

## case study

# *Readiness and Response: The case of hotel emergency management during hurricanes*

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### Introduction

Tourism and hospitality businesses are often located in some of the most beautiful locations in the world. These locations often present many natural challenges such as wildfires, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and hurricanes. Some of these natural events are regular seasonal occurrences for destinations and require businesses to be ready for and respond to these challenges annually, especially when they become natural disasters. Hurricanes are a seasonal challenge for the southern United States and the Caribbean Islands with the official season beginning June 1 and ending November 30 (NOAA, n.d.). Florida, for example, was hit in 2018 by Hurricane Michael, which was the first Category 5 Hurricane to strike the contiguous United States since 1992 (Wamsley, 2019). In 2017, Irma, a Category 4 Hurricane, made landfall in Florida where an estimated 6.5 million Floridians were ordered to evacuate (Held, 2017).

The growing size and frequency of major natural disasters is requiring hotel managers to refocus on their emergency preparedness plans because it is no longer *if* a natural disaster will hit, but rather *when* (Pennington-Gray, 2018). While planning is important, many situations bring unique challenges to management. Yet with experience comes the ability to handle these crises and disasters more efficiently and effectively. During a natural disaster, hotels may no longer be operating as traditional accommodations, but rather become a place of refuge and shelter for those left vulnerable due to a hurricane (Dobie et al. 2018). The question quickly becomes how and when to shift hotel operations from an economic focus toward a moral one, emphasizing the delivery of well-being for those in need. Hotel managers must determine the best strategies for which to utilize their resources to serve and protect their stakeholders: guests, employees, local residents, visitors, emergency responders and government officials.

### Background

Hutchinson Island, located on the east coast of Florida, is made up of two barrier islands separated by the Fort Pierce Inlet: North Hutchinson Island and South Hutchinson Island. The total resident population is approximately 13,000 with 14 beachfront hotels, inns, and motels totaling 1,200 rooms. There are two exits to Hutchinson Island on State Road A1A: via the South Bridge in Fort Pierce and the

Frank A. Wacha Bridge and Causeway. The closest airport is Palm Beach International (PBI), about a ninety-minute drive from Hutchinson Island. Hutchinson Island is located in a storm surge evacuation zone. Barrier islands and inland locations are often evacuated in Florida due to impending hurricane force winds or the risk of flooding from storm surge.

Hotel Adria is a 3-Star, 204-room, mid-scale hotel located off U.S. Highway 1 in Port St. Lucie, Florida. This 4-story property consists of 154 rooms with 2 queen beds and 50 rooms with king beds. The hotel has one, 80-seat restaurant with a 20-seat bar called Hemingway's. The restaurant is open for breakfast and room service from 6:30 AM - 10:30 AM, and dinner and bar service from 5:00 PM - 11:00 PM. The restaurant does not serve lunch since guests often choose to eat at one of the many nearby independently owned restaurants or near the beach. There is a lobby coffee shop called Pete's, serving only hot and cold beverages to go, and premade snacks and sandwiches. The hotel has two event spaces: the Atlantic Ballroom and the Sand Dollar Hospitality Room. The Atlantic Ballroom is 3,650 sq. ft. and accommodates sit-down events for up to 300 people. The Sand Dollar Hospitality Room is a 750 sq. ft. room that can hold up to 30 guests. The hotel also has a large outdoor pool with 30 lounge chairs and a gas grill for special events. The hotel's current online rate averages \$132. The hotel has a check-in time of 4:00 PM and a checkout time of 12:00 PM. Reservations need to be canceled at least two calendar days before the scheduled arrival date or guests are charged a one-night stay. Parking is \$17 per night and the hotel has a no pets allowed policy.

It is now Friday, October 13th and Hurricane Rene has been upgraded to a Category 4 Hurricane with winds up to 137mph. The Hurricane's outer bands are tracking toward Hutchinson Island 9 miles northeast of Hotel Adria in Port St. Lucie, Florida. Local authorities have issued a mandatory evacuation order for both North and South Hutchinson Islands. This will require the approximate 13,000 residents and 800 hotel guests to seek shelter on mainland Florida. The Governor has just issued a state of emergency and the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association (FRLA) has asked hotels to waive fees and cancellation policies. The Governor has also urged hotels that ban pets to welcome pet owners fleeing Hurricane Rene. The local airport is closed and all flights are cancelled. The evacuation zone for Hotel Adria has not been identified as a mandatory evacuation zone and is not expected to be in the direct path of the hurricane, thus it remains open.

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## ***No Regular Day in the Life of a Manager in Training***

Manager in Training (MIT) Mary Banna graduated last fall from a four-year hospitality management program in the northeast United States and is completing her training with a well-known hotel company at its property Hotel Adria on the east coast of Florida. She has been at the hotel since May and it is now October. The General Manager (GM) of Hotel Adria is in Chicago to meet with the franchise owners and decided that making Mary the Manager on Duty (MOD) for the four days he is gone is an excellent opportunity to expand her training. A day after the GM left, the hurricane watch in the Caribbean has been upgraded to a hurricane warning in Florida. The GM considers returning to Florida early, but since the hotel is out of the hurricane's projected path, he remains in Chicago to finish his meetings. On the day of his scheduled return to Florida, his flight is cancelled due to Hurricane Rene approaching Florida. The GM calls Mary to discuss hotel and staffing preparations for the impending storm. Mary informs him that the airport is closed, only some of the managers and staff have been able to make it into work, there are area power outages, and some of the cell towers are down. She explains that she has never experienced a hurricane before, and as the GM is assuring Mary that the other managers and staff will be able to help her during this emergency, their cell-phone connection goes dead. Currently on property with Mary Banna are the following managers: Liam Clean, Executive Housekeeper; Mitch Star, sous-chef; Amanda Quick, Front Desk Supervisor; Jack Done, Assistant Facilities Engineer; and Patricia Night, Catering Manager. Additionally, the following hourly staff are on property: 4 housekeepers, 4 part-time banquet servers, 3 restaurant servers, one front desk clerk, and one bartender.

## **Background Literature**

### ***Emergency Management and Hotel Practices***

According to McKnight and Linnenluecke (2016, p. 291), private firms are increasingly playing an important role in a community approach to emergency management. In this approach to emergency management, the role of private firms can be considered from a firm-centric or community-centric response to natural disasters (McKnight and Linnenluecke, 2016). A firm-centric approach emphasizes the business benefits of responding to natural disasters, while a community-centric approach looks beyond just business benefits to the advantages that accrue from interacting with community stakeholders and those affected by the disaster (McKnight and Linnenluecke, 2016 p. 296). In a disaster, firms need to consider moving from a market orientation focusing on profits toward a moral logic focusing on the needs of vulnerable consumers (Cheung and McColl-Kennedy, 2015).

Hotels cannot stop natural disasters from occurring, but they can mitigate their impacts on their business and the community through

ongoing emergency management planning. While the terms crisis and disaster are often used interchangeably, from an organizational perspective they are different. A crisis is often the result of a poor decision or internal action, while a disaster is often external and presents businesses with "sudden unpredictable catastrophic changes over which it has little control" (Faulkner, 2001, p. 136). Thus, hotels annually face potential disasters and must plan for them to avoid creating crises for their immediate stakeholders (employees, guests and residents). Emergency management planning consists of three broad stages: before, during and after the disaster (Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie, 2004). More specifically, emergency management often involves the consideration of one of two very similar planning frameworks. One consists of the 4 R's: reduction, readiness, response and recovery (Becken and Hughey, 2013), and the second is the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's): mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

FEMA, which operates at the federal level of government, suggests that emergency planning starts out with the "mitigation" phase, which is directed at taking specific actions to minimize the harm that might be caused by a disaster in advance. This is done by ensuring necessary supplies and equipment are in place, as well as having contracts with repair companies to respond to hotel damages after the disaster. Before a disaster affects a hotel, it's important to develop and continuously update a hotel emergency preparedness plan (Kwortnik, 2004). A key component of preplanning for a disaster is the establishment of an emergency command team with clearly articulated positions and responsibilities (FEMA, n.d.; Mills, 2017). Readiness strategies can prepare the hotel staff through scenarios and role-playing exercises (Kwortnik, 2004; Ritchie, 2003). A communication strategy should be developed in advance to communicate to both employees and guests during periods when communication technology may become unreliable (Drabek, 2000; The Beaches of Fort Myers and Sanibel, 2002). A plan to evacuate guests should be developed and tested in case the hotel is forced to evacuate.

Efforts to protect and secure the hotel infrastructure and inventory before the disaster impacts the property should be documented in the emergency plan. This may include plans to secure all outside items and submerging outdoor furniture in an inground swimming pool to avoid wind loss. Plan for backup generators and pre-check that they are in working condition and have enough fuel if needed (The Beaches of Fort Myers and Sanibel et. al. 2002; Caribbean Hotel Association & Caribbean Tourism Organization, 1998; Mills, 2017). Prepare emergency supply kits that can be handed out to guests and employees in case of power outages and impacts on hotel services (The Federal Alliance for Safe Homes, Inc., and FEMA, n.d.). Evaluate what rooms and areas are at risk of flooding and wind damage and

prepare construction supplies needed to secure these areas of the hotel (The Federal Alliance for Safe Homes, Inc., and FEMA, n.d.).

Once the disaster hits, the response stage will be the most important determinant of the organizational success in combating a crisis (Ritchie, 2004). There is a broad range of actions to be undertaken, and given the dynamic challenges disasters present, it's critically important that prior stages are successful for the response to be effective (Burnett et al. 1998). This is the time when organizational focus shifts toward safety and security concerns, as managers are faced with the time constraints resulting from rapidly changing events and their impacts on the business (Roberts, 1994; Hughey, 2013). Hotels may take on a completely new function as they focus on community relief (Dobie et al. 2018; Roberts, 1994). At this point, it is crucial for hotels to embrace the responsibility of supporting vulnerable customers and stakeholders. Leadership is key during a natural disaster, and employees need to know who is in charge. A physical space should be designated as the command and control center (Ergun et al. 2009) from which the leader can operate. Managers and staff should be visibly available to communicate and update guests, and reassure them of their safety (Kwortnik, 2004). A roll call should be taken to know which employees are on property and what skill sets they bring, in case employees need to take on multiple roles (Kwortnik, 2004; FEMA, n.d.). A review of the food and beverage inventory should be taken and more ice made and stored in case of power outages (Mills, 2017; The Beaches of Fort Myers and Sanibel et. al. 2002). If electricity and water outages are expected, asks guests to fill their bathtubs with water that can be used to flush toilets. Consider which parts of the building and grounds are most at risk, and post signs or employees to keep guests safe.

After a natural disaster when the hotel has assessed and estimated damages and returned to normal functions, it should seek to assist the local community by housing first responders, local officials and out of town repair crews (Becken and Hughey, 2012). Consider giving out supplies to community members in need and participating in fundraising campaigns. Actions toward getting to recovery comprise, not only for financial considerations and estimations of property damage, but also organizational long-term learning, evaluation of specific actions taken in previous stages, and continuing to help the community in the post-crisis period (Roberts, 1994; Becken and Hughey, 2013). A post event assessment should take place with managers and staff to learn from the disaster to serve in future preparations and updating annual emergency plans (Ritchie, 2003; The Beaches of Fort Myers and Sanibel et. al. 2002). Whether one considers emergency management to consist of the 4 R's (reduction, readiness, response and recovery) or FEMA's mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery, it's crucial that the hotel plan for the use of its human and physical resources before, during and after a disaster.

## *Protecting Vulnerable Consumers*

During natural disasters, residents, visitors, and customers are often left in a state of uncertainty that is consistent with consumer vulnerability (Cheung et al. 2017). Consumers experience a wide-range of negative effects on their well-being during their state of vulnerability (Berlemann, 2016; Uchida, Takahashi, and Kawahara, 2014). These may include anxiety, fear, and stress as individuals are pushed from relative stability to uncertainty (Baker and Mason, 2012; Dalziell and McManus, 2004). Relief from not only fear and anxiety, but also the need for food and shelter become greater for people during natural disasters (Finsterwalder, 2010; Cheung and McColl-Kennedy, 2015; Nguyen et al. 2019; Ragini et. al. 2018; Cheung et. al. 2017).

To support vulnerable consumers during natural disasters, private firms, like hotels, may be required to offer aid and protect consumers, due to enacted public policies (Rosenbaum et al. 2011). For example, the U.S. government has created policies to aid individuals needing shelter during disasters (FEMA, 2017; BITC, 2016). Specifically, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides funding to assist residents who are unable to stay in their homes by paying for hotel accommodations through the Transitional Sheltering Assistance Program (FEMA, 2017). The Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act (PETS) also requires that communities have plans that incorporate the assistance of pets into disaster planning (Leonard and Scammon, 2007). This law was passed by Congress to make sure emergency shelters and rescue facilities plan for the needs of household pets and service animals. According to FEMA, hotels are not required to take pets unless they are service animals (FEMA, 2017). During declared states of emergency, most U.S. states have laws to protect consumers against price gouging (Wilson et al. 2015). Hotels are often called on by public officials and trade associations to help their communities without harming those displaced by the impacts of hurricane disasters by waiving cancellation fees, allowing household pets (Mest, 2017; Dobrosielski, 2019), and controlling room rates (Wilson et al. 2015). Some authors note that consumers don't necessarily define price gouging by a legal definition, but rather the belief that the price was unfair (Wilson et al. 2015). Florida law explains that during a state of emergency, it is unlawful to sell items in an amount that grossly exceeds the average price for that item during the 30 days before the declaration of the state of emergency (Page and Cho, 2006).

## **Scenarios at Hotel Adria**

### **1. Room Rates**

A standard room rate at Hotel Adria during this period is between \$125 and \$150. Due to the hurricane, there is going to be an extremely high demand for rooms as residents seek shelter and tourists are forced to leave their hotels on North and South Hutchinson Islands. Hotel Adria is the only full-service

hotel within 20 miles. Jack Done, Assistant Facilities Engineer, mentions to Mary that the last time the hotel was impacted by a Category 4 Hurricane, its average daily rate dropped 40%, and after the storm occupancy was off by 50%, requiring the GM to cut staff positions. Hotel Adria is currently at 90% occupancy and 10% of those guests are scheduled to check out tomorrow. To offset the potential losses of hotel revenue after the hurricane, as well as any property damage expenses incurred from the storm, Mary decides to set their standard King/Queen guestrooms at the \$320 rack-rate instead of \$132 as specified on the website.

## **2. Pet Policy**

A couple with two children ages 3 and 5 and their 70 lb. Labrador Retriever, Marley, arrives at the hotel from their home after following the government-imposed evacuation order for Hutchinson Island. Hotel Adria has rooms available, but has a no pet policy. Mary knows that she will be able to quickly and easily sell this room to another evacuating family, so she is confident that the hotel will sell-out tonight. The weather is getting very bad outside and this family just spent two hours driving what should normally take 35 minutes due to the long line of evacuation traffic moving off the barrier island. According to hotel pet policy, Hotel Adria does not accept dogs. Mary informs the family that they can reserve a room, but their dog must stay in their vehicle. The family has no choice but to accept Mary's offer for a room without their dog Marley.

## **3. Residents Seeking Shelter**

Four hours have passed and Mary has filled the hotel with residents and tourists escaping the path of the hurricane, all paying the corporate rack rate of \$320. The Ellison Family of six—parents, grandparents, and twin girls aged 3—has evacuated their home on South Hutchinson Island. Their only choice is to drive to the nearest hotel, hoping to find temporary shelter until the storm clears. They arrive in desperate need of a room. Amanda Quick, the front desk supervisor, checks availability, but Hotel Adria is 100% occupied. In line behind the Ellisons are an elderly couple, Jose and Simone, who have also driven two hours in heavy traffic. The storm is getting more severe and the two groups are left stranded in the hotel lobby without the option of driving farther in these weather conditions. In fact, more evacuees are likely to show up seeking rooms. Amanda Quick, the front desk supervisor, checks with MOD, Mary Banna, to discuss what they can do for the Ellison Family and the elderly couple. Mary decides to call a meeting with all of the managers and discuss potential options for helping evacuees, now that the hotel is completely booked. She seeks feedback from each of the managers as to what they recommend.

## **4. Modifying Hotel Services**

The hotel is at 100% occupancy, including 80% transient guests who were unable to leave as scheduled due to the hurricane and the airport closure. Additionally, 10% of the guests are local residents who had to evacuate their homes on Hutchinson Island. Lastly, 10% of the guests are employees who are choosing to stay at the hotel, feeling that it would be safer than staying at their homes during the hurricane. The storm is expected to hit the area in the next six hours. The local county emergency command center has just informed Mary that a mandatory curfew for their county is in effect, so only emergency personnel are allowed outside, and it is expected that the hotel will lose power. If Hotel Adria loses power, it's unclear how long it will take to restore it. Mitch Star, the sous-chef, informs Mary that the 80-seat restaurant, Hemingway's, will be overwhelmed if all of the 500 guests are now required to eat in the hotel. Mary Banna convenes another meeting with the management team to discuss how to manage the hotel's services and meet guests' needs and concerns during the curfew and storm. The clock is ticking and it's only two hours before Hemingway's is scheduled to open for dinner.

## **5. Guest Issues**

The eye of the hurricane is now passing close to the hotel, the winds are gusting over 100 mph, and the sky is full of lightning and amazing cloud formations. Worried guests are stopping Mary to ask if the hotel is safe and if they will be safe in their rooms. Mary is finding it difficult to manage all of her responsibilities with so many individual guests stopping her and asking questions. Hotel Adria just lost power and Patricia Night, the catering manager, informs Mary that an elderly woman with Alzheimer's is lost in the hotel. One of the bartenders runs up to Mary and apologizes, but informs her that a young couple who've had too much to drink are outside trying to take a selfie to capture their first hurricane. Mary walks off to find the couple to bring them back inside the hotel.

## **6. The General Manager Returns**

Two weeks have passed and the GM is meeting with Mary to discuss the outcomes of the situations she and the hotel team encountered during Hurricane Rene. He reports that the Florida Attorney General's Office is considering charges against Hotel Adria after receiving thirteen complaints for price gouging. The GM also shares with Mary that the head of franchise relations from the corporate office has sent him an online video

of a scared Black Lab in a car parked outside the hotel during the hurricane that has received over 200,000 views on YouTube. A national news outlet has contacted the GM asking him for a comment about this video. On a positive note, the GM informs Mary that many of the guests that she sheltered in the hotel's public spaces when they were fully booked have posted positive reviews on TripAdvisor. He also informs Mary that the hotel received a nice letter from the family of the elderly woman with Alzheimer's that the hotel staff found her and took care of her during the storm. The GM also commends Mary for her innovative ideas and use of resources to feed so many guests who were required to stay indoors at the hotel during the curfew. As part of her management training, he asks Mary to reflect on the pros and cons of her actions regarding each of the challenges she encountered during the hurricane so that they can update the hotel emergency preparedness plan for the next hurricane season. He suggests that she also interview each of the managers and staff to get their feedback.

over 500 guests, considering they have only an 80-seat restaurant? While these scenarios occurred during the disaster, they should be addressed during the preparedness stage of emergency management. Protecting staff and guests becomes paramount during any crisis or disaster. This often requires maintaining calm, as well as communicating throughout the disaster. How could Hotel Adria prepare guests for what to expect during the hurricane and make them feel more at ease? What practices and procedures should be implemented to avoid guests' risky behavior or incidents involving elderly guests and small children?

## Discussion

Due to the location of Hotel Adria on the east coast of Florida, should it have been a surprise that the hotel would be sought out by evacuees for support during the hurricane? As storms move from tropical storms to stronger and stronger hurricanes, hotels statewide need to begin preparing to take-in evacuees or prepare their properties for possible impacts. What other indicators should have encouraged Hotel Adria to move from a firm-centric approach to a community-centric approach in handling the guest and service challenges they faced? During a natural disaster, managers are faced with many unique challenges and must quickly assess their options based on the severity of the situation. These choices should be guided by preparations already addressed in an emergency management plan created prior to the start of the hurricane season. One of the initial choices a hotel should consider is the modification of their rate and guest policies. What were Mary Banna's main mistakes regarding these and what could have been included in an emergency management plan that would have better guided her decisions?

Additionally, during natural disasters, hotels will need to utilize their human and physical resources in innovative ways to address guests' needs. Hotel Adria has a no pet policy, but if they took in guests with pets, how would they manage the needs and impacts of animals in the hotel? In support of community needs, Mary and the team of managers decided to accept many evacuees without having guest rooms for them. How might they have accomplished this? Often during a natural disaster, guests are unable to leave the hotel property due to safety concerns or an enforced curfew, putting stress on hotel services. How would you suggest Hotel Adria attempt to feed

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