: "How long will it take?" "Will they feed us on the bus?" "Will we have electricity when we get home?" By dawn on Friday, September 5th, the shelter was once again an empty church auditorium, and evacuees were on their way back to the Crescent City.

#### **Reflections on the Volunteer Experience**

Following my volunteer experience, I considered how my training as a librarian affected my volunteer work. The idea for this article emerged as I reflected on the types of questions evacuees asked, the types of information needs those questions represented, how I responded to their inquiries, and how library and information science professionals can improve information assistance and information access in shelters.

A few days following the shelter's closing, I compiled a list of the questions I was asked and the ways that volunteers helped to provide answers. In retrospect, I thought of other resources and methods that could have been employed and added them to the list. From there, I grouped similar pairs of questions and solutions and labeled the resulting information needs categories as follows: Familiarization with the Host Community, Adjustment to Shelter Life, Disaster-Related Information, and Regaining a Sense of Normalcy (see table 1).

## Discussion

Hurricane Gustav took place three years after two of the nation's largest evacuation and sheltering efforts—Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (Blumenthal and Barstow 2005). Yet, there seemed to be little weight given to the importance of information access and information assistance for evacuees at the Knoxville shelter. No guidance was provided for how best to collect or respond to evacuees' information needs. No formalized arrangements had been made for obtaining resources (i.e., televisions, local and host community newspapers, computers, radios, partnering with public libraries, etc.). Given the well documented psychological impact of inadequate information and communication on Katrina evacuees, the lack of a protocol or process was surprising (Jaegar et al. 2006; Callahan 2005; Honeycutt, et al. 2008; Spence 2007; Dalton 2005). Any information that evacuees received during their stay at the shelter was the result of volunteers' individual efforts.

Tremendous information needs are created by the uncertainty associated with disasters (Shklovski, et al. 2008). A storm's potential for destruction and the process of evacuating generate many questions and concerns for evacuees. Shelter workers can never be completely prepared for all information needs that will be encountered; however, many of those observed at the Knoxville shelter now seem quite obvious. Each disaster and each shelter will present some unexpected gaps and barriers to communication and information dissemination. If volunteers are prepared for the expected questions, more time can be spent tending to the unforeseen needs. Evacuees' experiences can be made less arduous if proactive measures are taken to prepare for what they will want to know.

Professionals associated with disaster planning seem to have focused very little on the information aspect of shelter management. A Knoxville shelter manager mentioned that as soon as a shelter opens, plans for its closure begin. Possibly, shelter managers do not perceive assisting with the information needs of evacuees as their responsibility, and therefore, not a priority of shelter operation. Barnes' 'home away from home' concept can help in reenvisioning shelters as "an environment that is designed to be supportive and not just a 'quick fix'" (2006, 225).

Many variables will impact information needs, information seeking, and information dissemination in shelters. For this reason, one should not overgeneralize the observations discussed in this article. The determining factors include the type of disaster, the means of evacuation, the magnitude of the event, the length of the stay, the size of the shelter, and the shelter population. The size of the shelter greatly impacts the effectiveness and overall feasibility of providing information and communication resources. Perhaps most importantly, as the size of the shelter grows, so does the disparity in the evacuee-to-volunteer ratio.

## Recommendations

Library and information science (LIS) professionals can work to compile these variables and to understand the opportunities and challenges that they present regarding the provision of information in shelters. Formal studies, firsthand reports, and the creation of a mechanism by which this knowledge can be recorded and preserved are all concrete ways in which LIS professionals can contribute.

## Research

Studies concerning the roles of public libraries during community-wide disasters shed light on disaster information needs, information seeking, and resource use. People in shelters have unique information needs, and their ability to seek or receive information is quite limited. Consequently, separate consideration should be given to the study of information services within shelters.

## Working with the Disaster Response Community

It seems evident that professionals in disaster planning have not placed enough importance on the provision of information in shelters. A recent text on disaster communication discusses the information responsibilities of planners, media, non-governmental organizations and government officials as communicating to the public and to each other—in other words, information dissemination (Haddow and Haddow 2009). Librarians would argue that there is a vast difference between the mere existence of information and people having the information they want or need.

Information professionals should continue their work toward integration into the disaster response network. Librarians have called for this (Challinor 2002; Will 2001; Jaegar, et al. 2006; McKnight 2006; Featherstone, et al. 2008), and progress is being seen with the establishment of the National Library of Medicine's Disaster Information Management Resource Center and the Disaster Information Specialist Pilot Project (NLM 2007; NLM 2008). LIS professionals may find inspiration in the experience of mental health professionals, whose services for disaster survivors were not fully accepted at first (Lystad 1985). Mental health professionals went to "stricken communities not sure what to expect, but nevertheless confident that they could help" (Echterling, et al. 2005, 230).

## A Centralized Resource for the Provision of Information in Shelters

Information professionals can use their expertise to create a framework for the provision of information in shelters. One way they can do this is to develop a centralized archive to collect materials related specifically to information needs in shelters. While LIS professionals can establish this resource and act as curators for its ongoing development and long-term preservation, contributions should be sought from the broad range of people involved in sheltering: volunteers, survivors, evacuees, scholars, and disaster planning and response professionals.

The National Library of Medicine has taken steps to define roles for medical librarians in disaster preparedness and response by creating a Disaster Information Management Coordinating Committee which has spearheaded the development of the *Disaster Information Management Resource Center* (DIMRC) (NLM 2007). The DIMRC contains links to NLM resources and databases for use by emergency planners, emergency responders, and librarians assisting in a disaster situations. The Center also contains a link to the *National Network of Libraries of Medicine's Emergency Preparedness and Response Toolkit* which contains library disaster plan templates, news about research and events by Network librarians focused on disaster preparedness, and an archive of disaster library stories by librarians. The National Network's Toolkit can serve as a model for the development of this author's proposed disaster shelter information center.

*The Information in Disaster Shelters Resource Center* (IDSRC) should include an *Information Needs and Solutions* section divided by the four main types of information needs discussed previously. A Resources section should include links to general disaster resources; additional links could be added during a given crisis. The Connect section should offer features such as discussion boards and blogs that would encourage participation and collaboration. This interactivity will provide a way for volunteers to seek 'real-time' advice. A Story Archive section would include interviews, testimonies, and first-hand accounts. Lastly, a Documents section would include studies, bibliographies, photos, and examples of flyers, posters, checklists, and handouts relating to the provision of information in shelters.

*The Information in Disaster Shelters Resource Center* has two roles. The first is to help volunteers (including librarian volunteers) assist those in shelters. The second is to capture the experiences and acquired expertise of those volunteers and survivors following the disaster. In this way, the IDSRC can be viewed as a feedback loop that is continually being utilized, evaluated, developed, and refined.

A possible outcome of such a centralized resource for shelter-related materials could be the development of guidelines or best practices for providing evacuees the information they need while in shelters. Librarians can collaborate with other professionals involved in disaster sheltering to synthesize materials for use in the field.

Such materials should:

- provide recommendations but encourage innovation as the situation dictates
- account for disaster conditions (i.e., little or no electricity, connectivity, communication)
- consider the many variables associated with disaster shelters (i.e., size, duration, location, population, volunteer turnover, etc.)
- brief volunteers on the important role of information in the lives of evacuees and survivors.

While this article's focus is not to create an exhaustive bibliography, librarians should be aware of some key points prior to providing information during a disaster:

- Use sources local to the disaster location (newspapers, radio, news channels). These sources tend to have more details and will also be most familiar to disaster survivors/evacuees, lending more credibility and perhaps providing a sense of normalcy.
- Search for blogs created by survivors 'on the ground' in the area. Accept that blogs are not always authoritative, but the richness and local-specific reporting may be a source of great information. Discover newly posted information by using the GoogleBlogs™ search or by searching discussion forums in place prior to the disaster and forums created in response to the disaster.
- If shelters in your area are opened to assist evacuees from another city or state, you may be serving a population much different than your local community. For instance, some shelter residents may not speak English, may not be able to read, or may have disabilities which would make it difficult for them to read print-outs of newspaper articles.
- Familiarize yourself with the topic of information services during disasters by reading articles in the LIS and Communications literature. Start by reviewing the NL/LM Emergency Preparedness Response Toolkit and join the NLM Disaster Information Management Resource Center's Disaster Information Outreach by Librarians discussion list.
- Build an understanding of such events by reading a few articles in disaster research. Read books written by survivors of recent disasters and watch documentaries on disasters that focus on survivors' stories.
- Review disaster-related mental health resources from CDC, SAMSHA, FEMA, Red Cross, MedlinePlus®, Center for Mental Health Services, and your state agencies.

- Providing information in disaster shelters may not necessarily involve a library. Be certain to differentiate between library services during disasters, library disaster planning (i.e., collections/staff/building), and the provision of information during disasters.
- Remain focused on the current information needs of the survivors' in the shelter.
- Try to understand the circumstances from which survivors' inquiries originate. Keep in mind that survivors may have lost family members, their homes, or their entire community.
- Employ the reference interview. The acts of listening to and understanding survivors' questions are just as important as providing answers.

## Conclusion

Disasters can happen in any place, at any time. Those who live in coastal states of the southeast face a renewed threat of storms every year with the start of hurricane season. Even when storms do not make a direct hit, their projected paths can cause the evacuation of tens of thousands, if not millions, of residents, many of whom will seek refuge in disaster shelters. Information professionals understand the significance of information needs in the everyday lives of individuals and recognize its even greater importance during times of crisis. They can employ their expertise to reshape and improve the shelter experience for both volunteers and evacuees.

**Table 1: Hurricane Gustav Evacuee Information Needs and Volunteer Solutions**

Information Needs	Representative Questions	Examples of Solutions
<b>Familiarization with the Host Community</b>		
	Where can I find _____?	Map of area (mark stores, libraries, restaurants, banks, etc.; sightseeing or tourist maps may have limited effectiveness); Local phone books.
	Where are we?	Map of United States with host city and native city marked, note distance in miles and travel time if driving or flying; City maps showing where the shelter is located; Flyers with shelter's location, address, phone number.
	How can I get to _____?	Bus schedules; Phone numbers of taxi services; Maps with the walking distance from shelter.

<b>Adjustment to Shelter Life</b>		
	When will we eat?	Poster with approximate meal times.
	How late can we stay out? Can we bring food back to our sleeping area? Can I have visitors come to the shelter? Do I have to sign-in and sign-out when I leave?	Poster with ground rules for the shelter.
	I have a question, but I don't know who to ask.	Poster/Dry erase board for shelter residents to pose questions and volunteers to provide answers.
	Who can help me with ___ ?	Posters with names, photos, and areas of expertise for shelter managers, volunteers, mental health counselors, nurses, etc.

<b>Disaster Related Information</b>		
	What is happening at home?	Cable Television; Radios; Recordings/streaming of evacuees' local news; Internet access; Printouts of evacuees' local newspaper; photographs of evacuees' local area.
	How can I get assistance?	Agency representatives (when possible); Printouts of FEMA, Red Cross and other agency's websites; Telephone for toll-free calls.
	I heard _____. Is it true?	Provide posters with reported questions and definitive answers (include volunteer's initials, date and time of answer, phone number of entity consulted for confirmation, space to edit and update as needed).

Regaining a Sense of Normalcy		
	What is happening other than the disaster?	Provide newspapers, televisions, Internet.
	Can we do something to take our minds off of the disaster?	Provide maps to the local public libraries, movie theaters, parks; Provide games, cards, notebooks, pens, coloring books, crayons, toys, footballs, basketballs, magazines, etc.
	What day is this? How long have we been here?	Provide a calendar and a clock.
	What is this city like? What is it like here?	Provide local newspapers, city brochures, etc.
	Have you heard when we get to go home? Do you know how we are getting home?	Provide a poster with regular updates, even if it states that there is no new information; Correct rumors; Post information related to why they have not returned (i.e., city is closed, no utilities, etc.).

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