

Initial Disaster Response Procedures

Notify the appropriate personnel.—Use the emergency call list to contact those appointed as initial responders. If it is outside of working hours, keep calling until you find someone who can respond.

If necessary, get clearance to enter the site.—If serious damage has occurred, it may be necessary to wait until the appropriate officials declare the building safe to enter. Re-entry to the site may also be delayed if hazardous materials are present, or if the building is a crime scene (as in the case of arson). If re-entry to the building is delayed, work must proceed from an off-site command center that has been designated ahead of time.

Begin to determine the extent of the damage.—What actually happened? How serious is the damage? How many and what type of materials are affected (e.g., general collections, local history materials, audio/visual materials, computers and data, plain paper, coated paper)? What kind of damage is it (e.g., water, fire, smoke)?

Make a detailed damage assessment.—Remember to take photographs or video and document the damage in writing.

Call the insurance company or in-house contact (for self-insurance).—Contact information should be provided in the disaster plan.

Get advice from a preservation professional.—Unless the disaster is very small, it is likely that you will want to contact a preservation professional to ensure that you are responding properly. In the event of a major disaster, you may need to arrange for a professional to provide on-site assistance.

Determine what additional personnel will be needed.—Staff members, volunteers, and/or temporary workers may be needed. Develop a system to keep track of personnel and ensure that everyone is properly trained.

Establish a command center for the recovery effort.—Potential sites should have been identified ahead of time.

Establish security procedures for the recovery site.—Only authorized persons should be allowed to enter the site; some type of identification (e.g., badges, vests) should be arranged.

Decide what will be salvaged and what will be discarded.—Remember that the salvage priorities that were determined ahead of time may need to be adjusted according to the extent and/or type of damage.

Decide how the materials to be salvaged will be treated.—Treatment options will be discussed in this session. For wet collections, sort the materials, separating those to be frozen from those to be air-dried. As you begin sorting and moving materials, it is essential to keep track of collections at all times.

Determine if it will be necessary to relocate collections.—A large space may be needed for air-drying, or collections may need to be stored elsewhere temporarily to protect them from danger while the building and damaged collections are salvaged.

Gather supplies and arrange for services.—Again, information should have been collected prior to the disaster, and an emergency supply kit should be available.

Stabilize the building and environment.—Do not turn up the heat; this will not dry out the space and may encourage mold growth. If the outdoor humidity is low, open the windows. If the climate control system is working, use it to provide as much cooling and dehumidification as possible. Your goal should be to keep the temperature below 70°F and the humidity as much below 50% as possible. Wet carpeting should be removed and wet furniture and standing water should be removed. If the climate control system is not sufficient to reduce the temperature and humidity to the desired levels, building dry-out services will be needed. Monitor the temperature and humidity in the recovery area several times a day to ensure that the desired conditions are reached and maintained for the duration of the recovery effort.

Communicate with the media and the public.—It is important to inform patrons and other interested parties of the extent of the damage and the progress of recovery efforts. It is also crucial that one person be responsible for all interaction with the media and the public.