



Risk Management

by Jesse Denton

Spring is the time to revisit your hotel's emergency plan and safety program

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The Vernal Equinox fell at 7:44am EDT on March 20, 2009 and marked the first day of Spring. For many of us this event brings visions of daffodils, spring flowers, tee times and jumping fish.

However, Spring also frequently brings along turbulent weather with cold fronts and warm fronts colliding, producing thunderstorms, with heavy rain, lightning, winds and occasional tornadoes. Natural emergencies, although infrequent, do happen and the hotel's Emergency Response Team (ERT) should be prepared for them. Depending upon its location, a hotel may have to cope with earthquakes, floods, waves, hurricanes/typhoons, tornadoes, windstorms, power failures or severe snowstorms. In some instances, natural disasters present unique problems whereby the hotel might be used as shelter or a hospital for nearby residents. With this in mind, it is time to dust off the hotel's emergency management plan and ensure it is up to date and current for the current situation and staff.

Have an emergency plan

The goals of an emergency plan are as follows:

- To help ensure the safety and well being of hotel guests and employees.
- Provide timely notification to the appropriate authorities.
- To provide a tool for training employees on proper reaction to an emergency.
- To ensure the flow of accurate information to persons affected by the incident.
- To promptly assist others in the evaluation of the cause(s) of any losses and an assessment of the magnitude of damage.

Preparation and training are critical components of any emergency plan. An effective emergency plan will provide for the following:

Training: Employee training and drills should be conducted semi-annually and on all shifts to ensure employees are aware of their duties and responsibilities during an emergency.

Emergency Resources: To help ensure hotel operations are restored as quickly as practical, agreements with suppliers, service providers, contractors, and other resources should be maintained. Stockpile materials to deal with extended power outages, to include: batteries for flashlights, fuel for emergency generators, light sticks (do not use candles).

Relations with Local Authorities: The ERT should establish a working relationship with local authorities who will be responding to emergencies at the hotel.

Emergency Checklists: Each department manager should have a checklist of actions that they should perform in the event of an emergency.

Emergency Response Kit: An emergency response kit should be kept at the front desk that contains records that will enable the hotel's management to keep track of the relocation of employees and guests after an emergency. It is also a very good idea to be ready for weather and other emergencies at home as well at work. Plan on what to do when threatened away from the job in order to ensure the safety of your family and yourself.



Why have a safety program?

Do most managers think there should be some type of a safety organization at their hotel? It seems some people think the tasks to be performed around a hotel are inherently safe enough that there is no need for an organized effort to improve the safety or security of their property. The truth about safety and the hospitality industry is most managers would say there should be a safety initiative, but too many fail to implement the program.

Here are just a few of the risks encountered every day by hotel employees: In a hotel operations group, the Guest Services staff usually has the lowest frequency of injuries of any group in the hotel; however, they still manage to trip over power cords and file drawers and bump into open cash drawers as well as incur an assortment of miscellaneous injuries. The nature of their injuries is such that it is usually difficult to pattern their activities to prescribe a solution to the problem. The best advice for these employees is to be smart, don't rush, look where you are going and lift properly.

As members of the Guest Services department, the bell staff has greater exposure to injuries than other members of the department. Unloading and loading luggage, tripping over luggage or curbs, and slips on wet walkways and surfaces, etc., can all result in injuries. The solutions are typically easy to find. These might include utilizing proper lifting techniques, requiring these employees to wear back supports, posting "wet floor" signs, making slip-resistant shoes a requirement for their uniforms, keeping luggage out of walkways, and ensuring that there is proper lighting. Everyone seems to know about these things, but not everyone practices them. Teach all employees about these programs; remind them and encourage them to use the proper methods and techniques. Then you have the beginning of a safety program.

The Housekeeping staff's exposure is huge. Consider that a room attendant may lift or bend up to 150 times while cleaning a standard hotel room; each attendant frequently cleans 16 to 18 rooms per day. Room attendants bend or lift 2000 to 2500 times per day. The exposure to potential injury is enormous. "Bending the knees not the back" is a very important habit for housekeeping staff. Additionally, room attendants have considerable exposure to injuries from other sources. They must learn to safely handle chemicals and items contaminated with bodily fluids, and they must deal with their personal security as well as the security of the hotel's and guests' property. Managers cannot afford to assume their staff knows how to perform these tasks. In fact, managers must provide training, testing and follow-up to insure safe practices throughout the hotel.

There are some insurance companies that will not consider insuring a hotel because the loss experience for the hospitality industry is not the best. However, there are several hotel companies that have excellent safety records. The best companies place safety as a high priority. Managers are held accountable for the safety record of the hotel. Frequently, the bonus of a general manager is sometimes dependent upon the safety record of the hotels' employees. Consider following these basic rules:

Establish a safety committee comprised of employees from various departments. Their mission should include finding ways to educate employees about safety in the workplace and identifying and eliminating unsafe situations or practices within the hotel.

Inspect safety. Conduct frequent observations of employees as they work. Use a checklist to ensure you are looking for the right actions; don't confuse safety inspections and housekeeping inspections.

Reward safety. Provide motivational incentives for employees and departments to work accident-free. These incentives can take the form of extra paid days off, pizza parties for the entire department, small cash bonuses, or non-monetary gifts such as gift certificates, theater tickets, hotel stays, or free dinner in the hotel dining room.

An important aspect of working safely is preserving the quality of life of employees. All employees have a life away from the hotel and have family and friends who are dependent on their wellness. One of the keys to being able to enjoy this time away from work is that employees must remain free of injuries from the workplace. This aspect of a safety program is potentially much more valuable than the financial side of the picture.

Today's the day. Get a safety program going — or revitalize the one currently in place. It's one of the best things a manager can do for an employee. ✧

(Jesse Denton is an independent loss prevention consultant based in Atlanta, GA. He possesses over 40 years of experience, the last 22 years with major hotel and insurance companies in the hospitality industry. Jesse was honored in February 2009 by HospitalityLawyer.com with the Hospitality Loss Prevention Lifetime Achievement award. He may be reached via e-mail at: jldentonjr@bellsouth.net.)