

# Spring Forward on Disaster Planning



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The Mahoning Valley Historical Society put their disaster plan into action this winter to recover from a burst pipe. Photo courtesy of the Mahoning Valley Historical Society.

After one of Ohio's roughest winters in recorded history, staff and volunteers at historical societies and museums across the state are probably glad for the arrival of spring!

Often, we read articles about how to "winterize" our institutions, protecting against ice, freezing pipes, etc. However, we rarely hear about how to prepare for the higher temperatures, fluctuating humidity, melting snows, and weather events that come each spring.

## Melting Misery

Because of the high snow levels in many areas of the state following the storms of winter 2013-14, institution staff must be vigilant for flooding problems that may occur once the snows melt. Among the supplies you may want to add to your disaster preparedness kits are water leak detectors and sandbags.

Some of the best water leak detectors are portable, meaning you can move them around your facility to areas where water has historically entered your structure. These monitors, which you can get at your local hardware store or order from suppliers like Dorlen ([www.waternalert.com](http://www.waternalert.com)),

let off a noisy alarm when they come in contact with water. If you are worried about larger water intrusions, such as flooding from nearby creeks, streams, rivers, or ponds, consider purchasing sandbags which you can place at points of your building where water might enter. And, water concerns do not disappear with the end of melting and runoff. Keep these alarms and sandbags ready in case of heavy rains or even lawn sprinkler malfunctions in the summer!

## Action? Lights? Cameras?

As we move into spring, Ohio is often hit by strong thunderstorms and heavy rains. It is important to make sure you know where your facility stores flashlights and to change out their batteries in case the lights go out at your facility in the wake of a heavy storm.

If losing power is a regular occurrence at your organization, you may want to consider the purchase of a backup or emergency generator to supply power to your facility. If budgets do not allow this, check in your town or city to see if hardware stores will rent these items until (Continued on page 12)

## DISASTER PLANNING IN ACTION

On Wednesday morning, January 8, 2014, the Mahoning Valley Historical Society (MVHS) encountered a disaster within the Arms Family Museum of Local History in Youngstown, when a pipe burst overnight in a wall on the museum's second floor and sent water raining down for several hours through two historic period rooms on the first floor and into the boiler room below.

The MVHS Buildings & Grounds Supervisor discovered the problem at 7:30 a.m., and immediately called the executive director who arrived at the museum by 8:00 a.m. On the drive in, the executive director called the collections manager to apprise her of the situation and to have her mobilize other staff to address the crisis. Upon arrival at the museum, the executive director collected his office copy of the institutional disaster preparedness plan, which was drafted and approved 12 years earlier.

In a period of just 2.5 hours that morning, the MVHS staff implemented every step in the disaster plan and stabilized the situation. They shut off the water, located the source of the leak, identified and began to isolate collections items that were water damaged, moved all undamaged collections items out of harm's way, used wet/dry vacuums to clean up standing water on the floors, set up containers to capture the water that continued to drip from the ceilings, notified key board members, and made preliminary contact with the insurance agent, insurance adjuster, a local fire and water recovery contractor and a local plumber. Three working days later, staff members met and formulated detailed plans for the continuing recovery effort and how to best inform the public about the situation. The local community responded with sympathy and generosity, and to-date several individuals have donated more than \$1,300.00 toward repair and restoration work in the Museum.

Winter 2014 was a difficult time for the Mahoning Valley Historical Society, its museum and its collections. Having a well-organized disaster preparedness plan, dedicated and experienced staff and moral and financial support from the community made the recovery process much easier.

*By Bill Lawson, Executive Director, Mahoning Valley Historical Society, Youngstown*

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power can be restored to your location, or if a local organization will loan you a generator if their facility still has power.

Another tool which you may want to have on hand in case of flooding or other disasters is a digital camera or video camera to record your historic structure and its contents. It is recommended to make a digital record now, before any disaster happens, and to have the camera on hand to record any damage caused by flooding, high winds, tornadoes, or other natural or man-made disasters.

## Develop Those Plans!

Hopefully, your historic organization has some type of emergency preparedness or disaster plan. If not, you can find excellent sample plans at the Ohio Connecting to Collections website under “Model Policies” (see <http://cdm16007.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p16007coll7>). You will also find a variety of disaster planning tools at the website of Heritage Preservation (<http://www.heritagepreservation.org/PROGRAMS/TASKFER.HTM>), the national institute for conservation and preservation advocacy. Regional preservation centers, like Cleveland’s Intermuseum Conservation Association (ICA), and the Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC), have many excellent publications on disaster preparedness and recovery, as do preservation information resource organizations like LYRASIS. You can reach the websites of all of these organizations at the Regional Alliance for Preservation website at <http://www.rap-arcc.org/>.

Once you have developed a disaster plan, it is important to pull it out of your filing cabinet and practice it regularly. Many organizations choose one day in the spring to practice portions of their disaster plan, whether doing a building evacuation drill, practicing recovery of specific types of collection material, or working with local law enforcement or fire officials to familiarize them with your structure and collections. If you do not have a specific date in mind to practice your plan, consider MayDay. For a number of years, Heritage Preservation has been sponsoring MayDay as a time to “do one simple thing to prepare for disasters.” The organization has contests, highlights best planning practices from the field, and encourages multi-institutional collaboration to plan for and recover from disasters. Learn more at <http://www.heritagepreservation.org/mayday/>.

There are many resources – regional preservation and conservation centers, national organizations like Heritage Preservation, and statewide assistance available through the Ohio Connecting to Collections project – which can help you “weather the storms” of late winter and early spring. And, be on the lookout this fall for an event from the Ohio Connecting to Collections initiative partners that will help cultural heritage professionals and volunteers work better with buildings and facilities staff to prevent disasters and keep your building environment at the best levels for your collections.