

The last word

The Deluge

In January 2011, Queensland experienced devastating floods that brought widespread physical, social, and economic damage across the state. While it has not been the only environmental disaster to occur in Queensland, it was shocking in its reach, causing devastation and hardship to thousands of people and businesses.

The 2013 floods, while not as widespread, have nonetheless reiterated the challenges faced by communities living in affected areas.

In 2011, we invited Amanda Gardner, Librarian at Boystown to comment on her experiences. Then, she said, "my small, one person library, was completely wiped out.

The library collection was a varied one, containing over 3000 items focusing on a range of subject areas in the social services. Every item in the library was lost and in the clean up no items were recovered.

So, here was I, new to the organisation, without a library, faced with the loss of the entire collection, no possibility of recovering resources, little knowledge of the corporate culture, and wondering if I still had a job."

With the help from a number of different agencies, including the Queensland OPALs, Amanda rebuilt the library. With the 2013 floods fresh in our minds, we asked her to revisit her experience.

What is the most important lesson you learned after the 2011 floods?

Many of the lessons are equally important – if I was to choose though, I think the most important thing is to be aware of what's going on in your environment, location, and building, and be prepared to act quickly.

Do you have a disaster management plan now? If yes, what does it include?

Kind of – an informal one for the library in my head which was quite successful in the latest floods. However, in writing my responses to your questions, I've realised I should really put it all down in writing and take it to my manager and the property manager in the event that I'm not around next time. The main features of this plan was to:

prepare:

- actively identifying possible hazards to the library and its collection, whether they be a natural disaster as in the floods, or some other type of hazard, e.g.: fire, burst pipes from kitchen, or toilet facilities. A flood event is the most likely as the site has a history of frequent flooding and, given climate change, it is likely to occur again.
- identifying potential issues that may occur in the event of a disaster, e.g. communication breakdown, too many helpers, not enough storage, evacuation obstacles like stairs, etc.
- having a plan with specific strategies to prepare for a

possible event, minimise any damage, and manage a response, e.g. ensure materials such as boxes and trolleys are on site to speed up removal of assets.

respond:

- monitor the weather and be aware,
- communicate with the property manager who would co-ordinate the response,
- maintain a list of contacts and alternative contact strategies in the event of communication barriers,
- have a specific removal plan for library material (ie. boxing order) and be prepared to direct volunteers according to that plan.

What is the most useful advice you were given – and what is the most useful advice you would pass on to colleagues dealing with the aftermath of a disaster?

Don't panic, work out what is needed, and ask for specific help. It's ok to say no to offers of help or donations of books until you have a plan and know how

you want to respond.

What was the most challenging aspect of rebuilding the library?

The insurance valuation. Undertaking a title-by-title price matching project was challenging and time consuming, however, I was able to complete the report with the help of QOPALS and the generosity of willing helpers.

What, if any, changes have you made to your practice or policies in light of two significant flood events in two years?

There were no written policies when I took on the position and I was too new to the organisation to have even established any of my own practices. However, because the insurance valuation afforded me the opportunity to learn about the collection and what staff wanted, and as an exercise in getting my head together and providing a focus for the rebuild, I took the time to develop and write everything down – from the collection development policy to acquisition policies to procedure manuals to new library design. The only thing I haven't written down is the disaster management plan – I can see I will be spending a little bit of time working on this in the near future!

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