

## Basics of Disaster Planning

*Content adapted from the Heritage Emergency Response Training Program organized by the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative, FEMA's Office of Environmental Planning and Historic Preservation, and the Heritage Emergency National Task Force.*

Having a plan for potential disasters provides piece of mind and ensures you have the right tools, information, and people in place to salvage your organization's collections. Planning involves assessing the risks of specific disasters, determining who should be involved during response and recovery efforts, preparing to protect human health and safety, and understanding how to salvage collections.

### Assess Risks

Begin by assessing which threats are most likely, such as weather-related incidents (tornado, flooding, earthquake, etc.), infrastructure failure (plumbing, power, building materials, etc.), and man-made incidents (bomb threat, active shooter, etc.), and concentrate your organization's efforts on those possibilities. For example, if your organization is not located in an earthquake-vulnerable area, but is within a flood plain or near a source of potential flooding, concentrate your organization's efforts on preparing for a flood rather than addressing a low-probability disaster. Also consider the potential implications of these threats and how they might impact your organization's ability to respond, such as loss of power or building collapse.

### Scope and Scale

Tailor your response options to the scope and scale of any disaster. An incident impacting a single room or building will require a different response than a disaster that impacts your local community versus a state-wide disaster. Be prepared to work with different local and state entities depending on the extent of the incident.

### Who to Involve

Decide the roles that should be filled in managing the response and recovery efforts. Who should oversee management of the situation? Who else should be involved and what are their roles? What types of assistance would you need, such as from local first responders or others in the community? What standing partnerships can you foster and develop that can be tapped for assistance if the need arises? Invite anyone you approach outside of your organization, including first responders, such as the police and fire departments, to familiarize themselves with the organization, building, and collections. Additionally, make a communication plan, determining who will be in charge of alerting staff, volunteers, and partners as well as who will act as the organization's spokesperson with the media.

## Roles and Responsibilities<sup>1</sup>

Establish teams with designated leaders. Some teams won't be needed in every disaster. Individuals can take on multiple roles if necessary, but don't overtax people's abilities. Always align roles and responsibilities with individual strengths.

- **Response Team Leader** – Coordinate overall response and work with all team leaders to accomplish tasks and goals.
- **Emergency Responder Liaison** – Works with Emergency Responders to provide information about the building, site, and contents. Emergency Responders will be responsible for clearing your facility and will provide information about safe entry. Request their assistance in evacuating or protecting threatened collections.
- **Health and Safety Coordinator** – Oversees the health and safety of your team by making sure people are physically capable of participating in response activities, managing first aid, providing protective equipment, making sure team members take breaks for rest, water, and food, and alerting team members to on-site risks. Will coordinate with the Emergency Responder Liaison and Emergency Responders.
- **Security and Facilities Coordinator** – Oversee functionality or recovery of building systems and establish safe operating conditions, protect the building and the people working inside.
- **Administrative and Financial Coordinator** – Coordinate communication with insurance company, purchasing of needed supplies, hiring of contractors, and in the event of a large scale disaster possible communication with FEMA to determine eligibility for federal assistance.
- **Supplies and Equipment Coordinator** – Oversee distribution of supplies, assess need for additional supplies or services, coordinate with others to purchase what's needed.
- **Communications Coordinator** – Facilitate communication amongst team members, compile information for the media, act as media liaison.
- **Assessment Coordinator** – determine severity and scope of damage, continue to assess condition until salvage and recovery are complete.
- **Documentation Coordinator** – Maintain accurate records of damage, document salvage and recovery efforts, track staff time and needs.
- **Salvage Coordinator** – remove collections from impacted areas, set priorities and begin triage, determine needed resources.

## Health and Safety

Prioritize health and human safety above all else. Formulate strategies for evacuation, including who will do what and where you will meet, and practice them regularly. If a disaster is imminent, implement sheltering or evacuation procedures. If a disaster has occurred, be aware of threats from property and building damage, downed power lines, blocked roads, and limited resources. Staff and volunteers should not be

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from "Field Guide to Emergency Response," Heritage Preservation and the American Institute for Conservation

asked to put themselves at risk and should wait for clearance from a local emergency management authority.

Consider what you need to respond to potential disasters. What are the specific hazards associated with a particular disaster (contaminated water, exposure to soot or mold, building instability, etc.)? Are there potential hazards associated with specific types of collections, supplies or building materials?<sup>2</sup> What will you need in terms of protective equipment for responders based on the potential hazards (e.g. masks, gloves, respirators, shoe covers, eye protection, hard hats, etc.)? Many of these items can be purchased ahead of time in a variety of sizes and stored in an appropriate and easily accessible location.

Also make plans to monitor health and human safety during a disaster and in the aftermath as staff and volunteers respond to assist with clean-up efforts. Plan to provide food and water as well as regular breaks and monitoring of stress and energy levels of staff and volunteers responding to clean-up efforts. Make people aware of resources that can help them cope.

## Collection Priorities

Determine what your organization's top priorities are when authorities have determined it is safe to re-enter your building and plan to photograph or take videos to document the damage. Are there special or more vulnerable items in your collection that should be attended to first? What is the plan for addressing the needs of those items based on the potential threat, such as flooding? Is there an alternative location to which collection items can be transported and cared for if conditions within your building still pose a threat to them? How will you track the movement and document damage to each item (collection identification or catalogue numbers may no longer be attached to or associated with artifacts after a disaster)? What supplies will you need in your disaster kit in order to salvage items in your collections and where should they be stored for ease of access? Fans, extension cords, gloves, masks, eye protection, and shoe covers are just a few suggestions, but your kit should always be tailored to the needs of your specific collections.

## Preparing Staff and Volunteers for Disasters

Once the plan is complete, ensure all appropriate staff and/or volunteers have access to copies. Update the plan, especially the contact list, and discuss and practice the plan regularly. Inspect items in your disaster and response kits annually to ensure that they are still in working order.

Additionally, familiarize everyone in the organization with the building and systems that house your operations and collections so that when things go wrong whoever is present can act immediately and appropriately. For example:

- Emergency Contact List - Fire, Police, Hospital, Poison Control;
- Essential Contact List - Electric, Gas, Water, Telephone, Local Emergency Management;

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<sup>2</sup> See Connecting to Collections Care: "[Arsenic and Old Lace: Controlling Hazardous Collection Materials](#)" and the Smithsonian Institution: "[Chapter 24 - Collection-Based Hazards.](#)"

- Staff and Professional Contact List - Staff, Volunteers, Local Collections Management Professionals, Regional Professional Organizations;
- Building maps with exits and fire extinguishers marked;
- Building maps with major systems marked – electrical panel, gas and water shut-offs, fire suppression, HVAC. Know who has been trained to work with these systems;
- Alarm codes and contact information for the monitoring company;
- Insurance information – if you have a policy, designate a staff member who will be responsible for contacting the insurance company in the event of a disaster;
- Cash or credit cards – designate staff who have purchasing authority;
- Location of first aid and supply kits;
- List of collection priorities - locations can be indicated on building maps;
- Know who has master keys to building and exhibit cases;
- Collection inventory - hard copy or digital backup that can be accessed off-site;
- List of vendors and suppliers.

## **Communication**

After establishing roles and responsibilities, create a master list of staff and volunteers who will need to be contacted in the event of a disaster. Be sure to gather contact information aside from business phone numbers and email addresses. Determine how information should flow from person to person and who should receive priority information. Information flow can be linked to the type and extent of the incident or disaster.

When communicating with parties outside the organization, be sure to establish a clear message that contains the most essential information. Your message should focus on what your organization is experiencing, why the audience should care, and how people can help. Be prepared for challenging or provoking questions that will take you away from your message and find a way to reframe the context that allows you to continue talking about what's relevant. Those who communicate with outside parties should be able to speak knowledgeably and calmly about the current situation.

## **Documentation**

Be sure to document the cause and extent of all damage. Also record timing of actions taken and decisions made, if possible. Your ability to document will be impacted by the nature and scope of the incident. For a localized incident such as a leak or burst pipe, staff will most likely remain onsite and monitor the occurrence and what actions were taken along with the impact on collections, if any. For larger disasters, documentation will need to take place after the conclusion of the event. Photos and videos will add depth to written accounts. Assessing damage and risk will allow you to prepare for and prioritize recovery actions.

For collections you will need to document the initial condition and damage after the event and then proceed to documenting your response activities. As part of preparedness, consider what approach you want to take in documenting locations, objects, and movement. In a large-scale incident existing locations and number may not be usable. Consider establishing a system for identifying locations based on structural

elements. Also consider how you want to assign tracking numbers for collections that need to be moved. Documentation will need to be assigned to a team which will set the pace for recovery and salvage efforts.

For buildings documentation will often start with emergency responders, but you should also document the extent of damage. As part of preparedness, gather images and maps of buildings and grounds for making notes and comparisons. Also consider preparing a damage and risk assessment form that aligns with your needs.<sup>3</sup> While conducting the assessment, mark hazards and safe access routes, make note of what systems function and don't, identify risks and security concerns, and identify collections that are vulnerable. Compile all the data and share it with those who need it, identifying current status, immediate actions needed, and other priorities.

See the "Disaster Planning and Management" toolkit for further resources, including how to write a disaster plan for your organization, what hazards to prepare for, and what actions to take when salvaging specific types of collections. A sample inventory sheet for collection salvage and location grid can be found below.

### Sample Inventory Tracking Sheet for Collection Salvage

Tracking #	Given #	Description	Material Type	Damage / Condition	Original Location	New Location

<sup>3</sup> For a sample form see [NCPTT Rapid Building and Site Assessment](#)


**Sample Location Grid for Collection Salvage**

