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# Faced with Crisis: The Importance of Establishing a Comprehensive Crisis Management Plan

David E. Matchen Jr.

*University of Baltimore School of Law, [dmatchen@ubalt.edu](mailto:dmatchen@ubalt.edu)*

Jason Hawkins

*University of Maryland - Baltimore, [jhawkins@law.umaryland.edu](mailto:jhawkins@law.umaryland.edu)*

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# FACED WITH CRISIS

The importance of establishing a comprehensive crisis management plan.

BY DAVID E. MATCHEN, JR.  
AND JASON HAWKINS

**B**y now, the story surrounding the death of Baltimore man Freddie Gray while in police custody is common knowledge. A series of protests afterward and emergency responses by state and local governments turned the lives of many of Baltimore's residents upside-down for more than a week in late April and early May, including the staff at the law libraries at the University of Baltimore School of Law (UB Law) and the Thurgood Marshall Law Library at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law (Carey Law). The mood got progressively uglier as the days wore on until, just after Gray's funeral on April 27, a protest in the northwestern part of the city turned violent. The governor declared a state of emergency and called in the National Guard while the city imposed a curfew throughout the following week. Both libraries and their universities were forced to respond rapidly to swiftly developing events in order to ensure the safety of their patrons and staff and to mitigate the disruptive effect of early closures.

Libraries bear a certain obligation to plan for the unexpected, the unpleasant, the unwelcome. Very often, this falls under the umbrella of “crisis management,” “disaster recovery,” or “emergency preparedness,” and, as the names imply, they cover a great deal of territory, evolving even as we write this article. For example, the civil unrest in Baltimore forced the staffs at both UB

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Some of the less common hazards that libraries may face—sudden structural damage or active shooter incidents—can be the most likely to expose the institution to liability. Libraries do not get sued because a flood of water ruins the periodicals. But it can be a different story altogether if a visitor is injured during the incident.



Law and Carey Law to address unexpected emergencies. The University of Baltimore is situated in Baltimore’s Midtown-Belvedere neighborhood, approximately two miles from the epicenter of the April 27 violence and directly across the I-83 expressway from Penn Station. The law school sits on the eastern edge of campus and was, at that time, gearing up for spring finals the following week. The university found it necessary to close early at differing times throughout the week, either in response to specific events—such as mass protest marches due to start and finish at Penn Station later that week—or to the citywide curfew. Although the curfew was not intended to apply to students returning home from class, the risk of misapplication in practice drove the school to shutter sufficiently in advance of each night’s curfew to permit students, faculty, and staff to return home. The law school also canceled the first evening’s exams the following week in the event the curfew had extended that far.

The effect on Carey Law’s operations was both more disruptive and longer-lasting, due jointly to the fact that these events occurred during the school’s final exams and that the school’s location was at the epicenter of much of the activity. Carey Law is part of the University of Maryland-Baltimore, sited just west of downtown. Beginning on April 23, the university issued a series of closure orders and shelter-in-place instructions in response to developing conditions. On Monday, April 27, the day of the most serious violence and the subsequent declaration of the state of emergency and the citywide curfew, the university and library closed at 2:00 p.m. Afternoon law school exams were cancelled, and the law school made arrangements for students to take the missed exams online. As a result of the declared state of emergency and the citywide curfew, the university made the decision to close at 7:30 p.m. until the curfew was lifted. The library would close at the same time. Furthermore, due to the uncertainty surrounding additional early closures,

the law school made the decision to cancel all classroom-based examinations. A new system was quickly put in place to allow students to take all their exams online.

More recently, as the authors were finishing this article, UB Law prepared for a network shutdown resulting from a critical equipment failure elsewhere on campus, and both libraries planned for Hurricane Joaquin’s potential landfall on the Eastern Seaboard.

Many libraries have crisis plans that cover only the most likely hazards: fire, flooding, or other water damage; inclement weather; salvaging materials. However, these plans may be inadequate. They fail to address unlikely hazards, such as sudden structural damage to a library building, civil unrest, cyberattacks, or even active shooter incidents, which can severely disrupt library operations and services. They may not provide for appropriate responses for individuals with special needs. A comprehensive plan will address not only common but also less-common hazards and will provide for appropriate responses for all users of the library’s operations and services. With the increasing occurrence of incidents once considered far-fetched, being prepared now requires more than simply shutting down for a snowstorm or recovering water-logged books.

### Why Crisis Planning?

The recent events in Baltimore convinced us that the time was ripe for a discussion of crisis management. The importance of proper crisis management planning seems obvious and yet daunting, in light of the consequences attendant on success or failure. Apart from the potential for life-or-death scenarios, the library must also be cognizant of the potential for liability in the absence of a plan or should an existing plan be improperly implemented.

Libraries should endeavor to have crisis management plans that cover less common hazards because such plans can reduce liability exposure, provide employees with confidence in immediately dealing with the

incident, and help libraries recover faster from the incident.

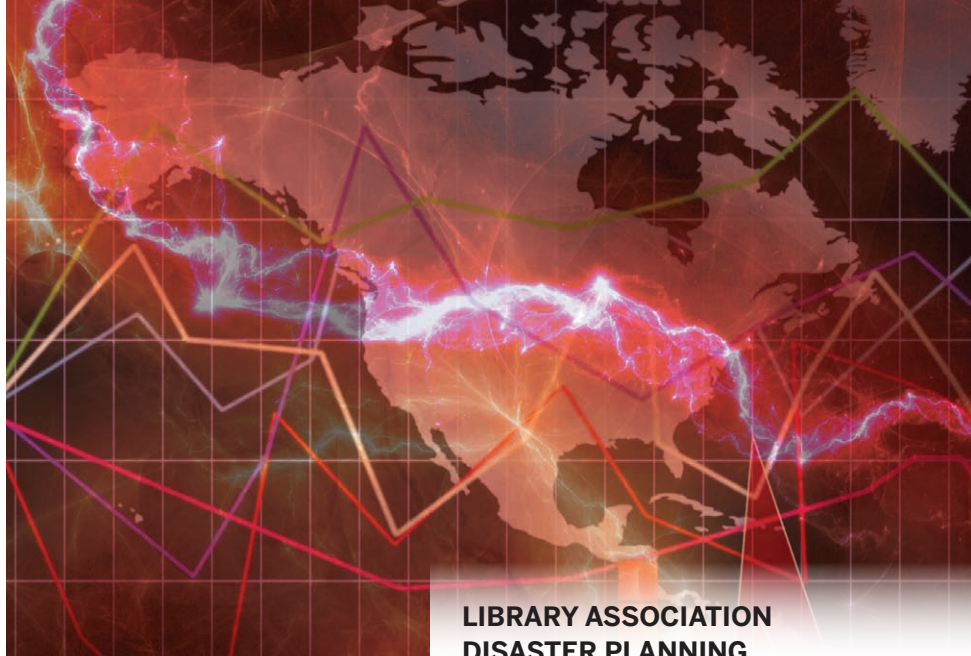
Some of the less common hazards that libraries may face—sudden structural damage or active shooter incidents—can be the most likely to expose the institution to liability. Libraries do not get sued because a flood of water ruins the periodicals. But it can be a different story altogether if a visitor is injured during the incident.

Several companies and institutions have faced lawsuits alleging inadequate emergency response plans. Following Hurricane Katrina, for example, patients and visitors trapped at Memorial Medical Center sued the hospital's operator in part over inadequate emergency response plans. The case settled for \$25 million. Victims of the Aurora, Colorado, mass shootings filed several civil suits against the theater's operator, based in part on the failure to develop, establish, and institute adequate emergency responses. In California, several lawsuits have been filed recently against the Long Beach Community College District, claiming that the district has failed to develop and institute emergency management plans that accommodate students with disabilities. The clear message to any institution is that your patrons care about your emergency planning.

For purposes of this discussion, we'll adopt the broadest possible definition of "crisis"—any event with the potential to disrupt library operations and/or threaten the safety or security of its patrons or staff. Accordingly, this article takes the broad view of crisis management planning, from development, content, and drafting tips, to training and communication considerations, to Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance.

### Plan Development

Whether you're modifying an existing plan or developing a plan from scratch, you'll need a crisis management team from a cross section of your staff. You'll get the most effective plan by pulling together your director and representatives from the following departments, as applicable:



## LIBRARY ASSOCIATION DISASTER PLANNING ONLINE RESOURCES

- **Public Services.** Those portions of your plan that impact your patrons and staff will benefit from public services input. They'll be the ones coordinating evacuation efforts and communicating instructions to your patrons.
- **Technical Services.** Your technical services division will be invaluable for the preservation of your physical collection, premises, and operational ability.
- **Information Technology.** Just as your physical collection needs protecting, so does your digital collection. Also, ensuring network availability will prove critical to your ability to communicate information to your patrons and staff in the event of a disaster. Your information technology staff may also be needed to implement various modes of communicating instructions to your patrons via social media, email, or text message alerts, etc.

Like any planning process, identifying stakeholders early on will allow you to get the cooperation necessary to make later implementation a reality. If your library is part of a larger entity (firm, law school/university, government agency), this likely means planning within the institution's existing crisis management plan. You'll need to coordinate with campus or building

In addition to the Library of Congress, which offers minimum best practices for library disaster planning at [www.loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/plan/index.html](http://www.loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/plan/index.html), most major library associations offer information on disaster planning and preparedness online:

#### American Association of Law Libraries

[www.aallnet.org/sections/sccll/toolkit/Disaster-Planning-Toolkit.html](http://www.aallnet.org/sections/sccll/toolkit/Disaster-Planning-Toolkit.html)

#### American Library Association

[www.ala.org/advocacy/govinfo/disaster-preparedness](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/govinfo/disaster-preparedness)

#### Special Libraries Association

[dev.sla.org/learn/resource-guides-2/disaster-planning-and-recovery](http://dev.sla.org/learn/resource-guides-2/disaster-planning-and-recovery)

security, school administration, or other operational teams to ensure that the measures you take don't contradict, impede, or frustrate other units' efforts while still ensuring the safety of your patrons, staff, and library. In this eventuality, many libraries adopt all or part of their larger organization's plan, tailoring it to the library's own needs. For example, during the civil unrest following the death of Freddie Gray, UB Law and Carey Law each followed the policies created by their respective universities. Coordinate with the other departments involved in facets of your plan and check for conflicts with their crisis procedures.



## ADA CONSIDERATIONS

Since we're operating under the assumption that surprises are one of the few things you can count on, your plan needs to cover certain contingencies. One particularly distressing example involves the possibility of needing to evacuate patrons or staff with disabilities. Those attached to larger institutions may find that the institution mandates particular procedures as a matter of compliance with the ADA, as do both the University of Baltimore and the University of Maryland-Baltimore. For example, at both schools the emergency management procedures require staff to escort disabled patrons to protected positions in stairwells and then immediately notify rescue personnel of their location and need to be evacuated.

The National Fire Protection Association offers an emergency evacuation guide for people with disabilities at [www.nfpa.org/safety-information/for-consumers/populations/people-with-disabilities](http://www.nfpa.org/safety-information/for-consumers/populations/people-with-disabilities). The guide addresses a variety of disabilities that may complicate evacuation plans and how to deal with them. The ADA home page also provides a guide for local governments on ensuring their emergency preparedness plans accommodate people with disabilities, which is available at [www.ada.gov/emergencyprepguide.htm](http://www.ada.gov/emergencyprepguide.htm).

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If, on the other hand, your library is autonomous, those cues are coming from you and you alone. Luckily for those charged with developing their library's crisis management plan from scratch, many resources exist to get you started in the form of guides or model plans. They aren't one-size-fits-all (you probably don't need tsunami contingencies if you're based in Colorado, for instance), but they can help jumpstart

a stalled planning process with scenarios you may not have considered.

An excellent resource for disaster or emergency planning for libraries is Miriam Kahn's *Disaster Response Planning for Libraries* (3rd ed., 2012). This book includes chapters on immediately responding to disasters, recovering collections and restoring operations, and the planning process. The book also includes several helpful checklists and forms. Other titles to consider include: *Library as Safe Haven: Disaster Planning, Response, and Recovery* (A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians) by Deborah Halsted, Shari Clifton, and Daniel Wilson; *Comprehensive Guide to Emergency and Disaster Preparedness and Recovery* by Frances Wilkinson, Linda Lewis, and Nancy Dennis; and *Emergency Preparedness for Libraries* by Julie Todaro.

Several of the major library association websites also provide information on disaster planning (see sidebar).

### Minimum Best Practices

When drafting your crisis management plan, certain principles will help ensure the plan is clear and useful. The Library of Congress offers the following minimum best practices for library disaster planning ([www.loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/plan/index.html](http://www.loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/plan/index.html)):

- Know how to take the immediate measures necessary for life safety.
- Keep a current list of emergency contact numbers.
- Identify specific responsibilities.

- Have basic emergency supplies ready.
- Be familiar with available disaster services (e.g., maintain a contract for disaster services [[www.loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/plan/contract.html](http://www.loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/plan/contract.html)]).
- Know what to do next/establish continuity of operations ([www.loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/plan/coop.html](http://www.loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/plan/coop.html)).

### Drafting Tips

We offer the following additional stylistic and content tips as a guide for your plan:

- **Be concise.** Those needing to implement your plan will generally be right in the thick of the crisis for which you're providing procedures. The less excess verbiage they have to wade through to receive and understand instructions, the better.
- **Be organized.** Use a table of contents. Your staff may know what's happening, but they may not know which of several synonyms you've opted to use to describe the crisis—for instance: civil disturbance, civil disorder, riot, or protests? The table will also help your staff determine at a glance whether "hurricane," for instance, is treated separately or categorized under a broader heading for "natural disasters." We also recommend you place the table on the front cover of the hardcopy of the plan. The whole idea is to enable your staff to quickly find the necessary information when needed. Alternatively, you may wish to use labeled tab dividers for ease of access on your physical copy. Speaking of which ...
- **Have a physical copy in an easily accessible location.** Many events that fall under the definition of "crisis" involve power/network outages. If your crisis management plan is locked away on a hard drive somewhere or the internet becomes inaccessible, your staff will really want that hard copy. If your library is a part of a larger institution and your library's crisis management plan

incorporates all or part of the institution's crisis management plan, then this material should also be available in hard copy.

- **Include a contact list.** Your plan needs to identify who gets contacted when, whether it's a department head, director, law enforcement, or ambulance services. Establish contingencies for when contacts aren't reachable.
- **Be comprehensive.** Since we are planning for the unanticipated, it's important to include a portion of your plan designed as a catch-all for situations not covered under specific crises. This sort of contingency planning minimizes the chances that staff will be left with no recourse but to improvise.
- **Make the procedures self-contained.** You definitely don't want staff flipping back and forth between sections while trying to piece together everything they should be doing in response to the present crisis. Even if it involves substantial overlap with other procedures, put all the procedures for each type of crisis in a discrete location.
- **Be up-to-date.** Be prepared to revisit your plan periodically to vet it for compliance with regulatory or policy changes, either at the library level or above; new circumstances affecting crisis management procedures (change of location, alteration of physical space, staff reduction, or new hiring, for example); or technological advances you can incorporate.
- **Establish ownership.** Each task related to a procedure should have someone responsible for its execution and trained in how to do so. Some procedures will demand evacuations facilitated by designated floor wardens. Others may require staff to secure the collection.

## Training

Should you choose to do your training in-house, the size of your staff may necessitate a "train the trainers"

approach—particularly if you're an academic law library with a large number of student employees. Don't leave it to a cold PowerPoint—the best training contains an interactive element, whether that be testing or the occasional drill during in-service or off hours. Everybody learns differently, and some of your staff members are bound to learn procedures better through a dry run or drill than they could by being told to memorize a manual.

Librarians should also consider consulting emergency management professionals. All states have emergency management agencies. Frequently, these agencies offer assistance or training for members of the public in disaster planning. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides links to state emergency management agencies at [www.fema.gov/emergency-management-agencies](http://www.fema.gov/emergency-management-agencies). For academic libraries, most colleges and universities have an office responsible for emergency management. This office is often located within the campus police or public safety departments. Employees within these offices are typically available to assist with planning and emergency training for all campus departments.

## Implementation and Reporting

Establish clear lines of communication to patrons and staff in the wake of a crisis situation. Onsite, a PA system will reach those present without access to the internet. Also, remember that, where your younger patrons are concerned, those channels of communication are subject to the dictates of fashion and technology. Where once email was king, now Facebook and Twitter dominate. Broadcasts through an institutional text alert system will also help disseminate critical information to your patrons and staff.

Various laws may also impose duties on how your library responds to certain crisis situations. For academic libraries, the federal Clery Act requires that all schools that participate in federal financial aid programs have procedures for reporting crimes committed on campus and emergency notification

systems. This means crisis management plans in higher education should have procedures in place for notifying the school's police department or emergency management office of situations involving possible crimes committed in the library such as hate crimes or thefts (e.g., student laptops). In the event of an active-shooter situation, for instance, libraries should have a plan for notifying the appropriate office as quickly as possible so that emergency alerts can be sent to the rest of campus. For more information, the U.S. Department of Education publishes *The Handbook for Campus Safety and Security Reporting*, available at [www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/handbook.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/handbook.pdf).

## Staying Up-to-date

Even if you're not modifying a pre-existing plan from a broader business unit, plenty of resources exist to get you started. Your obligations don't end with a finished plan, however. Your plan is a living document and must change as do regulations, policies, and personnel, lest you face a crisis with outdated information. No librarian hopes to have an opportunity to try out their crisis management plan in real life, but, as they say, it's better to have one and never need it than the reverse. ■



**DAVID E. MATCHEN, JR.**  
CIRCULATION/REFERENCE  
LIBRARIAN

John and Frances Angelos Law Center  
University of Baltimore Law Library  
Baltimore, Maryland  
[dmatchen@ubalt.edu](mailto:dmatchen@ubalt.edu)

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**JASON HAWKINS**  
RESEARCH LIBRARIAN

Thurgood Marshall Law Library  
University of Maryland School of Law  
Baltimore, Maryland  
[jhawkins@law.umaryland.edu](mailto:jhawkins@law.umaryland.edu)

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