



CCI Notes

14/1

Emergency Preparedness for Cultural Institutions: Introduction

Introduction

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition, defines **emergency** as "an unforeseen combination of circumstances or the resulting state that calls for immediate action," and **disaster** as "a sudden calamitous event bringing great damage, loss, or destruction; a sudden or great misfortune." From this it follows that all disasters are emergencies, but only those emergencies that get out of hand become disasters.

If an emergency is managed well, it may never turn into a disaster. Damage can be avoided by being prepared. To quote John Hunter of the U.S. National Parks Service: "Good planning can prevent an emergency from turning into a disaster and a disaster from turning into a tragedy."

The Need for Emergency Preparedness

Any physical emergency that affects a museum or gallery is likely to endanger its collections in some way. Because cultural collections are by their very nature both vulnerable and irreplaceable, even minor accidents can assume disastrous proportions. A museum's collections are both its major asset and its primary reason for existence. It may be just as endangered by a burst pipe, a leaking roof, or a clogged drain as by a hurricane, an earthquake, or an act of war.

Many of these hazards and their effects can be eliminated or reduced by developing and implementing a disaster plan.

When an emergency involves no threat to life, museum staff can usually remain in the building, or can at least have access to it. Staff should act quickly to limit the damage to collections, to control the cause of the emergency, to stabilize the environment, to assess the extent of damage, and to recover and stabilize those objects that have been or are in danger of becoming damaged.

When a threat to life exists, the public emergency services will assume control. They may deny access to the building until the threat has passed or until subsequent investigations are completed. Emergency services exist to protect human life and building structures. Museum representatives should meet with these agencies beforehand to discuss the museum's special needs. Emergency services personnel should be made aware that a museum's collections and records are frequently more important than the building itself, that after a catastrophe museum personnel have an urgent obligation to salvage what they can, and that the effective recovery and stabilization of the collections declines rapidly with each passing hour.

In an emergency, museum staff will be confronted with an intimidating and potentially disastrous situation. Without an Emergency Plan, the following situations may occur:

- Museum personnel may be unprepared for making the major and urgent adjustment of priorities that the situation may demand.
- The museum may lack staff with the necessary authority to make major decisions or to approve emergency funding immediately following a disaster.
- If management does not act quickly and positively, the chain of command and of communication may break down, resulting in unauthorized initiatives and bureaucratic delays.
- If communication breaks down, there may be confusion regarding responsibilities and priorities.
- Damaged parts of the collection may deteriorate rapidly unless correct stabilizing actions are taken. The remainder of the collection may become damaged if not immediately protected.
- Staff may act precipitately, perhaps without adequate knowledge or training, causing further damage.
- The museum may lack adequate facilities for relocating and treating damaged collections and records.
- The museum may lack the necessary resources and supplies required immediately following a disaster. If the emergency is widespread, there may be competition for limited resources or a failure to share those that exist.

In short, without adequate planning, management may lose initiative and may ultimately lose control of the situation.

Effective stabilization and recovery of collections cannot be undertaken unless the museum is organized and prepared—something that may require a substantial, if temporary, reorganization of responsibilities and resources. This will not happen of its own accord, nor can it be achieved effectively in the heat of an emergency. The existing museum organization must move smoothly into a **previously planned** emergency mode.

The Role of the Conservator in Emergency Preparedness

The stabilization and recovery of collections demand the presence of a trained specialist who can immediately assess the condition of each object and who can determine the most appropriate action to take based on the object's susceptibility to damage. This is a task for a qualified conservator. If a museum has a conservator on staff, he or she should be a member of the Emergency Planning Committee, and should head the collections recovery team. During an emergency, the conservator, working with the curator and registrar, makes immediate, practical decisions about salvaging the collections.

If a museum does not have a conservator on staff, it may be necessary to contact a local conservator or a conservation agency.

If conservation assistance is not available locally, call the Canadian Conservation Institute (collect) at (613) 998-3721 as soon as possible. You may call this number at any time of the day or night. Be sure to let the CCI Commissionaire answering the telephone know that you have an emergency.

Further Reading

Anderson, Hazel and John E. McIntyre. *Planning Manual for Disaster Control in Scottish Libraries and Record Offices*. Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1985.

Barton, John P. and Johanna G. Wellheiser, eds. *An Ounce of Prevention: A Handbook on Disaster Contingency Planning for Archives, Libraries and Record Centres*. Toronto: Toronto Area Archivists Group Education Foundation, 1985.

Forston, Judith. *Disaster Planning and Recovery*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 1992.

Upton, M.S. and C. Pearson. *Disaster Planning and Emergency Treatments in Museums, Art Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Allied Institutions*. Canberra: Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (ICCM) Incorporated, 1978.

Copies are also available in French.

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