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# Preparing for the Worst: An Analysis of Disaster Response Resource Provision by Canadian Library Associations (Paper)

## **Abstract:**

This paper examines how Canadian Library Associations (CLAs) provide support to the public libraries and librarians they empower in the areas of disaster preparation and mitigation. Utilizing qualitative content analysis, this study compared the resources and supports offered by 18 CLAs. The information, websites, and internal documents provided by the CLAs were assessed and coded using constant comparative methodology according to a) the type of resource and b) the type(s) of information contained in each resource. In total 8 categories of resources and 16 categories of information were established. Additionally, three concerning trends regarding the information currently being provided by the CLAs were discovered.

## **1. Introduction**

Although public libraries are not typically included in community response planning initiatives, recent disasters like Hurricanes Katrina, Sandy, and Harvey have demonstrated the vital role public libraries can play in supporting their communities' response and recovery efforts. However, "the success with which libraries can [provide these services] greatly depends on [them] being prepared for emergencies, and part of that preparation involves having formal and detailed disaster plans" (Borbst, Mandel, & McClure, 2012, 158). This is noteworthy because, according to a 2005 Heritage Health Index report, 78% of U.S. libraries have neither a disaster plan nor staff appropriately trained to carry it out (American Library Association, 2019). Thus, it is critical that public libraries receive the resources and support they need to create effective disaster plans and provide appropriate emergency training to staff. To that end, this paper explores how CLAs are providing support to the public libraries and librarians they empower in the area of disaster management.

## **2. Library Associations as Institutional Supporters**

In 2007 the National Library of Medicine (NLM) conducted an oral history project to identify the various roles libraries and librarians take on to support disaster management. One of the roles identified through this project was that of the institutional supporter: "Libraries acted as a command center for activities; posted institution-specific information on the web; helped displaced [patrons]; or acted as part of [an] institution-wide disaster plan" (Featherstone, Lyon, & Ruffin, 2008, 345-346). In a recently conducted study (Vander Kooy, 2019) that looked at how the eight roles Featherstone et al. identified applied specifically to public libraries, the role of institutional supporter was notably absent. This may be because the libraries' local associations are assuming that role for them.<sup>1</sup> For example, following the 2013 Southern Alberta

floods, the Library Association of Alberta gathered information about the extent of damage to its member libraries and provided continual updates to the public as well as information on fundraising and donation initiatives to assist in the recovery process (Library Association of Alberta, 2013). Likewise, following Hurricane Harvey, the Texas Library Association stated, “We want to put together ideas and guidance...that give [libraries] ideas of how to reach out...how to partner with different community organizations, how to make the library a community center for people looking for disaster recovery resources” (Peet, 2018). Thus, library associations appear to be a natural fit for the institutional supporter role as identified by Featherstone et al.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative content analysis using constant comparative methodology to explore and compare the resources and supports available to public libraries from 18 different CLAs. The associations chosen for this study included both the primary library association as well as the public library association (if one existed) for each of Canada’s 10 provinces and 3 territories (see Table 1). Once this list was established, each association was contacted via email with a request for information regarding any resources and/or supports they provided in the area of disaster management. The responses, web links, and internal documents that were received were then analyzed in terms of the types of resources they represented and the types of information they contained. For the sake of evaluating the level of thoroughness the CLAs were demonstrating, the resources and information available were also compared to those of the American Library Association (ALA) and the NLM’s Disaster Information Management Research Center (DIMRC). Both of these organizations were chosen due to their strong focus on the needs of libraries and librarians as well as their superior levels of advocacy work regarding disaster management.<sup>2</sup>

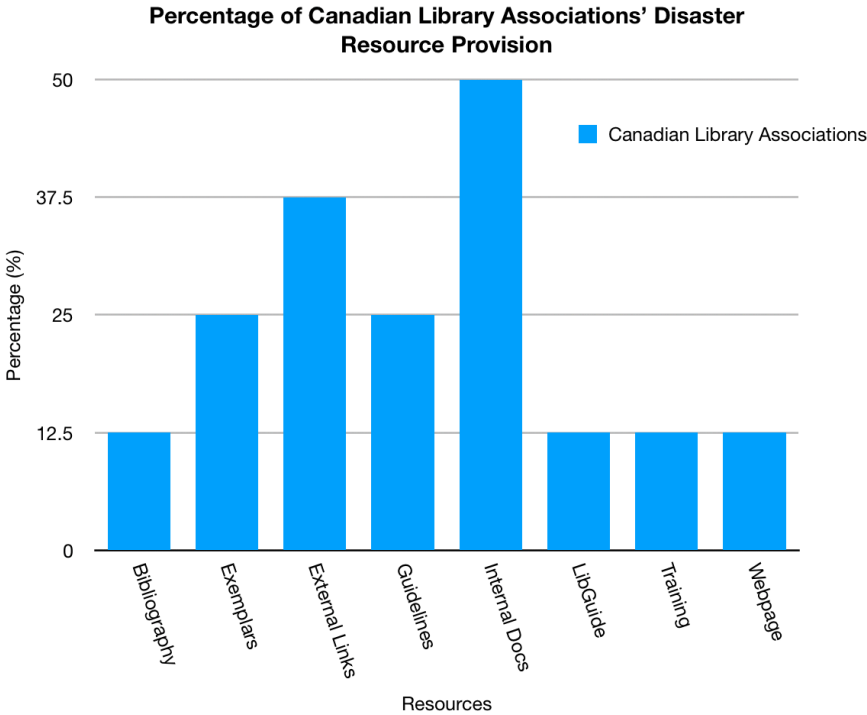
<b>Province</b>	<b>Association</b>	<b>Response Received</b>
Alberta (AB)	Library Association of Alberta (LAA)	
British Columbia (BC)	British Columbia Library Association (BCLA)	X
Manitoba (MB)	Manitoba Library Association (MLA)	
New Brunswick (NB)	New Brunswick Public Libraries Service (NBPLS)	X
Newfoundland and Labrador (NL)	Newfoundland & Labrador Library Association (NLLA)	
	Newfoundland & Labrador Public Libraries (NLPL)	X
Nova Scotia (NS)	Nova Scotia Library Association (NSLA)	X
Prince Edward Island (PE)	Association of Prince Edward Island Libraries (APEIL)	
Ontario (ON)	Ontario Library Association (OLA)	X
	Ontario Library Service – North (OLS-N)	
	Southern Ontario Library Service (SOLS)	X
Quebec (QC)	L’Association des bibliothécaires du Québec – Quebec Library Association (ABQLA)	

Saskatchewan (SK)	Saskatchewan Library Association (SLA)	
<b>Territory</b>		
Northwest Territories (NT)	Northwest Territories Library Association (NWTLA)	
	Northwest Territories Public Library Services (NWTPLS)	X
Nunavut (NU)	Nunavut Library Association (NLA)	
Yukon (YT)	Yukon Library Association (YLA)	
	Yukon Public Libraries (YPL)	X

**4. Findings**

The overall response rate for this study was 44% (8/18); however, the response rate by province and territory was 54% (7/13). A total of eight resource categories were identified. As shown in Figure 1, the resources CLAs provide most are internal documents (50%) and links to external websites (37.5%). Two of the resources they provide least, however, are training (12.5%) and easily accessible information on their home websites (12.5%). This is unfortunate since these are probably two of the resources that could most help librarians.

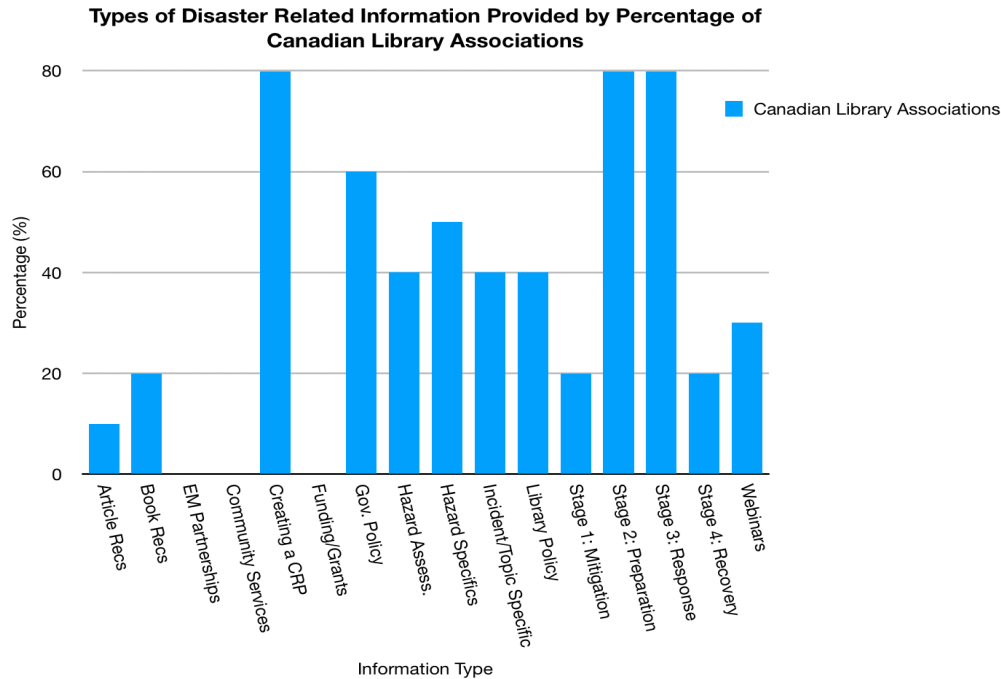
**Figure 1**



A total of 16 information categories were identified. As shown in Figure 2, the information CLAs provide most is related to the creation of a disaster plan (80%) as well as the preparation and response stages (80%) of the disaster cycle. However, literature recommendations (articles 10% and books 20%) and the other two stages of the disaster cycle (20%) were among the lowest types of information provided. Most notable, though, was the fact that there was no information provided by the CLAs regarding potential funding and grants, building effective partnerships

with local emergency response agencies, or providing services to a community devastated by a disaster, all of which are highly recommended by prior research (Bishop & Veil, 2013; Borbst et al., 2012; Decker & Townes, 2015; Featherstone et al., 2008; Haddow, Bullock, & Coppola, 2016, 443-444; McCook, 2000; Veil & Bishop, 2014).

**Figure 2**



## 5. Discussion

Although the results of this study should not be considered generalizable to all CLAs, there are some concerning trends that are worthy of further comment. First, there is the fact that locating these resources and the information they contain is not easy. For example, most CLAs do not provide direct links from their home websites. Moreover, even when associations like SOLS do provide resources, they can be difficult to navigate for specific information. This added complication can make creating a disaster plan both time consuming and frustrating for librarians, which in turn decreases the likelihood that librarians will actually create a disaster plan.

Second, the lack of information available regarding the provision of suitable services to a community devastated by disaster is a potentially massive oversight as “one study showed that even though 35% of the Louisiana public libraries were closed following Hurricane Katrina, the overall number of visitors only went down by 1%, indicating that individuals sought library services elsewhere if their library was closed” (Veil & Bishop, 2014, 722).<sup>3</sup>

Third, the lack of training being made available to practicing public librarians means they are unlikely to effectively plan for and respond to disasters within their communities as the appropriate skills, knowledge, and tools to do so will have to be acquired through self-directed means.

Finally, it is particularly concerning that none of the Prairie Provinces responded to the request for information, as between the years of 2005 and 2014 Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta together “accounted for 82% of all DFAA<sup>4</sup> weather event costs... despite accounting for only 18% of Canada’s population” (Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, 2016, 3). Thus, with so much proven potential for regular disasters, it seems especially important that public librarians in the Prairie Provinces receive appropriate resources, information, and training.<sup>5</sup>

## **6. Conclusion**

Obviously, further study is needed before any firm conclusion can be drawn, but as this paper shows, there are definitely areas in which CLAs can improve. Specifically, they should a) increase the diversity of resources they offer, b) improve the accessibility of the information available in their resources by making them more intuitive, c) provide information related to the vital disaster response roles librarians can fulfill in their communities, and d) create opportunities for public librarians to participate in disaster management related training. However, these recommendations should not be perceived as an absence of capacity or desire to help on the part of CLAs, but rather they should be viewed as an opportunity for these organizations build more comprehensive – and consistent – systems across Canada wherein both they and the public librarians they empower are able to contribute to the response and recovery efforts of communities affected by disaster.

## **7. Links to Conference Theme**

This paper fits the conference’s theme by addressing the divergence between theory and practice as it relates to supporting public libraries in the area of disaster management.

## **Endnotes:**

1. While it is true municipal governments and provincial ministries play a larger role in facilitating disaster management than library associations, they do not have the specialized knowledge or resources necessary to provide guidance and training for librarians seeking to improve their ability to respond to disasters. Likewise, during a regional disaster simultaneously affecting multiple libraries, it would not fall on local or provincial authorities to coordinate library-specific responses, but rather library associations.
2. The DIMRC provides an assortment of free resources and training for librarians interested in enhancing their ability to support the disaster workforce by identifying, using, and sharing both accurate and appropriate disaster health information (Disaster Information Management Research Center, 2019).
3. Similar patterns were also seen following Hurricanes Sandy and Harvey (Bayliss, 2012; Peet, 2017).
4. The Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements (DFAA) program reimburses the provinces and individuals (via the province) for expenses and damages resulting from large scale natural or manmade disasters (Public Safety Canada, 2019).
5. It is possible that public librarians in the Prairie Provinces do receive resources, information, and/or training, but without evidence this study cannot say for sure one way or the other.

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