

ALLIANCE REFERENCE GUIDE

Developing a Disaster Preparedness/ Emergency Response Plan

Preparing for disaster is one of the most important things a museum can do in order to safeguard its collections and protect staff and visitors from hazards. This guide provides a primer on disaster preparedness and helps museums understand the process of developing a disaster preparedness/emergency preparedness plan. It reflects national standards and outlines elements of a disaster preparedness/emergency preparedness plan that are in line with the requirements of the Alliance's Core Documents Verification and Accreditation programs.

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What It Is

A disaster preparedness/emergency response plan, commonly known as a disaster plan, is a series of written policies and procedures that prevent or minimize damage resulting from disasters (either man-made or natural) and help a museum recover. All museums are expected to have plans that address how the museum will care for staff, visitors and collections in case of emergency. This should be tailored to the museum's specific circumstances and facilities and should cover all relevant threats or risks to the museum, its collection and its people. This includes evacuation plans for staff and visitors and plans for how to protect or recover collections in the event of disaster. The plan should also outline the responsibilities of each involved party.

Why It Is Important

Identifying, understanding and preparing for risks are vital parts of museum management. Museums care for resources in trust for the public and must minimize risks to collections. Having a strong disaster plan helps the museum safeguard buildings, staff, visitors and neighbors. It also has financial implications that include insurance and conservation costs involved with salvage.

What to Consider

- » *The process of creating and implementing a plan is far more important and beneficial to the museum than the actual plan itself.* The plan may seem like the end result, but in actuality, the end result is what is achieved through using and updating the plan.
 - » *There are many different ways to plan.* Each museum has its own set of challenges, which requires thoughtfulness in planning. Museums are encouraged to take time to explore their circumstances and articulate them accurately in their plans.
 - » *Planning should be integrated in order to be effective.* Each of the museum's official documents should speak to one another consistently and comprehensively to support the museum's mission.
- “Universal staff participation in the creation of a unique disaster plan is essential. Simply ‘adopting’ a plan from a similar institution would not have created a body of critical knowledge among staff members in the absence of the actual document. Create a plan that, in addition to specific technical direction and procedure, has universal application.” Courtney B. Wilson, (*Covering Your Assets: Facilities & Risk Management in Museums*, 2006)

Anatomy of a Disaster Plan

Museums should have a current and comprehensive disaster plan tailored to its needs and circumstances. Each museum's plan will vary from the next because of its unique collections, regional area and infrastructure. In developing a plan, museum staff should be aware of all relevant threats to staff, visitors, structures and collections. A strong disaster plan will recognize potential risks and allocate the necessary resources to minimize damage or threat.

There is no one, perfect template for any document. Since the museum field is so diverse, each of the museum's documents should be influenced by its history, community, collections and governance. Interrelated policies and plans contribute to a cohesive vision and mission. Here are some common elements of disaster preparedness plans:

Introduction

Most museums have an introduction that explains how the plan is organized, where it is stored and how often it gets updated and by whom.

Emergency Preparedness and Prevention

Emergency preparedness and prevention can be accomplished in a number of ways. Generally, a museum explains how it will minimize potential risks. Common measures outlined in a disaster plan are: how the museum safeguards records; preventing damage to collections (e.g., integrated pest management, protection from mold, monitoring any potential hazards in the collections); a list of emergency supplies and the frequency with which they are inventoried; and security measures.

Response Procedures

This includes general guidelines and specific steps museum staff will take to respond to each type of disaster or hazard. In preparing this section, staff are encouraged to first do a risk assessment. Often risks may be particular to region. For example, museums along coasts have a risk of hurricanes that museums in the Midwest do not. Museums in California have a higher risk of earthquakes. Some museums may have a higher threat of wind damage, snow damage or excessive humidity. In addition to natural disasters, museums should consider man-made emergencies (e.g., terrorism, civil disturbances, health emergency). While no museum is exempt from the threat of terrorism, those in urban areas or with iconic stature probably face a higher threat. All museums face risk from fire or water damage (e.g., broken pipes) or mechanical failure (e.g., loss of security). Response plans should focus first on human safety—staff, volunteers and visitors.



Emergency Clean-Up/Salvage Procedures

It is important that museums specifically outline the clean-up and salvage procedures for both the collections and the buildings. These procedures should be prioritized so that staff and emergency suppliers can use their time wisely and effectively. Museums are encouraged to create step-by-step instructions for conserving and stabilizing collections, consider any condition reporting to be done during and after the emergency or disaster, and explain who will be responsible for what during disaster. It is important to consider long-term restoration treatment procedures and list any suppliers that may be involved if any professional cleaning, drying or repair is needed. Museums may find it beneficial to speak to other museums of the same discipline or in the same area to see how they plan to conserve objects. It is important to identify those to contact for help—first responders (e.g., police, fire fighters) and those who can help in recovery (e.g., area museum professionals, conservators)—before a disaster strikes.

Institution-Specific Information

This information includes: floor plans; a list of emergency resources/suppliers; an outline of roles and responsibilities, including designation of emergency coordinator(s); chain of command; emergency contacts and call list; evacuation procedures; information about alarm systems; and any forms or checklists that can facilitate and document the disaster. The museum might consider including or referencing a crisis communication plan for when it must communicate with the media and the public.

Where to Begin

Strong disaster plans are comprehensive, yet simple and flexible, and are easy to follow during an emergency. In devising the plan, staff can work together to gather information regarding the institution, the collection and any potential threats in order to outline preventive measures and develop emergency response procedures. The more integrated the disaster planning, the more usable the operating procedures. Here are some steps museums can take to plan effectively for emergencies and disasters:

- » *Create a team or committee to develop the disaster plan.* Museums are encouraged to include different functions of the museum in order to create a comprehensive plan. Having several people as part of the planning process empowers a greater number of staff to respond during disaster.
- » *Read resources.* There are many resources on disaster preparedness that can help museums develop their plan, some of which are included at the end of this guide.
- » *Assess and document risks and hazards.* These risks and hazards will be specific to the museum, so consider natural disasters, man-made threats and mechanical failure.
- » *Establish preventative measures.* Steps can be taken to prevent disasters or minimize damage. Due diligence in monitoring hazards can prevent them from morphing into potential disasters. As Benjamin Franklin said, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”
- » *Prepare for disaster.* To prepare, museums may find it helpful to determine supplies needed and inventory, label and make them accessible. Collecting staff and, if relevant, board emergency contact information will help staff communicate and respond during disaster. It may be helpful to identify and establish relationships with suppliers and collaborators before disaster strikes, offering tours of the museum so that they are familiar with the facilities.
- » *Take risk management measures.* As a risk management measure, it may be wise to make duplicates of important records and store them off site and make duplicates of keys.
- » *Outline emergency response, establish chain of command and appoint emergency coordinator(s).* When considering procedures, the museum can think about developing any forms or checklists. The better these forms, the easier it will be for staff to stay collected when disaster strikes.
- » *Develop salvage techniques and think of what needs to be done within a certain time frame.*
- » *Review and revise the plan often.* Like any plan the museum has, it should be a living and breathing document, reviewed frequently.

Core Documents Verification Program

The [Core Documents Verification](#) program verifies that an institution has an educational mission and the policies and procedures in place that reflect standard practices of professional museums, as articulated in *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums* and used in the Accreditation Program.

A disaster preparedness/emergency response plan is one of five core documents that are fundamental for basic professional museum operations and embody core museum values and practices. Listed below are elements required for disaster preparedness/emergency response plans from museums participating in the program.

Disaster Preparedness/Emergency Response Plan Required Elements

- » Is tailored to the institution's current facilities and specific circumstances
- » Covers all threats/risks relevant to the institution
- » Addresses staff, visitors, structures and collections
- » Includes evacuation plans for people
- » Specifies how to protect, evacuate or recover collections in the event of a disaster
- » Delegates responsibility for implementation



Where to Find Out More

- » *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*, edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt (AAM Press, 2008)

This guide is an essential reference work for the museum community, presenting the ideals that should be upheld by every museum striving to maintain excellence in its operations. An introductory section explains how virtually anyone associated with museums will find the book valuable, from trustees to staff to funders and the media. It is followed by a full outline of the standards, including the overarching Characteristics of Excellence for U.S. Museums and the seven areas of performance they address. Throughout the book is commentary by Elizabeth E. Merritt, director of the Alliance's Center for the Future of Museums. This publication is available as a [free PDF to all museum members](#).

- » *Covering Your Assets: Facilities and Risk Management in Museums*, edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt (AAM Press, 2005)

This publication offers data on how professionals around the country operate their facilities, manage space and risk and prepare for emergencies. Data is broken out by museum discipline, governance type and parent organization. It also includes insightful essays on best practices from outside experts and leading professionals in the field.

- » *Building an Emergency Plan: A Guide for Museums and Other Cultural Institutions* by Valerie Dorge and Sharon L. Jones (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 1999).

Building an Emergency Plan provides a comprehensive, step-by-step guide that a cultural institution can follow to develop its own emergency preparedness and response strategy.

www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/emergency_plan.pdf

- » Integrating Historic Property & Cultural Resource Considerations into Hazard Mitigation Planning, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

This how-to guide provides community planners with tools and resources to develop and implement strategies for their historic properties and cultural resources. While the emphasis is on the built environment, the guide also addresses museum collections, works of art, books and documents. The complete document (202 pages) or individual chapters can be accessed from this introductory page.

www.fema.gov/plan/ehp/hp/fema386-6.shtm

- » dPlan, Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) and the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners

dPlan is a free online program that helps institutions write comprehensive disaster plans. The program provides easy-to-use templates that allow museums of all sizes to develop a customized plan with checklists; salvage priorities; preventive maintenance schedules; contact information for personnel, insurance and IT help; and a list of emergency supplies and services.

www.dplan.org/

- » Worksheet for Outlining a Disaster Plan, Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC)

This template guides a museum in identifying equipment and services needed for disaster preparedness and recovery, setting salvage priorities and scheduling drills. It also includes checklists of tasks that should be completed on a daily and weekly basis.

www.nedcc.org/resources/leaflets/3Emergency_Management/04DisasterPlanWorksheet.php

- » Guide to Navigating FEMA and SBA Disaster Aid for Cultural Institutions, Heritage Preservation

This is an easy-to-use guide to the process of applying to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Small Business Administration (SBA) for assistance after major disasters. Heritage Preservation also includes online tools to assist with disaster preparedness and recovery.

www.heritagepreservation.org/federal/index.html

- » In the Face of Disaster: Preparing for Emergencies in Central New York

The Central New York Library Resources Council (CLRC) offers an 88-page manual that addresses collection priorities, facility audits to prevent potential disasters, insurance, response plans, and salvage priorities and techniques.

www.clrc.org/downloads/disastermanualrev.pdf

- » Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel, Heritage Preservation

Heritage Preservation sells a hands-on tool that outlines steps that facilitate disaster response and salvage.

www.heritagepreservation.org/catalog/wheel1.htm

- » [Sample Documents](#)

The Information Center's sample document collection is a unique and valuable resource for Tier 3 member museums. The collection contains more than 1,000 samples of policies, plans and forms from museums of all types and sizes, most of which were written by accredited museums. Tier 3 museum members can request sample documents from the Information Center in order to stimulate a conversation about issues and challenges facing the museum and to explore how different museums approach different issues. Using the sample documents should not replace the process of joining staff, governing authority and stakeholders in fruitful and thoughtful planning and policy-making.

Standards

The Alliance's standards address "big picture" issues about how museums operate. For the most part, they define broad outcomes that can be achieved in many different ways and are flexible enough to accommodate a diverse museum field. These standards can be achieved in tandem with standards issued by other organizations that address aspects of museum operations or the museum profession.

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Adhering to standards is achievable by all types of museums.

Standards provide a common language that enables museums to self-regulate, demonstrate professionalism and increase accountability. Policy-makers, media, philanthropic organizations, donors and members of the public use standards to assess a museum's performance and evaluate its worthiness to receive public support and trust. Simply stated by Elizabeth Merritt in *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*, "Standards are fundamental to being a good museum, a responsible nonprofit and a well-run business."

Having a strong disaster preparedness/ emergency response plan helps museums adhere to standards. For more on standards, visit the Alliance's website at www.aam-us.org.