

Galveston-Houston Area Alliance for Response Forum
July 29, 2011
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

MEETING SUMMARY

On July 29, 2011, Heritage Preservation sponsored the Galveston-Houston Area Alliance for Response Forum at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Over 80 participants joined distinguished speakers to launch the formation of a regional network that will raise the profile of cultural heritage in the world of emergency response. The Galveston-Houston Forum was the 19th Forum sponsored by Heritage Preservation's Alliance for Response initiative since 2003.

The day opened with a welcome from Wynne Phelan, Director of Conservation at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and Minnette Boesel, Mayor's Assistant for Cultural Affairs, City of Houston. Minnette extended a welcome from the Mayor and applauded the effort to start a road map for better city preparedness. She noted that cultural institutions are a huge asset to the community, and in the Gulf Coast region they are also very vulnerable.

Kevin Jaynes, CHMM, Regional Environmental Officer for FEMA Region VI, then spoke about FEMA's perspective on community self-reliance in an emergency. To better achieve their mission of preparing, responding, and recovering, FEMA is working with a whole community response concept. Their goal is to work closely with local and state partners in an emergency, and the better prepared you are personally, the greater help you can be to FEMA and the rest of the community. Mr. Jaynes mentioned that it is important to communicate and collaborate early so that the appropriate level of response is brought to a disaster. Forming these Alliance networks is a big step in the right direction. He suggested learning how the response framework works at all levels of government and looking for ways for the Galveston-Houston Alliance to be a part.

Mr. Jaynes was followed by Lori Foley, Vice President of Emergency Programs at Heritage Preservation, who spoke about the importance of the Alliance for Response initiative. She noted that Alliance for Response picks right up on FEMA's theme of communication and collaboration, with the idea to start local and grow into the big picture of emergency response. A network to advocate for the protection of local cultural collections is essential because heritage institutions contribute to local economies and provide a sense of normalcy after a disaster. Cultural heritage is valuable and vulnerable, and currently 80% of cultural institutions don't have an emergency plan with staff trained to carry it out. One of the keys to preparedness is having a relationship with emergency and first responders, and other Alliance networks nationwide have had much success influencing local emergency management policy after establishing these relationships.

Steven Pine, Conservator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and a member of the American Institute for Conservation's Collections Emergency Response Team (AIC-CERT), then spoke about AIC-CERT's contribution to the field. AIC-CERT was formed after several museums were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. AIC recognized that it would be beneficial to have a team of conservators trained in collections response to assist after major disasters. The teams can be deployed to regional disasters and will use their expert training to help assess and triage the damage. They also have a 24/7 emergency hotline to connect institutional needs to professionals with the appropriate areas of specialization. Mr. Pine noted that AIC-CERT strives to reach out to affected institutions and supports local efforts for preparedness like Alliance for Response. It's important to have cultural heritage institutions engaged in the emergency response framework to give them a voice after disasters.

Following Mr. Pine, a panel of emergency responders gave an overview of emergency response procedures. Dwayne Jones, Executive Director of the Galveston Historical Foundation, served as moderator and explained that the goal of the panel was to give participants an opportunity to get to know their emergency managers.

Larry Mousseau, Planning & Operations Supervisor for Harris County Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, spoke about emergency response at the county level. The county works with local jurisdictions on developing emergency plans to be prepared for any possible disaster. To do this they collaborate with a huge number of community organizations, and a local Alliance for Response group should get involved in the conversations. The county emergency management office also offers facility tours as a means of outreach to the community. Their website, www.HCOEM.org, is a great emergency management primer and resource for the public.

Lori Schwarz, Assistant Director of Planning and Special Projects at the Galveston Historic Preservation Office, then spoke about emergency response at the city level. Recent devastating hurricanes like Katrina, Rita, and Ike have been a wakeup call for the region, and the city of Galveston takes all storms very seriously. They do a lot of resident preparation and hold a large hurricane meeting every year to meet with community members. This meeting would be a great way for a local Alliance network to get to know the city emergency management staff. The Galveston Historic Preservation Office has also been trying to collect emergency management plans from individual institutions to keep on file. Ms. Schwarz commented that it's not always easy to bridge the gap, but it's so important to reach out and express the needs of your institution to local emergency management.

Creig Romero, Public Assistance Specialist, and Dan Brogdon, Asst. Public Assistance Officer, both spoke from the Texas Department of Emergency Management about state-level emergency response. At the state level emergency management really goes into effect in the aftermath of a storm. The State of Texas will assess the situation after a disaster and work to get federal disaster assistance from FEMA if needed. The state emergency management office serves as the advocates between FEMA and local applicants to make the recovery process as smooth as possible.

Dwayne Jones then posed several questions to the panel to address key issues in bridging the gap between the cultural and emergency management fields. In response to the question of how cultural groups can better contact emergency managers, it was suggested that you start by providing your emergency response plan to your local emergency responders to keep on file. In response to the question of how cultural institutions can prepare for disasters, Larry Mousseau pointed out that it is important to start by reading state plans to get to know the structure of emergency response.

In response to the question of how cultural institutions can differentiate themselves from other organizations, Lori Schwarz noted that cultural institutions are often used as a safe haven following a storm, and this should be used to their advantage. Larry Mousseau mentioned that the county keeps track of "cooling centers" for relief following storms, and if you can be added to that list, you'll be considered a critical facility in the city.

In response to a question about making sure that the cultural community is a part of emergency response training and education, Lori Foley mentioned that FEMA is currently developing a course for emergency personnel on cultural resources awareness at their Emergency Management Institute. Lori Schwarz suggested that you should ask first responders to hold training events at your institution, and Dan Brogdon suggested that you ask emergency responders to be on your planning team. By getting them involved early they will be more receptive to adding cultural heritage to their agenda.

In talking about what can be done to help expedite response time to cultural institutions, Dan Brogdon mentioned that emergency managers are very document oriented, and it's important to make sure you have all of your documentation dry, safe, and readily available. It's also critical to have connections in place with emergency managers so that you are notified of important response and recovery events, such as the FEMA Public Assistance meetings.

Lori Foley then closed the morning session with some suggestions of activities a Galveston-Houston Alliance for Response network might undertake. She suggested ensuring that all participating institutions have or are working on disaster plans. dPlan and other models are available online, and Amigos Library Services in Dallas is available to help review disaster plans. Once they are complete disaster plans should be provided to your local first responders and city and county emergency managers. Touring a local Emergency Operations Center or a disaster recovery facility like Blackmon Mooring will lead to new contacts in the emergency response world. Opening your facility to first responders for training and getting involved in the local hurricane conference are also ways to begin to get to know your emergency responders. Ms. Foley repeated the theme of the morning that "it is incumbent upon all of us to reach out and help each other."

Lunch was sponsored by Blackmon Mooring.

After lunch, a panel of speakers presented information on the importance of disaster planning and the tools to use when making a disaster plan. Kristine Barbier, Public Assistance, Program Specialist / Outreach Officer for FEMA Region VI, spoke first about the process of gaining federal disaster assistance from FEMA. Following a major disaster, FEMA's recovery division provides individual/public assistance, housing and unemployment assistance, and hazard mitigation planning assistance. FEMA cost shares the funding; generally you are responsible for 25% of the costs, but this can be reduced in bigger disasters.

Once a federal disaster has been declared, the state emergency management office and FEMA will hold applicant briefings all over the state. It is important to make sure you are invited to these meetings; previous contact with state emergency management officials will help. At the meeting you can submit a request for public assistance, and then FEMA and the state will work with you to make a project plan that will be put through a FEMA review. After the review, FEMA money for the project goes to the state and they serve as your grantor for the recovery period.

To be applicable for the funds you must be a State/City/County/Tribal organization or nonprofit that performs a critical service. Nonprofit libraries, museums, arts organizations, and all other collecting institutions open to the general public have to apply to the Small Business Administration for a low-interest loan before applying to FEMA. You also must have an eligible facility that your organization owns, was in active use at the time of the disaster, and is located in a designated disaster area.

It is critical to document everything during the recovery process, including repair or debris removal that occurs before the application is submitted. Keeping detailed logs of donated labor can offset the final cost share. For best results it is important to start preparing now by having updated insurance, detailed building infrastructure maps, and photographs of the building and the collections. Establishing lines of communication with city and state government before the disaster is also very important; if you have a plan and contacts in place you can expect a much smoother recovery.

Following Ms. Barbier, Steve Rock and Teresa Carter spoke about the creation of disaster plans and pre-existing contracts. Mr. Rock, Senior Program Manager at The Louis Berger Group, shared that lessons learned from Ike prove that pre-existing contracts will get you through disasters faster. A pre-existing contract serves to identify major issues in advance in order to lessen the burden of recovery. Ms. Carter,

Technical Director at The Louis Berger Group, pointed out that the most important part about planning is actually sitting down and doing it; it's too late to start when a disaster happens. You should fill your plan with critical information like staff and vendor contacts, building layout and infrastructure, and a detailed collections inventory. It's important for staff to understand their roles and also to understand the local recovery process. She also noted that communication with other cultural institutions and emergency managers is essential to understanding what you will need following a disaster.

Preston Huff, Regional Liaison for the National Archives and Records Administration, then shared some tips to consider when creating an emergency response plan. It's important to keep or move priority collections away from the bottom and top floors of buildings, and having a plan to react quickly will help avoid mold. NARA's REPAR-E (Records Emergency Preparation and Response-External) serves as an emergency resource for non-governmental records agencies.

Lori Foley and Dwayne Jones closed the day by noting that networking is critical in emergency response, and the goal of the Forum was to be an impetus for a long-lasting regional network. Those with suggestions for the network or interested in joining the Steering Committee should contact Dwayne Jones at dwayne.jones@galvestonhistory.org for more information.