

**Submission from Australian Library and Information Association and Public Libraries  
Victoria Network Inc to the Victorian Floods Review, May 2011**

**The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)** is the peak body for the Australian library and information services sector, representing 6000 members, and the interests of over 12 million library users. It is also one of the pillar groups supporting Blue Shield Australia, the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross.

**Public libraries Victoria Network Inc.** is the collaborative and advocacy organisation representing Victoria's 45 public library services. It provides a forum for discussion of ideas and for a collaborative response to issues affecting libraries.

## **1. The Role of Libraries in a Disaster**

A number of library services were affected by the floods. As with the earlier Black Saturday disaster, the role of libraries in assisting with dealing with the disaster and its aftermath has been demonstrated.

The role of libraries in this situation can be summarised as follows:

- To provide a safe community space, a haven from the reality of the disaster and where necessary, short term emergency accommodation. As community members waited for the flood peaks to arrive, using the library provided a distraction and a link with normality.
- Libraries provided councils with disaster recovery organisational capacity.
- In the reconstruction and recovery phase, libraries have been seen as a welcome sign of a return to normality.
- Libraries, recognised as a community gathering point, have been a point of support and contact, where people can informally share their stories.

The flood experience has once again demonstrated the role public libraries can play as part of the emergency management process and has reinforced their contribution, not only to information and learning, but also as a 'third place' – not home, school or work, but a shared community space.

## **2. Library services affected by the floods**

The following library services are in flood affected areas :

Central Highlands Regional Library  
Goldfields Library Corporation  
High Country Regional Library  
Gannawarra Library Service  
Swan Hill Regional Library  
Campaspe Regional Library  
Mildura Rural City Library Service  
Wimmera Regional Library.

## **3. Experiences in individual Libraries**

Library managers at some of the affected libraries have provided accounts as follows:

### **Swan Hill Regional Library**

The Mobile Library unable to visit towns in Ganawarra and Buloke shires due to road closures for several weeks.

The Swan Hill Library remained open throughout the emergency and was an important community meeting place and source of information.

We found people coming into the library to find information about previous floods so they could get an idea of how they might be affected by the impending flood. A local history volunteer put together a folder with information and photos of previous floods which was very useful for people to browse through. We had a long time to wait for the flood waters to reach us which caused its own unique issues because people had a lot of time to prepare but then had to just sit and wait. For several weeks life was put on hold in many ways while we all waited to see what was going to happen. Having the library open for people to come in to use the internet, borrow, etc. helped keep some normality for those who had been affected by flood and those still waiting for the water to arrive. I served a customer who lived in Benjeroop just a couple of days before the floods really devastated that particular area and my impression when serving her and her family was they were trying to keep life as normal as possible and borrowing from the library was one of those things they could do.

We dedicated noticeboards in the library entrance to flood information so people could easily read the latest updates without having to search several websites themselves for road closures and other relevant information. We had a radio going at the front counter so staff were aware of the most recent information being provided and people visiting the library often stood around it at news time or when the community meetings were broadcast live. Several times people came into the library with very little knowledge of what was going on so staff were able to update them about the times and dates of community meetings, etc. so we also acted as conduit for relevant local information and ensured that people did have an idea of what was happening around the community.

Library staff were given the opportunity to volunteer to help out where needed during the flood crisis and recovery eg. helping answer phones at council offices which were manned 24/7, oversee the flood relief centre, door knock, help with sand bags etc. Several staff did this over weekends and during the week as well as working shifts at the library.

### **Campaspe Regional Library**

Rochester Library was inundated by the high water event on Saturday 15 January.

Preparation the night prior prevented major stock, furniture and equipment damage. The information provided by the authorities did not indicate that the building would be majorly impacted.

The days following the event revealed that most decisions were made quickly and the best that could be done at the time. The main emphasis was to get the stock and furniture out as soon as possible to prevent any damage from mould and dampness.

Short term and long term off site storage has caused problems due not being able to access items easily.

Safety issues were highlighted about entering buildings that had been flooded – electricity, water, slippery surfaces and asbestos.

Staff reactions right throughout the flood, from beginning to now still need to be monitored. High stress levels for staff close to the situation, as well as others in the team who had to take on additional roles and duties to keep the service going. Also stressful dealing with customers who had lost library resources amongst their own personal belongings.

The enormity of how the floods have affected the Shire impacts on the decision making process to return services back to normal.

Providing a base level service is important but also highlights how much people value and need their library and how much they miss it.

### **Mildura Rural City Council Library Service**

Staff were trapped at the Red Cliffs Library for about 3 hours until a 4WD vehicle could get them out, but no real damage to Library.

The Mobile Library had to use another route out to the Nangiloc site due to road damage

Red Cliffs Library Meeting Room was used for co-ordinating relief in that area.

The Mildura Library supplied some equipment and supplies to the Emergency Centre that was set up in the Community Room next to the Library.

## **4. Issues and considerations**

No one expects a disaster such as a flood or bushfire to happen to them. The following issues have been raised by the experience of the floods in Victoria.

- Libraries need to have emergency plans in place to minimise damage to their own property and collections.
- Effective warning systems are essential to enable buildings and stock to be protected.
- It would be beneficial for galleries, libraries, archives and museums in the same area to work in partnership, providing practical support to each other, for example a safe repository for books, artefacts and valuable items under threat.
- Libraries contribute to the well-being of the community in a way that extends far beyond the bricks and mortar, vehicles, books and computers.
- Cultural institutions can play a useful role in helping communities reconstruct themselves after a disaster. In the immediate aftermath, the focus will be on food, shelter and clothing, but in the longer term, books on a shelf, photographs in an album, letters and other personal papers, are an important way of retrieving lost memories.

## **5. Recommendations**

- That public library managers should be invited and encouraged to play an active part in local government emergency planning.
- That the library's potential as a safe haven in a disaster zone should be recognised and factored into local government emergency planning.
- That libraries and other neighbouring cultural institutions should plan their disaster response both individually and in partnership.
- That public libraries be adequately funded to provide vital services such as internet access, mobile library services and community programs to help heal traumatised communities.

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