Heritage Health Information Survey (HHIS) Report

A Snapshot of Facts & Figures

About

The Heritage Health Information Survey (HHIS), collected in 2014, was designed to provide insights into how the institutions that hold our national heritage in trust are progressing over the past decade in the level of care they provide these invaluable items.

The HHIS Report, released in 2019, provides selected updates from the Heritage Health Index of 2004 and assesses the stewardship needs of today’s cultural heritage institutions with non-living, tangible, and digital collections. The resulting facts and figures highlight the real need for collections preservation and shine a light on the challenges faced by collecting institutions—most notably, smaller organizations.

Collecting Institutions: A Breakdown

The survey’s 1,714 respondents are representative of the nation’s 31,000 collecting institutions.

Of institutions with collections, 47% are museums, 35% are libraries, 12% are historical societies, 3% are archives, 2% are other scientific collections, and 3% are other.

Our nation’s collecting institutions hold more than 13 billion items from furniture to photos and sheet music to soil samples. All are cataloged, shelved, stored, and protected to varying degrees.

Around 70% of all collecting organizations have preservation or conservation of their collections named as a priority in their mission.

The gap in preservation needs between large and small collecting institutions of similar types is widest among libraries and narrowest among archives.

96% of collecting institutions are small institutions.

Damage to Collections

An estimated one-third of institutions have reported damage to their collections.

The biggest risk to collections is water damage.

Among scientific collections, the greatest risk is pests.

Nearly two-thirds of archives reported damage or loss to their collections due to obsolete equipment, causing a loss of access to born-digital information.

The amount of loose paper in collections is enough to fill 347 Olympic sized pools.

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Small Organizations Face Challenges

Small institutions are less likely to have designated personnel with conservation or preservation responsibilities, than are medium or large sized organizations.

Staffing among types of small institutions varied greatly. 97% of small archives reported someone was responsible for collections care.

Just 73% of small libraries had a staff member with these responsibilities.

56% of small historical societies rely solely on volunteers for conservation.

Small institutions are less likely to conduct emergency planning.

They are less apt to have security systems and tend to lack environmental controls, with the exception of archives.

Making Progress

Over a ten-year span, our nation’s cultural heritage organizations have:

- Reduced the incidence of damage from improper storage and light exposure by roughly 30%.
- Increasingly assigned collections care responsibilities to personnel, with 86% of institutions reporting in 2014, an 8% improvement over 2004 (78%).
- Conducted more collection assessments: the 45% of organizations that have done so is a 50% increase from 2004.
- Engaged in more emergency planning: the number of organizations with emergency plans has more than doubled, from 20% to 42%.
- Placed a greater financial priority on collections preservation, with the percentage of organizations that provided annual funds for these activities more than doubling from 23% to 49%.

Download the full report at www.imls.gov/hhis.