

Alliance For Response

Building Connections for Emergency Preparedness: A Conversation Guide for Communities and Responders

Introduction

The Alliance for Response (AFR) initiative brings together cultural heritage and emergency management professionals at the place where virtually all initial disaster response occurs – the local level. These regional networks represent a system for planning, response, and recovery that ensures a community's culture, arts, and historic assets are protected.

This Conversation Guide aims to assist with information sharing and assessing collections needs as well as to prompt discussion with the goal of improving emergency preparedness. This process can be initiated by communities, AFR networks, or both together. Information gathered in discussions can support internal community decision-making as well as be useful in communications with your AFR and emergency responders.

To aid in the discussion process, we offer some suggested tips for engaging communities below. We also recommend reviewing The SAR Guidelines for Collaboration ([GuidelinesforCollaboration.info](https://www.faic.org/guidelinesforcollaboration.info)), which offers complementary practical and theoretical frameworks from community and museum perspectives.

To assist with getting started describing your collection needs, prompt questions are offered below for consideration and adaptation. These were developed by the AFR Outreach Advisory Committee, a Foundation for the Advancement of Conservation (FAIC) initiative.

Suggested Tips for Engaging Community Partners

Initial discussions between AFRs and communities ideally lead to greater understanding of community needs for emergency preparedness to protect cultural heritage. Information from these discussions may support community and AFR decision-making and recovery plans. Discussions may happen in person or virtually. The format may be video, audio (via a recording or converted to a transcript), or written. Before your discussion, establish permissions (n.b. The AFR Forum Handbook includes a media release form among other sample forms) regarding discussion format and documentation of the discussion. Consider community protocols as decisions are made for how this information will be accessed, used, and stored.

Conversation prompts for the conversation can be developed within a single community or through partnerships between multiple groups, bringing diverse perspectives and expertise to the process. This document includes suggested questions for describing collections needs; these can be adapted and customized. The intent is to document important information for the benefit of communities in the event of a collections emergency (e.g. flood, fire, ruptured pipe).

When reaching out to community partners, AFR members should focus on building trust, listening to community priorities, and creating partnerships that protect cultural heritage during disasters. These guidelines can help promote genuine respect and openness when engaging with communities.

- **Start with real connections**

For AFR members reaching out to a community, think of this as starting a conversation with a neighbor, not collecting data from a subject. Take time to introduce yourself, explain why you're reaching out and explain your role with AFR. Remember that communities have a history of caring for their cultural heritage — recognize that expertise and experience.

- **Present the conversation guide as collaborative work**

This discussion informs all involved as to the best way to assist communities during emergencies. Shared information will shape how you work together moving forward—whether through training, planning, assisting, or sharing supplies and resources. It is important to develop the survey collaboratively, keeping in mind that some information is privileged. There are times the responses will remain within the community for use or sharing when the time is right or it becomes necessary. Perhaps a cultural department (e.g. Tribal Historic Preservation Office) could serve as the repository for the information.

- **Meet people where they are**

Offer various communication format options and let people choose what works. The conversation prompts may be used to create a survey or to guide a discussion over the phone or face-to-face meetings over coffee. Don't rush—good relationships take time, and thoughtful answers are worth waiting for. If the community has specific cultural practices around meetings or decision-making, follow their lead. Practice active listening.

- **Keep it simple and human**

After a preliminary conversation or email describe the purpose and work of the AFR. Speak conversationally, without bureaucratic language or jargon. For example, instead of "stakeholder engagement protocols" just say "working together". Here's how you might introduce the survey:

"We wish to learn how our AFR can work with communities to protect cultural collections and sites during emergencies. Every community is different, and we want to make sure we're collaborating in ways that actually matter to you. Would you like to discuss collaboration possibilities?"

- **Make participation feel safe**

Transparency builds trust. Information will be generated collaboratively. How information will be accessed and used will be determined by the community. The community will control who will see their responses and what will be done with them (i.e. to develop new resources or workshops). Let people know they don't have to participate.

- **Keep the door open**

If someone wants to talk more about their responses, make that easy. Sometimes the prompts will lead to a great conversation about what a community really needs. Keep building these relationships well beyond the initial discussion—that's where the real work happens.

The whole point is to center community voices and show genuine respect for what people already know. When we do this effectively, the discussions become the beginning of deeper collaboration that makes emergency preparedness work better for everyone.

Suggested Questions for Describing Collections Needs

The prompt questions below are intended suggestions to help guide your conversations. Feel free to adapt them based on your collaborative process and goals developed within your community. You might find that some questions don't fit your situation, or you may discover new topics worth exploring.

Preferred communication

To be prepared in advance, it is helpful for AFR members, communities, cultural organizations and emergency managers to exchange contact information.

- In case of an emergency affecting your heritage items or sites in your region, the closest AFR chapter is _____, and the contact information for them is: _____.
- In case of an emergency affecting your heritage items or sites, who should be contacted in your community?
- What is the preferred method of communication (i.e. email, phone call, text, etc.) with the community before, during, and after an emergency?
- Would you like to participate in the regional AFR network or serve on the AFR committee?

Location(s)

Some information about community collections may be sensitive and some information is private and cannot be shared. For some cultural organizations: you may wish to share where your collection(s) is located. Locations are often used by AFR networks to identify collections at risk during a disaster.

- Where is/are your collection(s) located? Are there other places (e.g. offsite) where collection items are located?
- Are there priority areas that should be secured first during an emergency?
- Who has access to the storage areas and can facilitate evacuation, response, or salvage/recovery?
- What security measures should be followed during response efforts?
- In the event of an emergency, is there a designated off-site location for temporarily housing collections — such as a neighboring museum or library or a board member's or volunteer's home or garage — and has this been used in the past?

- Are there sacred or important sites for the community that should be protected during an emergency (e.g. protection of archaeological sites from fire-fighting trench lines or flooding)?

Collections

This section may apply more generally to cultural organizations rather than communities.

- Can you provide a general description of the collections?
- Are there items considered the most significant or irreplaceable from a cultural, historical, or spiritual perspective?
- Are there any objects that should be prioritized for recovery?
- Are there culturally sensitive items that require special handling or restrictions during an emergency?
- Are there cultural specialists who should be involved in recovery efforts?
- Are there external resources or partnerships that should be contacted for assistance in conservation or restoration efforts?

Assessing risk

- Are you aware of any risks that pose a threat to your collections, sites or other cultural items (e.g., hurricanes, wildfires, floods, earthquakes, faulty facilities, vandalism, construction projects)? Consider using the [Hazard Risk Assessment Map](#) to help determine threats and levels of risk.
- Are there seasonal or climate-related risks (e.g., humidity, mold, pest infestations) that need to be monitored?
- Are there past or ongoing threats from development, construction, or infrastructure projects?
- Are there specific storage areas or buildings particularly vulnerable to these risks?
- Are there items in the collection that are particularly fragile or deteriorating?

Making a plan to address the risk and/or the damage

- Are there emergency response or salvage plans in place for the collections, and how can outside responders provide support?
- What conservation resources, funding, or partnerships are available and accessible to help mitigate risks?

- Have you conducted any risk assessments for collections, and can those findings be shared?
- Would it be helpful to have assistance in structuring these into a formal risk assessment form or protocol?
- Are storage spaces structurally sound, and do they meet the needs of the collection?
- Are there known issues with fire suppression systems, HVAC failures, or outdated storage materials?
- Are the collections housed in climate-controlled environments, and are there backup systems for environmental control in case of power loss?
- Have there been previous incidents of damage to the collections due to environmental hazards? If so, what lessons were learned?
- Are theft, vandalism, or unauthorized access concerns for the collection? If so, what security measures are in place?
- Are there risks related to the handling or transportation of collections within or outside of the community?

Preparedness

- How can AFR collaborate with you to support cultural heritage emergency preparedness?
- Do you have a disaster preparedness plan for cultural items?
- Would emergency response training or disaster planning workshops be of interest?
- Are there existing conservation plans or emergency salvage procedures for collections?
- Are there preferred emergency protocols for handling, moving, or stabilizing collections?
- Are there any items that require immediate stabilization or special materials (e.g., dry storage, controlled humidity) after exposure to water or smoke?
- Are there hazardous materials in the collection that could pose risks to responders (e.g., arsenic-treated artifacts, nitrate film, lead-based paints)?

Resources

Working with communities

[Diversifying your AFR Network and Increasing Community Inclusivity Tip Sheet](#), FAIC

[Creating Welcoming AFR Events for Communities](#), FAIC

[Guidelines for Collaboration - Guidelines for Communities](#), School for Advanced Research

[SAR Guidelines for Collaboration - Guidelines for Museums](#), School for Advanced Research

Gupta Anisha and Joelle Wickens. "A Guide for How to Set Up and Carry Out a Community Clinic." University of Delaware, 2024.

Creating an Alliance for Response

[AFR Forum Planning Handbook](#), FAIC

Creating an emergency response plan

[Field Guide to Emergency Response](#), FAIC

[Pocket Response Plan™ PReP™ Templates](#), Council of State Archivists

[Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel \(English\)](#), FAIC

[Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel \(Spanish\)](#), FAIC
