

Setting the Standard

THC's Museum Services Program Impacts National Initiative

Small history museums, long daunted by the standards set forth by formal assessment and accreditation programs, are poised to benefit from an exciting new program offered by the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). In direct response to the needs of smaller history museums, AASLH has developed a program to help small and mid-sized history museums, historic houses and other historical organizations learn more about national museum standards.

Other museum standards programs exist, but history institutions do not have a standards program that addresses their unique needs, particularly in the areas of interpretation, collections care in older buildings and historic structures, archives management and research libraries, and care of historic properties. In its recent field research, AASLH discovered history institutions desire a standards program that allows them to address standards incrementally in essential operational areas and to advance at a pace that is practical for even the smallest, volunteer-led institutions. They're about to get their wish.

With a three-year grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, AASLH worked with teams of volunteers from across the country to study existing standards programs and to develop an enhanced curriculum that meets the unique needs of history institutions. The result is a toolkit including standards and best practices in six core areas (see sidebar) and institutional self-assessment exercises.

After more than two years of work and thousands of volunteer hours, the AASLH's Standards

Program took an exciting step this summer. AASLH selected 11 service organizations from around the country — state and regional history associations, humanities councils, field service offices and others — to work with 47 institutions to field-test the toolkit created by the standards teams. The Texas Historical Commission (THC), in partnership with the Texas Association of Museums (TAM), signed on as a service provider and lent support to six Texas museums that agreed to participate in the pilot project (see sidebar).

“Participating in the testing phase of the standards program was a great opportunity for the THC, TAM and these six Texas museums,” said Laura Casey, state coordinator of the THC's Museum Services Program. “We helped shape and evaluate a program that ultimately will benefit thousands of small museums and other history institutions across the country.”

Georgia Caraway, executive director of Denton County Museums, sees an added benefit of participating.

“Being part of the development of a national standards program for small museums gave us the opportunity to show our commissioners court in a meaningful way that we're recognized as an important entity in the museum community,” Caraway said.

Texas representatives field-tested the stewardship of collections section of the standards program, and AASLH provided training in archival management via an online course. This distance-learning aspect was unique to the pilot testing in Texas and allowed AASLH to evaluate its efficiency as a continuing education option for larger states.

The AASLH Standards Program for history institutions focuses on standards and best practices in six core areas:

1. Mission, vision and governance
2. Management
3. Audience
4. Interpretation
5. Stewardship of collections
6. Stewardship of historic structures and landscapes

With the training complete, each participating museum conducted a self review of its current collections care practices and needs and identified an area that needed improvement to meet one of the standards. Over the summer, with guidance from the THC and TAM, the museums selected and completed a project that would help them achieve the particular standard.

Each standard is attainable at three levels (basic, good and better) allowing institutions to set their own priorities and improve their operations based on their available resources. Susan Weaver, director of the Depot Museum Complex in Henderson, said she especially appreciates this aspect of the program.

“The basic, good and better standard levels allowed us to establish goals our museum could reasonably obtain based on our size, budget and staff,” she said, adding that the self-assessment portion of the program was beneficial because it “made us take a good look at the museum and recognize our strengths and shortcomings.”

Casey believes the AASLH Standards Program can help move any history organization toward institutional sustainability, but notes that the program is uniquely designed to benefit smaller museums.

“This is the most comprehensive, cost-effective tool available for promoting standards and advancement,” she said. “The program will encourage and empower even the smallest museums to assess and prioritize their needs, set measurable goals and maintain an active planning process for improvements.”

Earlier this year, pilot sites from across the country evaluated the usefulness and effectiveness of the toolkit and the standards program. AASLH will use this feedback to further refine the program and will launch it next summer. To learn more about this important initiative, visit www.aaslh.org. ★

This article was written by Carlyn Hammons of the THC's History Programs Division.



Above: A self-assessment revealed the need to address the exposed pipes in the collections storage area of the Texas Pharmacy Museum in Amarillo. Inset: Vickie Armstrong of the Depot Museum Complex in Henderson looks for a film negative in the museum's collections storage area.

The following six Texas museums participated in the AASLH's Standards Program pilot testing phase:

- Brownsville Heritage Complex, Brownsville
- Denton County Museums, Denton
- Depot Museum Complex, Henderson
- El Paso Museum of History, El Paso
- Texas Pharmacy Museum, Amarillo
- Wolf Creek Heritage Museum, Lipscomb



Denton County Museum staff, Georgia Caraway and Kim Cupit, examine a collection object from the Denton County Courthouse-on-the-Square Museum, one of six Texas museums selected to field test the new AASLH Standards Program.