

Characteristics of Historic House Museums in Peril

The AASLH Historic House Committee developed the following checklist to help identify the characteristics of historic house museums in peril. Use this list to highlight areas in which your museum may need to improve.

Vision

- Most people involved with the historic house museum believe that “keeping the doors open” or maintaining the status quo is acceptable.

Mission

- Few people involved with the historic house museum know or understand the mission.

Board

- Most board members are unaware of their fiduciary and stewardship responsibilities.
- Most board members believe that in “keeping the doors open” or maintaining the status quo, they are fulfilling their fiduciary and stewardship responsibilities.
- Recruiting and retaining new board members is challenging.
- There is not a full complement of board members.
- There are few, if any, active board committees.
- There is no succession plan for board members and no one is willing to be president or chair of the board.
- No one on the board lives in the community served by the house museum.
- No one on the board attends community meetings or events as a representative of the historic house museum.
- There is no regular board performance evaluation, either by the board or by an outside evaluator.
- There is no ethics or conflict of interest policy.
- There is no strategic plan or the plan itself is just a list of ideas.
- There are no regular treasurer’s reports.
- The board is not aware of any problems and/or is taking no action to remedy them.

Financial

- There are no checks and balances in use for handling financial transactions.
- There is no audit.
- There is an operating deficit.
- There is no endowment or the endowment generates less than 15% of the operating budget.
- There is no planned giving program.

Staffing

- There is high staff turnover.
- Staff are reviewed irregularly or not at all or only at the time of crisis.
- There are no performance expectations for staff or these expectations are not communicated to staff.



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- Staff performance reviews are usually carried out by the president of the board without consultation with the other board members.
- There is no one on the staff from the community in which the historic house museum is located.
- There is no one on the staff who attends community meetings or events as a representative of the historic house museum.

Programs

- There are no historic structures reports for any of the historic buildings under the care of the board.
- There are no landscape or garden surveys (if the historic house has a historic landscape).
- There is no little or no regular maintenance of buildings or grounds.
- Repairs are performed on an emergency basis.
- Visitation has been declining over the last five to ten years.
- There are few school groups visiting the house museum.
- The historic house is open to visitors on a very limited basis.
- There has been no new research on the house for more than five years.
- There is little or no interpretation of the facts or story about the house's history.
- There is no connection made between the history of the house and current events or issues.
- Docents/guides tell the same story that has been told for many years.
- Routine tours are longer than one hour.

Collections

- It is difficult to plan programs because collections are poorly cataloged or are in disarray.
- Gifts to the collection are accepted without review of collecting policies or knowledge of the current collection.
- There are multiple numbering systems for the collection.
- There is no active review of the collection for possible deaccessioning.
- Collections records are not digitized.
- Collections are not safely housed or stored.

Communications

- Computer equipment is more than five years old.
- There is no website and/or no email address or email is checked irregularly.
- There is no current 4-color brochure.
- There is no signage or other means of finding the historic house museum.
- Membership is declining.

