



Risk Management

by Ray Ellis, Jr.

Develop an operations strategy to deal with the hotel's next disaster

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If ever there was a time to “think out-of-the-box,” this is that time. As we have moved past the June 1st opening of the Hurricane Season, your author on the Houston scene hears frequent reminders on radio and TV to prepare for the season. With the increasing intensity of tornados, greater attention must also be given to preparing for that potential threat. Add to this drought, wildfires, flooding and the underperforming economy, coupled with likely staff reductions, and any hotelier faces quite a challenge!

Yet, failure to prepare is truly a self-imposed plan to fail. Nearly every possible natural disaster that can wreak havoc on a hotel can be planned for in advance. Those hotel managers that fail to develop potential emergency and contingency plans, who fail to stockpile needed supplies, and equally significant, who fail to train their staff members on appropriate response procedures to emergencies, have no real valid defense. Most importantly, the safety and welfare of the guests and employees of the hotel are at stake, not to mention ownership's investment and assets, and the future viability of the hotel and the employability of its staff. Basically, preparation for emergencies boils down to three core areas: emergency plans, emergency supplies, and emergency response. Let's briefly examine each core area.



Emergency plans

Emergency planning MUST be a priority. Thoroughly review ALL emergency plans and the staffing for implementation of those strategies. It is always wise to assign by job title, rather than by name. There may be job titles eliminated and responsibilities will be necessarily redistributed among existing staff. It is imperative that each hotel manager review and be well versed in the various emergency plans. Regardless of an individual's work load or the hotel's occupancy factor, procrastination is not an acceptable defense in litigation.

Emergency plan guidelines should be prepared and distributed in a three-ring binder to each department. These binders should not be locked in the department manager's office where they may not be accessed during off-peak hours. Instead, locate the emergency plan binders in a prominent location where the supervisor on duty for each department can readily access them. Indexed according to type of incident, they will provide a top-to-bottom checklist of actions that should be undertaken when an incident occurs or is imminent. If everyone follows the sequential steps in their binders, the most critical steps will be addressed first and little will be overlooked.

As part of the planning process, determine the level of emergency service back-up that will likely be available from the community for each possible crisis, natural or man-made. Keep in mind that the municipal or county government and emergency services may likely be stretched thin during large-scale crises. It is best to know well in advance of an incident whether the hotel is pretty much going to have to “go it alone.”

Emergency supplies

Think of any type of impending or just occurred natural disaster and how difficult it will be to source and secure critical supplies. Here are just a few examples:

- Plywood for windows and doors for an approaching hurricane or windstorm
- Batteries, glow sticks, flashlights, generators and kerosene/gasoline during a power outage (remember that gas station pumps will not work without electricity)

- Sand and sandbags during a flood situation
- Snow shovels, snow blowers, salt and sand during a blizzard
- Water during a drought or firestorm
- Food, potable water and medical supplies for any emergency

Chances are good that if your hotel does not have these and other needed supplies stockpiled before a natural disaster, it will not be able to obtain them during or immediately after the occurrence. Generally, natural disasters are not selective in where they hit and who they affect, but they do affect many people and businesses in the same geographic area all at once. Therefore, expect critically needed items to be in short supply and/or not available at all.

Emergency response

Depending upon a hotel's location, it may be subject to wildfires, floods, mudslides, earthquakes, windstorms, hurricanes, waves and surges, tornados, power failures, arson, acts of vandalism or even domestic or international terrorism. How a hotel responds is merely a measure of how well it implements its emergency plans and utilizes its emergency supplies to minimize loss and protect and comfort its people. This requires that action be implemented by individuals employed by the hotel.

Guests will look to hotel personnel for direction and refuge during a disaster. Remember that guests will likely not be familiar with the hotel's location or the characteristics of the locale. Flee and outrun the looming disaster? Hunker down and weather the storm? What is the safest option or place to be? Expect these inquiries and more from frightened guests. Be prepared to respond to them in such a manner that will not incite panic or exacerbate an already tenuous situation.

To enable the hotel to respond in the event of a disaster, consider the following points:

- Is the hotel's emergency evacuation plan current? Have drills been conducted to train the staff members in proper procedures and to identify areas of weakness? Is the plan in writing and available to all staff?
- Are Engineering/maintenance staff as well as MODs and security personnel trained in procedures to shut down the facility in case evacuation is required? Do these key personnel have full knowledge on all shut-off valves, switches, levers and panels?
- Is there an immediate response team on premises? Keep a list, by name, of any associates who volunteer in the community as an EMT or volunteer firefighter. How many of these individuals will be lost to the establishment if called to serve the community during a crisis? Are there other personnel who have been trained in first-aid, CPR/AED or first responder training that are not committed to the community?
- Is the hotel's "telephone tree" current and maintained in an up-to-date status? This contact information should be kept both on premise and in a secure location off-premise.
- Does the hotel have contacts, by name, for all emergency services in your community, including police, fire, local DHS or other Federal level offices? Again, this contact information should be kept both on premise and in a secure location off-premise.
- Does the hotel staff regularly participate in community-wide emergency exercises, "table-top" or conference events?
- Does the hotel maintain back-up computer services and storage of critical information files at a remote and secured location?
- Does the hotel maintain a complete and protected roster of vendors, suppliers, building and systems emergency service units? (A tip: It is wise to develop working relationships in the community. For example, your hotel may use a contract security organization to supplement its own security department for special events. Be sure the contracted security firm is more than local, so that it can supply security staff from unaffected areas during a disaster. Example: One large hotel organization brought in security from San Francisco to help deal with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.)
- Use the front desk as control center. Special keys and devices for first responders, lists and locations of chemicals under the OSHA "hazcom" program, emergency response kits and a list of disabled guests who may require emergency assistance should all be immediately available at the front desk.
- Add to the items above the need for close coordination with the community disaster plan. Your property may be designated as an emergency clinic or refuge and this will require a comprehensive plan for water, food, bedding, supplies, and coordination and integration of volunteers and protocols with staff of the American Red Cross or other professionals of government relief agencies. Generally, the agency will take charge of the facility but hotel management will continue to maintain and operate the physical structure.

Pictured below: This mobile box stored outside the Engineering department of the Renaissance Waverly Hotel in Atlanta contains flashlights, batteries, chemical "glow" sticks, and other necessary lighting equipment in the event a power outage occurs.



- If the hotel has no special designation within the community, move to a plan for the protection and preservation of the property, guests and staff.
- Communicate as soon as you have important information affecting guests, staff or others on the premises; be sure everyone knows. One of the major complaints derived from post-disaster evaluations was the individual did not know what was going on and was, therefore, incapable of making a decision as to their own or their family's or associate's options. Have a redundant system; if the public announcement system fails, can people be notified via the hotel's telephone system or will it be necessary to send available employees to go door-to-door?
- To maintain a staff during a disaster, determine those employees who should bring their families on to the premises so they do not have the problem of trying to protect the property and their families simultaneously. ✧

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