

# September 11<sup>th</sup>: Art Loss, Damage, and Repercussions

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## THE HERITAGE EMERGENCY NATIONAL TASK FORCE

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The Heritage Emergency Task Force was created in 1995 in recognition that no one agency or organization can alone provide assistance, expertise, and resources for the cultural community in a time of disaster. Co-sponsored by the nonprofit Heritage Preservation and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Task Force is composed of more than 30 federal agencies and national service organizations concerned with protecting the nation's cultural heritage.

It seeks to help museums, libraries, archives, historical societies, and historic sites protect their cultural and historic resources from natural disasters and other emergencies by promoting preparedness and mitigation measures and by providing expert information on response and salvage. The Task Force also provides information to individuals about what they can do to salvage treasured heirlooms damaged by a disaster.

In October 2001, the Task Force set out to conduct an assessment of the impact of the September 11th events on cultural properties in lower Manhattan and at the Pentagon. Not only did we want to document the extent of damage, but also to evaluate how prepared institutions were to deal with emergencies of any kind. Support for this project was provided by the Bay Foundation and National Endowment for the Humanities.

Survey forms were mailed to approximately 120 museums, libraries, archives, and exhibit spaces located mainly south of 14th Street in lower Manhattan. To date [February 28], we have received responses from 52 institutions, for a response rate of 43%. We anticipate the following figures will vary slightly in the final report as the data is analyzed more thoroughly.

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As you probably know, with the exception of institutions located within the World Trade Center complex, there was a minimum of permanent physical damage to cultural institutions in the area. 96% of the respondents to our survey reported no structural damage to their buildings, and 88% reported no damage or soiling to their collections. Dust, smoke, and falling debris were cited as the primary causes of those that did report damage or soiling. Less than a quarter reported subsequent damage or problems related to the disaster.

However, a full 78% reported their institutions were forced to close as a result of September 11th and that their communications systems were disrupted, some for as long as four months.

Since our survey did not concentrate primarily on economic attendance issues, I will only briefly note a few findings in those areas:

71% reported that public visitation decreased after September 11. Again, this figure so far exceeds the number of institutions reporting damage that we conclude the decrease was primarily due to problems arising from the aftermath of the disaster, including restricted public access to the area, transportation difficulties, and disruptions in communications.

Comments we received from many respondents indicated that economic impact was among their chief concerns. Loss of income was directly related to the decrease in public visitation, as many of the organizations saw a sharp decrease in admission fees and revenues from shop sales. In addition, many saw contributions diverted to the rescue and recovery effort at the World Trade Center.

Some of the most interesting information the survey revealed regarding emergency management issues showed that although most organizations escaped long-term damage on September 11, it is clear that less than half were minimally prepared for any type of emergency. Just 44% had a written emergency response or emergency communications plan. Similarly, only 42% had staff trained in disaster response procedures. 60% indicated they had an emergency evacuation plan.

Several respondents indicated in comments that no plan would have been adequate for the events of September 11. However, that view only holds true if institutions were located in the Trade Center itself or immediately adjacent to it, such as the archives of the Helen Keller International Foundation housed at 90 West Street. In a number of instances, institutions located just blocks away from Ground Zero escaped serious damage due to previous emergency planning and immediate response measures.

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When asked if there was time on September 11 to implement response plans:

- 40% indicated they were able to put at least part of their plans into effect
- 56% said their buildings were evacuated in an orderly way
- 46% said doors, windows, and other openings were closed or sealed
- 33% shut down their building's other systems

Given the nature of the disaster, such simple steps as sealing openings and turning off ventilation systems probably accounted for the lack of reported damage to collections in the area surrounding the World Trade Center site. In all probability, these measures were taken in response to the smoke and fire when the planes first hit the Twin Towers and not in anticipation of the buildings total collapse. However, such preventive action later proved invaluable when the clouds of debris spilled over lower Manhattan.

While most institutions had first aid supplies on hand on September 11, only 38% had emergency communications equipment and even fewer, 30%, had the tools necessary to document damage for insurance claims. A mere 10% had supplies or equipment needed for the salvage of collections.

Perhaps the most disturbing finding was that only slightly more than half of the respondents had a current collections catalogue or inventory (58%). Of those with catalogues less than five years old, only 41% described them as complete. Even more alarming, 53% reported keeping no off-site copy of their catalogues. Had the destruction of September 11 been more widespread, many cultural organizations would have been left with no complete record of what had been lost.

On a more encouraging note, the survey found that cultural organizations recognized many of their previous shortcomings and were prepared to take steps to improve their emergency management capabilities. Here is a preview of areas the report will discuss:

- 70% of the respondents said their emergency plan should be revised in light of September 11.
- When asked to describe the most important elements of a new plan, the most common answer was to create or update a complete collections catalogue and to keep a copy stored off-site. Other priorities included improving communications strategy and revising insurance coverage.

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- Respondents considered emergency management training for employees to be a high priority. 68% said such training would be of value to their staff. It is clear from the survey that access to professional emergency management training should be increased, and further, be made available to all staff, not just those charged with security responsibilities.
- Also, standard training curricula should include "continuity of operations" models adapted from business. In the aftermath of September 11, a number of cultural institutions experienced fewer problems with damage to collections than with interrupted communications, lack of public access, and loss of business.
- The survey showed that most institutions lacked a basic understanding of how government disaster support is structured. Only 53% of respondents said they were familiar with sources of government financial recovery assistance prior to September 11. The most frequently recognized sources were FEMA (55%) and city or state agencies (44%). Only 30% cited the Small Business Administration, believing that non-profit organizations are ineligible for SBA assistance.
- They need to know that, in fact, private non-profits, such as museums and libraries must apply for a SBA loan first before approaching FEMA for the remainder of the damages. And in New York and Virginia, nonprofits affected by the events of September 11 are now eligible for Economic Injury Disaster Loans as well.
- The Task Force, working with FEMA, NEA and SBA, made this information available through our brochure Resources for Recovery. However, it is clear that we must distribute it even more widely.
- Finally, we must find ways to encourage organizations to keep complete and updated catalogues or inventories of their holdings and to store copies off site. With destruction of the magnitude experienced September 11, these catalogues may be the only record we have left of important artistic and historic treasures.

Some respondents noted that there was little or no funding for such efforts. Proper documentation and off-site storage of backup copies should be regarded as disaster mitigation measures. The Task Force will examine how it can be helpful in encouraging private and public support for this kind of work.

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Complete results of our survey, together with expanded findings, will be included in a report to be issued in April. I would be pleased to provide copies to those of you who are interested. The website is [www.heritagepreservation.org](http://www.heritagepreservation.org).