

***Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections***  
**MUSEUM SOS: STRATEGIES FOR EMERGENCY RESPONSE**  
**& SALVAGE**

**PREPARING FOR YOUR DISASTER:  
IT IS NOT A MATTER OF “IF” BUT WHEN!**

**May 14, 2004**

Let's assume you are the curator of a museum, which attracts about 200,000 visitors and school children each year. Your collections contain objects mostly from the Americas, including the world's largest collection of vertebrate fossils and a famous dinosaur hall. In addition, your library contains many rare and unique materials, including an extensive collection of manuscripts (some many hundreds of years old) and photographs. At 2:00 a.m. on a Tuesday evening, the Director of the museum calls you at home to tell you there has been a disaster at the museum. The city police have notified her of the problem, but provided no details other than the recommendation that someone should come quickly. The Director asks you to respond.

Upon arriving, you see smoke and flames coming from the east side of the property. A city fireman tells you the maintenance shed nearest the museum proper caught fire. The fire has spread to the nearby office building that house the library. No one is allowed to go into the building. The Fire Department has been pouring water into the building for about 20 minutes and has nearly suppressed the fire. A reporter and cameraman from the local TV station are pulling up, having heard about the emergency over the Fire Department scanner. Many of the garden's neighbors also are trying to get onto the property to see how bad the situation is.

**Is this an emergency? Why or why not?**

**Will you be able to respond to the emergency by yourself? What kind of help will you need?**

It's too late to try and answer these questions! A thoughtful approach to emergency preparedness is critical now while you have time to think and plan and to train yourselves to react in the most efficient and effective way when an emergency does strike.

**DEVELOPING A PHILOSOPHY - What are your institution's priorities and obligations in an emergency?**

The first essential step in the development of an emergency preparedness program is for the leaders of your institution to clarify your organization's philosophy and approach towards emergencies.

- How will you define an emergency for the purposes of activating your plan? (For our purposes, an emergency is any situation that adversely affects people, collections, or other property, and has the potential to get worse.)
- What emergencies are you most likely to face? (It is essential that you work with your local and national agencies to develop a plan in which broad based collaborations are involved – museums cannot manage a large scale emergency alone.)
- Is your priority to save lives or to save property? Would all staff members agree? Can you do both?
- What are your moral and legal obligations toward the safety of staff, visitors, the public, and the collections?

- Do you allow employees to go into an unsafe building or area even if they want to?
- What resources are you prepared to divert from other activities in order to carry out your responsibilities for emergency preparedness?
- How urgent is it for you to reopen to your constituents?
- What are your institution's other priorities? Payroll? Computer systems? Telephone systems? Personnel records? Etc.
- Who will speak for your institution?
- And, very important, exactly who will be in charge in an emergency?

### **ESTABLISHING A COMMITTEE - Who are the people in your institution who can discuss and resolve these issues?**

There are probably a number of people who need to contribute to these discussions. You may want to establish an emergency planning committee and appoint a chairperson. Once the fundamental philosophical issues have been resolved, this core group will be responsible for most of the real work. Representatives of this planning committee should be the principle members of each major function within your institution, such as collections management, personnel, public relations, security, facilities, and administration. A successful planning process is particularly dependent upon the active participation of the director of your museum.

Your museum may be one part of a larger institution—university, city, art museum, etc. Your planning efforts might therefore need to include representatives from that larger organization.

So, what does this committee do? At the first meeting, the chairperson must clearly spell out the goals and objectives of the committee.

- What are each member's responsibilities?
- What is the mandate of the group as a whole?
- Are there others who should serve on the committee?
- How often should the group meet?
- What is the scope of the committee's decision-making authority?
- What financial resources are available for emergency planning?
- What will happen to the committee after the plan is completed?

In addition, the group must establish a timetable for completing each phase of planning (see the attached "Suggested Timeline" for ideas), delegate regular assignments and deadlines to each committee member, determine what kinds of emergency supplies and equipment are needed, decide where supplies will be stored, and who will keep track of them. The group should also contact outside assistance sources, such as the local fire and police departments, the Red Cross, your colleague institutions, local museum support groups and any federal or regional disaster organizations which may be involved in responding to your disaster.

### **NOW, BACK TO THE FIRE!**

#### **WHO'S IN CHARGE? - Has the Director designated you as the person in charge? What if you had been out of town?**

The Getty Trust adopted the "Incident Command System" (ICS), which was developed for the California fire service in the 1970s. This command structure is designed to allow management

and coordination of emergency response regardless of which key personnel are present at the time of the event.

### **What functions are necessary to react to the fire and water damage that's occurring?**

You certainly need:

- ◆ Facilities staff to help evacuate the water, clean up the building and restore critical services;
- ◆ Security staff to keep people from entering, especially the maintenance shed which might contain pesticides and other chemicals;
- ◆ Public relations staff to deal with the media on site and off;
- ◆ Collections staff to assess the damage to objects;
- ◆ Perhaps library collections colleagues from a nearby institution help assess the damage to objects and books and to begin salvage operations;
- ◆ Probably some computer staff to restore your on-line catalog or mapping system if it was damaged;
- ◆ HR people to define emergency pay policies and guide staff in whether and when to return to work; and
- ◆ Someone to coordinate all these efforts.

There may be lots of other functions your museum needs, too.

### **Who's going to head each of those functional areas? What if that person is not available?**

The organization chart for emergencies is based on areas of responsibility, not by individuals. A line of succession by title, as deep as your organization can support (ideally three to five positions), is established for each essential emergency assignment before an emergency occurs. Regardless of the size of your organization, the ICS concept is an excellent way to minimize confusion during an emergency. The system allows for expansion and contraction of your plan to whatever magnitude of response your situation may require.

### **Do you know how to reach these leaders and in what order they should be called?**

List the names and home phone numbers of key staff members on a small card. Laminate the cards and ask emergency plan personnel to carry them at all times in a wallet or purse. Update this information on a regular basis. This is particularly critical if you work for the city, county, or a university, as your museum may be just one component of the overall organization.

As technology evolves, automatic paging systems are becoming cost-effective and easier to use. These systems allow you to pre-designate multiple groups of people who can be paged with one phone call, depending on the needs of the emergency.

### **BUILDING A PLAN - Do the people in charge of each function know what to do? For example, do they understand that there may be hazardous materials in the maintenance shed? Do they know the importance of diverting water quickly away from the books in the museum or library?**

Having determined the line of succession for each functional area, create checklists that detail the basic tasks that may need to be completed by the person filling the role. These checklists function as mini job descriptions and serve as guidelines only; they are not intended to be all-

inclusive, but are in place to help the user begin the process of managing an emergency. It is critical to take these checklist beyond the “what” stage and into the “how” phase. For example, it is easy to say, “Relocate damaged collections to a safe location.” However this requires extensive thought and planning to determine how to do that: how to find the equipment you need, how to document the move, how to identify and select appropriate locations, how to secure the space, etc.

**What if the head of facilities comes up to you and says, “I’ve got my two men working on getting the water out of the library. Could you go turn off the power to the building?” Would you know what to do?**

Rather than looking like a deer caught in the headlights, you might want to refer to a “fact sheet” that provides simple, step-by-step instructions to guide you through unfamiliar tasks. Topics may range from starting a portable emergency generator or shutting off a natural gas valve, to even such unthinkable topics as setting up a temporary morgue. Any task that is complicated or seldom done, but is relevant to the operation of your institution, can be written up as a fact sheet. The process of writing fact sheets is an excellent training tool. Important forms, like collections damage forms should also be included as fact sheets.

**USING YOUR RESOURCES - If you’re allowed to go into the museum and building to assess the damage to your collections, what tools or supplies would you want to have with you? Where would you get them?**

A technique that has worked well for the Getty is to pack the appropriate sections of our plan and the supplies we need for immediate response, in easily carried duffel bags. Each bag is labeled by title as noted in the emergency organization chart - all of the bags are stored together in a secure and accessible location. Having the essential information organized is particularly helpful if a person further down the line of succession has to assume a particular role. Remember, the bags are related to a specific emergency function, not to a specific individual. Do not store them in the custody of people who may not be present to use them.

In our fire scenario, you might want access to a flashlight, some rubber boots, some forms for noting damage, a clipboard, pencils, a couple throwaway cameras, and a map of the garden or library. You might also want that checklist on the Collections function, and the fact sheets on “stabilizing wet materials.”

**In the library you discover that about 20 rare books have been severely burned, and 3 significant exterior garden statues have been knocked over and broken during the fire. Once inside the building, you see that there are several inches of water on the ground, a row of books is sitting in the water and many others are wet. What resources, human and physical, will you need to respond? (*Don’t forget, every other function in your organization chart, from the life/safety staff to the public relations people should be asking themselves these same questions and, potentially, needing the same resources you do.*)**

Your organization already has many resources on hand that may be needed in the event of a disaster. However, will your staff know where to find them? It takes only a little time and energy to prepare and distribute a list of the locations and quantities of such basics as fire extinguishers, first-aid supplies, rolls of plastic, flashlights, paper goods, plastic boxes, hand trucks, battery-powered radios, shovels, crowbars, lumber, buckets, food stocks, and so on. Don’t forget that

other departments may regularly use things you would need in an emergency: cardboard boxes, packing materials, fans, dehumidifiers, etc.

While I was at the Getty, we developed a series of "crash carts," modified custodial carts which contain those supplies and pieces of equipment that are needed for immediate response to an emergency. Security Officers are trained to deploy and use them. There are carts are primarily focused on responding to water leaks and contain squeegees, wet/dry vacs, plastic sheeting, buckets, absorbent materials, portable lights, a portable generator, electrical cords, and small tools and personal protective equipment.

**Would you be able to treat the art objects and wet books yourself? Would you need access to a freezer service? Would you need access to consultants?**

Many institutions keep the names and telephone numbers of those colleagues, contractors, and vendors with whom they most often do business in a card file or address book. Take this practice one step further. Assemble this information into a master list of the names, addresses, and key telephone numbers of local institutions, botanists, and security personnel. Add the phone numbers of building contractors and landscape engineers your institution has used recently. Compile a list of local vendors, especially those with whom you have open purchase orders or special arrangements. This may minimize the need to use cash during major emergencies when vendors will not accept credit or checks. Organize this information by category, incorporate it into your emergency plan, and store it in the appropriate bags.

Store duplicate copies of important plans, drawings, and diagrams of your facilities and gardens in a secure and accessible place. Maintain copies of critical keys in a safe and separate location.

Develop a liaison with emergency planning organizations within your area. Attitudes are changing in most communities, and resources are growing rapidly in the emergency preparedness field.

**How many people would you need to help in the first 24 hours? How many more would you need later on to help clear debris and replant?**

Include your institution's non-employees in your emergency plan. Make use of your docents, volunteers, and contract labor. These people are dedicated to your institution and too often are left out of important programs. Help them to be an asset rather than a burden by letting them know what is expected of them and how they can contribute.

You may find that others call upon your museum staff in the institution to support their efforts. For example, your group probably has the best access to vehicles, equipment, and debris removal expertise. Or, your irrigation systems may be needed to help protect the institution against an approaching brush fire.

**TRAINING: THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENT - So, how do you and your colleagues become comfortable with the roles you may play during an emergency?**

Once the committee has completed a draft of the plan it must be shared with your employees before it is implemented. It is essential that you distribute the draft to all department heads for comments. Then share the plan with everyone at a full staff meeting. The committee must be sensitive in advance to individual needs, fears, and expectations. Encouraging suggestions from

all staff members and incorporating appropriate revisions allows everyone to become a part of the plan.

We all do what we train to do, so the more time you spend thinking and talking about your role, the better. On a regular basis, picture yourself in an emergency situation; anticipate the actions you would take; consider whom you would interact with. You might consider even allocating a few minutes of your regular department head meetings to posing a variety of likely scenarios.

**Do you wish your security officers had relocated the books on the lowest shelf? How could they have done that in a way that minimized further damage?**

Determine what training is needed for staff in key positions, and decide what kind of training other staff members will receive, as well as how frequently staff should be retrained and retested. Remember that if you have security personnel, they may be the only staff at the site initially during an emergency, especially during nights, weekends, and holidays (approximately 70 percent of the time). It is difficult to find the time, but regular emergency response training for your security or other designated staff is imperative and should include basic fire fighting, first aid, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, utility shutoffs, and emergency collections movement. Consider opportunities for cross training. For example, staff in your facilities department may be invaluable in repairing damaged electrical or domestic water systems. If you are part of a larger organization, many people may be valuable “extra bodies” in the event you need to pack out wet library materials or clear debris.

**If a region-wide emergency occurs during the workday, will your staff want to stay and assist?**

A great way to get your employees motivated is to assist them with emergency preparedness at home. If they know that they have taken steps in advance to protect their loved ones at home, they may be more willing to remain and help with the emergency at your institution. Even if your employees are unable to leave work due to impassable roads or the like, being prepared at home will provide some peace of mind so that they can concentrate on the task at hand.

**TESTING THE PLAN - Will this thing really work?**

Only if you move quickly to develop a scenario that tests the strength of the emergency plan while the subject is still fresh in your mind. “A Suggested Timeline” for developing and testing your plan is attached.

Conduct your first drill after staff members have been given an opportunity to develop an understanding of the program and to adequately rehearse any new skills related to the emergency plan. For greater impact, try to schedule the drill near the anniversary of an emergency that is well known in your community. At the Getty Museum, for example, they have historically held drills in April, the month of the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake.

Determine whether you want the public involved and how much publicity you want to generate. Docents and volunteers make great “acting visitors.” Decide how much participation you want from your public safety agencies.

During the drill, assign selected members of your staff to observe and evaluate the exercise. Document the drill with photos and video--both are great training tools and excellent motivators.

Do not expect your first drill to go off without a hitch, but use it as a learning experience. Plan the emergency drill to teach success, not failure; build confidence, not apprehension.

The drill should be developed by a very small number of employees so as to maintain an element of surprise and spontaneity among other employees. It is best to simulate the type of emergency most likely to occur in your area. Your drill should actually begin with the total evacuation of your staff and “acting visitors,” but must go father if you really want to test your response capabilities. Once your staff has been evacuated, key members should assemble at a designated location so that you can determine who is at the site to take responsibility for each function. This group of leaders should be presented with a comprehensive set of problems. Determine who will be in charge of the safety and health of visitors and staff, who will evaluate the structural soundness of the building, who will direct salvage operations for endangered collections, and where objects will be relocated if necessary.

It is helpful to simulate collections damage, structural damage, road blockages, and injuries. Cardboard signs describing these situations work well (i.e. “broken glass here”). Use moulage or theatrical makeup to create realistic injuries in order to test first aid and CPR skills. Moulage creates an amazing sense of reality and is very useful in keeping the staff focused on the seriousness of the drill. (The Red Cross or a local drama group may be helpful with makeup.)

The drill creates many opportunities to test your staff members. They should be able to operate fire extinguishers, move collections in emergency situations, use special tools and equipment, and shut off utilities. Make the drill realistic—tap the creativity of your staff. Provide at least two to three hours to really test your plan.

**By the way, did you know what steps the Fire Department would take when they responded to your fire? Did they know how to minimize further damage to your collections?**

Full-scale drills with broad simulated disasters are critical to testing the coordinated approach of your plan. But, smaller, more modest exercises can be interspersed for more focused attention to one or more areas. For example, mini-drills can test just the collections salvage efforts.

“Table top” exercises, especially involving outsiders like your local Fire Department, can be very enlightening about what response to expect in the event of a real emergency. And they give you an opportunity to provide the Fire Department with information on the sensitivities of your collections. By tabletop I mean bringing a group of interested parties together at one table to discuss one or more possible disaster scenarios. You may be surprised to learn how differently others may view the same scenario. It is a great learning opportunity and one which often times brings people closer together.

Telephone callback drills can give you a sense of the number of staff members you may be able to count on to respond to an emergency during off-hours.

**CRITIQUING YOUR DRILL - How did it go?**

If you’ve really planned a challenging drill, it probably did not go well. Don’t despair! Immediately following the drill, convene the emergency planning committee to evaluate the

exercise while impressions are still vivid. Create a non threatening climate for discussing the inevitable mistakes and need for improvement. Establish a format for the entire staff to participate in a critique session. Do not procrastinate—take action immediately on the good suggestions and comments. Establish a schedule for the next emergency drill.

Avoid the temptation to finish the plan and put it on the shelf. Most likely, after your first drill you will know just how much practice is still necessary. By conducting exercises at least annually, you will enhance your written plan over time, and staff members will learn to develop confidence in their level of preparedness.

**PERSEVERANCE: THE CRITICAL ELEMENT - OK, we've got a plan. That's it, right?**

Well, based on this scenario, things didn't go so well with the fire. There was significant damage to the collections, the museum had to remain closed for a month, personnel records were lost and your pay was delayed, the local newspaper was critical of the ineffective response, and your trip to your next annual national museum conference was canceled!

But next time will be different. Your emergency plan will evolve over time just as at the Getty's. While we are pleased with our progress, we also recognize that much more work has to done before we can consider ourselves fully prepared for a major emergency. There's a lot to do; don't be overwhelmed; just go home and do something!

**Wilbur C. Faulk, CPP**  
Executive Vice President  
Cultural Property Protection Group  
17101 Superior Street  
Northridge, CA 91325  
Telephone: 818-335-3824  
Fax: 818-885-6115  
E-mail: [wfaulk@cppgrp.com](mailto:wfaulk@cppgrp.com)