
Sustaining an Active Local Disaster Preparedness Program: Best Practices of Alliance for Response Pittsburgh

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Abstract:

This paper outlines the best practices of Alliance for Response Pittsburgh (AFR Pgh), the regional chapter of a national disaster response initiative under the umbrella of the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. The group's mission is to provide a forum for information, cooperation, and communication among emergency management organizations, first responders, and cultural heritage institutions. Established in 2008, AFR Pgh remains active and has created lasting impact in the greater Pittsburgh and Southwestern Pennsylvania region while many other AFR chapters have failed to thrive. In hopes of preparing other groups for the inevitable hurdles involved in cooperative disaster planning, AFR Pgh shares its history, challenges, and lessons learned.

Keywords: Alliance for Response, emergency preparedness, disaster response, shared resources, cultural heritage

Introduction

A heap of wet books and magazines lay jumbled in the parking lot. Soaked negatives and prints hung from a chain-link fence to dry under the cloudy sky. Volunteers hustled to interleave wet books with paper towels and prop them on a spare table. Was this the scene of a water disaster affecting local library collections? No – this was the scene of a 2012 hands-on training workshop provided by Alliance for Response Pittsburgh (AFR Pgh) to individuals from cultural heritage institutions and emergency management personnel from throughout the Western Pennsylvania region. Trainings like these, as well as tours, lectures, and risk assessments have motivated AFR groups throughout the United States to establish themselves and provide these opportunities for their members.

As institutions that focus on communities and the stewardship of their collections, libraries and museums have the responsibility of being prepared for natural and manmade disasters. Recognizing

the benefit of strength in numbers, international and national cultural organizations have formed emergency preparedness networks at both the state and regional levels. Most frequently, these operate with representation from a variety of institutions such as libraries, museums, and archives; however, these local networks can be difficult to sustain due to lack of funding, weak organizational structure, and passive membership.

In 2003, Heritage Preservation launched the AFR initiative at a day-long forum in Boston to foster cooperation among cultural and historical preservation organizations, improve local planning efforts, and enhance the protection of heritage resources (FAIC, 2015). Over the next decade, Heritage Preservation, with financial assistance from the Fidelity Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), expanded its reach to support kick-off events for twenty- three regional AFR groups throughout the United States. Now under the management of the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, AFR continues to support the birth of new groups by offering a toolkit that includes kick-off forum agendas and templates as well as tips for building local relationships, planning activities, and identifying funding opportunities. While each network initially follows the same kick-off model, there is no concrete formula for running an AFR group. Activity and membership levels may vary, but each group shares the same goal to create and support shared local networks devoted to preparing for emergencies to protect the nation's cultural history.

In June 2008, AFR Pgh held its kick-off forum at the Carnegie Museum of Art. Over sixty attendees participated in presentations and breakout sessions led by representatives from a variety of cultural heritage institutions and emergency management groups. Charged with excitement and enthusiasm following the opportunity to network and brainstorm with institutions from across Allegheny County, the original forum planning committee naturally assumed leadership responsibilities for the AFR Pgh group.

In January 2010, AFR Pgh collaborated with the Pennsylvania Academic Library Consortium, Inc. (PALCI) to receive a Preservation Assistance Grant from the NEH to purchase items for a shared disaster response supply cache that would be available to member institutions. Understanding that major natural and manmade disasters are better left to professionals, AFR Pgh built a cache to include items that would be useful to address smaller incidents, specifically water damage, the most common type of disaster that Pittsburgh -area institutions are likely to face (AFR, 2012). Around the same time, the group leadership, which hadn't changed since 2008, began to experience a waning of interest, participation, and spirit. In order to manage the supply cache effectively and avoid organizational dissolution, changes had to be made in the group's leadership and mission.

Alliance for Response Pittsburgh: 2011- 2016

Steering Committee

Recognizing the important role and sense of officiality that leadership plays in sustaining a successful organization, AFR Pgh reorganized by establishing a steering committee structure in 2011. Committee members serve year-long appointments from July--June with a nomination announcement in May and elections in June. The steering committee is made up of a Chair, Vice Chair (who transitions to Chair), Secretary, Treasurer, Programming Chair, Planning Chair, and Membership/Marketing Chair. Ideally, the steering committee includes representation from a variety of institutions at varying levels of experience. Members are invited to nominate themselves or others, but in the event that nominations are sparse, the steering committee assumes the responsibility of identifying and recruiting potential leaders within the group's membership.

The steering committee's main responsibilities are to build up membership, offer frequent robust programming, and engage in targeted communication and outreach. Additionally, steering committee members have participated in national and statewide AFR meetings, presented at regional conferences on the topic of disaster response, and have formed working partnerships with nearby AFR groups,

such as the Northwest Pennsylvania network. In fact, the AFR Pgh group inspired colleagues in the Erie area to form their own network and assisted with their kick-off forum in 2013. More opportunities for cross--state partnerships are on the horizon through the creation of the Pennsylvania Cultural Resiliency Network (PaCRN). Established to support the existing AFR networks in Pennsylvania and establish new ones where needed, PaCRN is funded through a two-year National Leadership Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and primarily provides workshops and training sessions. PaCRN has also established a volunteer-based Pennsylvania Cultural Response Team to respond as needed to emergencies across the state.

Challenges

AFR Pgh's inaugural steering committee grew from the group of individuals who had taken the reins to reinvigorate our organization. It consisted of employees from three different university libraries and one representative from the City of Pittsburgh. However, each year it is difficult to recruit new members to the steering committee. Since 2011, our committee presence has been dominated by representatives from local academic libraries and museum archives with less frequent involvement from public libraries, historical societies, and local government. Though our program attendance grows and organization membership remains steady, new and returning members are often hesitant to become more involved in the leadership of our events and initiatives. Therefore, the steering committee has little turnover or institutional variety, especially in top leadership roles such as Chair and Vice Chair. Aware that a lack of committee diversity and turnover increases the likelihood of burnout, members of past committees have reached out to personal contacts to avoid organizational stagnancy. Our current incoming Chair position will be filled by an archivist from a local township historical society, showing that our recent recruitment and diversification efforts have been successful.

Best Practices

Adopt a leadership structure for your group. A steering committee of dedicated and enthusiastic individuals from a variety of cultural institutions and organizations will ensure diversity and increase the odds that the group will thrive into the future. Steering committee roles and responsibilities should be defined and documented. Establish a regular meeting schedule, taking care not to overload committee members with frequent meetings and extra organizational responsibilities. Be flexible, however, with your planning; some years you may have a full committee and others, you may scrape by with only a few.

Membership

To increase involvement, we learned to promote the group's activities at regional events such as conferences and workshops and to become active as an organization online and on social media. Prior to 2011 we had no engaging web presence beyond a simple page hosted by Heritage Preservation that provided basic information on each of the existing AFR chapters. 'Existing' here is defined as any group that held a kick-off event regardless of current activity level. Beyond getting our current members more involved, however, was the question of how we could expand our member base. We needed to reach the smaller organizations, like local historical societies, and more emergency management professionals. To do this, we needed more diverse and more frequent programming as well as better promotional methods and communication channels.

We consider our membership region as Allegheny County (in which the city of Pittsburgh is located) and any surrounding county it borders; however, we also generally serve the Western Pennsylvania region (also known as the Region 13 Task Force for our Emergency Management and Homeland Security personnel), and parts of West Virginia and eastern Ohio. Our attending members represent a wide scope of the tri-state area. A large percentage of our members represent cultural heritage institutions but we also include emergency responders and managers, city and county officials, and local Homeland Security officials. For our purposes, a member is defined as any individual who attends a meeting and wishes to actively participate in the group.

Challenges

Recruitment and retention of members is an ongoing challenge. It is especially difficult to identify and interest representatives from small institutions such as rural historical societies or landmarks –organizations that would probably benefit most from the help of a cooperative disaster network. Often these smaller groups are run by volunteers and operate with limited public hours and internet presence, making it difficult to make connections. We must rely on word of mouth or serendipitous meetings during regional disaster workshops or training. It can also be a challenge attracting our members to multiple meetings if they have limited staff at their institutions. These members may only be able to attend one program which focuses on their most crucial need.

Best Practices

Identify organizations and individuals to invite to participate in the group. Consider all cultural heritage organizations such as libraries, museums, historical societies, archives, churches, etc. Think big by reaching out to museum and public library systems. But also think small like the individual historic landmarks and small community museums or collections. Then consider other groups with whom you should establish relationships such as civic organizations, local officials, and emergency responders. The goal of AFR is to bring together people with a common goal of protecting our cultural heritage collections. The only way to raise awareness is to market your group, events, and the services you provide.

Consider inviting an emergency official to present at one of your events. In 2012, AFR Pgh invited Bob Winters, Protective Security Advisor for the Pittsburgh District, Homeland Security to speak at our National Preparedness Month event. We established a relationship with Mr. Winters who has since included us in regional emergency planning meetings, thereby introducing us to officials at the city and county level. He has been a valuable resource for contacts and free training opportunities. It isn't enough to just invite emergency managers and first responders to meetings. To build a relationship, you must also participate in their endeavors. Request to be added to their mailing lists and make an effort to attend their open meetings and training sessions. They will begin to work with you, increasing the chances of being included in their emergency preparedness and disaster response plans, when they know you. Find the individual in these organizations that will champion you and don't be discouraged if it is not a simple process. It is also very important to invite them to tours of facilities that feature collections. This helps them to understand and buy in to the value of historic and cultural collections and the importance of protecting them.

Programming

The second responsibility of our steering committee is offering participatory programming. Since our kick-off in 2008, AFR Pgh has offered twenty events which can be organized into three categories in the tables below: Education, Tours, and Trainings & Exercises. We have been fortunate to have high participation from art and historical museums in addition to libraries. A member survey in spring of 2016 revealed that our most valuable programming events are site and collection tours and disaster recovery education, followed by hands-on exercises and digital preservation events. For future programming, our members have indicated an interest in more hands-on workshops, disaster planning sessions, and mold or pest prevention education.

In May 2012, AFR Pgh offered a well-attended disaster supplies training session, the funds for which were provided by the Preservation Assistance Grant that AFR Pgh received in 2010 for the shared disaster response supply cache. Tom Clareson, Senior Digital and Preservation Services Consultant at LYRASIS led this wet materials training exercise. Clareson described the supplies included in the cache, demonstrated work-space set-up and triage, and demonstrated basic drying techniques along with how to pack up materials for freeze--drying.

Without participatory programming, we are a group of people who just communicate occasionally through email or Facebook. Whether it is an educational lecture, facility tour, or hands--on exercise, the goal is to provide our members and new attendees with knowledge that will help them in the event of a disaster. They may experience that disaster at work, home, or on their travels. It could affect their own materials or collections that belong to someone else. It may even primarily affect human safety. Regardless, whatever the knowledge they gain from AFR programs, we hope it is useful.

<i>Education</i>	
Digital preservation	Public relations protocols
Disaster response	Restoring historic properties
Integrated pest management	Risk management
Mold remediation	Storage solutions
Mutual aid agreements	Vendor presentations
National preparedness (Homeland Security)	Winter weather patterns
Personal digital archiving	Winterizing collections

<i>Tours</i>	
Andy Warhol Museum	Iron Mountain
BELFOR Property Restoration	Rodef Shalom
Carnegie Public Library (Special Collections)	Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall
Emergency Operations Center/911 Call Center	Mattress Factory

<i>Participatory Exercises</i>	
'Anatomy of a Response'	Hands-on disaster response training
CPR/AED certification	Tabletop exercise: disaster response, plan, and supplies
Fire safety and suppression workshop	

Challenges

AFR Pgh operates without a budget. There are no dues requirements and all programming is free. We cannot pay for speakers or workshops. Meeting and event refreshments are often paid for from the steering committee's own pockets. Sponsorship has sometimes been secured by vendors and institutions that have underwritten catering expenses for related events, though this can be problematic as vendors are ultimately pitching their products and services. The lack of funds can make creating effective programming difficult at times; however, the steering committee often engages in expansive networking to find the best programming opportunities that will come at no cost. In the future, we may consider some events that would require attendees to pay a small fee, but the steering committee tries to avoid this so that finances are not another barrier to meeting attendance.

Best Practices

Each new steering committee should establish a programming schedule for the year and stick to it. It is a good practice to organize programming around social initiatives such as National Preparedness Month in September, the American Library Association's Preservation Week in April, or MayDay started by the Society of American Archivists and Heritage Preservation. Keep a record of past programs as well as a list of possible future events. Don't forget that activities and training can be repeated as your membership changes and grows. Programs can be no to low-cost and should reflect a variety of styles such as panel discussions, lectures, webinar viewings, tours, site visits, assessment exercises, demonstrations, training and activities. If programming options are slim or not working out, consider scheduling a meeting or networking event to keep the momentum going.

Communication and Outreach

The third task for our AFR Pgh leaders is engaging in effective communication and outreach efforts. In this endeavor, we've grown considerably since 2011. Initially, we operated solely from our email listserv which is sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh. Early on in the restructuring conversations, we discussed how to strengthen our communication and outreach efforts beyond the email list. The group decided that AFR Pgh needed a more enhanced website than the one provided by Heritage Preservation, a social media presence, and a way to share updates en masse between meetings. This led to the creation of a free Google Sites website, a Facebook account, and a biannual newsletter.

Email

While we do not have the data to show how many members were signed up for the email listserv in the years before our restructuring, recent data shows that in 2012, our numbers ranged in the sixties; in 2014, we had seventy-three members; and presently in May of 2016, we have eighty-two members. Our recent member survey shows that our members rank the listserv as their preferred communication channel. The benefits are that it's free, most people will use email, and it's a quick way to distribute information to many people. However, members can easily ignore these emails, they can get inadvertently sent to spam folders, and you cannot easily include attachments.

Website

Our website has primarily served to document our organizational memory, providing a simple way to pass on the group's files to the next steering committee. It documents our current and past leaders, current members, past events, news items related to AFR Pgh along with instructions for using the disaster supply cache, and all photos and documents related to the group. Our website traffic statistics over the last five years consistently show our past events page receives the most traffic and from areas outside of the Pittsburgh region. We would like to think that we serve as inspiration for other groups on what type of disaster response-related programming to offer.

Social Media

Our social media campaign began with both a Facebook group and page in lieu of a Twitter presence. We could share helpful information at a slower paced schedule such as internal group information and event marketing, local news alerts, and information from the City of Pittsburgh, FAIC and Heritage Preservation, vendors, and other institutions and AFR groups. We consolidated to a Facebook page in 2015 and currently have approximately 100 'likes'. Social media has also been beneficial for our group +1 marketing campaigns, where a member is encouraged to bring another individual who is new to the group to one of our events as their +1.

Newsletter

Finally, in 2013, we published our first digital newsletter with the intent to keep members engaged during the few months each year when no meetings are held. We avoided duplication of our website and Facebook posts by including member and steering committee activities along with other news-worthy content and planning information found nowhere else in our communication materials. Though well-received, our members prefer paper copies for which we have no budget.

Challenges

Without financial support, the group is unable to pay for a website with increased functionality, in-depth statistic tracking, or paid advertising via social media. We cannot print and mail paper newsletters, despite our members' preference. Success can and has been achieved without paying for communication tools, but it requires creativity and effort on the part of the steering committee.

Best Practices

Communication to your membership must be frequent and current. Online presence is vital to staying in touch with the community. Your website and documentation should be updated regularly. Highlight news about past and upcoming programs. Use social media to share disaster preparedness tips, make announcements, and promote events. To keep energy alive on social media, schedule and assign posting duties in advance. If you choose to create a regular newsletter, think carefully about the sustainability of the task. Can an individual or the group create content several times a year? What content will you be adding? How will you distribute the newsletter?

Conclusion

Like many AFR groups throughout the United States, the Pittsburgh group began with an enthusiastic and motivating kick-off meeting that quickly built bridges between librarians, curators, city officials, first responders, and disaster recovery vendors. Yet during the subsequent few years following its creation, enthusiasm waned as the initial members realized they needed consistent leadership and planning efforts at the local level. Through a restructuring plan in 2011, a small team of committed individuals established a steering committee structure; built up a diverse and exclusive membership base from both the cultural heritage and civic emergency management communities; established a robust social media and web presence to build outreach efforts and document the group's history; and created a consistent programming schedule that offers a multitude of tours, trainings, and educational opportunities. AFR Pgh's unique experience and lessons learned during their successful transformation can benefit other existing regional disaster preparedness networks, as well as individuals who are planning to establish such a coalition.

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