



## **Atlanta Alliance for Response Kick-off Forum**

February 8, 2007

High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia

Cultural and emergency response communities came together at the latest Alliance for Response Forum February 8, 2007, at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. Many participants indicated interest in continuing to meet and exchange ideas, and groundwork for a local network was laid during the breakout sessions.

The meeting was intended as the beginning of a long-term effort, not a stand-alone event. Welcoming remarks by Frances Francis of the High Museum, David Carmichael of the Georgia Archives, and Kate Nevins of SOLINET highlighted the importance of Atlanta's rich cultural heritage and the need to build alliances and put resources in place to better protect it. Jane Long, Vice President, Emergency Programs at Heritage Preservation emphasized the urgency of preparedness and explained how Alliance for Response has inspired other local networks and their activities.

The morning was devoted to two panel discussions. The first panel included John Ketchum, Federal Preservation Officer with the Federal Emergency Management Agency; Buzz Weiss, Public Affairs Officer with the Georgia Emergency Management Agency, Suzanne Lord, Senior Planner of the Atlanta-Fulton County Emergency Management, and Chief Antonio Webb of the Atlanta Fire Department. They outlined the different protocols of federal, state, and local emergency management agencies and urged cultural institutions to take responsibility for their own planning. Inviting firefighters and local emergency planners to tour cultural institutions and review disaster plans were among the recommendations; Ms. Lord also urged institutions to plan functionally, focusing on evacuation, shelter, succession, and alternate facility plans rather than trying to make a plan for each possible disaster scenario.

The second panel featured case studies of disasters at cultural institutions and how they responded. David Carmichael, Director of the Georgia Archives, gave a presentation on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and his perspective as the then-president of the Council of State Archivists. Among the lessons learned: disasters aren't always localized, and staff may not be available for recovery operations; destruction may be immediate or take a long time; vaults may not be enough protection for records; and vital records must be identified, systematically duplicated, and copies sent off-site before disaster strikes. "It's all about relationships—knowing people in advance," he said.

Tommy Gregor, Executive Director of the Thronateeska Heritage Center in Albany, Georgia, spoke about the 1994 flood that hit his institution. "Nobody had ever imagined that this could happen," he noted. Staff removed some things for protection, but then the places they had been moved to flooded as well. In the course of the disaster, he said, people were in shock and prone to rash decisions, and volunteers were not adequately trained, throwing out things that could have been saved.

Nan McMurry, Head, Collection Development, University of Georgia Libraries related her experience with a fire in 2003 that started in some cardboard storage boxes. The building had no sprinklers, and the smoke spread through the ventilation system, making it difficult for firefighters to figure out where the fire was. The fire department knew the importance of putting out the fire with minimal water use so as not to encourage mold damage in the aftermath, and a disaster recovery firm was already on campus for another job, so rapid response helped ensure the best possible recovery. The lessons she and her staff learned were that any kind of housing helped protect the information, and that books whose covers were badly damaged often had lightly or not damaged pages inside. The library's disaster plan was not very useful, she said, because it had not been regularly practiced and had fallen out of people's consciousness. Plus, it was stored online, and the computer network was down during the emergency.

Keeping a disaster plan current was the focus of many questions after the panel presentations. Practicing and drilling is necessary to keep the plan alive and useful through staff turnover and other changes, and it's best to work with first responders before an emergency happens to learn things like differences in vocabulary. "Salvage" and "bleeding" are two terms that have very different meanings for emergency responders and cultural workers! Bringing efforts by archives, museums, and libraries together was emphasized, as well as the need to get cultural institutions added to federal, state, and local planning.

Julie Page, Preservation Librarian of the University of California at San Diego, spoke about existing regional disaster networks and how they operate. Ms. Page said networks should be as inclusive as possible, since many institutions have more than one kind of holding—many libraries have art and most museums have books, for instance. Mutual aid agreements that provide trained volunteers after a disaster, share supply caches, and keep in Chair with organizations such as the Red Cross were also covered.

In the last session, four breakout groups discussed specific topics and reported their conclusions to the entire forum. One group proposed building relationships, making sure each institution has a disaster plan based in reality and reviewed by local officials, ongoing meetings between institutions and emergency responders, and mutual aid networks that could win a seat at the county emergency operations table.

The second group suggested institutions identify groups and institutions in all cultural fields and try to get each group represented at follow-up meetings. They also discussed how to fund activities. The third group proposed a Web site that would serve as a portal to cultural and emergency Web pages, supply lists that could be useful to all cultural institutions, funding for a centralized supply cache, and developing mutual aid networks.

The fourth group considered mobilizing a response team to help recovery efforts in other regions. They proposed building regional networks as the groundwork for a statewide network that could field teams, as well as bring first responders into the efforts, sign mutual aid agreements, and find funding for supplies and volunteers in a large disaster.