

ALLIANCE REFERENCE GUIDE

Developing a Disaster Preparedness/ Emergency Response Plan

Preparing for disaster is one of the most important things a museum can do in order to safeguard its collections and protect staff and visitors from hazards. This guide provides a primer on disaster preparedness and helps museums understand the process of developing a disaster preparedness/emergency response plan. It reflects the standards of the field that all museums should adhere to and aligns with the requirements of the Alliance's [Core Documents Verification](#) and [Accreditation](#) programs.

What It Is

A disaster preparedness/emergency response plan, or disaster plan, is a written policy accompanied by procedures that prevent harm in cases of emergency and minimize damage resulting from disasters (man-made or natural). All museums are expected to have a plan that addresses how it will protect its staff, visitors, and collections in case of emergency or disaster. The plan should be tailored to the museum's specific circumstances and facilities and should cover all relevant threats and risks. Key components include emergency procedures, evacuation plans for staff and visitors, plans for how to protect or recover collections, and assignments of responsibility.

Why It Is Important

Museums care for resources in trust for the public and therefore must minimize risks to those resources. Having a strong disaster plan helps the museum safeguard its collections, buildings, staff, visitors, and community. It also has financial implications that include insurance and the conservation costs involved with salvage. Risk identification and management are a vital part of museum operations.

Required Elements

Each core document has a set of required elements associated with it that are based on the [Core Standards](#). When writing or revising their disaster preparedness/emergency response plans, museums should ensure that they align with those standards and contain the required elements listed below.

Required Elements of a Disaster Preparedness/Emergency Response Plan:

- » Includes preparedness and response plans for all relevant emergencies and threats (natural, mechanical, biological, and human)
- » Addresses the needs of staff, visitors, structures, and collections
- » Specifies how to protect, evacuate, and recover collections in the event of a disaster
- » Includes evacuation routes and assembly areas for people
- » Assigns individual responsibilities for implementation during emergencies
- » Lists contact information for relevant emergency and recovery services
- » Includes floorplans
- » Bears date of last revision

Anatomy of a Disaster Plan

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A museum should have a current and comprehensive disaster plan tailored to its needs and circumstances. In developing a plan, museum staff should be aware of all relevant threats to people, structures, and collections. Each museum's plan will vary because of its unique collections, location, and facilities. A strong disaster plan will recognize all potential risks and provide appropriate procedures to minimize damage or threat.

There is no one perfect template for any document. Each of the museum's documents should be influenced by its unique history, community, collections, and governance. Interrelated policies and plans contribute to a cohesive vision and mission. While disaster plans vary in their organization and content, listed below are elements commonly found in these policies.

Table of Contents and Introduction

Most plans begin with a table of contents in order to make it easy to quickly look up information during an emergency. This may be followed by an introduction that further explains how the plan is organized, where it is kept, and how often and by whom it gets updated.

Prevention and Risk Management

Museums should work to minimize risk and to avoid emergencies as much as possible. In the plan, consider explaining how the museum minimizes potential risks in areas such as: records backups and technology safeguards, damage prevention for collections (e.g., integrated pest management, maintenance of appropriate and stable temperature and relative

humidity to prevent mold growth, monitoring of any potential hazards in the collections), acquisition and periodic inventory of emergency supplies, and security measures. Consider natural, biological, mechanical, and human threats as you work to manage risk.

Emergency Contact Information

It is important for staff and volunteers to know who to contact in case of emergency. This may include local emergency services; a security department, team, or manager; other staff members; the volunteer coordinator; etc. Most museums include the staff list and contact information in this section as well as the phone numbers for police and fire departments. This section could also name emergency coordinators or provide an overview of the chain of command and specific areas of oversight.

Disaster Preparation Procedures

In preparing this section, museums are encouraged to assess what potential disasters may affect them. Often risks may be particular to a geographic region. For example, museums along coasts have a risk of hurricanes that museums in the Midwest do not. Museums in California have a higher risk of earthquakes. Some museums may have a higher threat of wind damage, snow damage or excessive humidity. In this section, outline what disasters may affect the museum and how the museum can prepare if it has advance notice that a disaster is approaching.

Emergency Response Procedures

When an emergency occurs, staff and volunteers need clear direction in how to respond. Emergency response procedures should address how to handle emergency

situations such as fire, medical emergency, vandalism, theft, bomb threat, active shooter, influx of water (e.g. flooding, burst pipes), electrical outage, mechanical failure, and any others that may affect the institution. Response procedures should always focus first on human safety, then address the facility and collections.

Clean-Up and Salvage Procedures

After a disaster occurs the museum will need to take steps to return to normal operations. The emergency plan should include procedures for cleaning up the facility and salvaging the collections. It may also need to address the continuity of business while clean-up is proceeding. Procedures should be clearly prioritized so that staff, volunteers, and any outside assistance providers can use their time effectively. Museums should clearly assign oversight and responsibility for areas of salvage operations. This section should also include specific procedures for salvaging the types of objects in the museum's collection; these can be copied from a reputable source if the source is credited properly. Consider what local resources are available—other museums who may lend space or expertise, conservators in the area, companies that specialize in post-disaster clean-up, etc.—and include their contact information in the plan.

Evacuation Plans

If not addressed in the response procedures, the museum should have a separate section that details evacuation plans for staff and visitors in case of emergency. This section should provide instructions for exiting the building and for ensuring that visitors exit as well. It may also include instructions for specific

circumstances, such as the need to ensure that visitors with disabilities are able to evacuate or are directed to a specific location where emergency responders can locate them.

Facility Information

Where does the museum keep fire extinguishers? Where are the shutoffs for power and water? The alarm panels? This section should include specific information about the museum's facility that the staff will need if an emergency occurs. It should include floorplans for the entire facility, preferably with key points like emergency exits and fire extinguisher locations marked.

Supplies

Many museums list the emergency supplies kept on hand or those that may need to be obtained and where they could be sourced.

Process

Strong disaster plans are comprehensive yet simple and flexible, and are easy to follow during an emergency. In devising the plan, staff members should work together to gather information regarding the institution, the collection, and any potential threats in order to outline preventive measures and develop emergency response procedures. The more integrated the disaster planning, the more useful the operating procedures.

Keep in mind that:

- » The process of creating and implementing a plan is as important and beneficial to the museum as the plan itself. The plan may seem like the end result but, in actuality, the end result is the greater understanding achieved through creating/updating and using the plan.
- » There are many different ways to plan. Each museum has its own set of challenges which require

Communications

Consider including or referencing a crisis communication plan that states who is authorized to communicate with the media and the public during and after an emergency.

Forms and Checklists

Many museums include forms and checklists to assist in emergency preparedness and disaster response as an appendix to the plan. These may be collections forms such as condition reports and inventories as well as forms specific to one type of emergency situation, such as a bomb threat checklist.

“Universal staff participation in the creation of a unique disaster plan is essential. (Simply ‘adopting’ a plan from a similar institution would not have created a body of critical knowledge among staff members in the absence of the actual document.) Create a plan that, in addition to specific technical direction and procedure, has universal application.” Courtney B. Wilson, *Covering Your Assets: Facilities & Risk Management in Museums*, 2006

thoughtfulness in planning. Museums should take time to explore their circumstances and articulate them accurately in their plans.

- » Planning should be integrated in order to be effective. Each of the museum's official documents should speak to one another consistently and comprehensively to support the museum's mission.

Here are steps in the development of a disaster preparedness/emergency response plan:

- » *Assemble the team.* Select a team that has a manageable number of participants yet represents all of the necessary perspectives within the institution, such as administration, collections, and security. Having all relevant parties engaged in the planning process will result in a more comprehensive plan and more educated and empowered staff.
- » *Review resources.* There are many resources on disaster preparedness that can help museums develop their plan (see the next section of this guide).
- » *Assess and document risks and hazards.* Perform a risk assessment for the museum, considering natural, biological, mechanical, and human threats. Document the most likely hazards so that they can be addressed in the plan.
- » *Establish preventative measures.* Assess what steps can be taken to prevent disasters or minimize damage and include them in the plan. Due diligence in monitoring hazards can prevent them from morphing into potential disasters.
- » *Prepare for disaster.* Pull together the information that will be key during an emergency, such as what supplies are on hand and where they are located, contact information for staff and other relevant people and organizations, and assistance that may be available during and after a disaster. Consider offering tours of the museum to first responders so that they can offer advice and become familiar with the facilities.
- » *Take risk management measures.* Practical risk management is a key part of preparing for disasters. Consider taking measures like storing copies of the emergency plan and essential records offsite.
- » *Outline emergency responses, establish the chain of command, and appoint emergency coordinator(s).* Create procedures for each relevant type of emergency, ensuring that human safety is the first priority. Assign responsibility for completing the tasks listed in the plan. Also think about forms or checklists that will be needed to document emergency response or track disaster recovery efforts.
- » *Address the needs of the collections.* Develop measures to protect the collections before a disaster and address their needs post-disaster. Include salvage techniques for all types of objects in the collection (these can be taken from a reputable source if properly credited).
- » *Review and revise the plan regularly.* The disaster plan should be a living document, revised as any of the museum's circumstances change or the information becomes outdated.

Where to Find Out More

- » [*National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums*](#), edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt (AAM Press, 2008)

This guide is an essential reference work for the museum community, presenting the ideals that should be upheld by every museum striving to maintain excellence in its operations. An introductory section explains how virtually anyone associated with museums will find the book valuable, from trustees to staff to funders and the media. It is followed by a full outline of the standards, including the overarching Characteristics of Excellence for U.S. Museums and the seven areas of performance they address. Throughout the book is commentary by Elizabeth E. Merritt, director of the Alliance's Center for the Future of Museums. This publication is available as a [free PDF to all museum members](#).

- » [*Covering Your Assets: Facilities and Risk Management in Museums*](#), edited by Elizabeth E. Merritt (AAM Press, 2005)

This publication offers data on how professionals around the country operate their facilities, manage space and risk and prepare for emergencies. Data is broken out by museum discipline, governance type and parent organization. It also includes insightful essays on best practices from outside experts and leading professionals in the field.

- » [*Building an Emergency Plan: A Guide for Museums and Other Cultural Institutions*](#) by Valerie Dorge and Sharon L. Jones (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 1999).

Building an Emergency Plan provides a comprehensive, step-by-step guide that a cultural institution can follow to develop its own emergency preparedness and response strategy.

- » [Preservation Leaflets](#), Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC)

This template guides a museum in identifying equipment and services needed for disaster preparedness and recovery, setting salvage priorities and scheduling drills. It also includes checklists of tasks that should be completed on a daily and weekly basis.

- » [Emergency Response & Salvage Wheel](#), American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works

The wheel is a hands-on tool that outlines steps that facilitate disaster response and salvage.

- » [Sample Documents](#)

AAM's online sample document collection is a valuable resource for Tier 3 member museums. The collection contains more than 1,000 samples of policies, plans and forms from museums of all types and sizes, most of which were written by accredited museums. Tier 3 museum members can use sample documents in order to stimulate a conversation about issues and challenges facing the museum and to explore how different museums approach issues. Using the sample documents should not replace the process of joining staff, governing authority, and stakeholders in fruitful and thoughtful planning and policy-making.

Core Standards

Having a strong emergency preparedness and disaster response plan helps museums adhere to standards for facilities and risk management and collections stewardship. Those standards and the other [Core Standards for museums](#) are available on the [Alliance's website](#).