



DHPS | NY

DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE
& PRESERVATION SERVICES
FOR NEW YORK

Frequently Asked Questions

What is an Archival Needs Assessment?

An Archival Needs Assessment is a thorough examination of an organization's archival program. It aims to identify and address specific organizational needs, operational efficiencies, storage concerns, and collection management issues. The assessment and its resulting report will pinpoint areas for short-term improvement and long-range planning and vision, recommend solutions, and guide the development of your archival program. The report will also include resources to consult for additional information.

What is a Preservation Survey?

A Preservation Survey is a thorough examination of a collecting institution's preservation needs for archival collections, including environment, building, housekeeping, pest control, fire protection, security and disaster preparedness, and collection storage, handling, exhibition, and treatment needs. The main product of the survey is a report that identifies priorities for action, specific materials in need of immediate attention, recommendations for remedial action, the establishment of short- and long-term preservation goals, and resources to consult for additional information.

What's the difference between an Archival Needs Assessment and a Preservation Survey?

An Archival Needs Assessment is an overall examination of an archival program – assessing organizational needs, operational efficiencies, storage concerns, and collection management issues. In particular, an archival needs assessment will take an in-depth look at collections management topics including acquisition, appraisal, arrangement, and description. A Preservation Survey focuses specifically on the physical condition of a collection, taking into

account the collection's immediate environment, storage and housing, and potential conservation issues. The preservation survey aims to promote preventive care and mitigate deterioration.

What is the cost of an assessment/survey?

There is no cost to your institution for DHPSNY's services. DHPSNY is a program of the New York State Education Department, with services provided by the Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts. Our contract with the State provides funding for staff time and resources to perform the evaluation, as well as the preparation of the final report and additional follow-up.

What are the requirements for eligibility?

Eligible institutions are nonprofit, cultural institutions in New York State that hold [historical records](#) and/or library research materials, and operate programs to preserve and make them accessible to the public. Local governments in New York are eligible for Preservation and Condition Surveys but are not eligible for Archival Needs Assessments or Strategic Planning Assistance. In addition, institutions that receive funding via NYS Education Law 272 are not eligible for Preservation and Condition Surveys.

Previous awardees have ranged in size and scope from small town historical societies and museums to large, nationally-recognized nonprofit archives.

Can I apply if we're an all-volunteer organization?

Yes, we offer services to all-volunteer organizations. We encourage any interested organization to apply for an assessment or survey regardless of staff size. Our services and programs have been designed with small to medium-sized organizations in mind.

What type of material does an assessment/survey cover?

DHPSNY services are catered toward historical records and library research materials. For a great explanation of what is considered a historical record, take a look at this [one-page resource](#). DHPSNY does not perform assessments or surveys for collections that are object-based.

When should an organization apply for an assessment/survey?

The sooner the better! We've noticed a trend of some organizations wanting to "get things in order" before applying for an assessment, but as the saying goes, "don't clean up before the maid comes!" An assessment/survey is a foundational part of preservation planning. Even if your archival management or preventive care program is stable, an assessment will help you prioritize and move forward as an organization, and can provide advocacy and support from an external perspective.

How much information about my institution and collections should I include in the application?

Applications should be thorough and well-written, but putting together a winning application is not an insurmountable task. View a sample [Archival Needs Assessment application](#), [Preservation Survey application](#), and [Strategic Planning Assistance application](#), adapted from submissions that were highly ranked by our field reviewers.

What information should be included in the commitment letter?

The commitment letter should show that the institution as a whole is committed to seeing through the service for which you are applying. The letter should express support from the Board and/or Executive Director for staff to undertake the service and to implement recommendations to the best of their ability. In addition, the letter should identify a point person who will be responsible for coordinating with DHPSNY as well as implementing any recommendations that come from the report. Overall, the letter should show that the Board is aware of what the service is providing and has made a commitment to working with DHPSNY and their staff to see it through.

Who will conduct the assessment?

An experienced archivist or preservation specialist will conduct the assessment/survey. On rare occasions, a second staff member may be on hand to assist. With your permission, the DHPSNY communications specialist may also be in contact to profile your site or collection for our newsletter, website, or social media.

What does an in-person site visit typically consist of?

The one-day site visit is a bit like taking your collections to the doctor for a check-up, only DHPSNY comes to you. On the day of your in-person site visit, one of our trained preservation specialists will spend the day at your institution with the aim of getting a complete picture of the condition of your collections. We suggest allowing an entire business day, although assessments can take less time, depending on the size of your archive. We generally take just a few hours in the morning to discuss and view collections, break midday, and then continue into the afternoon until completed.

Here is a sample agenda for a full-day visit:

10:00 am - 11:30am Meeting with collections staff/volunteers

11:30am - 12:00pm Meeting with facilities staff/volunteers

12:00pm - 1:00pm Tour storage spaces

1:00pm - 2:00pm Break for lunch

2:00pm - 3:30pm Tour storage spaces (continued)

3:30pm - 4:00pm Meeting with Director/board representatives 4:00pm -

4:30pm Final questions and wrap-up

What does a virtual assessment typically consist of?

An assessor will work with your organization to collect information and documentation ahead of the virtual assessment. On the day of your meeting, your assessor will connect with your team via Zoom. The process usually takes about three to four hours, but can take less time depending on how quickly the group covers all relevant topics. Your assessor will come to this meeting having thoroughly reviewed all of the materials submitted before the day of the assessment, so that focus can be given to areas needing clarification, and to your specific areas of concern. For example, an agenda for an assessment will typically include introductions, an overview of the assessment methodologies, a discussion of institutional goals, topical areas of discussion as identified by the pre-survey, and a wrap-up.

Who should participate in a virtual assessment or in-person site visit?

DHPSNY staff like to meet with the individual(s) with the most collections knowledge. This person(s) would ideally be available for the entire assessment. It is also helpful to be able to speak with a Director when possible, and, for the preservation survey, with the staff member or volunteer who oversees building maintenance (although specific time can be set aside during the assessment to speak with these individuals). It is often productive to meet with as many people as are interested in participating, so no need to limit. If there is a particularly large group, the assessor may choose to set up the assessment in a series of shorter meetings with specific groups in order to ensure that there is time for all voices to be heard.

What info should be prepared ahead of time?

Prior to the site visit, DHPSNY staff will ask the site to complete a thorough questionnaire. This questionnaire will outline the topics and questions covered throughout the assessment including administration, policy, collections management, collections care, and emergency planning. The more information you can provide, the better the assessor can be prepared for your site visit.

Why do you need to talk to maintenance/facilities staff for a preservation survey? What's the reason/importance?

To get a good idea of the environment your collections are stored and exhibited, the assessor will need to know information about the HVAC system, building repairs and maintenance, plumbing and electrical systems, and housekeeping procedures. Usually, maintenance or facilities staff are very knowledgeable about these parts of the institution, and talking to them can provide the technical information needed to successfully complete a preservation survey. In instances where there is not a single staff member assigned to facilities maintenance, the staff member or volunteer with the most interaction with these systems and procedures should be included in the assessment.

What does a final report look like?

Final reports are typically 40-70 pages long, and thoroughly document the current state of your organization (building conditions, staffing, funding,

policies and procedures, etc.). An archival needs assessment will detail current collections management practices and provide detailed recommendations for future progress. A preservation survey will detail the specific conditions and environment of your collections, including temperature and humidity readings and other technical notes about environmental conditions. The final report contains detailed recommendations tailored specifically to your organization and includes a prioritized list of goals to guide your organization with next steps. You can get a sense of the full report by viewing a sample table of contents from a [DHPSNY Archival Needs Assessment](#) and a [DHPSNY Preservation Survey](#).

How long is the process?

Once an assessment is complete, you should generally receive your report in approximately two to four months. The overall process for Archival Needs Assessments and Preservation Surveys generally takes 6-8 months. It generally takes about 1-2 months to set up and complete the assessment, and about 4-6 months to receive your report once the assessment is complete. A follow-up program is completed about 6 months after delivery of the final report. See our [Planning & Assessment timelines](#) to learn more details about the process for each assessment track.

What does the six-month follow-up entail?

At the completion of the final report, the assessor will offer the organization several options for receiving a half-day support program intended to strengthen their ability to implement a recommendation in the assessment/survey. This program will be scheduled for six months after the site receives the final report and will be conducted remotely. For an archival needs assessment, these support programs might be built around subjects such as writing a processing plan, developing discrete policies, or finding aid basics. For a preservation survey, this may be built around subjects such as implementing an integrated pest management system, building housing enclosures, or environmental monitoring. The assessor will work with the organization to determine the appropriate topic based on organizational needs and assessment/survey recommendations.

Will I receive conservation treatment?

You will not receive conservation treatment at the time of your site visit. However, the assessor can discuss areas of the collection that may need treatment, as well as options for funding and treatment with a conservator. A condition survey can be a next step after the preservation survey.

Will you be processing our collections?

DHPSNY assessments/surveys do not include any active processing work of your collections materials. However, the assessor will discuss processing activities and prioritization. The recommendations from the assessment will help your organization build the internal capacity to develop goals and support active processing work. Depending on your needs, the six-month follow-up support program for an archival needs assessment may address activities like creating a processing plan.