

This nomination is for the following award: **Libraries Mean Business Award**

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Library Affiliation (if applicable) **St. Johns County Public Library System**

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Are you nominating an individual or a group/organization for this award? **Group/Organization**

Library (Other Organization or Research Team) Being Nominated **St. Johns County Public Library System**

First and Last Name of Head of Organization **Debra Rhodes Gibson**

Title of Head of Organization **Director**

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Was the program conducted within the previous calendar year? **Yes**

Will you be submitting any supporting documentation? **Yes**

If you would like us to review web pages in consideration of this application (including videos or other supporting materials that are stored online), please enter the Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) below.
<http://dos.myflorida.com/library-archives/services-for-libraries/florida-libraries-as/disaster-response/st-johns/>

Essay The historic downtown area of St. Augustine, Florida and nearby beach communities of Vilano and Anastasia Islands were badly flooded during our brush with Hurricane Matthew on October 7, 2016. While we were fortunately spared a direct hit, we were unable to avoid the seven foot storm surge. Many residences and businesses received considerable structural damage and much of St. Johns County suffered downed power lines and trees. The public library system was closed for several days following the hurricane as emergency operations crews worked feverishly to resume basic electrical, utility, and infrastructural services. In the meantime, library staff cleaned up their homes, helped their colleagues with damages, offered guest rooms to suddenly homeless friends, and many worked at the county's Emergency Operations Center. Staff got the call on Sunday that the libraries would be reopening in whatever capacity possible the following day. Some staff members had experience with hurricane recovery and knew that some of the most important things that could be immediately offered to the community were air conditioning, internet access, and a place to recharge their cell phones. Staff contacted various groups and presenters who had been scheduled to use the large meeting room and cancelled all events for the following two weeks. Tables and chairs were set

up near electrical outlets in the meeting room, a notice was put on the library's website, and a poster display was set up near the front door inviting patrons to go in and take advantage of our resources. Throughout the first open Monday, more and more damage reports started coming in about how extensive the flooding had been in our downtown area where many small businesses were located. While St. Augustine has its share of national chain retail stores and restaurants, we have a large and thriving small business community. Many residents and tourists love our city for the unique specialty stores, art galleries, and restaurants. Staff wanted to reach out to the local small business owners to let them know the library was ready and available to help them with their connectivity and meeting space needs. Staff immediately contacted leaders in the business community – Marge Cirillo in the local satellite office of the University of North Florida's Small Business Development Center and Melissa Glasgow, the Director of Economic Development of the St. Johns County Board of County Commissioners. They were enormously beneficial in getting the word out to the local business community that the library was open for business and ready to help. Melissa Glasgow thought it was a great idea and went so far as to draft and publish a press release aimed at local businesses (see supporting documentation). The response from local businesses was overwhelmingly positive. As noted in an October 12th article from the Historic City News website, www.historiccity.com, "We had to evacuate Monday because the owner of the iconic building was beginning the cleanup, which meant we had no telephone, no Internet, and no way to continue operations," editor in chief, Michael Gold, said. "I had a page-long list of emergency to-do's and none of them were going to get done if I didn't have some place to sit and work." The Library filled a critical gap for Historic City News offering electricity, light, WiFi Internet, air conditioned office space in their public conference room, covered tables and comfortable chairs, and, very importantly, working restrooms." (Full article here: <https://historiccity.com/2016/staugustine/news/florida/main-library-offers-displaced-businesses-temporary-quarters-60610>). The beauty of this service is that it was a simple, yet effective, thing that we could do for the public. All it took was reframing and spotlighting our existing library services. Our daily door counts were rapidly rising and we were short-staffed as several of our colleagues were out dealing with their own insurance adjusters and clean-up. We waived fines and offered free faxing, printing, and notary services to anyone affected by the hurricane, and once word got out about that, we became even busier. Simply offering up space was something we could easily do without requiring any additional staff time. Dolly Frank from the Bureau of Library Development of Florida's Division of Library and Information Services expressed that she had been inspired by various library systems' responses following the hurricane, and asked Karen Joslin, Special Projects Consultant, to put a story up on the state library's website. Karen chose to spotlight the St. Johns County Public Library System's responses as she felt they were the most comprehensive of all other affected library systems. In addition to reaching out the business community, branches in the library system served as drop off locations for supplies for the local food pantry, schools, and pet rescue organizations. Our website and social media accounts were updated frequently to help push out relevant recovery information. (Full article here: <http://dos.myflorida.com/library-archives/services-for-libraries/florida-libraries-as/disaster-response/st-johns/>). Melissa Glasgow and Marge Cirillo proved to be valuable assets in communicating up-to-date business recovery information to library staff so that we were in turn able to effectively disseminate those updates to our library patrons. If it's possible to have any silver linings to disaster recovery, one was that we learned the strength of our little community, and we also discovered the truth to Mister Rogers' famous quote, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are

helping'."

Summary Following the flooding from Hurricane Matthew, the Main Library of the St. Johns County Public Library System opened their meeting rooms to area residents with a focus on small business owners, inviting them to use air conditioning, internet access, and a place to recharge themselves and their devices. Printing, faxing, and notary services were offered at no charge to hurricane victims. Communication with the local satellite office of the University of North Florida's Small Business Development Center and the county's Economic Development department proved invaluable during the recovery process in aiding small business owners.