



Establishing Relationships with Disaster Recovery Vendors

Introduction

We create our disaster plans in advance of an incident so we are prepared to tackle whatever comes our way. For the same reason, it is wise to establish relationships and contracts with recovery vendors before a situation occurs. Advance planning and communication allow both parties to learn what each expects and requires from the other. Most institutions do not have the space, equipment, or resources necessary to freeze-dry wet documents or treat large quantities of documents for mold or pest infestations on their own. Recovery vendors are available to help. Recovery vendors typically offer services such as freeze-drying documents, cleaning and sterilizing documents that have been tainted by dirty water or soot, and mold removal. They may also offer specialized services such as recovering digital storage media, photographs, blueprints, and so on. Some offer on-site services in addition to off-site facilities, and others contract aspects of the process to third parties.

How do you find a reliable vendor? If yours is a government institution, statewide contracts may already be in place and available for you to utilize. Otherwise, you can contact colleagues for their experiences and opinions, ask for recommendations from conservation centers in your region, check vendor lists such as the one found on COSTEP MA's website (<http://www.mass.gov/mblc/costepma/>), or check your state's vendor list. The three vendors listed on the COSTEP MA website are approved Massachusetts state vendors.

Once you know who to contact, the first step is to contact each vendor and request an on-site visit. This provides an opportunity for the vendor to assess your facility's layout, for you to evaluate the services they can provide for your collections, and the information you need from each other. Typically vendors do not charge for the initial site visit and account set-up. Fees will be agreed upon when you finalize the contract.

From the Vendor's Perspective

The vendor may want to record details such as the size and availability of parking near your facility. This will allow the vendor to know the type and number of vehicles that can be used when they need to respond to an event at your facility. Vendors will want to know whether you have space on-site available for air-drying materials. Having an understanding of the size and location of your collections in your buildings will also increase the vendor's ability to respond effectively depending on the conditions. In addition to understanding the types of materials in your collections (bound and/or single sheets of paper; types of paper and inks; magnetic media; audio/visual/photographic materials; paintings and prints; etc.), the vendor will need to know whether you have any unusual formats that will require special handling. Other questions can include the following:



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- Do you have original irreplaceable records or published materials?
- Do you have concerns regarding electronic records?
- Do your collections contain material with sensitive information or material that will require special security?
- Do you have a prioritized list of collections for recovery purposes?
 - If not, take advantage of this opportunity to create one. Don't forget to consider what must be saved for legal and continuity-of-business purposes and what can be replaced.
- Do you have staff trained in document recovery techniques?
- Do you have disaster recovery supplies already on hand? If so, where are they stored?

Vendors may require access to floor plans that detail vault or storage space locations and other information normally restricted to internal personnel. In addition, they'll need to know additional details about your facility:

- How old is your building?
- How many floors are your collections stored on? What is the total square footage of the building? Of storage spaces?
- Where are the vaults located? What type of storage do you use (e.g., cabinets, boxes, open shelving)?
- Where are the exits and entrances?
- Is there a loading dock? Would it be available for the vendor's use?
- What type of HVAC system do you have?
- Where are your circuit breakers located? Do you have a generator for back-up power?
- Do you have elevators? Do you have a service elevator? Where are the elevators located in relation to your collections?

Vendors will also be interested in your insurance policies:

- Are you insured through an insurance company, or are you self-insured?
- If you do carry insurance for your facility and collections, what company do you use? Does the vendor have a working relationship with your insurance company?
- Do you have insurance that will cover your collections while they are being transported/are off-site?
- If you do not have insurance, do you have funding on hand to pay for recovery services?

What is your understanding of what the vendor will do for you and your collections? Does that differ from what they are able to provide? Be sure to voice your expectations of each other. It is vital that the vendor understand what your expectations are and that you understand what they expect of your institution.



From the Institution's Perspective

In setting up meetings with prospective vendors, visit their facilities to see how and where they do their work. Ask questions such as:

- Does the vendor have equipment that can be brought to your facility, or will everything need to be transferred? Do they own or lease the equipment?
- What drying technologies can they offer?
- How does the vendor track your collections while they're in the vendor's possession? In addition to your own lists and procedures, you will want to understand how the vendor tracks your collections on their end.
- Do they specialize in treatment of fire-damaged documents?
- Are they capable of treating mold/bacteria?
- Can the vendor offer training for your staff and help with preparedness/mitigation planning?
 - If so, are there additional costs associated with this training?
- Can the vendor be put on stand-by in the early stages of an imminent event?

Understanding where and to whom your collections will be shipped for treatment and storage is important because some vendors may send portions of the recovery work to third parties. Third-party involvement may complicate matters and increase costs. If this is the case, find out how you can contact the third-party company to evaluate their facilities and services. Ascertain the vendor's resources and capabilities, their strengths and weaknesses, and what services they can and cannot provide directly at this preliminary stage. Take this opportunity to speak with their staff, in particular, any trained laboratory staff with document recovery experience. Don't forget to check references from colleagues and those you obtain from the vendor.

When you do agree to a contract, make sure you read it over and have your counsel or a lawyer review it before you sign. Given that different vendors may provide different services and that in the event of a wide-spread disaster all vendors will be taxed responding to institutions in the area, it is recommended that you have multiple vendors on contract.

Be sure to set up an account or profile for your organization with each vendor. In concert with their site visit, this provides necessary information for the vendor in advance, including contact information, a sense of your collections and concerns, and an awareness of your facility, its layout, and access issues. Having the information on file means their initial response will be more tailored to your needs and that you will have access to assistance sooner than if you had to establish contacts following the disaster.

Once you have vendors on contract and have set up your accounts with them, there's still one more important step. Make sure your disaster plan has been completed and updated. Include the names and



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contact information for all of the vendors you have on contract, including after-hours contact information. Consider adding a list of basic information that the vendor will need to know when you call for assistance, such as: the primary contact at your organization; the type and extent of damage; the type of materials that have been affected; and if any safety concerns exist (e.g., contamination, hazardous collection materials, structural issues, and so on).

Always ask for a written estimate for cost and time and a scope of work or project plan. Institutions should request a detailed scope of work that avoids the use of vague phrases such as “dry documents,” “sterilize documents,” and “clean documents.” The scope needs to go into detail about how the treatment will be handled, temperature ranges, humidity levels, methods, and locations.

Bear in mind that the stabilization process includes a number of different costs such as labor, packing materials, possibly shipping fees, and a monthly cold-storage fee. While the costs may seem daunting, it is better to undertake the necessary care and treatment during the recovery process. Not acting immediately can incur additional costs caused by subsequent damage – such as mold – that can occur in the days following the event. Certain services may be offered by the vendor that you should be prepared to pay for, such as:

- removal or “pack-out” of the materials, which will include reboxing fees
- transportation of the materials to and from your facility
- freezing/vacuum freeze-drying, or low-pressure desiccant drying
- surface cleaning or sterilization of materials
- inventorying the materials
- storage
- imaging of documents
- recovery of non-standard formats or electronic records
- odor removal
- destruction of records, which necessitates a certificate of destruction
- labor and equipment charges

Once the emergency call has been made and the response is underway, you should ask what sort of access you will have to your collections. For instance, documents that undergo the freeze-drying process will be unavailable for at least 10–14 days. When low-pressure vapor desiccants are used, you may have access within 24 hours. An additional concern will be the type of security that will be in place during the treatment process.

You should feel comfortable asking your vendors where you are in the response queue. As mentioned earlier, having an account in advance will help speed the response to your institution, but in a widespread disaster, vendor resources will be stretched thin, which is another reason to have contracts with



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multiple vendors. The amount of time you must wait for the arrival of a vendor will affect how long your collections need additional security and attention on-site and will also affect continuity of business for your organization.

Conclusion

When the vendor returns your materials, bring your staff together to assess the vendor's services. How was their response time? What was the quality of their work? Were your collections treated properly and returned in good condition? Did you receive all of the paperwork required (e.g., destruction certificates) in a timely manner? This assessment will help you with future disaster planning. You may decide to extend contracts with some vendors and not renew contracts with others.

We know it is important to update disaster plans, but it is equally important to keep your vendor relationships up to date. When interviewing potential vendors, set up an initial site visit, ask questions about their services, whether they outsource any treatments, where their locations are, and any other questions that are pertinent to your collections and needs. When there are changes to your circumstances, remember to update your account profile with your vendors. As cultural stewards, we take the care of our collections seriously. Careful selection of recovery vendors is a vital part of that process.

Resources

COSTEP MA Website:

<http://mblc.state.ma.us/costepma/resources/links.html>

New York State Archives, *Records Advisory: Working with Disaster Recovery Vendors*

http://www.archives.nysed.gov/a/records/mr_disaster_vendors.shtml

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