

A Professional Response to Disaster

After hurricanes Katrina and Rita blew through the South, archivists across the country immediately began asking what they could do to help. Following on the heels of SAA's Annual Meeting in New Orleans, many archivists were particularly empathetic with our colleagues in affected areas. Many offered time and money. A number of repositories offered temporary positions for displaced archivists needing a job.

In addition to addressing the immediate aftermath of the hurricanes, we must also think of the broader issues of preservation and protection of cultural resources. One of our core responsibilities is protecting our collections. How well are we prepared for disaster—not only from future hurricanes, but also from earthquakes, fires, and other tragedies, large or small?

On a tactical level, we must ensure that we are prepared. Given human nature, it's easy to put off disaster planning and devote our attentions to things with more immediate rewards. In fact, surveys indicate that many repositories have no disaster plan, and many of the plans are outdated. We all must take time to ask: What if it had been me?

- After Katrina hit, many discovered that they couldn't contact coworkers. Home numbers were useless because people had evacuated, and work email systems were not functioning.
- The storm surge literally washed away a city hall in Mississippi, leaving only a slab. But because the staff knew that the city council minutes were of vital importance, they had moved the minutes to a more secure bank vault before the storm hit and the minutes were saved.
- At my agency a few months ago, a fire alarm went off. It was a false alarm, but the act of going through the steps helped identify areas in which we could improve.

Does your repository have an up-to-date list of emergency contact numbers for staff and disaster service companies? Have your most essential collections been identified so that copies can be stored offsite or so that they will be first for recovery? Does your staff know how to respond in case of alarm or disaster? These three steps, at a minimum, can help buy time in case a disaster strikes.

One approach to keeping disaster plans up to date would be for everyone in the archives profession – and others in affiliated professions – to observe an annual disaster preparedness day. One colleague suggested calling it “May Day Mayday.” On May 1 of every year, every archives would make time to do a few key activities, such as updating

contact lists, having a disaster drill, identifying the most essential collections, and checking supplies for recovery efforts.

“May Day Mayday” would not be the time to write a disaster recovery plan. That takes more than a day. The intent is to make sure that every repository takes a few key steps so that they know what to do and to practice the knowledge to make it real, and not just a policy on paper.

As a profession, we can – and should – take on some critical tasks:

- At the federal level, we must work to ensure that recovery of essential and historical records is part of FEMA’s mandate. Without documentation, people cannot rebuild their lives or protect their rights.
- We should advocate for a national initiative that, through the National Archives, would provide states with funds for disaster planning and preparedness. Because federal programs are based on local government records, the federal government has a clear interest in protecting those records. On a regional level, repositories and professional organizations can build partnerships for emergency preparedness and response.

But the work begins with individuals—those within professional organizations who are willing to volunteer to work on these programs and those within repositories who will take on a leadership role. Ultimately, every professional archivist must make preservation a priority.

What will you do today to be better prepared?