

Philadelphia Alliance for Response Informs, Builds Bridges

By Tom Claerson, PALINET

The Philadelphia Alliance for Response Forum, held June 13th at the College of Physicians, attracted nearly 90 culture heritage professionals and emergency managers for a day of presentations and discussion on working together to prepare for and recover from disasters.

The event, one of the first such meetings in the United States, was funded by Heritage Preservation (a non-profit national preservation advocacy organization) through a grant from the Fidelity Foundation. A luncheon at the event was sponsored by Munters Moisture Control.

Diversity a Hallmark of the Event

Joan Decker, Commissioner of Records for the City of Philadelphia, and one of the chief planners of the meeting, introduced the event and talked about the wide variety of local sponsors, including the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts (CCAHA), the Delaware Valley Archivists Group, the National Archives and Records Administration Mid-Atlantic Region, PALINET, the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCSL), and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC), as well as the City of Philadelphia and College of Physicians. All of the sponsoring groups had representatives on the event's planning committee.

The audience was diverse as well, with representatives of a variety of museum types, libraries, archives, historical societies, local government, and commercial organizations with strong interests in the cultural community.

Decker focused her comments on the "driving reasons" behind the event: the national attention on cultural heritage disasters following Hurricane Katrina, Philadelphia's long-standing reputation as a "treasure trove of history," minimizing the impact of future disasters, and providing "a wake-up call on disaster preparedness for local cultural institutions."

A Grassroots Movement

Jane Long, Vice President for Emergency Programs at Heritage Preservation, has been the "Miracle-Gro" of the grassroots Alliance for Response Initiative. She discussed the spectrum of disaster planning tools developed by her organization in concert with cultural and emergency professionals, then gave attendees an overview of the previous Forums held in Dallas, Boston, Cincinnati, New York, Seattle, Atlanta, and several California cities. Long reported that the Alliance for Response program has helped 14 communities and over 500 cultural heritage institutions in just over two years, and local disaster response networks, partnerships, and projects have resulted from each one of the previous events.

In all of the previous programs, a key outcome was to begin a continuing dialogue between cultural heritage professionals and local emergency managers and responders, including Police, Fire, Homeland Security, and local, state, and regional emergency management agencies.

Long spoke of the frameworks and protocols for disaster response which already exist at the local, state, and national levels, but she noted that the initial response always starts locally. Emergency responders can help us with preparedness, Long noted, "by pinpointing hazards specific to our locations, and making us aware of how cultural heritage institutions can fit into the strong emergency management infrastructure" which already exists in Philadelphia.

In previous meetings, and at the Philadelphia Forum, emergency management representatives heard about the importance of cultural heritage institutions in documenting local history, boosting the local economy, and reaching out to our communities in times of disaster. The valuable, but vulnerable buildings and collections we hold need special attention, particularly when disaster strikes.

An Infrastructure of Cooperation

An advantage Philadelphia has over some earlier Alliance for Response Forum sites is a long-standing existing infrastructure of cooperation between cultural heritage institutions. There are many cultural consortia in Southeastern Pennsylvania; a panel presentation featuring three important groups gave attendees an overview of the rich quilt of assistance available in the area.

Derick Dreher, Director of the Rosenbach Museum and Library, and the current Chair of the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries, discussed the many initiatives of PACSCL, and focused on the group's efforts in preserving cultural resources. Tom Kaiden, Chief Operating Officer of the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, profiled a wide variety of programs for GPCA's 330 members, including a Cultural Resource Directory, Online Job Bank, Phillyfunguide.com, and "Breakfast Club" Research Roundtables which feature discussions of cultural marketing research and trends. This initiative drew the interest of many in attendance, and launched thoughts of how future Philadelphia Alliance for Response efforts might move forward. Kristen Froehlich, Director of the Collection at the Atwater-Kent Museum of Philadelphia, and a dynamic representative of the Museum Council of Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley, spoke of her organization's history of professional development and networking. Through a variety of events, behind-the-scenes tours, brown-bag lunches, and other gatherings, the Museum Council has woven a web of support for museums in the region.

Each of the presenters discussed the strengths of their organization's initiatives, and all expressed an interest in participating in future cooperative disaster preparedness efforts which could benefit the cultural community.

Emergency Panel Enlightens the Crowd

At every Alliance for Response Forum held so far, the Emergency Responders' Panel has been a highlight of the day, and that was certainly the case in Philadelphia. The top emergency professionals from across the city discussed new initiatives and trends in disaster preparedness and response.

Mary Ann Marrocolo, Deputy Managing Director, Emergency Management, City of Philadelphia, discussed a number of new programs which can benefit cultural heritage repositories. Chief among these are "Incident Notification," where cultural heritage institutions can be notified of disasters within the city; identification of essential personnel for access to cultural sites after emergencies; and linking cultural heritage institutions to the City's Emergency Operations Center. Marrocolo concluded by saying cultural heritage institutions were "a vital part of Philadelphia's economy and vibrancy," and discussed how she wants to work with the cultural community to make sure we are part of the important new ways the city is keeping its citizens and sites safe.

Lt. Michael Grant of the Fire Prevention Division, Philadelphia Fire Department, discussed a concept that was new to many in the audience, "Shelter-in-Place." This safety option comes into play when circumstances (especially time and type of disaster, such as a chemical incident) do not allow evacuation from public places, and require sheltering occupants inside a building. Grant also spoke

of enhancing shelter facilities by closing windows, shutting down heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems, and other methods providing added safety. Participants expressed interest in learning even more about shelter-in-place in future Alliance for Response meetings.

Captain Walt Smith, Commanding Officer, Homeland Security, Philadelphia Police Department, discussed the role of law enforcement in disaster response, and focused on workplace security for cultural institutions. Asking participants to review, update, and especially practice their Emergency Plans, Smith focused on having us consider, and add to our plans, the threats from Anthrax, Bomb Threats, and Suspicious Objects.

The final presenter on the “Emergency Management Perspective” panel, Karin Crawford, is Program Coordination Branch Chief of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Region III National Preparedness Division. Crawford gave an excellent, practical presentation on FEMA assistance after a disaster, as well as preparedness tips for attendees to consider now.

FEMA Region III covers the Mid-Atlantic States, and assists institutions and citizens in preparing for, mitigating, responding to, and recovering from disasters. Crawford explained the “Declarations Process,” where local and state government and FEMA representatives jointly conduct a Preliminary Damage Assessment of a stricken area, the Governor of the state requests assistance, FEMA makes a recommendation to the President, and, if warranted, the President declares a disaster.

According to Crawford, disaster assistance is coordinated through the state’s emergency management agency. Public and non-profit agencies can receive disaster funding or direct assistance to help with critical expense that cannot be otherwise covered. Most of this assistance is through loans administered by the Small Business Administration. Cultural heritage institutions are also eligible for public assistance funding following a disaster.

Crawford closed with some important points about preparedness, including the fact that people and institutions should “be prepared to help themselves for the first 72 hours after a disaster” while recovery efforts are being coordinated. Identifying and developing agreements with recovery contractors, developing mutual aid networks, and working with insurance representatives were other key suggestions.

Building the Disaster Network

Julie Page, former Preservation Librarian with the University of California-San Diego Libraries, and now Co-coordinator of the statewide California Preservation Program, began the afternoon presentations. Page is a national leader in disaster preparedness for libraries, and spoke on developing disaster response and recovery networks, with a focus on the California Experience. She spoke of regional disaster networks based in San Diego, Riverside, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. These groups provide disaster response training, centrally-located caches of disaster supplies, and have even developed mutual aid agreements allowing staff from one library to work at another institution during disaster recovery.

Page also introduced a topic which was new to most of the audience – VOADs, or Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters. VOADs include the Red Cross, Salvation Army, Volunteers of America, and other organizations. She pointed participants to the Southeastern Pennsylvania chapter at www.sepavoad.org.

The final presentations of the afternoon provided an entertaining hybrid of humor with the horror we face in disasters. Laura Hartz Stanton, Director of Preservation Services at CCAHA, and Douglas

Miller, Historic Site Administrator at Pennsbury Manor, spoke of providing and utilizing local resources for disaster response.

CCAHA's work in preservation, conservation, and disaster planning was familiar to the majority of attendees. Hartz Stanton discussed the aid CCAHA can provide in assessing an institution's disaster vulnerability, as well as telephone and on-site assistance and treatment. CCAHA has a "Crash Cart" of Disaster Supplies and a Freezer for mitigating further deterioration of damaged materials.

Miller provided a model for attendees in the way he and his organization have built an environment of cooperation and trust with local emergency responders through a series of emergencies. Whether battling fires during holiday receptions, flooding, animals attacking artifacts, or other disaster situations, Miller and Pennsbury Manor's close communication with local responders has resulted in quick and caring response.

Charting Next Steps

Attendees and presenters split into three breakout sessions mid-afternoon. Joan Decker and Robert Cheetham of Avencia led a discussion of the use of G.I.S. (Geographic Information Systems) for mapping cultural institution locations and assisting in disaster response. Laura Hartz Stanton and Glenn Ruzicka, CCAHA's Director of Conservation, provided further details on disaster recovery, focusing on institutional salvage priorities, security issues in disasters, and utilization of freeze-drying for water-damaged materials. Heritage Preservation's Jane Long and Mary Rogers led discussions on building disaster planning relationships, and suggested issues for future meetings of the Philadelphia Alliance Group, including identification of lead organizations, scope of mutual aid activities, and the need to include further administrative, security, and operations managers in future Alliance efforts.

Evaluations of the meeting showed that the first responder information, shelter-in-place, mutual aid agreements, and working with Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters were among the greatest areas of interest to the audience. A vast majority of the respondents said they wanted to be involved in future Alliance activities. Most urgent among follow-up activities were developing or updating institutional disaster plans, and implementing a method to build a disaster network which would allow institutions to work together on disaster preparedness and response. A wide variety of training needs were also suggested.

The Philadelphia Alliance for Response Planning Committee is working on a variety of followup activities to the June 13 Forum. Please hold the morning of September 18, 2007 on your schedule for a meeting at the Atwater-Kent Museum. More details and an agenda will be available soon.