

Libraries are Lifelines in the Colorado Floods and Fires

by Jacqueline C. Murphy, Colorado State Library Sr. Consultant for Public Libraries and Community Development

What do you think of when you think of a library? Books? Storytime? These are services libraries give throughout the year in the best of times. What about the worst of times? When disaster strikes? The reality is that emergency/relief workers and librarians are working side by side in Colorado, as libraries are a vital part of our community infrastructure.

During the most recent bout of floods and wildfires in Colorado, libraries throughout the State were the calm in the eye of the storm - providing internet access and supporting families' basic needs. In last month's floods and last year's wildfires, from Larimer County to Teller, libraries provided shelter to displaced families and library big screens projected community briefings on floods and fires.

In Estes Park-Larimer County, one of the hardest-hit areas in the State, as the Town's underground infrastructure was unearthed and exposed, it was clear that the library is part of the community's basic infrastructure. Town emergency briefings grew throughout the days, with questions about water quality and road damage. In response to the question, is the library open, the answer was yes, and was met with community applause. Within a day-and-a-half of the full town evacuation on Thursday, September 12th, the library opened its doors to people unable to enter the Town Hall filled past capacity for a library big screen Town-wide briefing. The library then opened the rest of the building for internet access for the busiest Saturday on record. By Monday, people's frazzled nerves were calmed by the library's provision of dvds, movies, and kindle and other e-books.

The High Plains Library District in Weld County provided materials to the Erie Community Center which housed displaced families. They also participated with the Weld County Recovery Assistance Center, primarily by entertaining children as parents were completing FEMA and other forms.

In less impacted areas, such as Jefferson and Broomfield Counties, neighboring evacuees used the library's computers to contact loved ones and to apply for FEMA assistance, and the library websites served as an online resource for Colorado Flood Updates.

In last year's wildfires, libraries responded quickly to the emergency, and public computing center resources were used to meet needs of volunteers, evacuees and others. The Southern Teller County public computing center was located in what became an evacuation center during the Waldo Canyon fire. They hosted about thirty families, set up emergency services (Red Cross, U.S. Forest Service, Salvation Army) and used the bandwidth and wifi for communications, streaming video, internet, and email services. They also ran extended hours during the ten day period for computer access.

Poudre River Public Library District in Larimer County offered laptops to the High Plains Fire victims and volunteers at the evacuation center 24 hours during the month of June and part of July. The computers were available to do well check and also for personal use. They also used the projector to project the news and updates of the fire every day. The children also enjoyed some time of fun by watching movies

and playing with the computers when the parents needed to be on meetings and/or relax. Library volunteers and staff helped patrons with the use of the computers.

Farther north in the County, in Red Feather Lakes, library staff assisted many patrons who had been evacuated for the High Park fire. They linked patrons to the best fire information resources, encouraged sign-up for leta911.org to receive emergency notifications and in some cases doing this for the patron, provided no cost copy, print service for fire-related information, extended library hours as necessary to allow access to fire information in the late evening, and provided computer availability for those misplaced and without access to their own computers.

In recent days, as communities rebuild from the floods, some libraries may need to close their doors temporarily for mold mitigation. Some libraries, as historic public buildings, have withstood the trauma of the floods in amazing ways. For example, Town of Lyons resident, Mark Browning described standing outside the historic Depot library as flood waters rushed past, reaching 18 inches on the western wall. Fortunately, the western wall is made of solid Lyons sandstone quarried in 1881. Relatively little water entered the building in this section. Although there was about 4 inches of standing water in the building, there was no structural damage. The library will, however, need to replace significant lost materials and restore other parts of the building.

On an ongoing basis, the Colorado Cultural and Historic Resources Alliance (CCAHR) assists libraries, museums and historic sites with disaster preparation and response. CCAHR is recognized by the Colorado Office of Emergency Management as one of the Emergency Support Functions. Most recently, CCAHR started a Community Services Working Group to explore additional services libraries can provide during and after disasters, such as mobile computer labs, traveling librarians to provide FEMA forms and insurance materials, and using libraries for the community center function.

Many of these examples illustrate that when a disaster hits our counties, libraries mobilize quickly, bind communities and facilitate civic engagement. What can be done in your County now to leverage your libraries for future emergencies and Colorado natural disasters? Going forward, be sure to include the library in your planning roundtables. Your library director is a civic leader, as are the fire chief, school superintendent, commissioners and mayors.

As Estes Valley Library Director Claudine Perrault said, “the library is necessary for communities to operate with clear information and human connection, in both the best and worst of times.”