

ARCS 2015 Conference Session Review

After the Alarm: Response, Recovery, and Advocating for Preparedness at your Institution

Presenters:

Heather Becker, The Conservation Center, Chicago
Rebecca Fifield, Preservation Management Consultant

Submitted by:

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Heather Becker, CEO of The Conservation Center in Chicago, opened the session with a discussion of some of the basics of disaster preparedness and emergency response, highlighting the importance of an institution's human resources and proper training. Some examples include the necessity for an emergency contact list/phone tree, for having an emergency response system in place, institution-wide awareness of evacuation protocols, and adequate insurance. There should be commitment to training drills based on different scenarios and risks given an institution's geographic location: procedures in the event of an earthquake, or flooding, or whatever hazards are most likely in natural disaster-prone regions.

Ms. Becker went on to note the relationships that should be fostered and maintained; the people and resources most relied upon in emergency and disaster situations. Having a strong network of colleagues and contacts is vital: you need to ensure that your institution is a priority to them. Insurance brokers, art shippers, conservators, remediation specialists - all may play crucial roles in an emergency. This is of particular importance to disaster-prone areas, where there is a higher likelihood of widespread devastation and numerous institutions and museums simultaneously needing assistance. If possible, having a remediation company on retainer could be beneficial because your institution will be at the top of their priority list.

Further, the significance of off-site backup cannot be emphasized enough. An inventory, priority removal plan, documentation (catalog record/information), photographs of the collection, and appraisals all play huge parts in the claim process, so creation of, and remote access to these will prove invaluable in the event of an emergency.

With regard to onsite recovery, the ability to respond to a disaster or emergency in a timely manner is paramount. In order to do so, systems need to be in place. A response team needs to be confirmed, with alternates identified in the event that some team members won't be immediately available following a natural disaster. Regardless of the amount of preparation, all scenarios and situations cannot be predicted. Once emergency responders have taken control of the scene, it is very likely that there will be some amount of time when museum staff is barred from entering until it is secured and deemed safe. Because time is of the essence during recovery, this waiting period can

be used to determine the plan of action when the building and/or collection are accessible.

During an emergency it is common to go into salvage mode, considering little more than recovering as much as possible. Often overlooked, therefore, is health and safety. Policies and procedures regarding the personal safety of staff and volunteers is an equally important component to preparedness.

Once again, as most registrars and collections specialists know, documentation is key. Before any recovery can begin, everything should be documented and photographed in situ. This is important not only from a collections care and preservation viewpoint, because this too is an important part of the adjustment and claim process. When the time comes to assess the damage, core decisions need to be made. The extent of the damage will most likely dictate triage procedures, as will collection priorities. Onsite stabilization is generally preferred, if possible, both because handling, packing, and transporting can further the damage and also because it allows for better security and control of the recovery process. If offsite recovery is necessary, there needs to be an inventory of all objects leaving the premises, and only one or two people should be designated as overseers of triage and recovery in order to prevent disorganization.

A final note on Heather Becker's presentation is about prevention. A Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Response Plan is only as good as its implementation. Biannual drills are recommended along with reviews of the most likely scenarios for a given institution.

Sometimes when attempting to create and/or implement a Disaster Preparedness Plan, we might be faced with resistance, skepticism, or simply a difference of opinion. Rebecca Fifield, Preservation Management Consultant, offered suggestions and strategies for those proposing a plan for the first time, as well as designing one for sub-optimal conditions.

One way to approach this is by presenting a vision; if you provide a vision of success, you're more likely to be heard. Be prepared with a budget, priorities, and a training schedule. One is also more likely to succeed by partnering with allies within the institution. Illustrate how this will affect (and benefit) other staff and their responsibilities. It's important to try to make this a museum-wide issue: Education staff needs a plan to evacuate children in the event of an emergency, Facilities personnel needs to be prepared to save or salvage the building, IT specialists should consider the technical ramifications of a disaster or emergency situation.

Another clever strategy is to attach it to another project within the museum. Is there an audit coming up, a review of health and safety, a new exhibit or construction project? Emphasizing the importance of a plan, the role it plays in a particular project is a good way to get others to invest in its implementation.

Some might see this as an absolute: it's all or nothing. I, for one, approach an initiative such as creating a Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Response Plan with exemplary scenarios in mind, with the notion of everything recommended being implemented exactly as written, and all staff happily cooperating for the greater good. In reality, the complete, ideal situation may not happen overnight. Your proposal may be shot down, but resilience is key. Plant the seed, start with something as simple as talking about it, about the benefits, and continue to present new ideas. Creating a timeframe can be presented as an institutional challenge – with all working toward this specific goal.

It's also ok to resort to referencing the worst-case scenarios and previous disasters, either locally or within the institution itself. What if such a scenario were to happen again? What about our reputation? What would the community think if disaster struck and we were completely unprepared?

Despite your best efforts, you might still be met with resistance. This is why it's important to continue to connect preparedness with the museum's priorities, to tie it in to the big picture. You might, of course, be challenged by any number of retorts: "We can't know how to respond until something happens, we can't know ahead what might be needed," or "We don't need to make more work, we're spread so thin as it is," or "I have this exhibit to put on/this event to plan/this program to develop..." Because it's more likely than not that you will be confronted with some form of at least one of these scenarios, it is a good idea to set short-, mid-, and long-range goals. It can take years to create a complete Disaster Preparedness plan, so chip away at it with realistic milestones.