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# **Collaborating with Public Librarians to Promote Emergency Preparedness and Safety Awareness**

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**Running Header:** Collaborating with Public Librarians

**ABSTRACT.** The Louis Calder Memorial Library received an Express Community Day Award from the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM) to partner with the Miami-Dade County Public Library librarians to promote emergency preparedness and safety awareness.

Named *Safety Fair: Keep Your Family Safe - Emergency Preparedness at Home and Away*, the events improved the public librarians' knowledge of NN/LM resources, such as TOXNET, MedlinePlus®, ToxTown®, ToxMystery®, and WISER®, as well as University-created resources. A train-the-trainer program was also implemented for the public librarians.

**KEYWORDS** Emergency preparedness, health sciences libraries, medical libraries, MedlinePlus, outreach, public libraries, safety awareness

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## *INTRODUCTION*

The University of Miami Miller School of Medicine is located in South Florida which is one of the most underserved, multi-cultural areas in the United States. Many local residents lack access to health care as well as health and safety information resources. In addition to the usual health and environmental safety concerns, hurricanes are also a constant threat in the area.

There are many reports on library preparedness for disasters, mainly focusing on preservation and salvage of print materials; however, reports on a library's role in emergency preparedness outreach and community participation are not as plentiful. Both public and academic libraries have played various important roles in their communities. After the 2004-05 Gulf Coast hurricanes, local public libraries provided access to critical information which probably had the most significant impact on the local communities.<sup>1</sup> Health science librarians have a history of partnering with public school teachers and librarians to promote searching medical and consumer health databases.<sup>2</sup> Similar outreach efforts have been attempted to educate patients at free medical clinics in South Carolina<sup>3</sup> and to reach out at senior centers, clinics, and public libraries to improve consumer health database searching in San Diego.<sup>4</sup> In addition to database searching skills training, there have been very successful outreach projects focused on National Library of Medicine (NLM) resource promotion where usage remained high a year after the training was initiated.<sup>5</sup>

In an effort to address the need for health and safety resources, librarians from the Louis Calder Medical Library met with representatives from the Miami-Dade Public Library System (MDPLS) to collaborate on the best way to meet these needs. The librarians from the Calder Library and the MDPLS agreed that an effective solution would be to organize community fairs

that would promote emergency preparedness awareness as well as provide concrete information on disaster planning. The Miami-Dade Public Library System (MDPLS) strives to reach every resident of Miami-Dade County with its 48 branches and four bookmobiles. The library system, a recipient of the 2008 National Medal for Museum and Library Service, proudly serves more than eight million visitors who come through its doors annually and another 4.4 million who access collections and services online via <<http://www.mdpls.org>>. With such strong existing outreach programs, it became the perfect partner for health and safety fairs.

An initial meeting between the Calder Library administration and a few of the staff from the Miami-Dade Public Library System allowed the organizers to divide up the responsibilities and agree that the MDPLS Marketing Department contacts would be utilized in order to find exhibitors for the fair. It was also agreed that the MDPLS Marketing Department would design the logo and the signage for the fair, but the Calder Library staff would use their resources to print the pamphlets and other promotional materials. Designed to be a multi-step event, the first “main” fair was held at the MDPLS main branch, and subsequent satellite fairs were held at the HistoryMiami Museum. The fairs proved to be a great success benefitting both librarians and teachers as well as the numerous family and community organizations that attended. In addition to providing critically needed health resources and instructional safety information, the Calder Library staff visited two Miami-Dade Public Library locations to disseminate information regarding the National Library of Medicine databases to public librarians so that they may then share the information with other staff within the organization and with their patrons.

#### ***BACKGROUND – SAFETY FAIRS AND TRAIN-THE-TRAINER SESSIONS***

The Louis Calder Memorial Library received an Express Community Day Award from the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NN/LM) for partnering with the Miami-Dade County Public Library to promote emergency preparedness and safety awareness and to provide training for public librarians on relevant resources. Calder librarians have been looking for new outreach opportunities and a way to increase cooperation with the public librarians, and the NN/LM funding provided the means needed to implement the project. Named *Safety Fair: Keep Your Family Safe - Emergency Preparedness at Home and Away*, the events and training sought to improve the public librarians' and community members' knowledge of NLM resources, such as TOXNET, MedlinePlus®, ToxTown®, ToxMystery®, and WISER®. (Wireless Information System for Emergency Responders) Librarians also distributed information about, and provided demonstrations of, resources crafted by the University of Miami, such as the Family Disaster Plan Guidebook in English and Spanish and a coloring book distributed to children at summer fairs. A subsequent train-the-trainer program provided hands-on training of targeted NLM resources for public librarians. Class participants were asked to fill out a brief questionnaire after the training sessions.

### ***PROMOTION***

The public librarians assumed the responsibility of publicity and marketing of the safety fairs and used numerous Miami-Dade County channels to disseminate the information. Among the techniques used to publicize the first fair at the MDPLS main branch library was an announcement on the news page of the MDPLS website and an interview displayed on the Miami-Dade *County Connections* TV program. Additional onsite distribution was employed

with fair flyers being handed out and two posters placed at the entrance to the main library branch. Prearranged groups and tours such as clubs, classes, and camps also played an important role in boosting the attendance. Finally, the library also placed an announcement in the *Miami Herald* and *eUpdate*, the University of Miami's online weekly newsletter for faculty and staff. Similar methods were used to publicize the second and third fairs, and a promotion notice was displayed on the host organization's website <<http://www.historymiami.org/>> as part of their crime prevention and safety exhibit opening.

A number of stock NLM brochures and other items were distributed at the fairs and training sessions for the following resources:

- ToxTown
- ToxMystery
- The Household Products Database
- WISER
- TOXMAP Environmental Health e-Maps
- Haz-Map Occupational Health Database
- NLM Gateway
- Toxicology and Environmental Health Information Resources

### ***SAFETY FAIRS***

At the fairs, Calder medical librarians distributed various NLM resources and other relevant promotional items to attendees, many of whom were minorities and who represented a wide spectrum of ages. In fact, youth librarians and teachers were so impressed with the coloring

books that they asked for additional copies for use with their students in activities involving emergency preparedness! Calder librarians also distributed family disaster plan guides and hurricane preparedness coloring books to the attendees. Overall, the visiting teachers and parents were pleasantly surprised by the availability of so many free resources about various home safety topics, and a few even came back to discuss the resources further and investigate ways to incorporate them in to their classroom activities.

During the first fair held on June 17, 2010, Calder librarians met other exhibitors and discussed potential future partnership opportunities. The exhibitors at the fair included:

- Miami-Dade Consumer Services Division
- National Safety Council
- Miami-Dade Police
- Miami-Dade County Extension Office's home and garden safety speaker
- Local Citizens Crime Watch organization
- Storyteller Melinda Munger

Originally, the organizers planned to arrange a large, all-day, community safety awareness and emergency preparedness fair at the main MDPLS branch and subsequently hold a number of smaller fairs at some of the busier MDPLS branch libraries. However, due to budgetary constraints, the public library could not implement the branch events before mid-November at the earliest. Since the hurricane season runs from the beginning of June through the end of November, a decision was made that the subsequent fairs should be held earlier in the hurricane season. As a result, the second fair was held on July 10, 2010 at the HistoryMiami Museum, which is adjacent to the library's main branch. In addition to the MDPLS librarians, Miami-Dade County's HistoryMiami Museum staff helped organize and co-host the subsequent

fair. Thanks to the efforts of the summer activities director, the third fair was integrated into the museum's main family day event themed *Hurricane Essentials and Be Aware and Be Safe!*

### ***TRAIN-THE-TRAINER SESSIONS***

In addition to the three safety fairs, Calder Librarians implemented three train-the-trainer sessions for the Miami-Dade County Public Librarians. Since many of the public librarians in attendance were branch or departmental managers, they were well positioned to train other staff members, as well as library users of the resources available. The first session was part of the Miami-Dade County Library monthly Adult Services Meeting and was held at the West Dade Regional Library on September 20, 2010.

Calder librarians presented various NLM safety and health information resources to approximately 40 branch library managers and librarians. Resources presented included MedlinePlus, NIH Senior Health, PubMed, ToxTown, Disaster Information Management Research Center (DIMRC), ToxMystery, Radiation Emergency Medical Management (REMM), ClinicalTrials.gov, WISER, Household Products Database, AIDSinfo, LactMed, ToxMap, and others. Although most of the resources were demonstrated live, it was convenient to have a PowerPoint back-up version, as Flash was not available in the public libraries, preventing a live demonstration of ToxMystery. The second and third sessions, geared towards librarians from various departments, were held at the main branch of the MDPLS on October 5, 2010.

### ***EVALUATION***

To help in evaluating the library's participation in the safety fairs, an existing Calder Library Department of Community Service (DOCS) questionnaire (previously used for a separate NN/LM Award) was modified and shortened for the use at the fairs. Despite efforts by the organizers to make completing the questionnaires easier, most fair attendees did not complete the forms. Many attendees were children and parents and teachers could not take time to focus on the questionnaire.

Despite the lack of surveys from the safety fair attendees, other measurements pointed to a successful organization of the fairs. The initiative had over 1,000 participants, many from underserved communities, who received critical knowledge about freely-available safety and health resources. Roughly half of the fair participants were children who received coloring books, completed NLM's ToxMystery, and explored NLM's ToxTown. In addition to the population at large, attendees included local school groups, visiting teachers, and other Miami-Dade County employees. Over 400 family disaster plan guides, both in English and Spanish, and hurricane preparedness coloring books were distributed, along with approximately 200 brochures and disaster plans. Due to the high volume of health-related questions received at the branches and at the Main Public Library, the information provided regarding the National Library of Medicine website could be utilized to help customers on a daily basis. The "train the trainer" sessions were effective in disseminating information to front-line public library staff. Calder librarians also made new contacts with relevant community organizations that are already resulting in future outreach efforts.

Fortunately, the train-the-trainer sessions provided a much better environment for obtaining completed questionnaires. Over 50 Miami-Dade County public librarians attended the three train-the-trainer sessions, and 44 train-the-trainer questionnaires were collected. All

responders rated the training session as either “Helpful” or “Very Helpful.” A few trainees even noted that it may have been beneficial to have longer training sessions. Most (72-85%), reported they already knew of Medline Plus and TOXNET. Lastly, trainers reported that they were more likely to obtain home safety information that came from print resources rather than from other experts (please see following section for details).

Although Miami-Dade County is a very diverse, international, multilingual area, public librarians identified that the majority of their patrons speak English. One question, “Before today, had you heard of MedlinePlus, ToxNet or other NLM databases?” should have been broken up into individual items on the questionnaire. Since the question grouped the choices together, most librarians answered “yes” because they had heard of MedlinePlus, but some public librarians noted on the surveys that they had only heard of MedlinePlus by crossing out the other choices.

When asked “What other sources of home safety information do you use?” most public librarians chose print materials over the other sources of information. However, since “Internet” was not one of the options (they could have written in electronic resources), only a few responses were attributed to electronic resources.

### ***LESSONS LEARNED***

Due to the success of the initial fairs, as demonstrated by the large number of attendees, all allocated award funds were expended within six months. County budgetary concerns regarding in-kind contributions arose suddenly, thus causing abrupt changes in the program. As a result, hosting of the additional satellite fairs at other MDPLS branches needed to be scaled back and

instead the focus was placed on train-the-trainer seminars. While promotional items could have further strained the budget, Calder Library already had MedlinePlus-branded hand sanitizers, so the remaining award funds were spent on reproduction of the family disaster planning guidebooks and hurricane preparedness coloring books. Fortunately, the train-the-trainer seminars also did not require much funding as they were held at local library facilities and all the relevant NN/LM materials are available online for free.

The organizers learned the importance of remaining flexible when working with other institutions and dealing with unpredictable demand and turnout at the fairs. Because not all fairs have equal rates of attendance, priority should be given to the ones that saw higher turnouts, which in this case tended to be the smaller subsequent fairs as opposed to the main fair. For example, close to 200 participants, including 125 children attended the first fair which was promoted the most. However, the second fair proved even more successful with 573 people in attendance, including families, school groups, and a surprising number of new immigrants to South Florida who had yet to experience a hurricane. It may have helped that the second fair was held at the HistoryMiami Museum, which is known for its well organized family days.

Another beneficial lesson learned was becoming aware of, and being open to, new opportunities. When planning the fairs, the organizers did not anticipate that such a large percentage of attendees would be children. Obstacles arose, such as uncompleted evaluation questionnaires. Fortunately, due to a variety of materials ready for the children and the librarians, teachers and parents were excited by the availability of the many useful resources for the students. Children also enjoyed exploring ToxMystery and ToxTown, and working on the hurricane preparedness coloring book. Nevertheless, it would have helped to discuss with the

hosting organization a profile of the visitors most likely to be expected at the events and to prepare accordingly.

Initially, one last complication arose with the large number of resources being promoted, as it was difficult to demonstrate all of them during a short period of time. Fair visitors grew impatient discussing their information needs, especially with other visitors waiting or if they had children. All in all, despite the numerous unanticipated obstacles, the fair organizers managed to overcome them and it was truly rewarding to have public librarians and educators seek out the medical librarians to inquire about the resources and discuss plans to improve their classroom activities.

### ***TIPS FOR BETTER OUTCOMES AND COLLABORATION***

It was difficult to convey the fairs' message efficiently and execute a training action plan successfully. One contact proved to be especially knowledgeable about community engagement in the region. Even though the fairs are hectic, colleagues have a good deal of information to share about how to conduct successful events. Building upon the experiences at these fairs as well as conversations with a key community health provider, librarians learned the following that may help to improve collaboration between medical and public librarians:

- Concentrate on promoting the core message rather than the handouts or giveaways. As a train-the-trainer contact noted, due to the lack of resources, it is important to concentrate on the fair attendees who are genuinely interested in the message and not to focus on giving out as many freebies as you have. Reduce clutter on display tables so it is clear what the purpose of the display actually is.

- Focus on train-the-trainer sessions and not necessarily the fairs themselves. A trained professional such as a public librarian may be able to reach a broader audience in need of the resources. Additionally, the cost of organizing a training session is much lower than organizing a public safety fair.
- Design evaluation methods carefully and have a backup plan for gathering survey data. Some attendees may be unwilling to filling out surveys due to the time it consumes and the busy environment. Asking a few questions orally and recording the answers is a potential solution. In addition, a survey for public service staff a few months after the train-the-trainer session would be helpful in evaluating usefulness of the information received during the training sessions.
- Remain flexible when working with outside institutions and dealing with unpredictable demand and turnout at the fairs. For example, the number of people attending the first “main” fair was fewer than the number of attendees at the subsequent fairs.
- Research social media technologies that could help in the outreach effort and make the fairs more efficient.

### ***CONCLUSION***

The fairs were well attended, allowing librarians to deliver useful home safety information to a large, underserved audience. Based on this experience, partnerships with public librarians have developed and new opportunities have emerged. It may be very difficult to continue organizing safety fairs without further funding and the number of promotional items would certainly have to be reduced. Continuing train-the-trainer sessions would still be possible since they do not require

much promotional materials or complicated scheduling arrangement for facilities. Furthermore, the target audience could be expanded to include more individuals and organizations that are involved in safety awareness promotion in the community. Contacts with other community organizations were made and may result in cooperation on new community outreach projects.

All Calder participants truly enjoyed working with public librarians providing information to the community and building partnerships. It would have been nearly impossible to achieve the same results without the help of the public librarians and their colleagues in other county organizations. Although these events did not represent the first partnership with the public librarians, the safety fairs proved that medical and public librarians could work together to benefit the community and open up new professional training and growth opportunities.

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