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Emergency Planning: Responding to Emergency with Urgency

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No hospitality facility or destination is immune from potential threats and emergencies caused by nature or human action. Considering tragic disasters like 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina or, more recently, the flooding which left the atriums of Nashville's landmark Opryland Resort under 10 feet of water, the time to plan for an emergency certainly isn't in the middle of one.

Properties and convention and visitors bureaus (CVB) who take a proactive, collaborative approach to crisis management by creating and continuously updating an emergency plan are far better prepared to respond, minimize negative outcomes and recover faster.

The emergency plan at the Tampa Convention Center in Florida was developed with executive involvement by the facility's director of operations, the security manager and the director of conventions services who are the core of the emergency response team, according to Shawn-Ta Wilson, CMP, Assistant Director of Convention Services.

"Convention services management staff also play a critical role in implementing the plan. It's their role to be on the front line working with meeting planner customers. In an emergency, they will be looked to as the first responders," says Wilson, a member of the Association for Convention Operations Management (ACOM), which is dedicated to advancing convention services management and its role in the success of hotels, convention centers and CVBs.

A team effort

"We have an emergency team and a chain of command set up so that, if there is an emergency, this group of people each has a role. I am responsible for calling paramedics or fire personnel. Other managers would make contact with the police, the CVB and, when necessary, the media," Wilson says.

The Tampa Convention Center emergency team periodically reviews and updates the emergency plan as well as providing a basic level of training to staff involved, according to Wilson.

While each situation is certain to call for responses based on the nature of the emergency and the hotel's infrastructure, adopting emergency response plan procedures could include the following:

- Accurately identifying and reporting fires and property damage
- Emergency guest communication and evacuation procedures
- Procedures to be followed by hotel staff who remain to conduct some critical functions before they evacuate
- Procedures to account for all guests and employees after emergency evacuation
- Rescue duties for key employees who are designated, if necessary, to assist civic personnel
- Names and phone numbers of people who can be contacted for further information on the emergency
- Identifying a facility spokesperson to interact with the media so as to minimize confusion and conflicting information
- Sub-plans for responding to specific emergencies such as weather-related emergencies, protesters, a bomb threat, a fatality or on-site violence

Donna Karl, CMP, Vice President of Client Relations at the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau, helped spearhead development of a post-Hurricane Katrina crisis management plan in use today which integrates the crisis plans of the city, the CVB and individual hospitality properties. In addition to her citywide crisis management insight gained by weathering Hurricane Katrina, Karl has experienced the need for emergency planning from both a property's and a meeting organization's perspectives.

"I feel very confident that the majority of properties have emergency and evacuation plans in place," observes Karl, who recently spoke to ACOM membership about emergency planning. "Where I think they could do a better job is in discussing their plan as part of the event preparation. When they're sitting down with meeting planners at an early stage they should be bringing up the topic of emergency preparedness on their checklist of things to address."

"Through my conversations with them, I think the properties take emergency planning very seriously, but I'm not confident they are bringing it up enough with meeting planners. I'd also like to see more of the meeting planners kick it up a notch by preparing emergency plans for their individual events," Karl says.

"One of the things we've put out there in the past is that every meeting that comes into the city, whether it's 10 people in size or 30,000, we send the meeting planner a copy of our plan," Karl explains. "We send it along with a personal

email from me encouraging them to have their own emergency plan for the event and informing them that if they don't have one, we offer a service to help them create one."

A need for event emergency plans

Industry studies have shown that only 30 to 40 percent of meeting planners create individual event emergency plans with about the same percentage of planners placing importance on considering a facility's level of preparedness planning in the site selection process. Only about 20% of planners "always" meet with the facility regarding its emergency response strategy. Yet these studies also reveal that one third of planners have experienced a crisis at a meeting with natural disasters, accidents/fatalities, protests, labor strikes, bomb threats, fire and food-borne illness among the leading emergencies.

"Typically it is only when an event falls during hurricane season that we get requests from meeting planners for a copy of our plan or they will want to spend some time talking about it," Wilson observes. "The other time there is interest is if the meeting planner has previously experienced a conference emergency that has heightened their awareness and causes them to approach emergency management more proactively."

"It all depends upon the situation, but let's say it's a bomb threat: the facility has a responsibility to respond to the alleged threat and communicate with organizations meeting at their property," says Karl. "They would also apprise the CVB of the situation, but it is the responsibility of the meeting organization management to decide what to do."

"That is not the time for a meeting organization to say 'Hmm, who's going to make the decision about whether or not to cancel or delay the meeting? Who decides how we will push this information to our attendees and exhibitors? How will we get this information onto our website so that attendees' families halfway across the country know what is going on? That's why it is so important that a meeting organization has an individual event emergency plan and has at least some of their response thought through in advance."

"It's important for a meeting planner to have a very clear understanding of their venue contract force majeure clause," notes Lynn McCullough, ACOM Executive Director. "Careful scrutiny of the clause should occur during contract review. There are different variations of the clause that can be reviewed and mutually agreed upon by the meeting planner and the venue."

"We advise all meeting organizations working with us that one of the first and foremost things they need to do in an emergency is call their insurance company," Karl continues. "Event cancellation insurance is extremely important, particularly if the event contributes a significant amount of income to the

organization. If a meeting organization is going to seek an insurance reimbursement for a meeting that they cancelled early or cancelled altogether, they need to open that line of communication early because it's ultimately the insurance company that is going to determine the financial impact of that decision. You want the insurance company to tell you if and when it's time to cancel a meeting."

Emergencies happen

"In the 16 years I've been here, we haven't had an emergency situation that required evacuation," says Wilson, "though we have had a few close calls."

"Complacency about emergencies should be both a fear and a lesson," says Karl. " 'It will never happen to me.' 'It will never happen here.' People may understand the need for emergency preparedness, but when it hasn't affected them face-to-face, there's a certain amount of complacency that can settle in. It's human nature. To me, it's an emotional investment. The lesson is the need for continuous advocacy, so that the lessons learned are not lost."

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