Being on the safe side

By Kate W. Ragsdale and Janice Simpson

Emergency procedures for disabled users and staff

College and university librarians, responsible for the safety and security of their customers as well as their staff, have developed elaborate plans for averting tragedy and disaster during emergency situations within their buildings. Once an emergency management plan is developed and implemented, carefully trained library staff members are able to spring into action during emergency situations where sound judgment and time can separate safety from tragedy. By sharing written disaster plans and discussing potential threats, librarians have become adept at developing emergency evacuation plans that fit the peculiarities of their individual buildings—plans that can save lives in the face of emergency.

Library emergency management plans generally include sections on protecting and evacuating people. However, librarians are perplexed about what procedures to use in emergency situations that involve their users and staff with disabilities. There are many kinds of emergencies, many kinds of disabilities, and many library architectural idiosyncrasies to consider.

Even some campus security experts are bewildered by the variables involved in developing procedures for ensuring the safety of individuals with disabilities in public buildings. More attention is paid to getting people with disabilities into the buildings than in planning for their safe evacuation.[1] While providing access to library patrons with disabilities is mandated by law, emergency situations ranging from a temporary power outage to a catastrophic fire necessitate plans for the timely and safe evacuation of all patrons and employees.

The library literature has little to offer concerning this complex topic. Some library disaster plans include a section on evacuating individuals with disabilities, and these are helpful even though the procedures are necessarily customized for their particular buildings. At least two discussion groups within ALA have shared ideas on emergency procedures for library users and employees with disabilities. All of these ideas are helpful; but in the final analysis, each library must structure a plan that works for its situation.

Issues to consider

Librarians recognize that many factors contribute to the complexity of providing protection for users and staff with disabilities during an emergency situation. Listed below are examples of the complications and issues that surface.

• Although it is the responsibility of the college and university as well as of the library to minimize danger for all library users and employees during emergency situations, most academic libraries appear to be on their own when developing procedures for emergency situations. On many campuses there is no overall campus plan for safety.

• It is perhaps more difficult to develop emergency procedures for libraries than for other public buildings because library buildings are in use many hours every day. Procedures that work in regular hours may be different from those designed for the "off" hours (evenings and weekends) when fewer library employees are on duty.

• It is impossible to develop procedures for every kind of emergency. Fire, bomb threats, power outages, and (in some areas of the country) tornadoes and earthquakes are the most common emergencies which require immediate action. Fire, earthquakes, and power out-

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ages provide no prior warning; however, there is often time to prepare for tornadoes and hurricanes. These factors must be considered when formulating emergency procedures.

• It is impossible to develop procedures to cover every kind and level of disability.

• There is not general agreement about the best methods to use when evacuating individuals who need special assistance. All alternatives should be considered; judgment and common sense must be applied to each situation based on the circumstances.

• Staff turnover in college and university libraries makes it difficult to have all library employees fully trained in emergency procedures. To accommodate frequent staff changes, a good emergency plan must be adaptable as well as easily implemented.

• There appears to be no good way to identify individuals who may need assistance in case of a library emergency. Library users have a right to privacy, and users who may need assistance in exiting the building if the elevators are not operating are not required to identify themselves upon entering the building. Some library emergency plans state that the library user is responsible for informing the library staff of a need for assistance. Some libraries ask users with disabilities to state in which part of the library they will be working in case an emergency occurs. Other libraries rely on the floor/area monitors to check for users who need assistance during emergencies. Still others offer users with disabilities battery-powered communications devices to use whenever they are in the building. Ultimately, the library's responsibility is in providing information about procedures to follow in case of emergency.

Architectural considerations

In spite of the complex issues involved, librarians must figure out how to provide an environment that is safe for all individuals in the building. The very first step in preventing personal injury to library users and employees during an emergency is to construct library buildings according to code and to maintain these buildings according to code.[2]

Library buildings have individual architectural features that challenge the simplicity and effectiveness of emergency procedures for individuals with disabilities. However, regardless of the design of the building, attention to the items below can help to ensure the safety of all library users and employees.

• **Providing visual alarms.** Visual alarms must operate in public buildings at the same time audible alarms are sounding. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) require that visual alarms be located in specific areas throughout the building, that they be installed at a certain height, and that the lights are of a certain intensity and color.[3]

• **Designating accessible routes.** The ANSI Standards for Buildings and Facilities require accessible routes as a means of egress or connection to an area of rescue assistance in an emergency.[4] These routes should be shown on prominent, easy-to-read signs in the building.

• **Identifying areas of rescue assistance.** These designated areas, identified through prominently displayed signage, are most commonly stairwells, but can also be exterior exit balconies, certain corridors, or a vestibule where barriers are set up to keep smoke and heat from spreading.[5] It is important to provide two-way communication in areas of rescue assistance so that those waiting there can communicate with and receive instructions from emergency personnel.

Developing a plan

Many libraries have responded to the ADA self-study which includes questions about emergency procedures. A logical next step is cooperation among the campus ADA coordinator, the Disabled Students Office, safety and security personnel, library users with disabilities, and librarians in making a plan to help ensure the safety of library users and employees with disabilities in emergency situations. The actions and services listed below are not building-specific but apply to most campus libraries.

• **Developing an evacuation management plan.** There are two basic elements to any emergency plan involving occupants of a public building: alerting all people in the building to the emergency situation and then moving them to safety. Issues that are more complex include how to make sure that each library user understands that there is an emergency, how to identify individuals who must be informed by means other than an audible alarm or announcement, where the safe places within the building are, and how to make sure that everyone, regardless of physical impairment, moves into a safe place quickly.

It is a good idea for librarians to team with the fire and police departments in developing

emergency procedures for people with disabilities. Each group contributes expertise in developing workable procedures, and with the completion of that process, each group then understands what its responsibilities are when an emergency occurs.

- **Selecting an emergency coordinator.** One way to coordinate communication during an emergency, especially one that involves evacuation, is to designate one person as coordinator. For the sake of convenience and quick action, this person probably should be a library employee. Other library employees, serving as monitors and located throughout the building, will communicate through the coordinator who is in direct contact with the professional emergency personnel on the scene. Quick and effective communication is especially important when there are people on upper floors who need special assistance in exiting the building.

- **Providing concise information**. An emergency plan for library users with disabilities can be effective only if these individuals know what the plan is. Concise information with floor diagrams showing routes of evacuation should be posted on each floor where people will naturally look (probably near the elevators). More than one escape route should be selected in case something (like smoke) blocks a route.[6] Written information, again with floor diagrams, should be readily available for library users and staff with disabilities. Emergency personnel should be provided with copies of both the procedures and the floor diagrams showing the designated escape routes and the areas of rescue assistance. And all library staff must have access to written information concerning evacuation procedures.

- **Assigning monitors**. In the event of an emergency, each area of the library (divided by floor or functional area) may be monitored by an assigned library employee. This person informs users located in this area about the emergency, gives instructions, and checks the entire area thoroughly, searching especially for individuals who need assistance. It may be necessary to remind users that the elevators cannot be used in a fire and are not operable during a power failure.

- **Training monitors.** Monitors must understand what their responsibility is with regard to persons who need special assistance in exiting the building. There is widespread disagreement, even among safety experts, about the exact nature of these responsibilities since

legal implications for liability in case of injury vary from state to state.

It is generally agreed that a library employee should communicate the need for assistance to the professional emergency personnel (either through the coordinator or directly). Also, this employee may direct individuals who need help in exiting the building to a designated central spot or area of rescue assistance, whereupon emergency personnel will take over. At this point, most authorities require that the monitor leave the individual in this safe area (as difficult as this might be) and exit the building so that the fire fighters or other emergency personnel will have only one person, rather than two, to assist. Although it may be extremely difficult for the staff member to leave in such a situation, having an effective procedure in place should alleviate fears of both the patron and staff member. For example, a beeper can be left with the individual who is awaiting assistance so that two-way communication exists.

Carrying a person with mobility impairment down stairs in a wheelchair is dangerous and should be avoided if at all possible. The library employee should ask the individual about the best way to provide assistance. Some libraries use an evacuation chair designed with skids to maneuver stairs.[7] Although there are several suggested ways of carrying a person down stairs,[8] most libraries do not train staff to carry individuals who cannot handle stairs alone. It is acceptable for a library employee to assist an individual down stairs only when waiting for emergency personnel to arrive would result in certain tragedy.

- **Scheduling drills**. It cannot be overemphasized how important it is to schedule drills to practice and reinforce emergency procedures. Procedures should be tested on a regular basis, and both staff and library users must become accustomed to acting quickly and knowledgeably in a stressful situation. Some say that a plan is only as good as the last time it was tested on all employees.[9]

Orienting individuals to the plan

Beyond general measures that librarians can provide in assisting users with disabilities during emergencies, knowing how and when to assist is in many cases based both on common sense and a rudimentary understanding of disability-specific limitations. Enlisting library users or staff with disabilities when developing an emergency management plan helps to clarify

exactly what assistance may be needed and to dispel myths concerning specific disabilities.[10]

• **Assistance for the visually impaired and blind**. It is a good idea to orient blind and visually impaired individuals to the layout of the building, carefully pointing out designated areas of rescue assistance. Once they understand the layout of the library, blind library users are often quite independent in moving around in the building. These patrons should be provided with the emergency procedures in large type, Braille, on tape, or orally.[11] One thing to remember is that guide dogs can become disoriented in an emergency, especially a fire, which can contribute to the confusion.

• **Assistance for the hearing impaired and deaf.** Standards in building construction require that there be visible alarms, such as flashing lights, in addition to audible ones throughout the building. Strobe lights are not recommended because they may induce seizures in some individuals.[12] Alerting deaf library users to an emergency can also be done by sign language, by providing the individuals with a vibrating alarm or beeper, or by carrying signs that give simple evacuation instructions.

• **Assistance for the mobility impaired**. As mentioned earlier, library personnel should lead individuals who are mobility impaired to the designated safe area and then exit the building, informing emergency personnel of the person waiting for assistance in the safe area. A beeper and/or a flashlight may be given to the person awaiting assistance. Mobility-impaired persons in a wheelchair should be assisted down the stairs by library personnel only in order to avoid tragedy and, in those cases, the chair should always be left behind.

Concerns of the disabled

While library users with disabilities do not expect librarians to have developed fail-safe procedures to assist them in an emergency situation, they have the following concerns:

• that the risk of disaster is not an excuse that prevents them from working or studying in a building;

• that the level of safety for them in the building is the same as for able-bodied people;

• that the unique difficulties that they might face in an emergency are anticipated and planned for in advance.

As a response to these concerns, immediate action by libraries includes improving emergency procedures for library users and employees with special needs. Libraries can also work toward providing improved safety measures for all library users and staff, equipment for two-way communication, and the identification of areas of rescue assistance.[13]

Conclusion

The Americans with Disabilities Act mandates greater access to public buildings. As more library users with disabilities take advantage of this increased access, college and university librarians must be prepared to deal with emergency situations involving a variety of patrons. Having a good emergency management plan that anticipates problems involved in evacuating individuals with disabilities could save time and lives when an emergency arises.

Notes

1. *Employers Are Asking . . . About the Safety of Handicapped Workers When Emergencies Occur* (Washington, D.C.: President's Commission on Employment of the Handicapped, 1985), 5.

2. Ibid., 5.

3. *Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG): Checklist for Buildings and Facilities*, Survey Form 20 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, 1991).

4. *American National Standard for Buildings and Facilities—Providing Accessibility and Usability for Physically Handicapped People* (New York: American National Standards Institute, 1986), 4.3.10: 21, and A4.3.10; 76.

5. *ADAAG,* Survey Form 10.

6. Judith Fortson, *Disaster Planning and Recovery: A How-to-do-It Manual for Librarians and Archivists* (New York: Neal-Schumann Pubs.: 1992), 35.

7. *Employers Are Asking,* 12.

8. Ibid., 10–11.

9. Ibid., 18.

10. Ibid., 8.

11. Ibid., 15–16.

12. Ibid., 13.

13. Ibid., 6.

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