

# Prepare for Disaster Before Trouble Comes

A personal inventory can ease the crisis if disaster strikes.

by Linda Anderson

Picking up the pieces after a disaster can be much easier if you already know exactly what pieces you have to pick up, say Texas Cooperative Extension experts. That's why Joyce Cavanagh and Nancy Granovsky, both Extension family economics specialists, advise making an inventory of personal possessions before a crisis occurs.

Such an inventory can be invaluable, Cavanagh says, "because the insurance company is not going to reimburse you if you cannot prove what you had." But going from room to room, writing down a list of everything you own probably isn't practical, the experts agree.

"Realistically, you're not going to take the time to write a pencil-and-paper inventory," Cavanagh says. Instead, the next-best thing to do is take photographs or videotape the items in each room, including items in drawers and closets. Make it a family activity; let the children take photos or videos of the items in their own rooms, she adds.

In addition, Granovsky says, keep records of important items — such as special collections, jewelry, antiques and electronic equipment — along with serial numbers where applicable. Some of these items might need to be inventoried even more closely with the help of an appraiser.

"If you have high-dollar items," she says, "pay to have them appraised by a professional." The American Society of Appraisers ([www.appraisers.org](http://www.appraisers.org)) is a place to start, she says. The organization's web site provides a listing of professional appraisers and their locations, as well as their specializations, including antiques, collectibles, fine arts, jewelry and coins.

"The appraiser will help people document the value of important items at a given point in time," Granovsky says. The value of an item, such as fine art or jewelry, will vary depending on changes in market value, but an appraisal can give the insurance company proof of the item's worth.

## Insurance coverage

When inventorying personal property, do a check of your insurance coverage, too, Cavanagh recommends. "Do a review of your current insurance coverage and [talk to] your insurance agent to make sure you have adequate insurance and to see if you need additional coverage," she says. "You need to make sure you have replacement coverage on the dwelling and on the contents."

With replacement coverage, the insurance company will reimburse you for the cost of replacing an item, not for that specific item's

current — and likely depreciated — value, she says. For example, you might have a claim on a television that cost \$300 when purchased new several years ago, but is valued at \$50 today. But a new replacement for that set might cost \$600. Replacement coverage will cover the cost of a new television rather than the depreciated value of the old one.

This kind of insurance coverage "should be a little bit higher [than insurance without replacement coverage], but not that much,"

Granovsky adds.

Don't stop there, the experts say.

To make sure your home and its contents are completely covered, "you may need flood insurance that covers flood damage" caused by rising water, Cavanagh says. Flood insurance on the dwelling and on the contents are sold separately, she explains, so "make sure you have both kinds of [flood insurance] coverage."

Once you have completed all these steps and have an inventory of your and your family's personal items, make several copies of the inventory and keep them in separate and safe places, the specialists say. Such places include

safety deposit boxes, at work, with a trusted relative, or at your lawyer's office.

"As you put copies in a variety of places, you need to be cautious about keeping them with trusted individuals," Granovsky says.

If the process of making a personal inventory sounds complex, she says, keep the end result in mind: After a disaster, recovery or replacement of personal items will be easier, leaving more time to focus on loved ones.

For more help in keeping a personal inventory, get a copy of Extension publication B-1330 — *Personal and Family Financial Records Inventory*. To purchase a copy, go to the Texas Cooperative Extension Bookstore web site at <http://tcebookstore.org> and click on the link to Work and Money, and then Money Management.

For information on replacing important documents after a disaster, go to <http://agnews.tamu.edu/dailynews/stories/HURC/Oct0305a.htm>. More information on disaster preparedness is available at the Texas Extension Disaster Education Network web site at <http://texashelp.tamu.edu>.



**Editor's Note:** Linda Anderson is assistant news editor and Extension communications specialist for Texas A&M University, which supplied this article.

