

Survey Findings: Executive Summary

Libraries as Partners for Emergency Preparedness and Response in Times of Crisis: An Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership Grants for Libraries Project [LG-254819-OLS-23]

1. Introduction

Libraries as Partners for Emergency Preparedness and Response in Times of Crisis

(<https://imlsgrant.web.illinois.edu/>) is a two-year project funded via the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership Grants for Libraries program [LG-254819-OLS-23]. *Libraries as Partners* is a preliminary investigation into partnerships between libraries of any type and traditional emergency response groups such as the fire service, emergency medical services, local and state health departments, and others to help the communities that they serve prepare for, respond to, and recover from community-wide crises. Community-wide crises are emergencies that impact the health and safety of large portions of communities or whole communities and include severe weather such as hurricanes or tornadoes, extreme temperatures, flooding, wildfires, public health emergencies, and other hazardous events.

Libraries respond to emergencies in their communities in a variety of ways, such as providing accurate and up-to-date information, connecting patrons with disaster relief organizations, serving as shelters including as cooling and warming centers, and providing their Wi-Fi, parking lots, and innovative remote services as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. The essential social service that libraries provide to their communities has been recognized by the federal government since 2011 when the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) added libraries to the list of those institutions in the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act who are eligible for temporary relocation during emergencies. Despite this recognition, traditional emergency response groups often do not view libraries as emergency response partners or are unaware of the services that libraries can provide during emergency response^{1 2}. A lack of literature on libraries as partners during community-wide crises further emphasizes the partnership gap between libraries and traditional emergency response organizations. The *Libraries as Partners* project is necessitated by this partnership gap. The project's overarching goals are to further understand the reason for these gaps, investigate the characteristics of successful library-emergency partnerships that do exist, and promote the essential role that libraries can take on in emergency response.

The following sections describe the results of a survey conducted during *Libraries as Partners*' first year. The survey of Illinois' diverse library community was used to establish a baseline understanding of libraries' responses to emergencies and partnerships during these emergencies. Its findings will inform the national conversations and deeper investigations that will occur during the project's second year.

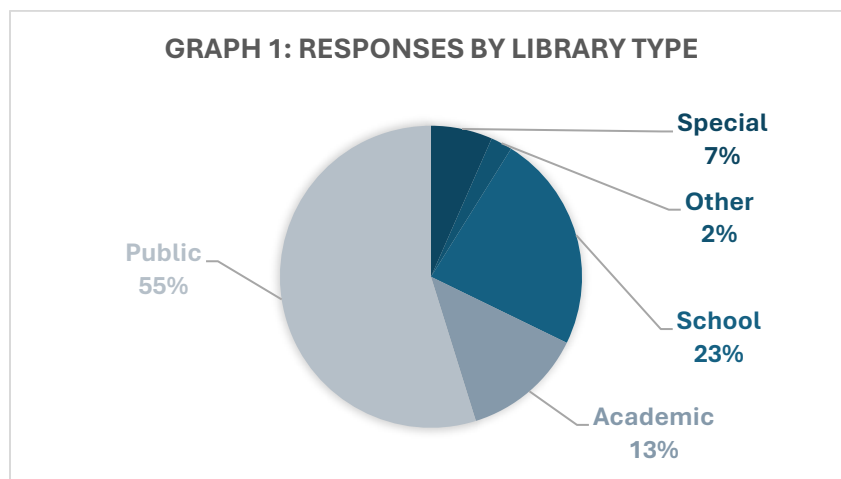
¹ Smith, M. (2019). "Top ten challenges facing public libraries." *Public Library Quarterly*, 38(3). Pp. 241-247. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2019.1608617>.

² Hagar, C. (2013). "Public library response to natural disasters: a 'whole community' approach." *SJSU iSchool*. <https://ischool.sjsu.edu/ciri-blog/public-library-response-natural-disasters-whole-community-approach>.

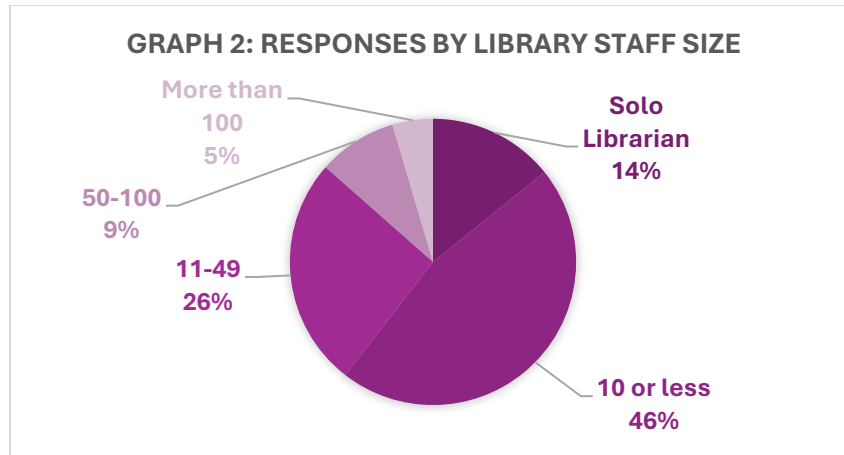
2. Data Collection and Library Demographics

The survey was conducted using the Qualtrics survey software. Data collection began in November 2023 and ended in March 2024. Illinois libraries of all types were contacted to participate in the survey by email using the information available in the L2 Library Directory and Learning Calendar (<https://librarylearning.org/>), a directory of Illinois multi-type libraries. With duplicate contact information removed, the total libraries from the L2 directory that were contacted was 1,740 (140 academic, 640 public, 795 school, and 165 special). The survey received 605 total responses for a response rate of 34.7%. All responses were anonymous.

Over half of respondents to the survey were from public libraries, with smaller percentages of academic, school, and special libraries represented in the responses. Increased participation in the survey by public libraries indicates that public libraries may engage with community-wide emergencies and response efforts to a greater degree than other library types. See Graph 1 for percentages of library respondents by library type.



The size of respondents' libraries varied widely, including libraries with just a solo librarian to those with over one hundred staff. Most libraries reported staff sizes of less than 50, with a significant portion of those being libraries with 10 or fewer staff. See Graph 2 for library sizes by staff represented in the survey responses.



The communities that respondents serve ranged widely from small, rural communities to those in densely populated urban and suburban areas. While the survey did not collect the names and exact locations of libraries, respondents indicated the Illinois regional library system that they are located within: Illinois Heartland Library System (523 member libraries), Reaching Across Illinois Library System (1,227 member libraries), and the Chicago Public Library System. 73% of respondents were from Reaching Across Illinois, 26% from Illinois Heartland, and 1% from Chicago.

While the survey received diverse responses across library type, size, and location, the racial diversity of patrons served by libraries as reported by participants was low, with 62% of respondents describing the communities that they serve as being primarily White.

3. Results

The survey began with a short section that gathered demographic information about the respondents as discussed in Section 2 above. This was followed by three sections: 1) Emergencies; 2) Scope and Nature of Partnership; and 3) Role of Libraries in Partnerships.

a. Emergencies

The survey's first area of focus, Emergencies, identified the types of emergencies that libraries have responded to in the past, are currently responding to, or have created emergency plans to respond to if they occur in the future. As library partnerships may vary depending on the specific challenges and needs of different emergency types, it was critical to collect information about what emergencies libraries do or do not respond to and how libraries approach emergency response.

60% of respondents said that their library had been involved in an emergency response and 40% said that their library has not participated in an emergency response. Of the 60% who indicated that their library had responded to an emergency, the top emergency types that libraries responded to were: 1) COVID-19; 2) extreme cold; 3) tornadoes/severe weather; and 4) extreme heat.

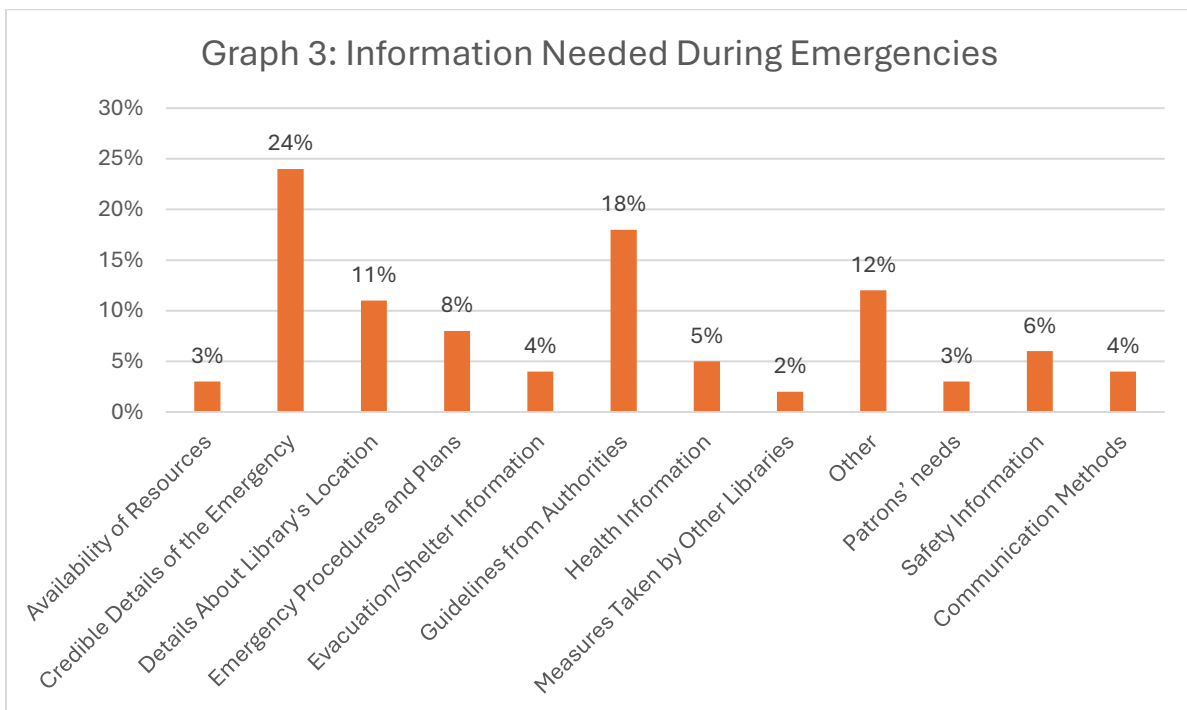
Respondents who indicated that their library had responded to one or more emergencies were prompted for further details about their emergency response, including the roles of library personnel during the

response, information that they needed to respond, training that they received, and overall evaluation of the success of their responses.

During emergency response, the most common roles of personnel were: 1) following emergency procedures/plans; 2) leadership and administration; and 3) maintaining normal library services. Few libraries reported the presence of a dedicated safety/emergency response team, and their existence varied by emergency type. Dedicated response teams were most common for emergencies such as violence (ex. gun violence), bomb threats, and flooding. Less than 3% of respondents said that there were personnel in their library whose roles involved training and preparedness for emergencies.

Similarly, only 43% of respondents said that they received training for specific emergencies (CPR, first aid, active shooter, etc.) annually. 47% receive training only occasionally or have not received any for several years, and 10% reported that they had never received training for emergencies. Of those who have received training, the most common training topics included violence/threat preparedness and medical emergency response. When reflecting on their libraries' past emergency responses, training and preparedness was noted as one of the top areas of failure across respondents, after failures in communication and outreach with the community or partners.

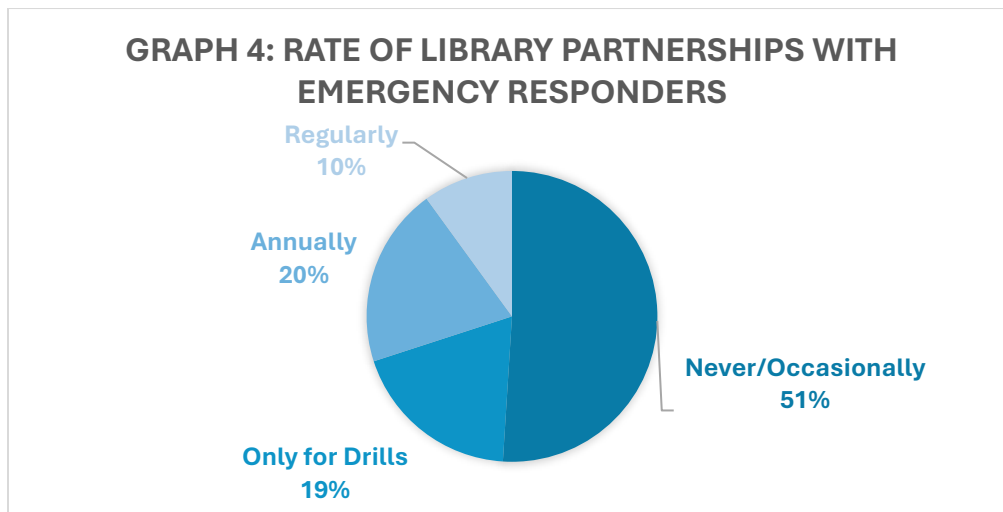
To respond effectively to emergencies, libraries indicated a variety of information that they needed, especially credible details of the emergency, guidelines from authorities, information about the library's location and effect of emergencies on the library, and other information. See Graph 3 for the types of information needed that were discussed by respondents. However, only 2% of respondents indicated that they gather information using resources provided by the federal, state, or local governments (e.g., Centers for Disease Control, Illinois Department of Public Health, county health departments).



b. Scope and Nature of Partnership

The survey's second area, Scope and Nature of Partnership, focused on clarifying the past and existing presence of library-community partnerships during emergencies, especially if partnerships have occurred and how partnerships have been developed and maintained if partnerships do exist.

Just 10% of respondents said that they collaborated regularly with emergency response groups and that these groups recognize libraries' contributions to emergency response. Others have never or only occasionally collaborated with emergency response groups or only collaborated for specific reasons (e.g., drills). 86% of respondents said that their library is not a member of a community emergency task force, committee, or other group. See Graph 4 for the percentage of library partnerships across respondents.



Of the partnerships that do exist, 56% were initiated by libraries and only 13% were initiated by an emergency response partner. Other partnerships were initiated by an outside group (such as local government), or respondents did not know how the partnerships were initiated. The most common partners were the local fire and police departments.

c. Role of Libraries in Partnerships

The final area of the survey, Role of Libraries in Partnerships, focused on defining the current role of libraries as partners to emergency response groups and identifying future roles for libraries to fill.

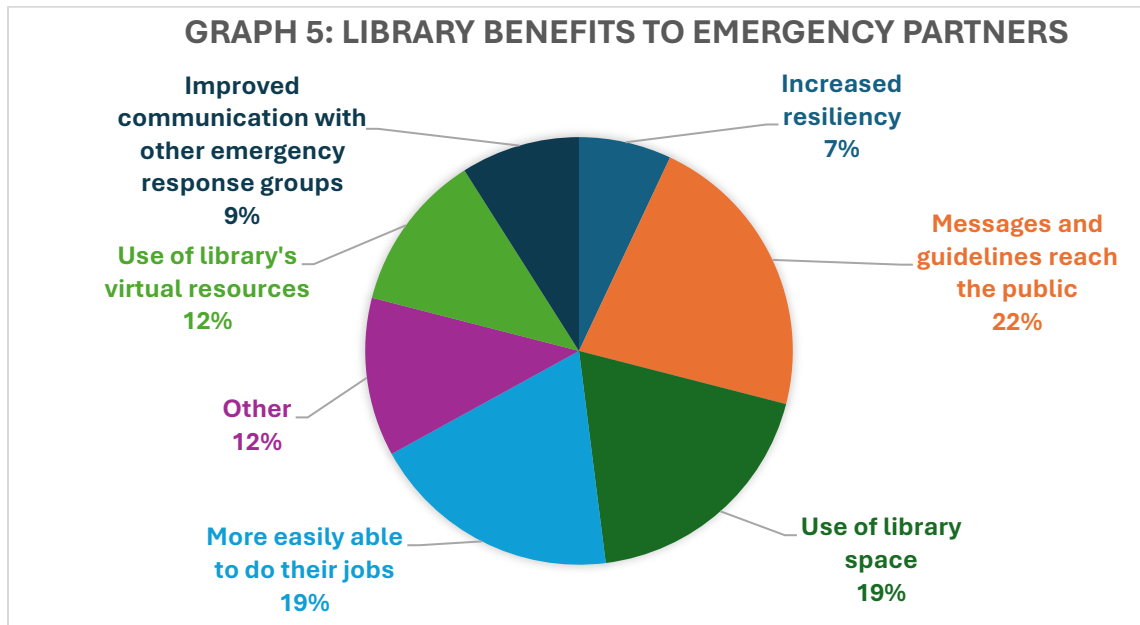
Library roles during emergencies included:

- information collection and sharing (especially through the term “information hub or center”),
- providing emergency specific responses (e.g., CPR/first aid for medical emergencies),
- access to library services and resources (especially WiFi, charging, physical space), and
- community support.

The majority of respondents held a positive view of partnerships for emergency response, with 67% believing that library partnerships enhance their community's resiliency especially through their role as information and resource providers.

Respondents also believed that their role benefited their community emergency response partners, especially by helping community response groups reach the public with their messages and guidelines.

Other beneficial roles of libraries included partners' use of the physical library space and resources. See Graph 5 for ways that libraries benefit their emergency response partners.



Respondents indicated that in the future, roles they expected to continue or take on included:

- information collection and sharing,
- providing more emergency-specific responses,
- opening their library space for use by partners, and
- partnering with more emergency response groups.

4. Key Findings

Three major findings emerged across the survey's results that indicate areas of improvement for library emergency response and their partnerships with emergency response organizations.

- **There is an urgent need for systematic and tailored training for a variety of emergency responses.** Libraries lack training and preparedness for emergencies which inhibit their ability to effectively respond to emergencies in their community when they occur. Very few library personnel were in charge of training and preparedness in their libraries, which may contribute to low levels of regular library training and large variations in the training content that libraries receive.
- **Better cyberinfrastructure is needed to support timely and comprehensive information exchange and communication.** There were large discrepancies in the information that libraries needed to respond to emergencies, especially their needs for credible information about emergencies and guidelines/protocols from authorities, and respondents' little use of information from authorities including federal, state, and local governments. Improved cyberinfrastructure that allows libraries to access information from authorities or awareness of the resources that do

exist will allow libraries to more easily find the information that they need to respond to emergencies. Additionally, the top failure reported during emergency responses was a communication and outreach failure by libraries, indicating that there may be potential to leverage communication apps or virtual meetings to complement conventional means of communications.

- **The role of libraries in emergency response alongside other stakeholders must be reformed.** Only 10% of respondents felt that emergency response organizations viewed them as equal partners, and most of the partnerships that did exist were initiated by libraries. Community partner awareness of the role that libraries can take on during emergencies should be increased, and opportunities need to be created for libraries and partner organizations to plan and collaborate together. While the current services that libraries provide most often include WiFi and device charging, information provision, and physical space, libraries would like to contribute more to emergency response and partnerships by providing emergency specific responses and establishing more partnerships.

5. Conclusion

This survey of Illinois libraries provided a baseline understanding of the current state of library-community partnerships during emergencies. Its results will inform future in-depth studies of libraries as partners during emergencies across the United States. Many libraries already respond independently to emergencies in their communities, providing their resources and space to those who need them. However, gaps in training, infrastructure, and partnerships with emergency response organizations inhibit their ability to effectively respond to community emergencies and expand their collaborations with emergency partners. Strengthening these areas will help libraries become equal partners in emergency preparedness and response.

In the second year of the *Libraries as Partners* project, the conversation will expand to the national level through two Community Engagement Roundtable discussions. Through panels and conversations between participants from across the country, the challenges of library emergency response and partnerships will be addressed and strategies for creating successful and sustainable library-emergency partnerships will begin to develop.