



A Proposal to Expand the Role of U.S. Libraries in Crisis Information Dissemination and Management



U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science

For more information on the Commission's initiative to expand the role of U.S. libraries in crisis information dissemination and management, contact the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science.

Additional information is available from the Commission website:
www.ncdis.gov/info/trust/trust.html.



U.S. National Commission on
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IN A CRISIS, PEOPLE MUST HAVE INFORMATION

Whether related to a terrorist event or a natural disaster, during and following a crisis people must have access to information.

In such times, a lack of information can be both dangerous and terrifying. At the same time, information overload and misinformation, whether accidental or deliberate, can become "weapons of mass disruption."

Crisis information is critical both at the time of crisis and in the hours, days and weeks that follow. The information must be available when and where it is needed, both during and after the immediate crisis. Some information needs to be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Crisis information must:

- come from authoritative sources;
- be usefully organized and independently verified;
- come from around the world in real time, yet be available in local communities;
- be sensitive to cultural concerns and available in peoples' own language;
- communicate a sense of order, control and continuity;
- foster understanding, a sense of community and hope;
- be given in context and distributed in multiple formats.



In light of recent events, the United States must mobilize a comprehensive system for more effective crisis information dissemination and management.

The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) is a permanent, independent agency of the Federal government, established in 1970 with the enactment of Public Law 91-345. The Commission is charged with:

- advising the President and the Congress on the implementation of policy;
- conducting studies, surveys, and analyses of the library and informational needs of the nation;
- appraising the adequacies and deficiencies of current library and information resources and services; and
- developing overall plans for meeting national library and informational needs.

The Commission also advises Federal, state, and local governments, and other public and private organizations, regarding library and information sciences, including consultations on relevant treaties, international agreements and implementing legislation, and it promotes research and development activities which will extend and improve the nation's library and information handling capability as essential links in the national and international networks.

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Print and broadcast media must be required to produce and run public service announcements that direct people to libraries for crisis information.



In the future, a nationwide phone number should be established for crisis information to relieve the burden on the "911" phone number. While we have a highly sophisticated system for emergency response, it is often overwhelmed with non-emergency calls. We need an expanded system for crisis information dissemination and management that specifically addresses the public need for information.

It is clear that the United States needs more effective crisis information dissemination and management. It is also clear that we have a vital, comprehensive system of libraries in the United States that can meet the information needs of the public during, and after, an emergency or disaster.

The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science will join with others in the government and the library community to make this happen. The Commission believes that the cooperative efforts of government agencies and libraries can make an enormous difference in the strength and competency of the United States, and indeed in all of us as individuals, to meet the challenges ahead.



A new national crisis information infrastructure could potentially cost billions of dollars and take years to create. But, it does not need to. A significant investment has already been made.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES ARE A RESOURCE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

The Nation's more than 16,000 Public Libraries already form an extensive network of resources that can be empowered to meet this need for crisis information. This resource is in place we need only to leverage it, engage it, and empower it.

After September 11th, libraries in New York City, in Arlington, Virginia, and in Somerset County, Pennsylvania, mounted heroic efforts to answer important questions. Similar responses occurred in many libraries around the country, *acting without coordination or direction*, because the U.S. network of public libraries is already a tremendous national resource for information dissemination and management, particularly in times of crisis. We need to expand and enhance this resource as an essential component of U.S. crisis information dissemination and management.

Public libraries have all the characteristics that contribute to effective crisis information dissemination and management.

The U.S. library system is a network of information resources and knowledgeable, skilled individuals that exists both virtually and physically. If phone lines go down, if computers freeze up, most people can still drive or walk to a nearby library where they can get essential information.



Libraries and librarians can respond quickly and effectively by creating collections of resources and by building organized, accessible databases of information about the crisis and about relief efforts and agencies.

Public libraries are trusted and reliable sources for information. They are familiar, neutral, physical places where people can come together to learn and to talk about what has happened.

Public libraries know how to organize and verify information and have systems in place that keep large amounts of information easily and readily accessible. They provide Internet access and e-mail for those who need it.

Libraries have incredibly valuable human resources in their skilled librarians. They know how to assist others to focus their questions, and they are familiar with proven ways to verify the accuracy and validity of the information that is found.



Libraries are the acknowledged repository of information both present and past. They already have global reach and local presence. They are part of a vast system of libraries not only across the country but around the world.

Public libraries provide both immediate and long-term access to information resources. They can make information available where and when people need it, both during and after crises.

Public libraries are places where people can meet and come to recognize themselves as a community. They communicate a sense of order, of being in control, of normalcy.

Public libraries have resources to help people deal with the aftermath of a crisis. Many psychologists believe the emotional toll of September 11th will last for months, if not years, as people cope with events that changed their worldview dramatically—and permanently.

Libraries are excellent at providing the context for crisis information. They routinely provide information in multiple formats: in person—from reference librarians to storytellers—through video and audio recordings, from the Internet, and of course, in print.

Public libraries serve people of different ethnic background and who speak many different languages. From the spontaneous conversations among teens around a library table to current event discussion forums and book talks, libraries know how to facilitate and encourage dialogue and intellectual exploration to foster understanding.

Public libraries foster hope. Libraries offer not only information but a sense of place and community. By assisting them to obtain knowledge of the past and present and gain insight into the future, libraries help people to move forward through times of despair and terror.

INCLUDING PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Many people who need information are already seeking it at the library, so those who have crisis information to disseminate must include the library in their dissemination plans. Planning for emergency preparedness and homeland security at all levels—federal, state, and local—must include public libraries immediately.

Federal, State, and local government agencies must have systems in place—and use them—to distribute essential, up-to-date information to public libraries. This can be done in cooperation with the state libraries which can efficiently channel the information to appropriate libraries and library systems in each state.

The libraries and librarians, in turn, must be ready to disseminate the information to people when and where it is needed.

Funding must be allocated from federal, state and local emergency sources so that libraries can remain open for extended hours during crises—even 24 hours-a-day, 7-days a week, when necessary.

