



Fire Safety Duties for Museum Protection Officers

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A fire in any museum is a terrible thing. Works of art, museum specimens, and historical documents are irreplaceable and in many cases their value is priceless. The old saying “if it burns, it’s gone” sums up the problem with a fire involving a precious piece of cultural property.

The effects of this type of fire are devastating not only on the museum, but also the community they serve. The best way to save cultural property from fire destruction is by preventing the fire. Museum & Cultural Property Fire Safety Teams can be highly effective in fire prevention activities. In the event of a fire or other emergency, their actions save lives.

Fire protection is almost always assigned to Security Department in many types of cultural properly institutions. However, any required training programs for security officers often assign a minor role to fire safety responsibilities. The facts are that fire is a major threat to any type of cultural properly. History is filled with tragic losses in museums, churches, galleries, zoos, aquariums, and landmark buildings. Though theft and vandalism are realistic threats, they often affect only a few pieces. A fire has the capability of destroying large collections and even the entire facility. Yet most training is aimed at security functions geared to theft and vandalism.

All fire safety and security practices should be guided by the museum’s emergency plan. The Fire Safety & Emergency Action Plan should define the steps to take during any type of emergency as well as the role of all safety and security personal that will be executing the plan.

Many cities require the appointment of a Fire Safety / Emergency Action Plan Director (FSD). This person may or may not be the Director of Security. When assigned to a non security position, such as the Facilities Manager, the actions of the FSD must be closely coordinated with the Security Director.

It goes without saying that all stationary museum protection officers will act as Fire Wardens for their assigned area. In most cities Fire Wardens must receive specialized training by the facility FSD.

Fire Wardens will be assigned to designated areas known as posts. During an alarm they are responsible for evacuation throughout their post’s assigned area. The Fire Warden must be sure

no one is left behind. Every area with restrooms should have male and female Fire Wardens. Bathrooms must be searched as part of the evaluation sweep so both sexes are required. However during a fire alarm it is acceptable for a Warden to yell into a bathroom announcing they will be entering to search.

At the sounding of an alarm each museum protection officer becomes the Fire Warden for his or her patrol area. They should give directions to exit and quickly sweep their assigned areas. When finished they should report to the Fire Command Station.

General Fire Warden Duties

During open hours each stationary museum protection officer serves as that areas Fire Warden:

They serve as a point of contact for fire safety information with staff in their assigned area.

They assist the FSD to organize fire safety programs in their assigned area. This includes helping staff prepare for all types of drills and emergencies.

They perform pre-event fire safety and security inspections for hazards whenever any special event is about to begin..

They keep track of building occupants in their area that will need assistance during evacuation. Special needs persons should be assigned buddies to assist them in the event of an emergency.

They shall direct evacuations from their patrol area.

They will search for persons left behind during an alarm.

They will be sure doors and windows are closed in their area at the sounding of an alarm and report any self closing doors that fail to close.

They will know how to activate a fire alarm.

They will report missing or damaged fire extinguishers, smoke detectors, and pull stations in their patrol area.

They shall report or remove obstacles that would impede exit during an emergency.

They will know the location of fire extinguishers, AED devices, and first aid kits for their patrol area.

They report missing fire evacuation maps from their patrol area.

They will know the types and use of fire extinguishers.

They must know procedures for fire drills, lockdowns, and internal relocations.

They shall report and take command in medical and non-fire emergencies until help or a supervisor arrives.

Officers continue to keep an eye out for security issues by observing and reporting possible suspicious activities. Remember false alarms may be intentional diversions.

Protection staff must know and follow proper radio procedures.

Officers must know their facility specific roles and responsibilities during any drill or emergency.

During an alarm if someone refuses to comply with any museum protection officer, the officer should immediately notify the Fire Command Station. It may be a diversion to attempt to commit a crime. If a fire is obvious then the officer should remain only as long as his or her safe escape is not compromised.

If the area becomes dangerous the officer does not have to stay or forcibly remove the non-compliant person. Instead they should report their last known location and the fact the individual refused to move to the Security Supervisor or Fire Safety Director. The Fire Department will send firefighters to the area, and if needed they will remove them. The officer need not risk their life for those that will not comply.

Special Event Fire Safety

During any type of special event a certain number of museum protection officers should be assigned to fire safety duty. This should be their primary assignment for the event. A minimum of two officers should be assigned to fire safety for any special event.

The assigned officers should carry two way radios and keep in contact with the Fire Command Center, flashlights, and at least one thermo-imaging device. They should have key access to all storage areas and closets in the facility.

Before each and every event the museum protection officer should perform a fire safety walkthrough/ inspection of their entire post. During this walkthrough they look for all types of possible hazards, not just those related to fire. .

They must be sure to check for overloaded electrical circuits throughout the patrol area.

If they notice a dangerous condition that might cause a fire or impede evacuation in the event of an emergency, they must report it immediately to the Security Supervisor or Fire Safety Director.

If patrol officers notice fire violations, they should not get into a confrontation; instead report it to the Security Supervisor or Fire Safety Director.

Typical violations are improperly stored combustible materials, dangerous extension cords, overloaded electrical outlets, flammable liquids, and debris blocking exit paths.

When candles are in use a trained fire safety team member should be assigned to a stationary post with the proper type of fire extinguisher.

Medical Emergency

The fire safety crew often is also charged with responding to medical emergencies. In the event of a medical emergency in their assigned area they should follow standard security operation procedures for that facility.

At a minimum they should immediately radio the command center and give the following details:

Their name or assigned number

Exact location (floor, room number).

Type of medical emergency.

Name and approximate age of victim.

Report if person is conscious and breathing.

Provide the fire command dispatcher with any other information requested by 911.

If CPR is needed, send a person to retrieve the closest AED device.

Only give CPR if they are trained and certified, if not request backup from CPR certified officers.

Send someone to the nearest entrance or elevator landing to escort emergency responders to the area.

Museum protection officers should only provide aid to the level of their training. If they are CPR certified and BLS First Aid Trained they may perform first aid as directed in their SOP manual. Many facilities have a hands off policy requiring officers to wait for assistance from the authorities. Be sure officers know their museum's policy.

At the first sign of smoke or fire:

Call the command center via radio and activate the pull station closest to their location. It is important all museum protection officers know the location and use of all types of pull stations found in the facility.

In buildings with dedicated line Fire Warden Phone Stations, the officer should call the fire command station after activating a pull station.

After the alarm has been sounded they start the orderly evacuation of their assigned area.

Report the amount of smoke as: odor only, light, moderate or heavy. Include the color of smoke with the report. An example would be: "We have a moderate smoke condition with black smoke showing."

At the sounding of an alarm:

Calmly but firmly instruct occupants to evacuate the area.

If someone resists, don't use force, instead report the incident and their location via radio or warden phone.

Be sure doors and windows are closed. Report automatic fire doors that fail to operate.

Check bathrooms and offices to be sure no one is left behind.

If someone is in need of assistance during the evacuation, assign at least two physically capable persons to assist them or remove them to an evacuation area and report their location via radio or warden phone.

Never take more than two minutes to perform duties so as not to become trapped. Each patrol post should be a small enough area that a search and exit can be executed quickly.

Follow out the evacuees from the assigned floor and report that the post has been cleared.

Report any fire or smoke conditions encountered on the assigned floor or during the evacuation to the command center.

If heavy smoke is present direct the occupants to crawl. The rule of thumb is: "*If you can't see your feet you need to be crawling*".

Descend stairways backwards in smoke. Descend as if going down a ladder.

In smoke stay close to a wall as the group exits. Follow the wall out of the building.

Remain calm and don't panic. Reassure the occupants as the group exits the building.

Report anyone missing immediately to the outside Fire Command Post upon exit. The location of the Fire Command Post will be outlined in the Fire Safety & Emergency Action Plan.

Accompany the occupants from each post to the evacuation area then report to the Fire Command Post.

Lockdowns

Be sure all permanent occupants in an officer's assigned area know the facility lockdown procedure. Every building occupant needs to know their role in both a *hard* and *soft lockdown*. Hard lockdowns are for life-threatening events while soft lockdowns are used if the crisis is non-life threatening. Protection Officers will be locking down with their groups and taking command of the situation. Their role is to be sure the others are following lockdown directions.

It is essential that every museum protection officer is familiar with the facility plan for both soft and hard lockdowns. This information is found in the Fire Safety & Emergency Action Plan. Read the plan and go over it with the Security Supervisor or Fire Safety Director.

Internal Relocations

Sometimes the FSD will not have everyone leave the building, but may instead send them to an assembly area inside the building. This is typically a stairwell or hallway. The Protection Officer will lead their group to the area, being sure no one is left behind. In larger buildings they may be directed to go down the stairs a certain number of floors (usually 4) and reenter the building. It is important for all officers to know where internal assembly areas are.

When arriving at the assigned area, officers must take attendance and note anyone missing. They then report any missing persons at first opportunity to fire command by Warden Phone, cell phone, or radio.

Fire Extinguishers

It is not the duty of a museum protection officer to fight fires. However, many small fires can be contained and disaster averted by quick actions with a fire extinguisher or wall mounted hose. Protection Officers should request hands on demonstration of fire extinguisher and mounted hose systems use by the Fire Safety Director.

Types- There are five different types of fire extinguishers each designated by a letter (A,B,C,D, & K). Each class fights a different type of fire. It is important to have the right extinguisher for the right fire.

Type A Fires- These would be the ordinary combustibles such as wood, paper, fabrics, rubber, and most types of plastic.

Type B Fires- Flammable liquids and gasses such as: gasoline, alcohol, paint, and tar.

Type C Fires- These would be for fires in energized electrical equipment. Note: Once the power is turned off most Type C fires become type A fires.

Type D Fires- Combustible metals such as Sodium and Potassium.

Type K Fires- Type K fires are grease fires. These would be in cooking vats that are filled with animal and vegetable oil.

No matter what type of extinguisher it is used the same way. The way to remember how to use any extinguisher is to use the word PASS. Each letter stands for a step in the process.

P- Pull (Pull the pin.)

A- Aim (Aim at the base of the flames.) Always aim at the base of the fire not the flames themselves.

S- Squeeze (Squeeze the handles and the extinguishing agent will start to discharge.)

S- Sweep (Sweep from side to side across the base of the flame until the fire goes out.)

Many extinguishers fight more than one class of fire. These are known as combination extinguishers. ABC & AB extinguishers are the most common combination types encountered.

After the fire goes out stay vigilant as it is very possible the fire may restart. It is foolish to turn one's back on a fire. If the fire restarts, simply repeat the Squeeze and Sweep steps.

Remember all Protection Officers should receive hands on extinguisher training or a demonstration from the Fire Safety Director. At a minimum officers should know where every type of extinguisher is located in their area, and what type of fires it fights. **THEY DO NOT HAVE ANY RESPONSIBILITY TO FIGHT A FIRE!**

The rule of thumb is if an extinguisher can't be put into operation within 30 seconds, the alarm box should be pulled and an immediate evacuation performed.



Walkthrough-

As part of every museum protection officer's training they will need to do a walkthrough of their assigned patrol area with a supervisor or Fire Safety Director. The walkthrough should include the following :

The location of all fire alarm pull stations in their area.

The location of all fire exits.

A demonstration of how to use the pull stations.

The location of and types of fire extinguishers in their assigned area.

A demonstration of the PASS method of fire extinguisher use.

The location of the Fire Warden Phone and its use (if the Museum has an in house fire phone system).

The location of the nearest AED device.

The location of the nearest first aid kit.

All exits and stairwells.

They should walk each exit stairwell to know the route out of the building.

They should visit the location of their outside assembly area.

Officers must visit the building Fire Command Center.

Conclusion

Fire safety is an important part of every museum protection officer's job. Fire has the potential to do more damage to a museum than any other type of problem, barring a major natural disaster or full scale terrorist act. Training in fire safety makes up a small part of the museum protection officer's curriculum. Additional training on an ongoing basis is a sound practice for cultural property protection.

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About the Author

Robert J. Heyer is a cultural property protection specialist living in the New York Metropolitan area. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree from Monmouth University as well as post graduate certificates in private security and criminalistics. His extensive security and counterterrorism experience includes working as a fire captain, hazardous materials specialist, and commanding decontamination units. He has provided counterterrorism training for fire departments, police departments, schools, businesses, and hospitals throughout the New York Metropolitan area. Emergency responders around the world have used his training manuals to provide training to their various departments. Robert commanded two decontamination units, at a hospital and major train station, following the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 and responded to numerous incidents with the Anthrax attacks that followed. He is a Certified Protection Officer (CPO). Robert studied fine art protection in Manhattan where he worked as a Public Safety Manager & Fire Safety Director at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. He currently is Director of Security and Safety for a large Urban New Jersey high school.