



Emergency Plans Target Attendee Safety, Business Continuity

BY MITCHELL BEER, CMM

Buffeted by hurricanes, tornadoes, ice storms and severe heat waves—and looking ahead to the prospect of a global flu pandemic—meeting planners, suppliers and destinations are putting plans in place to ensure attendee safety and business continuity in a world where the unexpected is increasingly likely.

The savviest organizations are moving past the widespread industry prohibition against discussing onsite emergency procedures or acknowledging seasonal risk for fear of reminding meeting planners or attendees that something could happen to their events, facilities or supplier firms. Industry leaders are being more deliberate about communicating their emergency plans to partners, clients and staff, and some are going a giant step beyond.

At least one major North American supplier, Freeman, is sharing its emergency

A Basic EMERGENCY Checklist

Eisenstodt Associates LLC uses a three-page checklist to assess basic emergency preparedness at meeting venues. The company also asks a series of tough questions before hiring a transportation provider. The following are some examples from these lists.

For venues

- Visual alarms for people with hearing impairments
- Automatic fire doors
- Auto link to fire station
- Ventilated stairwells
- Emergency maps in guest rooms and hallways
- Automated external defibrillators (AEDs) available on site
- Staff trained in CPR and first aid
- Public address system
- Video surveillance in public areas, elevators, entrances and hallways
- Staff trained in issuance of duplicate keys
- Emergency power source
- Standard operating procedure for power outages
- List of personnel who speak languages other than English
- Guest notification procedure for fire emergencies
- Written emergency plan for extreme weather conditions
- Procedures for dealing with terrorist threats
- Emergency communication procedures and evacuation plan
- SafePlace accreditation
- Results of last three food safety inspections
- Temperature in food preparation areas
- Access to kitchens
- Hand-washing protocols

For transportation suppliers

- Are drivers local? If not, how have they been trained on local traffic patterns?
- What training have they received for the routes between pick-up and the destination?
- When and how are they tested for drugs and alcohol?
- When did the vehicle pass a safety inspection?
- Describe procedures for: disruptive passenger; illness of passenger; death of passenger; road closure; traffic backup; inoperable emergency equipment, bathrooms or communications equipment; and crime in or around the vehicle.

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plan with customers, facilities and competitors, recognizing that all parties will need to cooperate during a major health crisis to avoid disaster.

At least one convention bureau (the New Orleans Metropolitan CVB) is prompting meeting planners to develop their own emergency procedures, to the point of helping them out with the details—even if they're scheduled to visit different destinations the following year.

"Emergency preparedness is that gorilla out there that no one wants to talk about, but we need to," said Donna R. Karl, CMP, vice president of client relations at the New Orleans Metropolitan CVB and an MPI Gulf States Chapter member. "Instead of being seen as a negative, a city that starts talking about contingency plans should be seen as a place that is professional. We're up to date, we know what we're doing here and you're going to get the best experience because we're prepared."

Phil Black III, CLSD, director of safety and security at The Westin Kierland Resort & Spa in Scottsdale, Ariz., says the general consensus is that meetings industry participants can no longer be proprietary with their crisis plans.

"We really have to begin opening up those lines of communication, within our communities and with our competitors, because we'll all be potentially affected [when disaster strikes]," he said. "I strongly encourage meeting planners to look beyond the basic security steps and challenge the venues where they're considering holding their meetings or events about how prepared they truly are."

Forgetting the Lessons of 9/11

The attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, focused many meeting professionals' minds on safety and security.

"Post-9/11, the emphasis has shifted more toward crisis planning and beyond the basics of having an evacuation plan," Black said. "Today's meeting planner is

beginning to ask the important questions about who is on site and what is taking place while their event is going on—not only [asking about] any competitors that may be at that facility, but any high-exposure targets.”

But Karl agrees that the urgency around Sept. 11, 2001, has dissipated.

“When Sept. 11, 2001, occurred we were all taken by surprise,” Karl said. “Many planners developed emergency plans, and it was very high on our to-do lists.”

In subsequent years, however, she says meetings industry participants have become complacent and maybe “a little lazy.”

Yet there have been dozens of events—such as the 2003 outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Toronto, hotel strikes, earthquakes and hurricanes Katrina and Rita—where the common denominator was the need for an emergency plan.

“Emergencies come in very different packages,” Karl said. “It can be many different things.”

Joan Eisenstodt, chief strategist with Washington, D.C.-based Eisenstodt Associates LLC and an MPI Potomac Chapter member, says the lessons of Sept. 11, 2001, have been lost.

“If you go to 2001 as a benchmark, which I think it is for a lot of people, and you ask what has changed in this industry, I would say pretty much nothing.”

What if ... ?

The problem, Eisenstodt says, is that no one is looking at the broader implications of specific threats.

“We can talk about the 10 things people should be aware of, although I think there are far more than 10,” she said.

“But we are totally unprepared to deal with the most minor problems or the most catastrophic, as an industry overall and with individual meetings.”

Eisenstodt lists a series of what-if scenarios that every planner and facility should be able to anticipate, beginning

with simple but important contingencies such as a participant getting drunk or having a heart attack on site. Matters become more complicated when an entire group is displaced—if a convention center becomes a refuge after a natural disaster or if a facility is at the center of a sudden disease outbreak, like the Washington, D.C.-area hotel that was closed because of Norovirus in early March.

But Eisenstodt warns that even the simplest common sense precautions are far from universal. Planners forget that their mobile phones may not work if a tour bus breaks down outside city limits or that they’ll need a flashlight in the event of a power outage.

“People think I’m overreacting when I ask these questions,” she said. “I still contend that the person who says nothing bad ever happened at their meeting is the

person who has the problem. You only have to go through one emergency and you become a totally different person.”

Ask Every Time

Karl urges planners to ask about emergency plans on every site visit. And she stresses that contingency planning must go beyond individual facilities to embrace the entire host community.

“When Katrina happened, we found out that one emergency plan is not enough,” she said. “The city of New Orleans had a plan. The state of Louisiana had a plan. The Superdome had a plan. Each hotel had an emergency plan, and so did the CVB. But they didn’t all talk to each other. They weren’t integrated.”

The lesson learned?

“You need all that information before [disasters] happen,” Karl said.

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Now, the New Orleans Metropolitan CVB communicates more proactively with all the major players in an emergency, including its clients.

"I'm in the process of calling all our definites for 2007 and 2008 and making sure they have a copy of our emergency plan and understand it, and that we also

have a copy of theirs," Karl said.

If a client doesn't have a plan, Karl says she's lecturing them about why they should have one, and even takes it a step further—she's there to help them prepare one.

Karl has already coached three groups through the emergency planning process,

and will soon be assisting a fourth client who won't even be meeting in New Orleans next year.

"We don't care," she said. "We feel it's important to have one, wherever you're meeting. We don't want anyone to be caught unprepared."

Eisenstodt agrees that communication is crucial—within the industry and with outside emergency preparedness and law enforcement agencies. She says too many hospitality companies limit emergency training to management, when every staff member will need to know his or her role in a crisis.

Recent safety and security conferences in California and Arizona included speakers from the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and local police. Eisenstodt says that kind of liaison should be the rule, not the exception.

Preparing for a Pandemic

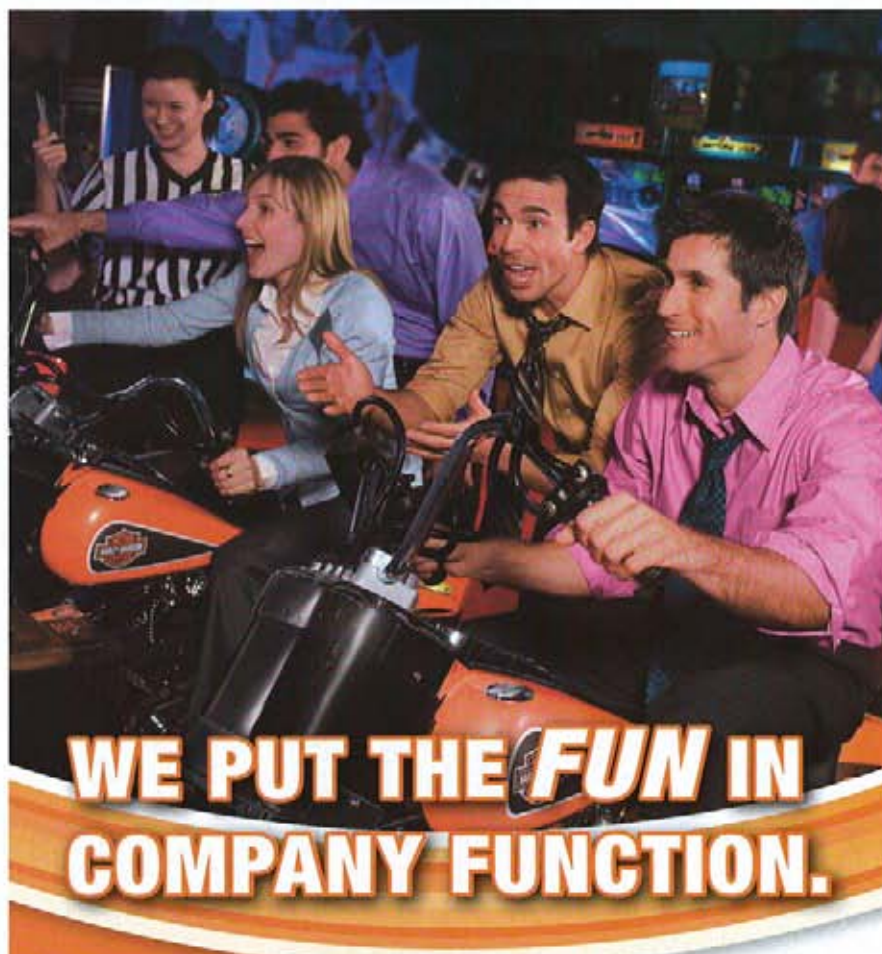
One supplier that has made preparedness a priority is Dallas-based Freeman. David Klutts, corporate director of risk management services, says the prospect of a global avian flu pandemic has been on Freeman's radar for some time.

"From our involvement with the SARS outbreak and the fallout from Sept. 11, 2001, in the travel industry we knew this was something that could have a tremendous impact," he said. So Freeman introduced a company-wide training program and decided to communicate key elements of its business continuity plan to all employees by the end of February 2007.

"We hope this is a plan we will never need to implement," Klutts said. However, he says, the more prepared businesses are, the better off everyone will be in the event of an emergency.

"If you don't share information and turn it into knowledge, it's useless," he said.

Key elements of Freeman's May 2006 *Pandemic Influenza Business Continuity Planning Guidelines* include the following.



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Preparing Convention Centers for

DISASTERS

The "daunting and expensive" task of preparing major meeting facilities for natural disasters and terrorist attacks is the subject of a chapter in the soon-to-be-released *Developing the Infrastructure for Convention & Event Tourism*, edited by Robert Nelson, Ph.D., of the University of Delaware.

"Preparing for disaster relief is not a role that convention center managers want," according to Nelson and four co-authors, including Marvin Cetron, Ph.D., president of Forecasting International, and Warren Reuther Jr., CEO of the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center

in New Orleans.

But convention centers have many characteristics that make them natural staging grounds for relief and evacuation in times of emergency, according to the authors. Their large spaces can provide assembly areas for relief workers, and their loading docks, parking and proximity to transportation make them natural evacuation hubs.

The Morial Convention Center received an estimated 20,000 people seeking refuge from Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Houston's George R. Brown Convention Center housed many of the evacuees. After the Sept. 11, 2001, ter-

rorist attacks, the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York served as a staging area for responders and a makeshift morgue.

The authors also warn that tougher security at military bases and embassies will lead terrorists to seek softer targets.

"Some of the softest targets are operated by the hospitality industry. By their basic nature, convention centers must remain open and welcoming to attendees and thus find it difficult to exclude those with hostile intent."

Until recently, the authors note, "most domestic convention facilities

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did not envision themselves serving as centers for disaster relief, and the buildings were not designed for that purpose." The paper recommends facility improvements and procedural changes that would prepare convention centers to cope as staging grounds in times of crisis and as potential terrorist targets.

"Convention Centers as Staging Grounds for Disaster Recovery: Lessons Learned from 911 and Katrina" will appear in *Developing the Infrastructure for Convention & Event Tourism*, published by Haworth Hospitality Press (cited with permission).

- Background on pandemic flu
- An assessment of the impact of an eight-week pandemic—or a series of outbreaks lasting up to two years—on staffing levels, supply chains, subcontractors and customer demand

- A review of critical business processes and procedures in the event of a pandemic, including a detailed division of responsibilities across the company

- A step-by-step implementation plan, with information on hygiene, protective equipment, stress management, sick and bereavement leave policies and opportunities to telecommute

A key objective for the training program is to deliver just the right amount of information.

"We didn't want to create any sense of alarm," Klutts said. Freeman management determined that it would be counterproductive to distribute the full,

in-depth crisis plan to all personnel.

An Evolving Scenario

"Sure, it's an ever-evolving scenario," Klutts said. "You don't have all the answers when you don't know all the questions. But you've got to prepare just in case, based on best practices in business continuity."

That same overall philosophy led Freeman to post its plan on the International Association of Exhibitions and Events (IAEE) Web site, making it available across the industry.

"It isn't as if no one else will be affected by our plan," Klutts explained. "You might see competitors helping competitors at a trade show if there's a labor shortage, so it's a shared effort."

Medical geographer Dr. Kristy Duncan of the University of Toronto says business continuity is one of the common threads

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that link the two main issues she studies, pandemic flu and climate change.

"It's a supply chain issue," she said.

"It's great that you have a plan. But unless your suppliers have their own plans, you're no further ahead."

Transforming Business Practices

Duncan, who will keynote April 19 at the MPI Ottawa Chapter's National Meetings Industry Day workshop, says the temperature extremes and weather disasters brought on by climate change will bring new challenges for meetings and events. Sustained heat waves and urban smog will become much more common, while ice storms and blackouts will occur with little warning.

"You can't get to meetings if you can't drive," she said. "None of our lights work. Technology doesn't work. And the

big question with climate change or a pandemic is whether a city's infrastructure will hold up."

With severe weather, there is at least some hope of government assistance in a crisis that is limited in time and space. A flu pandemic will affect multiple sites at the same time, and just as communities begin recovering from the first wave, a second wave will hit.

For an industry that is all about bringing people together, Duncan says the challenge will be to transform business practices—to remain viable and to give back to a society that will be severely weakened. Meanwhile, meeting professionals will be dealing with all the same issues facing the rest of the business community.

"It's the aftermath. The depression. The financial loss," Duncan said. She says it's about how you rebuild society,

including the services and support on which meetings depend every day.

Conservative estimates place the cost of the 2003 SARS outbreak at CDN\$945 million for public health and \$4 billion for the economy as a whole.

"The numbers were relatively small compared to what we would be facing in a pandemic," Duncan said.

Those concerns translate into massive legal, insurance and employee health and wellness issues, along with practical questions at every point in the supply chain, Duncan says.

"If I'm working with hotels and they're planning on increasing cleaning stock or protective gear or masks, when do you source that? If you have contractors on site, what guarantees do you have that they'll come to work?"

There are issues for individual employees, as well.

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"How are you going to look after young children if daycares and schools close?" Duncan asked. "How are you going to look after elderly parents? What food and water are you going to ask people to stock and for how long?"

Challenging Every Department

Many of those issues were on the table—literally—when the Westin Kierland held its annual emergency preparedness exercise in late March 2006. Last year, Kierland staff took part in a tabletop simulation of a hypothetical attack on a high-profile guest. This year, the topic was pandemic preparedness.

"Last year's scenario was an all-day exercise that truly challenged every member of management in most departments," said the Kierland's Phil Black. The focus of the tabletop exercise changes each year, so staff is challenged to think outside the box about how they would respond in that new situation.

Black stresses the importance of organizing facility-wide exercises around crisis plans, rather than simply developing and publishing them.

"It may take an entire day to work through," he explained. "We develop follow-up action plans after each exercise, and those plans are pursued until they are closed out."

Just Get Something Started

Emergency preparedness is an unfamiliar and scary topic for many meeting professionals, but the New Orleans Metropolitan CVB's Donna Karl stresses the need to get started on a plan.

"It doesn't have to be the best plan in the first year, [and] you don't have to start from scratch," she said. "There are many plans out there now, and you can copy one. If you get something started, you can add to it each year to make it better."

But there is no getting around the need to be prepared.

"A meeting planner is a leader in an

organization," Karl said. "When you decide where a meeting is going to go, you're bringing your attendees, your employer and your co-workers to a destination they're not familiar with. If an emergency occurs, they'll be looking to you to find out what to do and

where to go." **TMP**

MITCHELL BEER, CMM, is president of The Conference Publishers Inc., www.theconferencepublishers.com, and director of strategic education projects for the MPI Ottawa Chapter.

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