



### Thinking Ahead about Museum Protection:

**An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure**

by Diane Adams-Graf and Claudia J. Nicholson

Consider the following unpleasant possibilities:

- A class of visiting students, touring your exhibit, is verbally threatened and harassed by another visitor.
- You discover, years later, that a former staff person had sold hundreds of artifacts from your collection.
- Roofers leave their work at the end of the day and a fire starts between the walls, races through your third floor storage area and, in a few hours, destroys your collections.
- You walk in to work one morning to find your entire lower level covered with two feet of water from burst pipes.

Sound unreal? Are you prepared for all or any of these problems? These are real-world examples, and the museums involved responded at various levels of preparedness. Fortunately, museums of any size can be prepared for all of these situations, and more. Protecting your museum from different kinds of threats and planning responses is not expensive. Your first line of defense is *not* an expensive security/fire detection/protection system. It is policy, procedures and training—things that any organization can afford.

#### The Basics

Basic questions include:

- Are you familiar with the methods by which your museum provides protection? Who is responsible for its protection programs?
- What safeguards are in place for the visiting public and for staff? Is everyone aware of them?
- How is the security of the collections established and maintained?

- Exactly what levels of coverage do current insurance policies provide?
- Is there a written protection program? Is it accompanied by procedures that specify how staff will respond in any situation that threatens people or collections?

#### Planning

It is safe to assume that the risks of crime, natural disaster, theft, fire and accident do exist and will occur. This article outlines some of the fundamental concepts and tools relating to how we address those risks. We will cover physical protection of property, collections, staff and visitors; protection from fire, flood, and natural disaster; and response to any and all incidents. This article cannot cover these topics in great depth, but there is a useful bibliography at the end, and many organizations offer training in these areas.

The function of security is to protect people and property. Threats and injuries can include (but are not limited to) floods, tornadoes, infestation or pollution; medical injuries, chemical accidents (vehicular, railroad) and/or substantial damage to building,

collections or property; and/or trespassing, theft, vandalism or the use of weapons. Standard safeguards and responses have been developed for each of these.

It is the responsibility of every museum to establish policies and follow understood procedures to minimize risk to people and reduce loss to its collections. Protection tools may include security systems, disaster plans, fire and natural disaster response systems, insurance

plans, building design, designated staff and training but primarily, *protection is the encompassing system of policies, procedures and physical design that reduces risk and dictates the parameters of any response.*

First and foremost is designating authorized staff. Put someone in charge of security. One person, regardless of staff size, should hold responsibility and authority for identifying needs and developing the protection programs for prevention and response.



*This sign on an exhibit in the Hennepin History Museum explains why visitors should not touch the artifacts. The second sentence reads:*

*“Please help us to preserve these artifacts for future generations.”*

*Photograph by Northern States Conservation Center*

#### Editor’s note:

TECH TALK is a bimonthly column offering technical assistance on management, preservation and conservation matters that affect historical societies and museums of all sizes and interests. Comments and suggestions for future topics are welcome.



Continued from p. 3

Second, have a protection risk analysis survey conducted by local police or fire department, insurance or government risk managers, your staff, security personnel from another museum, contract security professionals, or any combination of these.



Photo by Northern States Conservation Center

Above: This foliage near the base of a museum building could conceal an intruder.

## Risk Analysis

A risk analysis begins by looking closely at your particular museum's circumstances: the building construction, environment, community, outside protection services, insurance coverage, legal responsibilities, existing policies and procedures, and staff awareness. The risk analyst will walk through the building and grounds with you, making observations on security, protection, procedures observed, the layout of the building and the uses of existing protection devices.

The person who conducts the assessment will provide you with a confidential survey report that identifies all of the strengths and weaknesses of your external perimeter, the building shell, exhibit areas and storage areas.

The analyst should also interview you, your board and/or staff to determine current procedures, accountability, emergency response systems and problems already identified by your staff and volunteers, and to suggest both physical and procedural improvements. The results of this analysis will be summarized in the survey report.

Develop your security program based on the findings of your analysis and report. Your overall program will address two essential areas of protection: prevention and response. First, develop systems and procedures to lessen and *prevent* the threat of accident, fire, crime or disaster. Second, develop systems and procedures that will provide for the most comprehensive, rapid and effective *response* to any accident, fire, crime or disaster. Develop the two hand-in-hand, but look at them critically as separate elements of the protection program.

Photo by Northern States Conservation Center



Right: Unlocking the security gate of the Enchanted World Doll Museum, Mitchell, S.D., 1998.

## Program Checklists

The following checklists provide essential elements of each type of program. Note: Wherever it is appropriate, be sure to (a) establish written procedures that insure the security of confidential information, and (b) arrange for training and regular retraining in all procedures.

### Building and Grounds Program

- Identify the vulnerability of the building or buildings.
- Clear the building perimeter of shrubs, trees and other plantings, for clear visibility.
- Confirm that building entrances and parking areas are well lit.
- Install locks on all doors and windows (motion sensors or bars on first two levels).
- Have regular and/or irregular patrol by local police or contract security.

### Lock and Key Program

Most museums consider physical security to be one of the most basic components in their protection program. Physical security is commonly understood as locking and securing your building from outside intruders. However, internal theft accounts for a large part of museum security problems. So, it is important to consider control of internal access in order to address risk within the building.

- Establish written procedures regarding the issuance and control of keys that also identify staff permission to enter specific, non-public areas.
- Individual systems can be set up by a lock and key manufacturing firm, a security firm as part of an overall building security plan, or developed by private contract.
- Verify that only those staff requiring access to a given area have a non-reproducible key (which has "Do Not Duplicate" stamped on it and a key not stamped with a room number).
- A key retrieval system should be in place for collecting all keys that are not used, especially by staff leaving the employ of the institution.
- Secure the key storage area and control all key distribution and collection.

### Collections Management Program

Just as important as building security and a lock and key program is a comprehensive collections management system. A collection management



*Continued from p. 4*

system that fixes responsibility, ensures periodic inventories, and establishes access procedures is one of the best defenses against internal theft (a depressing 90 percent of museum thefts are inside jobs).

- Establish a collections policy and procedures ensuring that all artifacts within the museum are adequately documented, accounted for, and inventoried on a regular, and irregular, basis.
- Establish procedures for design of exhibits, securing artifacts on exhibit, and regular checklist checks of exhibit content to deter theft, or detect it as soon as possible after it occurs.
- Establish a collections policy and procedures for the safety and accountability of borrowed artifacts.



*Photo by Peter Lanier*

*Taking regular inventories of artifacts is an important tool for collections management. Taking this textile inventory at MHS are Mary Patton (left) and Diane Adams-Graf (right).*

- Establish a collections policy and procedures that identify the parameters for all access to secured storage areas.
- Confirm that collections procedures ensure the accuracy and security of all museum collection records.
- Store a duplicate set of collections records off-site in the event your entire building is destroyed.

## Guard Program

- Determine that there are staff members (paid or volunteer) who are trained and familiar with the physical plant, emergency and criminal response procedures.
- Have guard staff perform full building and perimeter check prior to opening and closing.
- Make guard staff responsible for key storage, control and collection.
- Guard staff may be responsible for pass issuance to non-staff for access to non-public areas.
- Guard staff may be responsible for controlling packages in and out of the building (mail carrier deliveries, coatroom).

## Visitor and Staff Security Program

- Post emergency numbers on all telephones.
- Create and install emergency response flip-books at all telephones outlining first response for visitor or staff injury, criminal activity, fire or natural disaster.
- Conduct fire drills and practice responses to natural disasters.
- Make sure that all participating staff are familiar with all established written procedures.

## Fire Protection Program

Fire protection and a disaster plan are key elements to any protection program. There are many resources available for both. Refer to these, consult with your local fire and law enforcement personnel, find out what is being used elsewhere, secure examples of disaster plans in place at other museums, and consider developing joint disaster plans with other institutions within your community.

- Schedule regular fire drills to evacuate building of all staff and visitors.
- Conduct regular reviews with local fire department personnel, which may include alerting them to the location of your most important and valuable collections.
- Have regular staff training in fire extinguisher use and familiarity with fire response systems.
- Confirm that personnel are available to respond to the alarm systems on a 24-hour basis.
- Install a lock box outside your building that provides fire personnel with access to your building's keys in the absence of staff.
- Install alarms and other systems designed to respond to smoke, heat and flames.
- Install fire suppression systems, alarms for on-site response, and fire extinguishers.

Whatever conclusions you reach as a result of your risk analysis and resulting protection program, be sure that all plans and decisions are finalized in written policies and procedures that are reviewed and approved by your board. Make certain that all policies and procedures are distributed and accessible to all participating parties, and updated, on a regular and timely basis.

Additionally, it is absolutely necessary to provide frequent and thorough training to all staff and/or volunteers. If everyone is familiar with all aspects of your protection program, knows their role in it and follows the established procedures, you will experience less loss from accident, crime and disaster and be more prepared to respond to it if it does occur.



Continued from p. 5

## Insurance Program

- Meet with insurance representatives who specialize in museum insurance.
- Identify the organization's degree of acceptable risk.
- Confirm that collections management procedures are in keeping with insurance policy requirements.
- Review policy content: property, locations, exclusions, terms and liability.
- Be familiar (and prepared) with exact steps in process of making claim(s).

## Emergency/Disaster Program

Develop a written policy and procedure and have it approved by governing board. Identify:

- roles (identify the individuals who will take responsibility for each role),
- places (where is the designated off-site salvage location?),
- supplies (which supplies are necessary to have on-hand to respond?), and

- resources required for any type of disaster (call list of emergency personnel, assisting museums, conservation contacts).

Also: List the specific conservation responses for particular types of collections material (e.g., water-damaged books, fire damaged sculpture, smoke damaged textiles, electronic data media, etc.).

Distribute and review the written disaster plan and all components thereof on a regular basis. Make sure key personnel have copies off-site—disaster plans sitting on a shelf in a burning museum do no good.

Protection programs are successful preventative tools. If people and property are fully protected, the need to respond to threats is minimized. Develop your protection program *before* a major loss from fire, crime or natural disaster. It will save lives, buildings, cultural property and your organization.

## Additional Resources

There are especially good resources on emergency preparedness and disaster response, as well as examples of disaster plans available to serve as models. Contact the Minnesota Historical Society's Conservation Outreach Program at 651/297-1867 or [conservationhelp@mnhs.org](mailto:conservationhelp@mnhs.org); its lending library also has all the books listed below available for loan.

American Association for Industrial Security Standing on Museum, Library and Archive Security.

*Suggested Guidelines in Museum Security.*

Arlington, Va: American Association for Industrial Security, 1989.

American National Standards Institute (ANSI)/ National Fire Protection Association (NFPA).

*Standard for the Protection of Cultural Resources, Including Museums, Libraries, Places of Worship and Historic Properties.* NFPA 909; Quincy, Mass: National Fire Protection Association, 1997.

Buck, Rebecca A. and Jean Allman Gilmore. *The New Museum Registration Methods.* Washington, D.C. American Association of Museums, 1998.

Burke, R.B., and S. Adeloeye. *A Manual of Basic Museum Security.* Washington, D.C.: International Committee on Museum Security and Leicestershire Museums, 1986. (Out of print.)

ICOM and the International Committee on Museum Security. *Museum Security and Protection, A Handbook for Cultural Heritage Institutions.* New York: Routledge, 1993.

Lord, Allyn, Carolyn Reno and Marie Demeroukas. *Steal this Handbook! A Template for Creating a Museum's Emergency Preparedness Plan.* Columbia, S.C.: Southeastern Registrars Association, 1994.

Museum Security website and listserv:

[www.museum-security.org](http://www.museum-security.org)

Northern States Conservation Center:

[www.collectioncare.org](http://www.collectioncare.org)

Upper Midwest Conservation Association:

[www.preserveart.org](http://www.preserveart.org)

Thanks to the Northern States Conservation Center, P.O. Box 8081, St. Paul, MN 55108, for providing additional images.



An example of a key-card security system that limits staff access to storage areas. Here, Robert Herskovitz, MHS Outreach Conservation program, demonstrates the key card system in the MHS storage area.

MHS file photo; photo by Eric Mortenson

**Diane L. Adams-Graf** has been a project specialist with the Minnesota Historical Society Museum Collections department since 1997. She works with collections management and collections-related projects at MHS historic sites.

**Claudia J. Nicholson** has been a curator with the Minnesota Historical Society Museum Collections department since 1997. Her primary area of curatorial responsibility is for artifacts representing social and community life.