



Developing a Museum Collections Emergency Operations Plan, Part 1



MCEOP: What is an MCEOP and why do museums need one? No, it is not some newly discovered ancient Greek monster ala the Odyssey. So what is it?

It stands for Museum Collection Emergency Operations Plan. To some of you that might sound even worse than a new discovered monster, but it is a critical piece of your emergency preparedness plan. Even if you do not have an Emergency Operations Plan for your entire institution (which you should, by the way), an MCEOP is essential if you have collections and want to protect them during an incident.

Where do you start developing an MCEOP?

Start by identifying risks:

- Risks posed by your facilities: How many individual buildings does your institution have that hold collections? What condition are they in and is the maintenance up to date? Look at the location of your main building or any other properties and the risks posed by each location. If you only have one building, are there any issues related to the building's fabric or your security that might affect the collections. Examine all potential issues.
- Environmental risks related to your location: is your institution near a body of water such that flooding is an issue? Are there weather related issues like hurricanes or tornadoes; heavy snow; heavy rain; microbursts or other environmental hazards near your institution?
- Human caused risks to your Institution or collection: vandals; civil unrest; protests, etc. There are also the risks posed by events—internal events or use of facilities for weddings, meetings, and other external events.

Remember that *LIFE SAFETY* is your first concern!

As you examine potential risks, look at your security related to those risks.

- Is there a need to upgrade your security policies and procedures? For example: Key control (who has keys to the building(s); collection areas; other secure areas); do you allow after hours access—if yes, in which areas of the facility; is your security during events adequate for the event, etc.
- Do you have fire detection and suppression systems? Are they monitored and tested at least yearly; does the institution have a practiced response to alarms?
- Technology: do you have Cameras, alarms; motion sensors; glass break sensors, etc. Are the systems tested regularly (at least once a year), monitored and working correctly?

Also look at your overall security to determine any vulnerabilities that might pose risks to collections, buildings and people.

Collection Priorities

Can you save everything? No. What can you save and does that entail grabbing anything that is to hand or should you plan for what to evacuate? How do you decide?

The process of deciding what will be relocated or salvaged first is something that needs to be done in advance of emergency incidents. There are many criteria for deciding what is First Priority to evacuate or salvage and they are not mutually exclusive. These are the top two criteria:

- Is the item mission critical? Start with your mission—your collection should all be mission related, but some items reflect that mission more than others—what we call mission critical. Begin with your Scope of Collections and Collection Policy along with your documentation to determine which items are mission critical. If you had to start over, which 10 or 20 items would allow the museum to do that? Which items best tell the story central to the museum's mission.
- Is the item on loan to the institution? All Loans are considered High Priority because they do not belong to the Institution

In addition, it is critical to have your accession and deaccession records on your priority list and have backups of your collection documentation and other vital records stored off-site.

In alphabetical order, here are some additional criteria used by the National Park Service:

- Associated with Eminent Individual(s) or Event(s) or Resource(s)
- High Frequency of Use

- High Interpretive and/or Educational Value
- High Monetary Value
- High Research and Scientific Value
- Rare or Irreplaceable
- Type Specimen
- Voucher Specimen

Usually a combination of these AND Mission critical will determine the High Priority items

Once your short list of First Priority items for salvage or relocation is established, there are Secondary and Tertiary Priority items that should be established to prioritize what should come next after the First Priority items are safe or salvaged.

For the MCEOP we use the METAG color coding system to identify First/High Priority; Second Priority and Third Priority Items.

- METAG Color Coding for Priority Collection Items
 - First Priority = **RED**
 - Second Priority = **YELLOW**
 - Third Priority = **GREEN**

If you have a large collection and some things are not considered salvageable or necessary you might have a Fourth tier that is Black.

Once the museum has established their RED Priority Items, the objects on the list should be tagged with their color code and if possible consolidated and moved to an easily accessible location for quick removal. There is a balance that must be acknowledged in moving your higher priority objects together—that is the need for quick response and removal verses the higher potential for theft of your most valuable items. Each institution must decide how to handle this dilemma.

Your Yellow and Green priorities should also be marked with their respective color code. This will enable you to determine the next set of collections that should be relocated and/or salvaged once the Red priority items are taken care of. Green priority items would be the last to be salvaged or relocated.

Next time we will discuss other priorities to include in your MCEOP along with the rest of the items necessary for this Plan.

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MS267: Museum Ethics
July 2023

MS218: Collection Inventories
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MS007: The Mission Statement: Is It Really That
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