

CALA Southeast & Southwest
Chapters Joint Conference 2025

Librarian First Responders: Transforming Public Library Services in the Wake of Natural Disasters

Feili Tu-Keefner, PhD, MLIS

(pronounced like “FAY LEE”)

涂菲莉 (she/her/her)

(feilitu@sc.edu)



School of Information Science

College of Information and Communications

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA



**Chinese
American
Librarians
Association**

Our Team



Feili Tu-Keefner
University of South Carolina



Denise Lyons
Commissioner/State Librarian
Kentucky Department for
Libraries and Archives



April Hobbs
MUSC Libraries



Studies from 2015-2024: Focused on People, Partnerships, and Communication:

<u>South Carolina (2015-2017)</u> • <u>Focus group meetings</u> • <u>Survey</u>	Flooding, Hurricanes
<u>South Carolina (2017-2018)</u> • <u>Survey</u>	Community members' use of public library disaster information services after the Columbia flood and Hurricane Matthew
<u>Houston, TX (2018-2019)</u> • <u>Focus group meetings</u>	Hurricane Harvey
<u>Northern California (2022)</u> • <u>Focus group meetings</u> • <u>Interview</u> • <u>Informal discussions</u>	Wildfires
<u>Kentucky (2023)</u> • <u>Focus group meetings</u> • <u>Interviews</u> • <u>Informal discussions</u>	Tornadoes (West) Mountain Flooding/Mudslides (East)
<u>Southern California (2024)</u> • <u>Focus group meetings</u> • <u>Interviews</u> • <u>Informal discussions</u>	Multiple disasters, including floods, fire, extreme heat, earthquakes, etc.

preparedlibraries.org

Building a Culture of Preparedness

Learning from the “Recovering Together” project, NorthNet Library System (<https://libraryrecovery.org>)

“Organizations that fare best during a disaster are those that prepare ahead of time and train all staff members to take action. These organizations also create a culture of preparedness. They encourage shared responsibility and build preparedness activities into regular routines. Preparedness becomes a facet of “business as usual” instead of a singular event or yearly exercise.”

“Leadership competencies determine the success or failure of crisis management efforts.”

Crisis Leadership

Boin, A., Hart, P., Stern, E., & Sundelius, B. (2005). *The politics of crisis management: Public leadership under pressure*. New York: Cambridge University Press

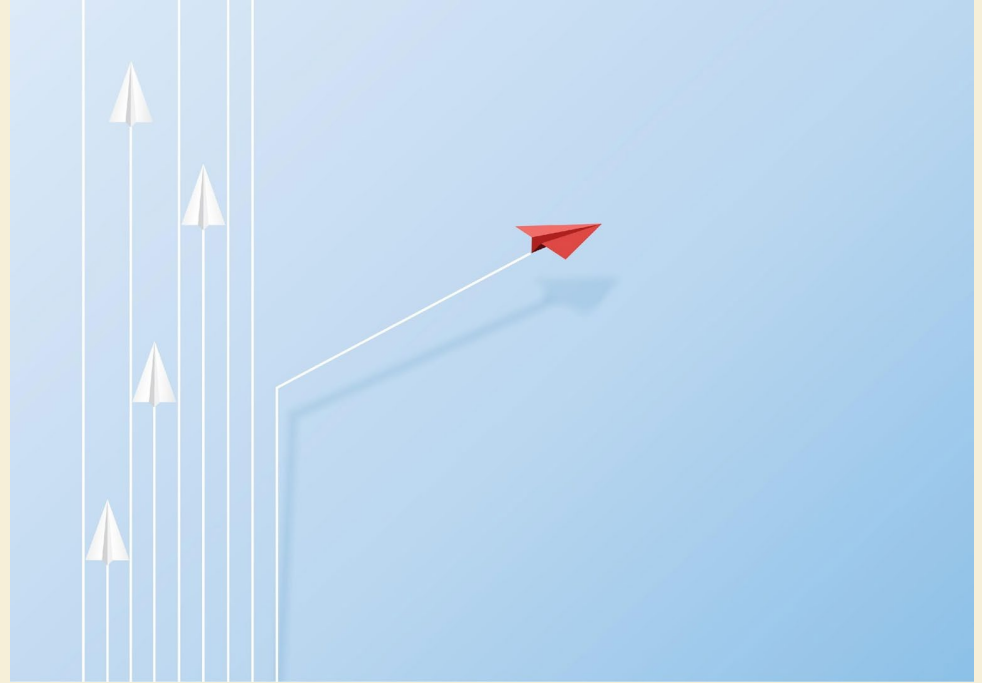
1. **Sense Making:** Grasping Crises as They Unfold
2. **Decision Making and Coordinating:** Shaping the Crisis Response
3. **Meaning Making:** Constructing a Crisis Narrative
4. **Ending a Crisis:** Managing Accountability
5. **Learning and Changing:** From Crisis to Reform

Emotional Intelligence at Work

Goleman, D. (1998). What makes a leader? *Harvard Business Review* 76 (6):93–102.

1. **Self-Awareness:** The ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others
2. **Self-Regulation:** The ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods, the propensity to suspend judgment- to think before acting
3. **Motivation:** A passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status, a propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence
4. **Empathy:** The ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people, skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions
5. **Social Skill:** Proficiency in managing relationships and building networks, an ability to find common ground and build rapport

Leadership in a Crisis: What We Found



Tu-Keefner, F., Hobbs, A., & Lyons, D. (2025) Libraries on the front lines: The imperative for disaster-ready information professionals. *Journal Library Administration*, 65(1), 79-99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2024.2432230>

Self Awareness and Sense Making

- **“... I just graduated last December [2014] with my LIS degree. And I come from having a marketing and PR background and did television for awhile, ... having [] press release ready, ... having [] media list ready on standby, ... having everything in Constant Contact. So that when ... ready to start sending information, ... just hit a button, and it starts to move very quickly. Or even having a strong social media or Facebook presence. ...” (Librarian – 2015)**
- **“... Some of us have a lot of people under us and we would use Facebook if you were able to do that. That’s another thing that again all of this internally with staff. ... we collected information about staff members that had lost things in the flood such as their house flooded, or they needed clothing and things like that and that was all kept in a Google Doc Spreadsheet and then other staff members donated these items that were needed. ...” (Library Administrator – 2018)**
- **“... what makes me so proud to be a part of this thing is we didn’t close our doors until we absolutely had to. We knew that the-our community needed us. ...” (Library Staff – 2022)**
- **“... It wasn’t long at all. It was basically as soon as the power was turned back on, we were in the building, which is basically our MO in any disaster or anything. If the power is on, then it won’t kill us. We’ll be here. ...” (Library Staff – 2023)**

Self Regulation

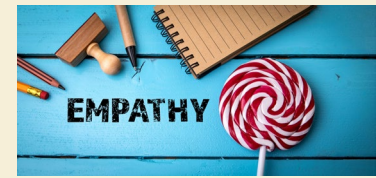


- “... We maintained an average of nine minute response time for answering customer’s question, which I think really shows the responsiveness. Stats on Instagram, we gained 150 new followers on Instagram. Our posts were liked 412 times, which was really good. Because I think they just started Instagram within a month. So, I think that was beneficial. ...” (Librarian – 2015)
- “... Since Harvey, I have worked at nine different locations and I agree completely ... moved around, the different staff, they were very supportive of each other, ... Oh ... it was only an inch in the house, oh ... I’m fine. It’s just amazing how particularly in those early days everybody was just like it’s okay I can get four inches of water, it’s okay, but people did keep supporting each other and we’re very welcoming everywhere. ...” (Library Administration – 2018)
- “... So you had a lot of people who were struggling with not just the evacuation, but they had been gone for a while, they were trying to come back and then they hit a new barrier and they had to relocate for a longer period of time. ...” (Library Administrator – 2022)
- “... If there’s a storm, you know, bad storm coming or something, I go ahead and let the staff know. I’m like, hey, your power is out. Just don’t come in. You won’t get in trouble. If we do open, it’s fine. So that we’re not worrying about people potentially putting themselves in harm’s way trying to get to work when we’re not even planning on being there...” (Library Administrator – 2023)

Motivation, Decision-making, and Coordinating

- **“...librarians have to do what you always do, which is to pull information together, make sure it’s accurate. Get it out there. The social worker got ... involved pretty quickly to get FEMA, to be at the library. And then once they were at the library, they managed that relationship with FEMA. ...” (Library Administrator –2015)**
- **“... [We] visited laundromats, local stores and things like that because we wanted our community to be keenly aware, we are not abandoning you. ...”(Library Administrator – 2018)**
- **“... And one of the very big ones is that we make our facilities available immediately. So, our main library...We have a big community room, and it will turn into the TEP, which is the temporary evacuation point where people can find services. We have good air handlers. ...” (Library Staff – 2022)**
- **“... Our children’s librarians went and set up in one of the classrooms and just offered programming for the students. And so the parents could go drop the kids off with the children’s librarians know they were being taken care of. ... (Library Staff – 2023)**

Empathy, Meaning Making, and Social Skills



- **“... My mom had flooding. So I walked through that [FEMA] process personally so I could file her claim, so that’s why it was easy for me to be able to—this is why we can hit this button ... So I went through the application itself just for us (library staff), and took screenshots so staff would know ...” (Library Social Worker – 2015)**
- **“...So in direct response to try to assist fellow... City of Houston employees get back to normal and allow us to get business back to normal as quickly as possible. The library came up with a contingency plan... to offer a camp similar to the camp that we offer during the summer months. We called... Camp Houston and it was only open and available for other city employees. ...” (Librarian Subject – 2018)**
- **“... And we communicated with staff about practicing empathy and having additional patience during these fire events; to be ready for people who are under an extreme amount of stress when coming into our buildings to just be ready to accommodate as much as we possibly can. ...”(Library Staff – 2022)**
- **... Yeah, we started it...Right after the flood, we have two showers for the public that were used every day, all day. ...” (Library staff – 2023)**

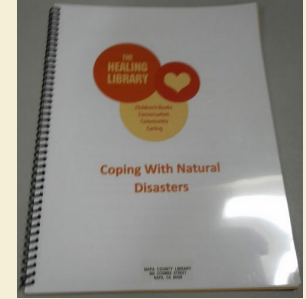
Learning, Changing, and Ending Crises



- **“... it would be beneficial for us to start looking at ways to be prepared if this should ever happen again. And maybe looking at organizations that we could connect with now, so that if this should ever happen, we are better prepared to provide services and information. ...”**
(Library Administrator Subject – 2015)
- **“... In between [Hurricane] Ike and [Hurricane] Harvey we had started doing Camp STREAM which is our norm now our normal summer day camp offering. So we had more experience with administering and all the logistical stuff that goes into taking care of kids and keeping them engaged for an entire day that we’re able to bring to that experience with Harvey that we didn’t have that experience when we did this for Ike. ...”** **(Library Administrator – 2018)**
- **“... Being specific about what you need...being very specific. I think that would be good to do before the disaster strikes, knowing what those things are and having a task for volunteers that they could do. ...”** **(Library Administrator – 2022)**
- **“...Teaching them [community members] little preparedness things like have a list of local numbers and emails, just in general having a plan made beforehand. ...”** **(Library staff – 2023)**

Public Librarians' Provision of Critical Information Services

- Most everyone waived fees/forgiveness
- Virtual programming including storytimes
- Postcards for Responders – community can write thank you notes to responders
- LIS Programs – Resilience Hub Infrastructure training, libraries as a community hub
- Staff participate in emergency services training, disaster Training
- Disaster Recovery Collection – building houses, wildfire landscaping, etc.



- a series of kits designed to make a family's journey of healing following a trauma easier to navigate and personalize.
- <https://www.thehealinglibraryus.com>

Recommendations



- **Deliver collaborative real-time health information services via online platform**
- **Develop partnerships before a crisis happens, including what systems and structures would offer the most flexibility and what you have in hand**
- **Educate the community to be prepared (scan documents, have important information in multiple places). “Survivors will tell you to prepare.” (Library Staff, 2022)**
- **Support ongoing continuing education for staff and managers; specific areas included de-escalation, HR, self-care, and technology training**
- **Connect with health sciences librarians and social workers in responding to the community members’ information needs**
- **Understand the library’s role within the government structure (i.e. county) for clear communications and reduction of duplicate information**

Questions or Comments

Contact Me:

- Feili Tu-Keefner, Ph.D., M.L.I.S.
- feilitu@sc.edu



School of Information Science

College of Information and Communications

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA