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Collections Assessments Made Manageable

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Conducting a systematic collections assessment is the best way to plan for the future of your collection, but where to start? To answer that question, Samantha Dorsey, curator, City of Bowie, Md. Museums developed a checklist that divides a collections assessment into four areas: environment, storage, condition of objects and display of objects.

Each assessment area is broken into immediate, intermediate and long-range actions, plans and goals. Thinking about a collection as a whole can be overwhelming, so only the immediate actions and manageable steps from Samantha's checklist are provided below. By following the assessment checklist, it will be possible to take the immediate and positive steps that will lead to greater control over the environment, storage, condition and display of your objects.

Collections assessment checklist for small museums:

Environment:

Immediate action

Assessment Questions:

- What do you expect from your regional climate?
- What do you expect from your interior environments?
- What do you expect from your HVAC system?

Next Steps:

- Acquire and study 5 years of regional climate data.
- Monitor temperature and relative humidity by room, floor or zone to the best of your ability and budget for at least one year.
- Monitor pest activity. Identify temperature-sensitive

- and seasonal pests.
- Hire an HVAC expert to inspect your system for efficiency, output and presets.

Storage and Housing:

Immediate Action

Assessment Questions

- Do you have designated storage facilities or areas?
- Do you have shelving?
- Do you have object storage supplies?
- Is the storage area part of your facilities maintenance plan?

Next Steps

- Create and delineate a designated storage area. Move all objects not on display or in processing to this area.
- Acquire or purchase shelving.
- Organize and inventory object storage supplies.
- Regularly maintain storage areas.

Condition of Objects:

Immediate Action

Assessment Questions

- Has your collection been cataloged and photographed? Where and how is this information kept and saved?
- Has your collection been reviewed for purpose?
- Do you have an object handling policy in place?
- Do you have plentiful and readily accessible object handling supplies?

Next Steps

- Review your object catalog. Enter and maintain basic information in a consistent manner.
- Maintain different collections for different use: general collection, decorative use, educational use, etc.
- Create an object handling policy and distribute to staff. Include in collections management policy.
- Purchase object handling supplies: powder free, petroleum-free nitrile gloves, a padded basket, a cart with walled shelves, cotton toweling, a flashlight and a magnifying glass.
- Consider storing them together as a transportable kit.

Display and Exhibition:

Immediate Action

Assessment Questions

- What is the original use of your display space? Was it a domestic structure or was it purpose-built to exhibit objects?
- What light sources are in the exhibition space?
- What objects are you exhibiting?
- How is the exhibit intended to be experienced? Self-guided or docent-led?

Next Steps

- Review museum environment data to determine what objects are best exhibited in that space.
- Attempt to control natural light levels using shades, shutters or curtains.
- Replace high value objects with photo-reproductions.
- Arrange objects in the exhibition area in relation to their sensitivity to light (windows) and environmental extremes (HVAC vents).

- Place “Do Not Touch” signs near objects within visitor reach.

Resources

[Peer-to-peer assessment program](#)

Collections care, fundraising, governance or any number of big-picture opportunities or challenges can be the center of conversations between the paired organizations and LHS staff.

Contact Alan Rowe, coordinator, Local History Partners, at (317) 232-4591 or arowe@indianahistory.org for more information on how your organization can participate.

[AASLH StEPs program](#)

[Conservation Assessment Program](#)

[Sustaining Places](#)



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