



ESSENTIAL WORKER: Self-Advocacy During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic

During uncertain times, many institutions consider layoffs, furloughs, and face unprecedented closures. This document is intended to provide assistance to registrars and collections specialists who need to advocate for their role in cases in which an institution's senior leadership may not fully understand the important role we play during a crisis.

Collections specialists and registrars are essential staff in museums, galleries, and heritage sites. These roles are crucial to the institution's fundamental ethical and legal responsibility to preserve and maintain collections. This fundamental responsibility to care for, preserve, and maintain collections is not altered by an institution's public closure. Collections specialists and registrars are uniquely trained to carry out these duties.

Justifications to retain collections personnel when considering furloughs and layoffs include:

Continuity of Operations

- Collections specialists and registrars are the institution's main point of contact to important constituencies including lenders, donors, insurance, shipping, and customs agents, conservators, law enforcement, counsel and emergency management organizations, amongst others. This network is essential in navigating closure during a pandemic and re-opening after the crisis is over.

Ethical & Legal Requirements

- Check your provincial/state and national guidelines. Most will note that an institution has an ethical responsibility to care for its collection. Leaving the collection unattended for extended periods of time may contravene this requirement.
- Collection specialists and registrars should conduct regular checks on collections whether the institution is open or not. These checks may be required by loan agreements and/or insurance policy terms.

Insurance, Loans, & Exhibitions

- An institution may be required to return loans, renegotiate loan agreements, or plan for the rescheduling of loan shipments.
- An institution may be required to renew or extend certificates of insurance for objects on loan or exhibition.
- The institution's insurance policy may come up for renewal during the shutdown period and require immediate attention.

Preservation & Facility Maintenance

- If you are responsible for managing the maintenance of collections storage, exhibitions, or the preventative conservation of a heritage building, there should be a way to maintain and conduct your essential job responsibilities.
- Basic housekeeping and monitoring of collections and gallery spaces, including temperature and humidity levels, and checking for leaks or mechanical failures, are essential.

There is still Work to Do

You may be in a situation where you are faced with the potential of a furlough or a layoff. The following list of work tasks may be of assistance. Collections work, by its very nature, is often a solitary task that can be easily accomplished with appropriate social distancing guidelines in place. Additionally, many collections-related tasks can be completed from home.

What can you do from home?

- Provenance research.
- Develop a contemporary collecting strategy to manage post-pandemic collecting.
- Review and re-write collections policies and procedures as needed. This is a great time to revise or create emergency plans and review continuity of operations (COOP) documents.
- Review loan forms and renegotiate loans as required.
- Compliance with Federal laws, such as NAGPRA, and continuation of efforts to de-colonize museum collections.
- Develop social media postings based on the collections and exhibitions.
- Work on data entry and database clean-up.
- Research and prepare grant applications.
- Develop or add to the online collection.
- Prepare a detailed inventory of supplies on hand and what will be needed once the institution re-opens.
- Work with the exhibition department on any upcoming exhibits where objects may be needed. Do a virtual “pull” of objects and review details of exhibit plans.
- Develop a collections volunteer program if you do not have one. This is a great way to make collections work more visible and tie collections positions to an outreach program.

What work can you do while maintaining social distancing guidelines (in addition to the tasks listed above)?

- Accession objects
- Deaccession review
- Re-housing of collection objects
- Inventory
- Photograph collection objects
- Practice preventive conservation (e.g., cleaning, environmental monitoring, integrated

pest management)

- Inspect the collection for objects that may need conservation.
- Inventory personal protective equipment that could be donated to local agencies.
- Create a video tour of the collections storage space or of a collections-based activity such as re-housing an object or cataloging.