

Museum Emergency Support Teams

What is a MEST?

MESTs are groups of museum staff members organized by region in order to be most effective for local disaster planning and response.

Who are the MEST Members?

MESTs are made up of staff members from museums, libraries and archives within a defined region. Directors, curators, facilities managers, and security staff have all been a part of active MESTs.

When do MESTs React?

In a localized emergency involving one or several museums in the immediate area, the local MEST members have the best knowledge of what the museum(s) have and needs, and what is available in the local area.

What do they do?

- Learn local emergency procedures; involve emergency management officials from local level
- Assist each other with disaster plan preparation if needed
- Determine local resources for disaster planning and recovery; coordinate usage of those resources to benefit all local sites
- Find speakers or instructors to come and offer training opportunities related to disaster planning
- Set up communication between all local sites, for both ongoing and emergency support
- Visit local sites at each meeting so all members are familiar with a museum's layout in case their help is needed in an emergency

Virginia Association of Museums Emergency Task Force
MUSEUM EMERGENCY SUPPORT TEAM (MEST) TOOLKIT

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Why Form a MEST?

In recent years we have seen the impact of disasters on museums and cultural institutions around the country. Hurricane Katrina left those charged with protecting historical and cultural resources with a realization of how unprepared we are in times of emergency. For museum professionals, it brought to the forefront the need for an organized plan of action in case of an emergency, as well as the need for trained 'first responders' who can assess, stabilize and preserve buildings and collections compromised by a disaster.

Disasters occurring close to home have punctuated this necessity:

- Isle of Wight County Museum: Flooding from tropical storm Ernesto in 2006 - the museum has yet to reopen
- Hermitage Foundation Museum and Gardens: Vandalism in July of 2006
- Jamestown Island Visitor Center: Flooding after Hurricane Isabel in 2003
- Poquoson Museum: Fire destroyed the storage shed in November 2007

While the museum community banded together to help save our cultural heritage, these instances clearly indicate the need for effective local disaster planning and response. To that end VAM launched an Emergency Task Force to help ensure that Virginia's museums can get assistance quickly if they suffer a major emergency like fire or flood. VAM is the first such organization in the nation to plan a statewide Emergency Response Task Force system for its cultural institutions. (See: About the Task Force)

The benefits to forming a regional Museum Emergency Support Team (MEST) are:

- A coordinated process for how member institutions can best work together in an emergency situation
- Opportunity to carefully work through the MEST disaster plan process as a group, resulting in better preparation for member staffs and institutions
- Help from one another with preparation for emergency situations
- Opportunity to share Disaster Plans as desired
- Assistance with disaster plan preparation if needed
- Awareness of and support for the MEST and member institutions from local government and emergency officials
- List of local resources for disaster planning and recovery
- Coordinated usage of those resources to benefit all local sites
- Established communications between member sites for both ongoing and emergency support

Getting Your MEST Started

An individual, institution or group contacts VAM, who helps determine chairperson for region

Chair:

- Sets meeting date and time

- Arranges meeting location

- Sends invitation out to initial members (see What Organizations are in Your MEST?)

- Asks them for forward invitation to others who may be interested

VAM:

- Provides mailing list for other museums in area if needed

- Sends out additional information to invited group once meeting is scheduled:

- Includes basic information about VAM's Emergency Task Force
- Includes Toolkit and VAMEST.org links

- Arranges to send VAM representative to first meeting

What Organizations Are in Your MEST?

1. Each MEST determines the region it will cover

Factors to Consider:

Do you already have an existing consortium or group of museums formed for other purposes?

Do you have a number of museums with a similar governing structure?

Can you include all the museums in your city or in your county?

Can you expand to include institutions in adjacent counties?

What are traffic conditions like in your area?

What is a comfortable length of time for members driving to meetings? What is a reasonable distance for members to reach one another in an emergency?

Also consider special collections at these other institutions:

Libraries

Archives

Colleges and universities

2. When your MEST has determined its boundaries, please advise VAM staff
3. Members of each MEST decide what staff members from each institution will be notified of meetings (alternates or additional staff may also attend)

SAMPLE AGENDA

First MEST Meeting

_____ **Region**

Chair:

Prepares Agenda

Invites group to make brief introductions: name, institution, type of materials comprising their institution's collections

VAM Representative:

Gives brief presentation about MEST Program (why VAM initiated program, MEST and ERT, purpose of MESTs, how VAM can help)

Group:

Discusses and decides the size of and members in your regional MEST (see "What Museums are in my MEST")

Begins discussion on how your MEST institutions can help one another:

1. Which institutions have a Disaster Plan? Which do not?
(Discuss ways those without one can write a plan; See "Help for Institutions Without a Disaster Plan")

2. What disaster situations could trigger a need for help?

Decides how your MEST members want to communicate between meetings (VAM representative can discuss one option, VAMEST.org)

Decides how often your MEST should meet – at least initially - and sets date, time and place for next meeting

Decides where to meet:

1. A central location that everyone can get to easily
2. Rotate meeting locations at each MEST member institution

Sample MEST Mission and Vision Statements

Mission

Provide an active network for local museums, libraries, and archives to improve their collective emergency preparedness, Getter protect their collections, staff, and visitors, and coordinate mutual assistance in recovery from disasters affecting cultural resources in [your region].

Vision

Preparation and planning will facilitate the voluntary efforts of any assembled response team assisting any institution(s) affected by a disaster.

The [your region name] MEST will serve as a meaningful supplement to each institutions' own disaster planning efforts, including training, planning, and resources to foster a culture of preparedness among area cultural institutions.

In the spirit of professional cooperation, participation by both public and private institutions is encouraged. The MEST shall provide a forum for communication, planning, and assistance outside of existing bureaucratic or institutional structures and restrictions.

To be available as a resource for local municipal and county first responders in addressing emergencies affecting cultural resources.

To provide a "go-to" resource for the Virginia Association of Museums (VAM) in providing assistance to institutions affected by an emergency or disaster event within the [your region name].

To maintain a shared cache of emergency recovery and response supplies, both independently as a group and with the assistance of VAM when appropriate.

To provide a forum in which staff of collections-based institutions can build relationships and develop awareness of one another's locations, collections, and resources before emergency incidents, not during them. Such mutual familiarization will allow the MEST to help direct resources and assistance to those institutions most in need during an incident affecting multiple locations.

- Thanks to the Richmond MEST for providing this basic template from their mission and vision.

Sample Press Release

Below is a sample press release MEST members can use to inform local media about formation of the MEST and any activities of interest. Individual institutions may have their own format, but this should help get you started.

Consider placing this information on MEST member websites, newsletters and other publicity materials. (Not only will it inform the public about formation of your MEST, it offers an opportunity to promote individual MEST member institutions and the proactive stewardship measures they are taking for their museum collections.)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Contact:

Contact Person
Institution Name
Telephone Number

Fax Number
Email Address
Website address

Area Museums Join Together for Emergency Planning

[Your City, VA, Full Date] — To help ensure that Virginia's museums can get help quickly if they suffer a major emergency like fire or flood, local museums/cultural institutions in the [name of your] area have banded together to form a Museum Emergency Support Team, or "MEST". Together they will plan for emergency response, coordinate local resources, establish relationships with local emergency officials, and create local response teams to assist one another in emergency situations.

MEST members include [list of institutions in your MEST]. The [name of your] area MEST is one of a group of such Teams being established around the state under the sponsorship of the Virginia Association of Museums, the first such organization in the nation to plan a statewide Emergency Response Task Force system for its cultural institutions.

[Insert a quote from a MEST member about the value of becoming part of the MEST. Example: "We can all help one another by taking a proactive approach and becoming involved in our local Museum Emergency Support Team."]

MEST member institutions discuss how they can best work together to prepare for potential emergencies, work with local emergency responders, and establish communication between team member sites for emergency support.

For more information, contact: [Name of MEST Chair and institution phone number]

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Meetings

Meeting Schedule

- Regular meetings are a way for your MEST members to stay in contact
- Determine a practical schedule that works for your MEST members (initially you may meet monthly, then every other month, then quarterly, etc.)
- Most meetings last no more than 2 hours
- Once the schedule is set, members put all of the meeting dates throughout the year on their calendars

Who Attends

- A representative from each MEST member institution (see “What Organizations are in Your MEST”)
- Invite new staff replacing MEST member representatives to attend meetings
- Invite other staff members from MEST institutions to attend meetings

Committees

- At the first or second meeting confirm MEST chairperson and elect secretary to serve for one year; rotate from year to year
- Elect Committee chairs (see section on “Committees”) to serve for one year; rotate from year to year

Basic Agenda

- Introduction of new member representatives
- Chairperson Update
- Committee Reports
- Assignments for next meeting (everyone try to take on some small task)
- Program (Discussion, Presentation, Activity or Training Session)
- Checklist Progress (see “MEST Action Checklist”)
- Adjourn

Committees

The following are suggestions for potential MEST Committees and their roles:

Coordinating

Chair works with Program & Training to set meeting agenda

Secretary keeps a record of MEST meetings and sends out meeting reminder

Local Contacts

Establishes contact with city or regional emergency management

Program & Training

Coordinates programs for MEST meetings

Coordinates guest speakers or special training sessions for MEST members

Technical Assistance

Provides help to local sites without a Disaster Plan

(See: "Help for Institutions without a Disaster Plan")

Supplies and Resources

Generates a standardized list of emergency supplies

Prepares list of local resources and vendors for emergency response

Serves as SmartBox contact (arranged by VAM; see "About SmartBox")

Communication

Establishes MEST member communication methods:

Phone Tree

Listserv

VAMEST.org website

Prepares and updates contact list

Advance Preparations

When an emergency happens the less you have to think about and arrange, the better off you'll be: collections will be safer, recovery steps will move faster – and stress on staff will be greatly reduced. Here are some things your MEST can already have in place in the event of an emergency:

- **Backup Supplies** – MEST members can join together to stock a set of backup emergency supplies that any member can use in the event of an emergency. A member site may have surplus items; perhaps some supplies can be purchased jointly or maybe donated by local merchants. Consider adding folding tables, lights and a pop-up tent (to create a portable work space for staff or MEST members.) Any institution that uses any of the supplies can commit to replacing whatever it uses.

- **Supplies for Temporary “In Situ” Storage** – Not all collections can or should be moved from where they are exhibited or housed, even in an emergency. They may simply be too large or too fragile to withstand transportation. Your MEST may want to keep some supplies for in situ storage on hand (such as extra-wide padding and plywood) that could be used by anyone in your MEST in the event of an emergency. Joint purchase of these materials could reduce the cost to any one institution and they could be stored in a central location or in your portable storage unit.

- **Portable Storage Unit** - VAM can contract with SmartBox or another company providing portable storage units on behalf of your MEST. Members can stock the unit with backup supplies. In an emergency the company will move the entire unit to a site (pre-determined by the MEST) where it is needed, and one or more members of the MEST will be able to use the contract in a given event. VAM will arrange the contract on behalf of each MEST so it is in place if you need it. For more information, contact mcarlock@vamuseums.org.

- **Temporary Storage Space** - If a MEST member museum had to move some of its collections from the site, where could you take them for safekeeping in the event of an emergency, while the building is undergoing repair or to isolate damaged pieces until they can be evaluated? MEST members may be able to identify appropriate space in a nearby facility that could be used by any institution in your MEST. As an alternative, contract storage units generally offer a secure facility and often climate-controlled space.

Communications

Effective communication during a crisis is a critical key to success in avoiding or mitigating damage during a disaster.

Meetings:

Establish a regular meeting time for MEST meetings (initially your MEST may meet monthly, then every other month, then quarterly, etc.)

Phone Tree:

Establish a Phone Tree
Schedule annual updates

Communicate online:

Staff from institutions in your MEST can join VAMEST.org, the online website created for Virginia MEST members to communicate, and share information throughout the year as needed

Make the MEST Circle Bigger:

Develop ways to inform other Staff at your museum about MEST activities
Develop ways to inform your Board/Management about MEST activities

Communicate with Your Community:

Discuss ways to inform the public in your communities about MEST activities
(See "Sample MEST Press Release")

Evaluation:

Evaluate the effectiveness of your MEST communication systems during a Disaster Drill at a member institution

Program and Training Options

Keep your MEST active by providing ongoing training opportunities and programs addressing critical issues. In addition to the suggested and your own discussion topics and activities, consider inviting guest speakers to address specific subjects. (VAM may also suggest topics for discussion as they arise.)

Suggested Program Topics and Activities:

- Develop a mission statement for your MEST (see “Sample Mission & Vision Statement”)
- Discuss how member institutions with different governance structures would work together during a disaster
- How MEST member institutional plans tie into local government emergency plans
- Invite local emergency officials and responders to talk about how your MEST would work with them in an emergency (see: “Working with Emergency Responders” online at: http://www.heritagepreservation.org/lessons/HPR_Emergency_Poster8.5x11.pdf)
- Plan communication strategies during a disaster
- Develop procedures detailing how your MEST member museums can help one another in the event of a disaster
- Discuss methods to inform other staff at your museum about MEST activities; members report on results at future meetings
- Discuss methods to inform your Board/Management about MEST activities; members report on results at future meetings
- Discuss formats for informing the general public about MEST activities; make a plan to act on one or more and report on results at future meetings
- Select one resource organization for each MEST member to investigate; report back to the group on resources the organization provides (see: “Links to Organizations with Emergency Plan & Response Resources”)
- Discuss disaster-related experiences MEST members or other Virginia institutions have had to address
- Conduct a Disaster Drill for each MEST member institution
- Discuss how members have incorporated the MEST into their institutional Disaster Plans
- Develop a Master Emergency Supply List and distribute to every member of your MEST
- Assemble a complete set of backup emergency supplies
- Talk with VAM about contracting for a portable storage unit for MEST member use and decide where it would be placed in the event of an emergency (see “Advance Preparations”)
- Identify and make any advance arrangements needed for local storage space MEST members can use in the event of a disaster if needed

MEST Action Checklist

- ☐ Mission Statement developed
- ☐ Press Release about your MEST sent to local papers
- ☐ Phone Tree established
- ☐ Committees in place
- ☐ Disaster Plan in place for every member institution
- ☐ MEST Disaster Drill conducted at member site/s
- ☐ Information about MEST and discussion with municipal, county or other local emergency officials and responders about interaction during an emergency
- ☐ Procedures established for ways MEST members can help one another in a disaster
- ☐ Information session on MEST given to other staff at each member institution
- ☐ Information session on MEST given to Board/Management at each member institution
- ☐ Backup Emergency Supplies gathered and placed in a central location or portable storage unit
- ☐ Emergency storage space identified, contract in place if need be
- ☐ List of local resource goods, services and funding for recovery efforts compiled and distributed to MEST members
- ☐ MEST members use VAMEST.org (or other website)
- ☐ Individual MEST members are encouraged to attend ERT training and be certified
- ☐ MEST conducts a May Day activity, writes a press release for local papers and posting on VAMEST.org