

Planning for the Worst-Case Scenario

When Hurricane Katrina, the most destructive natural disaster in the nation's history, hit Mississippi in August 2005, rain, wind, and flooding damaged the main building and administrative offices of the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi. Thanks to an emergency preparedness and response plan, however, all of the Ohr-O'Keefe's collections survived the storm.

"The preparedness plan defined what was to be packed up and moved to the interior room deemed safest by our architects and engineers," said Holly Zinner, the museum's Deputy Director. This precaution ensured that the work of master potter George Ohr, the museum's namesake, was preserved undamaged.

In 2006, as the Ohr-O'Keefe worked to rebuild and resume operations, the Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts (CCAHA) strengthened the museum's existing emergency plan based on knowledge gained during Katrina. Updated annually prior to the onset of hurricane season, the plan has not had to be implemented since 2005.

An institution usually cannot foresee an emergency (defined as circumstances or conditions that call for immediate action) or a disaster (a sudden event that wreaks destruction and interrupts operations). And while an emergency plan cannot always prevent harm, as in the case of the Ohr-O'Keefe, it can save lives, minimize loss, and lower costs by providing a framework for organized response, recovery, and continuity of operations. Every collecting institution, no matter its size, needs an emergency plan.

Dr. Jessie Carney Smith, Dean of the Library at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, confirmed the value of a written plan. Smith recently worked with CCAHA Director of Preservation Services Laura Hartz Stanton to complete an emergency plan for the library. "It is most useful to plan in advance and to know where we will relocate our collections if such a need arises," Smith said. "We have a much clearer idea of what 'emergency preparedness' really means."

Julie Choma, Collections Manager at the Philip and Muriel Berman Museum of Art at Ursinus College in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, worked with Dyani Feige, CCAHA Preservation Specialist, on an emergency plan earlier this year. "Seeing the details, lists, and information needed was a learning experience," Choma said. "There are so many details one would not initially consider."

Determining how likely a disaster is to happen, and what its impact might be, forms the basis for disaster planning. Each plan is unique to the institution. "Salvage priorities, staff responsibilities, and building-related information are not useful unless described accurately and specifically for each institution," Feige explained.

When CCAHA assists an institution in disaster planning, the first step is for a consultant to capture some of these details by touring the space and meeting with staff responsible for decision-making and collections care. "Every staff member in an institution is responsible for emergency preparedness, so it is ideal for staff at all levels to be involved to some extent with the development of a plan," Feige noted.

This surprised Smith. "We had no idea that the planning process or the plan itself would be so comprehensive and involve so many people, offices, and contacts on and off campus," she said.

After a site visit, the consultant writes a first draft of the plan. Most plans require several drafts and back-and-forth conversations before completion. "The more the institution's staff is involved, the more valuable the plan is," Feige explained.

According to Choma, the feeling is mutual. "Having external eyes evaluate our facilities' risks and develop the plan has been a great positive," she said. "Staff often overlook various things within an institution as it becomes commonplace, but external expert eyes catch [these] details."

Most plans developed by CCAHA consist of at least eight basic parts. An emergency information sheet—containing emergency shut-off locations and phone numbers for emergency responders, utility companies, and insurance companies—opens the plan, allowing for easy access to vital facts in an immediate situation. Next comes a staff telephone chain to facilitate contact. Then one of the most important parts of the plan, the response outline, lists the actions to take in an emergency or disaster, defines responsibilities, and assigns tasks to staff members, volunteers, and outside contractors.

The fourth section, collection priorities for recovery, determines which items should be salvaged first. "Most institutions find choosing salvage priorities difficult, but it is absolutely necessary," said Jessica Silverman, CCAHA Conservator and Preservation Consultant. "For instance, valuable time and resources should be allocated to unique items, not objects that may be replaceable." Including this list, with locations and images, speeds recovery and helps outside responders who may be unfamiliar with collection items.

Lists of necessary disaster recovery and personal safety supplies—which an institution should stockpile on-site in advance—and vendor contact information make up the fifth part of the plan. The sixth section includes instructions for response in each type of emergency as well as for handling and salvage techniques for collection materials. Next, continuity plans detail how the institution will resume operations. Appendices, including floor plans, forms and contracts, and other resources, come at the end of the plan.

Although a major step, writing a plan does not mean an institution is fully prepared. One of the most important—and most difficult—parts of emergency preparedness is testing the plan, training staff to use it, and updating it regularly. Feige and Silverman also recommend that institutions form partnerships with others in their area to compile shared supplies, schedule joint training sessions, and build relationships with local first responders.

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1 / Hurricane Katrina damaged the Gallery of African American Art and other buildings on the Ohr-O'Keefe campus, which was under construction and 11 months from completion at the time 2 / Boxing wet books for freezing, a salvage technique 3 / Participants at CCAHA's Preparing for the Unexpected: Disaster Planning for Cultural Collections program, held in Virginia