



Seasonal Disaster Emergency Preparedness Planning for Collectors

Whether personal or institutional, all collections are subject to risks that can seriously affect the lifetime and value of a collection. For many museums, galleries, and private collectors, an essential aspect in Collection Management is maintaining a loss prevention plan for seasonal disasters. The US hurricane season runs from early June through the end of November. Hazards from these storms come in many forms including high winds, tornadoes, storm surges and flooding.

Natural disasters make all of us acutely aware of our vulnerabilities to disaster. Fortunately, catastrophes of a large magnitude are rare, but disaster can strike in many ways. Large or small, natural or man-made, emergencies put collections in danger. Hazards can often be mitigated or avoided altogether by a comprehensive, emergency-preparedness plan. Such plans provide a means for recognizing and responding effectively to emergencies. The goal is to hopefully prevent damage or, at least, to limit the extent of the damage.

Identifying Risks

A prudent first step is to list geographic and climatic hazards and other risks that could jeopardize the building and collections. These might include geographical susceptibility to hurricanes, tornadoes, flash flooding, earthquakes, or forest fires, and even the possibility of unusual hazards such as volcanic eruptions. Consider man-made disasters such as power outages, sprinkler discharges, fuel or water supply failures, chemical spills, arson, bomb threats, or other such problems. Take note of the environmental risks that surround you. Chemical industries, shipping routes for hazardous materials, and adjacent construction projects all expose you to damage. Any event that is a real possibility should be covered under your Emergency Preparedness Plan.

It is also important to determine the vulnerability of the objects within the collections. What types of materials are included? Are they easily damaged? Are they particularly susceptible to certain types of damage such as moisture, fire, breakage, and the like? How and where are collections stored? Are they protected by boxes or other enclosures? Is shelving anchored to structural elements of the building? Is it stable? Are any artifacts stored directly on the floor where they could be damaged by leaks or flooding? All items should be raised at least four inches from the floor on waterproof shelves or pallets. Are materials stored under or near water sources? Analyze your security and housekeeping procedures. Do they expose collections to the dangers of theft, vandalism, or insect infestation?

Consider vulnerabilities. Are your collections insured? Is there a complete and accurate inventory? Is a duplicate of the inventory located at another site? Although there may be a wide range of disaster scenarios, the most common are water, fire, physical or chemical damage, or some combination of these. The specific procedures of a disaster plan focus on the prevention and mitigation of these types of damage.

Decreasing Risks

Once your hazards are specified, the disaster planner should devise a program with concrete goals, identifiable resources, and a schedule of activities for eliminating as many risks as possible.



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While water damage is the most common form of disaster for collections, everyone needs a good fire-protection system. Wherever possible, collections should also be protected by a fire-suppression system. Preservation professionals now recommend wet-pipe sprinklers for most collections. In addition, water misting suppression systems have become available within the last several years; these can provide fire suppression using much less water than conventional sprinkler systems. Before choosing a fire-protection system, be sure to contact a preservation professional or a fire-protection consultant for information about the latest developments in fire protection and for advice appropriate to your collections and situation.

An inventory will provide a basic list of holdings, and will be essential for insurance purposes. Improved collection storage, such as boxing and raising materials above the floor level, will reduce or eliminate damage when emergencies occur. Comprehensive security and housekeeping procedures will ward off emergencies such as theft, vandalism, and insect infestation. They will also ensure that fire exits are kept clear and fire hazards eliminated.

Identifying Resources

An important step in writing your plan is to identify sources of assistance in a disaster. Research these services thoroughly--it is an essential part of the planning process. These can range from police, fire, and ambulance services to maintenance workers, insurance adjustors, and utility companies. If possible, invite local service providers to visit in order to become familiar with your site plan and collections in advance of an emergency. For example, you may want to provide the fire department with a list of high-priority areas to be protected from water if fire-fighting efforts permit.

Other valuable sources of assistance are local, state, or federal government agencies. While it is widely known that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides disaster assistance programs, institutions may not be aware that this can include support for recovery of art objects and cultural resources. Conservation is defined by FEMA as "the minimum steps which are both necessary and feasible to place the items back on display without restoring them to their pre-disaster condition." FEMA does not cover the replacement of destroyed items.

Before the Storm – Checklist

- List of emergency telephone numbers
 - Fine Art Shippers
 - Staff
 - Conservators
 - Remediation Companies
 - Local PD\FD
 - Insurance Broker
- Prepare and Maintain Fine Art Inventory – Off site
- Evacuation Plan w/Alternate route



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- Install HVAC climate control system with a back-up generator to protect artwork against rising humidity
- Make sure everything that can be moved off the ground is raised a min of six inches.
- Basic Emergency Supplies and Equipment
 - Dehumidifier
 - Flashlights
 - 50-ft. extension cord (grounded)
 - Portable electric fan
 - Wet vacuum
 - Plastic trash bags
 - Paper towels and Sponges
 - Mop and Broom
 - Gloves (rubber/leather) and Rubber boots and aprons
 - Plastic sheeting (stored with scissors and tape)
 - Hurricane Lamps and oil
 - Candles and matches
 - Battery operated AM/FM radio with extra batteries
 - First aid kit

Finally, if the planning process seems overwhelming, approach it in stages. Decide what type of disaster is most likely to occur in your area, and begin to plan for it. The plan can always be expanded to include other scenarios.