

READY RESPONSE

Steps to place your facility in a disaster response position

By Raymond C. Ellis, Jr., MBA, CHTP, CHE, CLSD



Whether the disaster or crisis involves your facility only, or is part of a wide-spread community involvement, what is your response capability? Since 9/11 the hospitality industry has encountered frequent instances where the civil authorities have been incapable of responding to a 911 call because their units were also impacted by the crisis. Personnel and equipment were overwhelmed by the nature and extent of the incident or were rendered incapable of response as in a post-Katrina New Orleans.

Senior management must make a decision as to how to respond to the fact, “We may have to do our own thing!” In New Orleans, several large properties gave evidence of pre-planning that permitted them to continue to serve the media, emergency workers and government representatives, whether city, parish, state or national. While the executive committee will retain its oversight authority, it must establish a special committee to address the need for an effective response in a disaster; whether it be natural or man-made, including an act of terrorism.

Such a committee may be designated as a security, risk management, crisis management, emergency management committee or other title acceptable to

your establishment. Let us review the steps necessary to place the hospitality facility in such a response position.

1 Review the staff as to any who may have special training in first aid and CPR. Do you have employees who are trained for emergency medical services (EMS) as a volunteer within their local community?

2 Your inventory of staff skills should include an analysis of those who may be volunteer fire responders in their community.

3 Are there employees with carpentry as a hobby that can assist in preparing the property for the onslaught of a hurricane or can provide temporary repairs following any disaster?

4 List those staff persons who have maintained their “cool” under adverse circumstances in the day-to-day operations under a non-crisis scenario.

5 Consider those employees who would best serve as a basic or “skeleton” crew if a “bare-bones” operation is the only response the organization will be able to provide.

6 Review the possibility of bringing the families of key staff to remain in the hotel throughout a disaster scenario. This will permit a more supportive role by key staff, as they would not be distracted by

concern for family members out in the community.

7 Determine the multiple roles to be assumed by the key staff. In a one-on-one review, establish those roles and be sure the individual is comfortable in those roles and can effectively serve in those various assignments. You certainly do not want a person to assume cooking duties when they have no cooking skills.

8 Establish a “chain-of-command.” If a management or supervisory staff person is incapacitated or unavailable at the time of an incident, have clearly defined responsibilities and authorities for a successor.

9 Institute a picture ID program that will be for all staff who form the “skeleton crew.” It should be distinctive and one that will provide easy and ready identification by your security staff or any contract security support personnel that have come on-site to assist in securing the property.

10 Contract security use and response should be carefully reviewed by a senior management committee. Although the lodging industry is almost unanimously opposed to the use of armed security staff, there are times when exceptions must be made. This proved to

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be the case in New Orleans when looting became such a problem. Several hotels, which continued to operate, flew in armed security officers from as far away as San Francisco. Needless to say, such arrangements take careful pre-planning.

11 Again, looking to the New Orleans post-Katrina example, some lodging properties were bringing in trailer-loads of food and water. Review the response required to continue operations in a situation where there is no normal delivery schedule or local capability. What reasonably nearby sources are available through your regular suppliers? Have a series of redundant locations in order to compensate for a disaster which might involve entire geographic sites, as in the gulf locations of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. If one site is unable to respond, what is the fallback? Add to your regular supplier lists, other organizations which might provide alternative sources for your needs. Work through corporate headquarters or other properties “under the same flag” for off-site support in supplying of food, equipment and even some staff on loan.

12 Amateur radio operators, as in past major disasters, again proved to be the most reliable communication resource. Review staff for any “ham operators” among the employees. If there are none, investigate the possibility of contracting with a local “ham operator” to serve in that role. If in a vulnerable location for hurricanes, tornados and floods, consider a “secured” location on premises for an amateur radio operation. Become involved in the community communication planning. There are increased efforts to make it possible for agencies of the government, including police, fire, FEMA, Homeland Security, etc. to communicate with each other. Get into that loop to the greatest extent possible. Security considerations will, of course, establish some limitations.

13 Another critical element in communications is providing data to staff, guests and any of the public caught by an emergency situation. Invariably, when guests or others “stranded” at a lodging establishment due to an emergency are interviewed in a post-incident survey, the consistent complaint is: “I did not know what was going on. I had no idea as to whether I had any alternatives.” Your response strategy should

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include bulletins as soon as you are aware of a new development. Has a mandatory evacuation been ordered? How will you implement such an order? Alternatively, has your property been designated as a “place of refuge?” Plan staff time to deliver bulletins to each room if the public address or other communication systems are inoperative. Your response must be to share data with staff and guests as soon as possible. What you know, they should know as well.

14 A corollary to the property’s response capability is in its efforts to protect the identity of any persons involved with the property. That includes employees, guests, contractors, vendors and members of the general public who may provide information for an event or as a future sales potential. The breadth and international implications of this issue require an additional article, and will only be referenced here. Hardly a day passes without a report on identity theft, “phishing,” major intrusions into data banks of financial institutions, credit card companies, universities, business enterprises and government agencies. Here, the only suggestion will be that your organization be proactive and carefully assess what data you really need. Perhaps it is time to discontinue the practice of sending a birthday greeting to “frequent guests.” A nice gesture, but one that compromises one’s identity. There is no reason for including the social security number of anyone other than your employees. Credit card information

is critical, but work with your IT staff and consultants to establish the best possible protection of your data. Remember, if your database has been violated, your response is to immediately notify all affected persons or organizations.

15 Expanding upon the training referenced in step 1, there is a need for a comprehensive training program that will focus on the development of response skills in all employees. Awareness and sensitivity are two elements that must be stressed. Every employee must be trained to immediately report any persons, items or situation which creates suspicion in their mind. It is likely there have been more instances of litigation due to an inadequate response or a total lack of response. Thus, overreaction occurring within and contained within the operating procedures of the establishment becomes an acceptable strategy. As we move from the general response capability to a natural disaster or crisis scenario, we will turn our attention to terrorism. There has never been a greater challenge for the lodging industry than how we might respond to a terrorism incident.

16 The lodging establishment within a community achieves a certain identity as it hosts dignitaries, controversial organizations, civic, political, educational and personal events such as wedding receptions, parties and recognition celebrations. That identity may make the property a choice for a terrorist action. In recent years, Marriott and Hilton International properties have sustained terrorist hits in overseas locations. It is unfortunate, but if a suicide bomber intends to bomb a property we cannot stop it. At the point the individual is intercepted, the bomb will detonate. It is for that reason, we have preceded this point with the response actions in the event of a disaster on the premises or in the community. In the final analysis, response to a terrorist action is mitigation. The recommendations in the earlier steps noted in this article must be the pattern for response. Remaining staff must take charge of the situation and work with the respondents in rescue, evacuation and restoration efforts.

Your author’s sincere hope is you will never have to face a terrorist attack. However, if you do, and the preparations urged in this paper are in place, you will provide a magnificent response! ■