

Wet Files Run on a 24-Hour Clock. Your Crew Is the First Hour.

A hurricane makes landfall on a Friday night, and by Saturday morning a law firm's file room is standing in four inches of water. The building loss is yours — extraction, drying, the work you already sell. The paper loss is a different job, running on a different clock, and most water-mitigation shops walk past it without ever knowing it was theirs to start.

Wet paper starts dying the hour it gets wet. Polygon, which says it runs two dedicated document recovery centers in North America, puts it plainly: paper-based media begins to degrade within the first 24 hours. The Northeast Document Conservation Center — NEDCC, the conservation field's own authority, not a vendor — adds the second deadline: mold can begin to develop on wet materials in as little as 48 hours, and once you're past 48 hours, deterioration accelerates and recovery becomes a major undertaking. Every conversation about wet files is really a conversation about those two numbers.

Your crew's job in the first hour is to freeze the clock, not to dry the paper. This is the part that runs against a mitigation tech's instincts. You do not air-dry a flooded file room. You do not aim fans at wet records. You do not peel apart stuck sheets to "help" them. The stabilization playbook — Polygon's published first-response guidance, matched by NEDCC's — is: cool the room down, separate the dry material from the wet, blot standing water with clean towels (never newspaper, which transfers ink), and get the wet records frozen. Freezing within 24 hours, ideally blast freezing, halts the damage where it stands. A frozen file can wait for decisions. A wet one can't.

Frozen paper buys the only thing a flooded law firm actually needs: time to think. Once files are frozen, nobody has to decide in a panic what gets saved, what gets scanned, and what gets thrown away. NEDCC's guidance to institutions makes the same point — freezing buys decision time, and institutions are advised to arrange commercial freezer storage *before* an emergency, not during one. The firm with a freezer plan makes calm, defensible choices about client originals. The firm without one makes expensive ones at 2 a.m.

The drying itself happens somewhere else, in equipment you should never buy. Saturated books and files are dried by vacuum freeze-drying: the frozen material goes into an airtight chamber under vacuum and the ice leaves as vapor, so the paper goes from frozen to dry without ever turning back into liquid water. That's why frozen files don't stick together, swell, or distort the way air-dried paper does — and Polygon's methods article conditions the no-sticking benefit on freeze-drying within the first six hours of the water damage. The chambers are industrial infrastructure — Polygon says its national document

center in Allentown, Pennsylvania runs a chamber that has operated for 15 years and logged over 100,000 hours. No mid-size shop builds that. You don't need to. You need to be the crew that got the paper frozen and inventoried before the clock ran out.

Law firms are the cleanest first door because their own bar association already wrote the pitch.

After Hurricane Harvey, the State Bar of Texas published salvage guidance for law offices, drawn from NEDCC: freeze-dry large volumes rather than air-drying them, freeze to stop mold while decisions are made — and it lists Polygon as an NEDCC-recommended recovery vendor, with Texas locations in Houston, San Antonio, and Dallas. When a managing partner asks why you're talking about freezers instead of dehumidifiers, the answer is: *your own state bar's disaster guidance says so*. You're not selling a theory. You're reading their playbook back to them.

The pre-loss vehicle already exists, and it's free. Polygon's Code Blue program is a published preparedness program for document holders: the client registers at no cost, fills out a detailed questionnaire about the facility and what it needs to protect, and Polygon builds a Document Disaster Recovery Plan — a response protocol written before any loss, with priority response when a disaster hits and discounts on drying equipment, freezer storage, scanning, and packing. During Harvey, Polygon's first move was reaching out to its Code Blue clients to tell them it was ready. That's the whole lesson: in a regional disaster, the clients with a written plan get called first. The clients without one get in line.

Here's the honest shape of your role, because nobody publishes a contractor program for this.

Polygon US publishes no partner program, no referral terms, no signup for restoration companies on the document side — anyone who tells you otherwise is inventing it. What exists is a capability, a free client-facing program, and a published 24/7 emergency line (1-800-422-6379) whose stated categories include documents and contents damage. The motion is a conversation and a phone call: you carry the plan into the law firms in your market before storm season, you help them see that Code Blue registration costs nothing, and when the file room floods, your crew is the first hour — stabilize, freeze, inventory, hand off. Who contracts whom gets settled on the call, per job. That's not a weakness in the offer. That's how this industry actually works.

What your crew needs to be credible on day one is discipline, not equipment. A real 24/7 dispatch that answers during a storm. Pack-out discipline: full boxes, labeled, with a priority list captured for the files the firm needs for active cases — because the firm's first question won't be about paper, it'll be about *which* paper. And the restraint to stabilize instead of drying. The shops that win this work aren't the ones with the most gear. They're the ones whose techs know that wet sheets don't get separated, fans don't get pointed, and the freezer call goes out in the first hour.

The first conversation to have this week: pick the three law firms in your market whose file rooms sit under a restroom, a riser, or a roof that's already leaked once. Don't pitch them restoration. Ask one question: *"If your file room flooded on a Friday night, who is your freezer call — and is it written down anywhere?"* If the answer is a blank stare, you've found your opening. Tell them the plan is free, the clock is 24 hours, and your crew is the first hour of it.