

EMERGENCY EVACUATION

Managing Hospitality Risk

WHAT'S AT RISK?

True emergencies in hotels are rare. This is a blessing, but can also lead to a false sense of security and lack of preparation that can be disastrous when emergencies do arise.

In 1980, a horrendous fire at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas led to the deaths of 87 guests and employees, and injuries to countless others. Among the many hard lessons learned was the importance of maintaining emergency evacuation detection, notification, and safety systems and procedures. Investigators found that, at the point of fire origin, a fire alarm never sounded. A supposedly smoke-free stairwell that was a crucial escape route filled with smoke. The laundry chutes failed to seal, and defects existed in the heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems—all contributing to the spread of smoke. While many individual heroic acts took place in trying to aide the victims, the overall emergency response by staff was lacking. For example, the hotel had no means of communicating with guests such as a PA system. It is estimated that \$270 million was paid to settle subsequent lawsuits. There is far too much at risk to neglect proper planning for emergencies.

WHAT ARE YOUR LEGAL OBLIGATIONS?

Hospitality managers have a legal obligation under state and local laws to maintain their facilities and train their employees in compliance with the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Life Safety Code, or presiding equivalent codes. Hotels and lodging



facilities have very specific requirements under the law. The prudent hospitality manager will be well aware of the major components including construction requirements, building service and fire protection equipment, warning systems, and means of egress. It is important to make a proactive partnership with local authorities including the fire department, police force, and emergency services. The lodging industry has a special duty and higher-than-average burden of care for its guests when it comes to emergency evacuation. Failure to provide for safe and timely evacuation in the event of an emergency will lead to claims against hotels where, in many cases, “strict liability” will apply. The unprepared hotel will have little hope of defending itself against allegations of negligence.

HOW CAN YOU BETTER PROTECT YOUR ORGANIZATION?

For some suggestions designed to assist you in developing sound policies and procedures for your organization, please turn this document over and review the attached checklist.

For more information about this and other hospitality risk management topics, please contact:

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Checklist: Emergency Evacuation

- Create a written emergency response plan, including clear procedures for evacuation. Distribute the written plan to all managers and supervisors.
- Designate specific roles for staff members and make your management team accountable for implementing the plan.
- Managers and supervisors, in turn, should document specific departmental and employee responsibilities.
- Bring the plan to life through routine staff training and periodic practice drills. Employees should be trained in hotel evacuation procedures when they are hired and at least semi-annually thereafter. Evacuation drills should be performed in cooperation with the local fire department at least annually. Staff performance should be evaluated and any weaknesses reviewed and follow-up training completed.
- All emergency systems including alarms, emergency lighting, annunciator panels, PA systems, and the like should be routinely checked and kept in working order on a documented testing and maintenance schedule.
- Employees should be taught to treat all alarms as serious. Managers and supervisors must assure that the “false alarm” syndrome does not set in.
- Security, or other designated staff members, should always investigate alarms and communicate immediately with the front desk. If two-way radios are available, they should be used.
- Guests with disabilities that might make evacuation difficult should be noted during check-in and certain staff members should be designated to assist with evacuating these guests. This requires specific training on assistance techniques.
- It is very important to decide, ahead of time, on a logical meeting area that is a safe distance from the building so guests and staff may be accounted for.
- Preferably, any elevators will be automatically recalled to the first floor and locked out except for fire department use; if not, then this should be a manual responsibility assigned to trained personnel.
- Elevators should be clearly posted with signs that tell guests “Do not use elevators in the event of a fire alarm - use stairwells.”
- Assign a security or staff person to meet the fire department and direct them to the fire, if known, or to the annunciator panel, if available.
- Guest evacuation procedures should be posted in each room, including universally understood exit diagrams on the inside of each guest room access door.
- Signs should be posted to instruct guests on safe behaviors during an emergency alarm, including advice to check their room door for heat before opening. If hot, they are to stay in their room and seal door and vent openings with wet towels, and as soon as possible, to make their way to the nearest stairwell and exit the building.