

There are Picasso's floating in the basement – now what?

David Carmicheal attempts to answer that question, and mostly succeeds, with a book that reads more like a novel than a training manual.

The title says it all: “Implementing the Incident Command System at the Institutional Level: A Handbook for Libraries, Archives, Museums and other Cultural Institutions”. His mission with this book is not to protect, preserve or recover the floating Picasso; his mission is to provide cultural institutions an overview of how to use the ICS in THEIR efforts to protect, preserve and recover their floating Picasso's.

The needs of cultural institutions are rarely considered as part of a community emergency plan. While salvaging documents, books and art works are certainly important parts of a disaster response, it is usually an afterthought. “The police will not rush to the rescue if a docent discovers six inches of standing water in the basement art storage room on a Sunday afternoon,” Carmichael says. (pg. 20)

“When there is a major disaster, they might not be there at all,” he continued. “Your highest priority – to salvage your collections – will not be *their* highest priority.” (pg 11)

Carmichael wrote this book to appeal to the academic/cultural audience. His definition of the ICS is poetic: “The ICS is like a circle that has no specific starting or ending point. It is difficult to appreciate its shape until you've been around it one time.” (pg 13) He even explains military time and doesn't just assume the reader knows what it is. How many ICS manuals do that?

In keeping with cultural traditions, this is a real library book: hardback, glossy, library binding – the kind of book you could have just pulled out of the stacks.

One of the nice things about this book is that it jumps right into the details. The long history of the ICS system is dispensed with in a few sentences. Almost 40% of the book consists of forms, signage and checklists that can be copied. Some of the ICS forms are adapted specifically for the preservationist audience.

Major lessons and points are highlighted in boxes on the outside edge of pages, which makes it easy to flip through and find specific concepts. Just like his conversational style throughout the book, they are smart, crisp and intelligible. The box on the page discussing the planning section says “*The Planning Section Chief predicts the probably course of events and prepares alternative strategies.*”

(pg 65) The box on the pages talking about response workers says: “*Always speak UP (the chain of command, not AROUND.*” (pg 80)

There is also something you don’t find in most ICS manuals – a step by step incident description based on a hurricane scenario at a library on a university campus. Three days are described in chronological order (in 197 steps spread over 22 pages) and detailed with the date/time, the action the library would take, and referenced to the page in the book that describes that action. For example:

Step 19: Strike Teams Set Up (pg 60 in manual): 07/15 @ 1400 – “*The Operations Section chief (Incident Commander) divides the staff and students who agree to remain into two Strike Teams: Identification and Retrieval (to locate the vulnerable materials and remove them from the shelves to the packing area) and Packing and Removal (to box the books and records, remove them to new locations, and record the new locations. The Safety Officer goes over things that staff should remember while working: the proper method of lifting heavy boxes; dangers on the loading dock, such as electric pallet jacks, incoming trucks and the height of the dock itself*” (pg 101)

How much more detailed can you get and still have it all make sense? But this was my favorite:

Step 168: Sixth Operational Period Briefing: 07/17 @ 0420 “*The only Technical Specialist, the library’s Conservator, has nothing to report.*” (pg 119)

I’ve seen quite a bit of ICS material, and what struck me about this book was not only how easy it was to read, but how nonthreatening it was. Very often, people in this field tend to ‘shield’ themselves from the ‘others’ by creating jargon-laden, complicated systems that really do work for professional responders on a large scale (i.e.: the 2011 tornados in Alabama). But they make no sense to the museum curator trying to deal with a flooded basement.

For a librarian’s point of view, I sent this book to a friend, Jackie Ruben, who is a seasoned (and retired) librarian from the Los Angeles County Library System.

“My first thought is that libraries have been going through disasters for many years (*see Alexandria, Library of*) and most have either been through their own disasters or seen the effects through library literature,” she said.

Jackie pointed out the one weakness of Carmichael's book. She was skeptical of his use of a flooded basement as an example for using the ICS because of the difference in scale between a burst pipe and an event like Katrina. She didn't feel that imposing the same structure on both was realistic.

"It makes sense for a fire or police department because emergency response is their business", she said. "But for a library or other organization that already has a chain of command, with its own terms, responding to a burst pipe by trying to locate the Incident Commander is overkill."

Her bottom line: there is a time to apply common sense and a time to apply ICS. "In fact, if the water is flowing in slowly (and no electric lines are involved) you might even choose to grab those Picassos before stabilizing the water," she added.

Even given that criticism, she agreed this kind of planning was worthwhile. "Libraries and museums nowadays get hit with things so major – civil unrest, hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes and fires – and then there is all the clean up afterwards."

Which circles back to Carmichael's mission. By providing a framework for cultural institutions to plan and respond to major disasters, he also offers a way to familiarize the staff with the ICS and how it can be used. His friendly and conversational style doesn't intimidate or pressure and explains a complex system in understandable language. This book could be a guide for any non-emergency response institution or agency.

Finally, throughout this book, Carmichael refers to the Incident Command System as "THE" ICS for a reason. For him, it is truly an abbreviation and not a noun. That, alone, is reason enough to get this book.



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For emergency managers, some people are harder than others to reach. Sometimes, it's because they aren't that interested in being reached – tenured professors, for example. Sometimes, it is because we aren't sure HOW to reach them – like the cultural institutions in your community. How does one open a dialogue with a library or museum about integrating them into a community emergency plan?

Here's a book that will help: ["Implementing the Incident Command System at the Institutional Level: A Handbook for Libraries, Archives, Museums and other Cultural Institutions"](#), by David L. Carmichael, the Director of the [Georgia Division of Archives and History](#). His mission is to help cultural institutions use ICS to protect, preserve and recover the Picasso's they find floating in the basement storage room – and all those other archives and treasures that make up our cultural heritage.

I write quite a few book reviews for the [Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management](#) (in exchange for a free copy of the book – great way to increase your library!), but [this one](#) is a favorite. It is easy to read, nonthreatening, bereft of jargon and targeted to an audience that can sometimes seem somewhat mysterious.

Carmichael understands all that. He is a past president of the [Council of State Archivists](#) and has been very active in supporting this kind of emergency preparedness. In 2007, after Katrina and Rita, he led the effort to publish a well-known report that assessed *state-by-state* their archive's ability to protect their records. That report, ["Safeguarding a Nation's Identity"](#), was widely distributed. The title page describes it as examining "The readiness of state archive to protect the records that identify who we are, secure our rights, and tell our story as a nation." It opened a whole new level of discussions and interest on a national level for preserving cultural records and artifacts during a disaster.

Personally, I like that this book is poetic – something one doesn't generally associate with ICS. Carmichael describes it like this: "The ICS is a circle that has no specific starting or ending point. It is difficult to appreciate its shape until you've been around it one time." How lyrical is that?

I also like that it is a real library book: hardback, glossy, library binding – the kind of book you could have just pulled out of the stacks. And while "the library stacks" might not be a term familiar to some of

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your community, it is definitely key to communicating with this audience. They will appreciate the formality of a 'real' book. Why? It's part of the mystery. :-)

Yeah, it is kind of expensive - \$47 at [this link](#) (don't look for it on Amazon – they have it listed for over \$200!) But it is also timeless. ICS isn't going to change that much. This book will be as relevant in the next few years as it is now.

So, I'm suggesting you go buy a couple copies and give them to your libraries and museums to start the conversation. I mean – who wouldn't want to save something like a Picasso?

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