



NEWS

## **How to prepare for your next natural disaster**

By [Guest Contributor](#) on 6/20/2018

In a crisis situation, when hotel property, brand reputation and guest safety are at stake, there isn't any time to wonder what to do next. Hotels must be prepared to address the emergency at hand quickly, effectively and with minimal disruption to guests.

Some crises can be averted through proactive measures, such as an effective security strategy or well-trained staff. Other crises, such as those caused by natural disasters, can occur at any time, so preparation is key.

When Kilauea volcano on Hawaii Island erupted in May 2018, spewing lava and ash into the air, residents from remote communities were evacuated and several hundred homes were destroyed.

While no hotels were directly affected by the lava flow, the disaster brought to light the devastating power of Mother Nature and reminded Hawaii's hospitality industry of the importance of disaster planning.

Every place on Earth has the potential to be hit by a natural disaster. Take the following steps to ensure you're prepared when disaster strikes.

### **Make the right plans**

Many hotels may use a template crisis plan that includes every possible scenario, even those that don't apply to their specific property. Evaluate your plan and tailor it to meet the unique needs of your hotel in order to make it more efficient and effective for management and staff.

Conduct a risk assessment to identify the top natural threats that have the potential to impact your hotel. On Hawaii Island, a volcanic eruption is rare but possible, while hurricanes, tsunamis and earthquakes stand a much greater chance of occurring. In other locations, blizzards, tornadoes, wildfires, floods or heat waves may top the list.

By identifying specific threats, you can create more detailed preparations that will help keep your guests and staff safe.

### **Practice, check and update**

Simply having a disaster plan isn't enough. Once you've established your plan and put it in writing, it must be practiced and updated on a regular basis in order to remain beneficial.

Have your staff participate in regular disaster trainings and practice evacuations to ensure they know their role and can implement procedures at a moment's notice. Include evacuation procedures for guests with disabilities or those who need assistance. A well-trained, well-prepared staff will be able to rely on experience in the face of an emergency, keeping guests calm and safe.

Time these trainings to coincide with seasonal changes, such as the start of hurricane or monsoon season. If your departments have regular team meetings, start talking about disaster preparedness and verbally running through evacuation procedures in the weeks leading up to storm season to make sure it's always top of mind.

Emergency materials should be well stocked and checked frequently to ensure they're up to date and ready to use. Create a checklist of materials and designate a department manager to ensure each item is in stock and working properly once or twice a year.

Finally, revisit your plan every six months to update designated points of contact for specific tasks. Ensure emergency numbers, emails, websites and reference information are correct.

### **Communication is key**

When a crisis hits, your staff will be busy implementing disaster procedures and ensuring guest safety. In these critical moments, guests will have lots of questions, reporters may be calling, and the disaster could be pushing closer to your hotel, creating a stressful situation for employees. The last thing you want is a misinformed employee giving the wrong information to a guest, or telling a reporter how unprepared the hotel is.

A crisis communication plan helps avoid communication missteps by facilitating open, accurate and timely dissemination of information to staff members and stakeholders.

Your plan should outline who will be responsible for contacting employees, guests, board members, media, local agencies and other stakeholders, and the most appropriate method of communication for each audience. Properties that serve international guests should identify and train bilingual staff members to assist and communicate with non-English speaking guests.

Draft key messages for each disaster scenario, which can easily be versioned to the specific situation. These messages can be used to contact stakeholders, create website or social media updates, and update phone message lines. A separate script should be provided to employees to help them answer common guest questions. These proactive measures help keep messaging consistent and controlled, avoiding the potential for reputational damage.

Designate a single spokesperson to talk to media, and train other staff to direct media inquiries to the spokesperson. Have your spokesperson attend a media training to gain valuable interview tips and practice key messages. The preparation will come in handy if he or she needs to address the media in a high-stress situation.

### **When disaster strikes nearby**

Your disaster preparedness plan will help you address a crisis that threatens your hotel directly, but what happens when disaster doesn't quite strike?

In the case of the Kilauea volcanic eruption, Hawaii Island hotels weren't directly affected, but local properties found themselves dealing with questions from guests, residual environmental issues such as air quality, and other effects.

Guests could be frightened by reports of an impending eruption or storm nearby, even if your location is safe. Keep lines of communication with guests open, informing them of the situation and reassuring them that the hotel won't be affected. Let them know of any issues they should be aware of, such as a decline in air quality or more extreme weather than normal.

Depending on the situation, it may be prudent to issue a warning to avoid traveling to the affected area, or provide additional weather and news resources to guests.

Finally, since a nearby disaster likely affects your hotel's surrounding community, be sensitive to the damage and losses occurring nearby. Put a hold on social media posts or advertising that promotes leisure activities at your property until after the disaster has passed. While you do want to let guests know that your hotel is safe, you don't want to be seen as taking advantage or being insensitive to the situation.

Dealing with a natural disaster is challenging for any property, especially when it comes to ensuring the safety of your guests. With the right planning, you and your staff will be well prepared to weather any storm.

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