New Orleans Library Reopens with RFID

Donations from RFID solutions providers enabled a New Orleans Public Library branch destroyed by Hurricane Katrina to reopen with an RFID infrastructure.

By Mary Catherine O'Connor

June 27, 2006—Hurricane Katrina nearly closed the book on the New Orleans Public Library (NOPL) system. All 13 branches were damaged by wind, water, mold or a combination of all three. Eight of these were so far gone they need to be completely rebuilt. The first rebuilt library—the Alvar branch in the city's Bywater neighborhood—has just been completed and is expected to open to the public on July 5. When it does, all 13,000 books on its shelves will carry RFID tags, which will be used to check the books in and out and to perform inventory once. RFID systems provider Tagsys and Integrated Technology Group (ITG), a library systems integrator, have donated and deployed the RFID system.

After the storm, a foot and a half of standing water damaged much of the building and some of its collection of books and other media. But once mold had set in, the branch's entire collection needed to be destroyed and the building replaced.

Though it has already reopened five other branches, the Alvar branch is the first New Orleans Public Library to be completely rebuilt. It was selected as the first reconstruction for a number of reasons. "Much of the rest of the Bywater neighborhood was dry after the storm, so lots of people were still living nearby" explains Linda Santi, director of community awareness for the NOPL system, adding that many of the households have doubled their size by taking in relatives and friends. Moreover, it is one of the smaller branches, so the reconstruction would not take as long or be as costly as rebuilding larger branches.

Santi says that the donations from Tagsys and ITG (as well as other donations from groups including the publication *Library Journal*), enabled the NOPL to raise the bar in terms of the technology at the Alvar branch. While the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provided funds for rebuilding, it would only offer enough to restore the facility to the level of automation it had before the storm, which consisted of an optical character recognition (OCR) scanners used by staff to check books in and out.

There was no self check-out system prior to the storm. Now, however, patrons will be able to check books and other RFID-tagged media, such as DVDs, on their own, using the self check-out station Tagsys provided. This system includes a bar-code scanner, to which patrons must present their bar-coded library cards to log in to the library's IT system; and an interrogator, which reads the tags attached to the books or other media the patron sets on the check-out desk, checking them out to that patron. Because it is automated and requires no input from staff members, this system will free up valuable time for the branch's skeleton crew of just two librarians (it employed only four prior to Katrina), who will be able to focus on other, more educational or research-oriented tasks at the 2,550-square-foot library.

"We don't have the funds to hire more staff at Alvar," says Geraldine Harris, assistant director of the NOPL. "So we're hoping that patrons at Alvar will be able to figure out the new system quickly and soon begin

checking books out on their own."

In total, Tagsys donated 25,000 RFID tags, which will be used as the branch grows its collection. The passive tags operate at 13.56 MHz and contain a Tagsys chip, and are compliant with ISO standards 15693 and 18000-3. The company also provided two security gates, which sound an alarm if patrons attempt to remove tagged items before they've been properly checked out. This will help the branch keep track of inventory and discourage theft. Tagsys also provided RFID interrogators for staff to use to inventory tagged media and access the loan history of specific items.

Norcross-Ga.-based ITG worked with Tagsys to install the RFID hardware and software required to run the system. It also performed the required software integration to link the Tagsys system with the library's backend system.

The new library is an important symbol of re-growth in the Bywater neighborhood, says Stacy Betts, head of library sales for Tagsys. "You walk through the neighborhood and it's still very depressed," Betts says. "There are still homes showing messages spray-painted by FEMA. A lot of homes are still vacant. But the library is a very nice building." The new library will serve as a community hub for nearby residents who need a place to come together, says Santi.

More and more libraries in the United States are following the lead of European and Asian libraries by adopting RFID. According to 3M Library Services, which competes with Tagsys for market share of RFID systems used by libraries, 2 percent of the 9,500 libraries in the United States currently use RFID for book tracking. Globally, 8 percent of libraries use the technology, while the yearly growth rate of libraries adopting RFID is estimated at 30 percent.

Singapore, one of the most technologically advanced countries in Asia, has deployed RFID throughout its national library system. Tagsys recently announced that it supplied 13.56 MHz tags for the Shenzhen Library, a new public library in the growing southern Chinese city of the same name. The facility is set to open in mid-July. It will use Tagsys' tags, which contain the Philips ICODE SLI chip and comply with ISO 18000-3, as well as readers to track and manage its collection of books and other media. The library is replacing an older main library in Shenzhen, a city that has experienced explosive population growth in recent years.

By the end of June, nearly two million tags will be attached to books, CDs and other media, while patrons will be issued library cards containing the same type of tag. They will present the cards and tagged media to Tagsys' self check-out stations throughout the library, which will automatically check the media out to the card-holder's account and deactivate the tag's anti-theft mechanism. Thus, alarms placed at all of the library's exits (also provided by Tagsys) will not sound an alarm as the patron leaves. (If patrons attempt to remove media that has not been checked out, they will set off the alarm.)

Tagsys worked with integration partner Shenzhen Seaever Enterprise, based in Shenzhen, to install the RFID infrastructure and integrate it with the library's IT system. At 530,000 square feet, the Shenzhen library is large enough to grow its collection to more than four million books. The library plans to service 8,000 patrons and circulate 50,000 volumes per day.