

The Collection Can't Be Replaced. The Plan Takes an Afternoon.

Every special-collections librarian you will ever meet can tell you exactly which shelf keeps them up at night. It's not the shelf with the most valuable item on it. It's the shelf under the pipe run, in the room nobody walks through in July, in a building that goes quiet for summer shutdown — because a roof leak over an irreplaceable collection doesn't announce itself. It drips, unobserved, for a weekend, and by Monday the question is no longer whether the material got wet. It's whether anybody froze it in time.

Irreplaceable changes the math of every other restoration conversation. A flooded office can be gutted and rebuilt. A flooded warehouse can be inventoried and replaced at market value. A special collection — the letters, the first editions, the university's founding papers — has no replacement column on the spreadsheet. That single fact is why archivists think about water differently from every other buyer you serve, and why the conversation that matters to them is never about drying. It's about the plan that exists before the drip.

The clock, because the clock is the whole argument. The Northeast Document Conservation Center — NEDCC, the field's own conservation authority — puts mold growth on wet materials at as little as 48 hours, sooner in warm conditions, and warns that deterioration accelerates sharply past that window. Summer shutdown is the worst-case alignment: a leak that starts Friday in a closed, warming building can be a mold event by the time staff return. NEDCC's standing advice to institutions is equally plain: freezing buys decision time, and commercial freezer storage should be arranged *before* an emergency, not negotiated during one. An archivist who has heard those two sentences from a vendor who isn't trying to sell them anything remembers the vendor.

Paper type decides the method, and the method decides who has to be in the plan. NEDCC's matching is specific: coated papers and water-sensitive inks — which describes a large share of what special collections actually hold — go to vacuum freeze-drying, where frozen material dries by sublimation in a vacuum chamber and never passes back through a liquid state. That's what keeps coated pages from welding together and bound volumes from swelling out of shape. It is also, not coincidentally, industrial equipment: Polygon says its national document center in Allentown runs a freeze-dry chamber that has operated for 15 years. No university keeps one in the basement. So the plan an archivist needs has two names in it, not one: a specialist center for the chamber, and a local crew for the first day.

The flagship proof that this works at collection scale is Polygon's own published case study. After Hurricane Maria, the National Archives introduced Polygon to Puerto Rico's Archivo General. About 2,000 boxes of the territory's historical record were shipped to the Allentown processing center, where the documented process ran in phases — chamber drying, microbe neutralization, page-by-page surface cleaning, then rehousing in new acid-free folders and archival cases. Polygon puts the labor at over 6,000 hours across six months. For an archivist, the details that matter are the rehousing details: this is conservation-grade handling by people who finish the job with acid-free folders, not a drying company with a chamber. When you bring this case into a special-collections conversation, you're showing the librarian that the pipeline their material would travel has already carried a national archive.

The planning instrument itself is free, twice over. The Council of State Archivists points institutions to dPlan, a free disaster-planning template built for cultural institutions — the form of the plan is a solved problem, available this afternoon. And Polygon's Code Blue program is a free preparedness registration for document holders: a questionnaire about the facility and its holdings, a written Document Disaster Recovery Plan built from it, priority response when a disaster hits a region full of simultaneous claims, and discounts on freezer storage and drying. Polygon states more than 25 years serving libraries, museums, government agencies, and medical offices; its published client orbit in this world includes institutions like MIT, the Boston Public Library, Harvard, and the Met. The plan costs the library nothing but the afternoon it takes to write it.

So where do you fit, the restorer whose office is twenty minutes from the reading room? Not at the chamber — at the shelf. The first-day work in a collections loss is local work: find the water, protect the dry material, keep wet items from being handled the wrong way (nobody separates wet sheets, nobody fans a rare book), pack in sequence so the catalog order survives, and get it frozen or moving toward frozen inside the clock. That is a protocol a good mitigation crew can be trained to in a day, and it is precisely the work that has to happen before any truck from a national center arrives. In the plan, the specialist is the destination. You are the first chapter.

Say the quiet part in your own pitch, because archivists will respect it. There is no published program that makes you anyone's official document-recovery partner — Polygon publishes no contractor terms for this work at all. What you're offering the librarian is not a credential. It's a named local responder, trained to their material's handling rules, written into a plan they control, with the specialist's 24/7 line beside your number. Archivists spend their careers distinguishing between what's documented and what's merely claimed. A vendor who shows up making only documented claims is speaking their language.

The first conversation to have this week: call the special-collections librarian or university archivist nearest you and ask for half an hour with one agenda item: *"Walk me through what happens in your*

building if a pipe lets go over the stacks during summer shutdown — who gets called, and where does wet material go in the first 24 hours?" Then offer the afternoon: you'll sit with them while they sketch the plan — dPlan is free, the specialist registration is free, and your crew's protocol is the part that makes both of them real. The collection can't be replaced. That's exactly why the plan is worth an afternoon.