

CRISIS RESPONSE AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

California's geography and biodiversity is stunning, but brings with it drought and wildfires, storms and flooding, earthquakes, and seasonal extremes of temperature.

Libraries are categorized as essential services by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.¹ Library workers are "second responders" and "information first responders."² California's public libraries help their communities be better prepared, more responsive, and more resilient when crisis happens.

When community members are displaced from their homes, separated from loved ones, or struggling with other effects of disasters, libraries provide essential resources. Libraries help their communities charge cell phones, connect to Wi-Fi, and access food and water. Public internet terminals connect community members to family, friends, insurance providers, and other agencies.³

Seventy-nine of California's 185 library jurisdictions report providing crisis support to their community during the 2018–2019 fiscal year.^a

RESPONDING TO CRISIS

- Librarians and disaster response agents whose libraries and communities have experienced earthquake, flooding, hurricane, mudslide, tornado, wildfire, and winter storm confirm that libraries enhance community resilience in four key areas: economic development, social capital, information and communication, and community competence, which includes flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving.⁴
- Often, claims for insurance and disaster relief funding can only be filed online and require up-to-date internet browser software. With 24,000 internet terminals, plus equipment like photocopiers and printers, California's public libraries provide essential resources during and after disasters.⁵
- A National Library of Medicine project examined the disaster response efforts of libraries, finding that "*librarians' abilities to evaluate, organize, and disseminate accurate information made them ideal partners for emergency planners and disaster response agencies.*"⁶



- Heat emergencies are increasingly common in California. Between 1998 and 2014, heat emergencies caused more deaths than all other declared disaster events combined.⁷ Public libraries provide a place for people to take shelter, cool off, breathe better-quality air, and drink water. As one Public Health Emergency Preparedness Coordinator said: "*The biggest issue we have is that when we open cooling centers or encourage people to use public air-conditioned places they are very underutilized unless they are places people regularly go to, like the library.*"⁸

CASE STUDY: NAPA COUNTY LIBRARY

Between summer 2014 and fall 2018, Northern California experienced two major natural disasters that tested the Napa County Library's resources and response capacity.

On August 24, 2014, a magnitude 6.0 earthquake caused one death, at least 200 injuries, and an estimated \$1 billion in damage. In the quake's aftermath, county departments used the library as a temporary hub for vital functions, including Child Support Services, the Public Defender, and the District Attorney. Library staff assisted with recovery efforts by working in the Local Assistance Center. County departments relied on the library as a partner and a bridge to hard-to-reach clients for public services.

Before the community could fully recover from the earthquake, wildfires broke out in Napa and Sonoma counties in October 2017. The Tubbs fire ultimately burned for over three weeks across nearly 37,000 acres of Napa, Sonoma, and Lake Counties. Dozens of people were killed and five percent of homes in the area (over 4,600 homes) were destroyed. The relationships, trust, and results gained through partnerships built after the earthquake positioned the library to play an essential role as the wildfires raged. The County Executive Office, as lead in the Emergency Operations Center, tasked the library

with keeping the community informed. Fires took out phone lines, cable, and internet connections for the vast majority of residents, making the library their lifeline for safety, health, and welfare updates. Library staff signed residents up for NIXLE, the text-based emergency notification system used by CalFire and county agencies, and registered residents on the Red Cross-sponsored Safe & Well website, enabling family members to make sure their loved ones were safe. With access to internet and phone service limited, printed copies of maps, hazard notifications, and health alerts were posted on whiteboards in library lobbies.

In later months, when power and internet across the county were shut down for public safety during extreme weather conditions, libraries remained open and online. They experienced a 92 percent increase in door count, with individuals and business owners alike pouring through the doors to use power strips, charging stations, laptops, and printers. Many patrons reported that the library was the first place they thought to go when they needed help; others learned about library services and programs while they waited for an available power outlet.

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NorthNet Library System has created libraryrecovery.org, a resource-rich website to help libraries and their communities prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters.



NOTES

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5. Counting Opinions. N.d. "Summary Report: 2018–19." Toronto, ON: Counting Opinions. <https://www.countingopinions.com/pireports/report.php?b2f208d620414747f0abbd034d539cc3&live>.
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