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New Program Accredits Hotel Safety

By Sue Pelletier

Since 9/11, planners have increasingly become aware of the potential for disaster during meetings, and the potentially disastrous legal issues that could result from their liability for injuries or deaths that happen at their meetings. But they have more than enough to do without trying to become hotel security experts, too. Even if they learn the right questions to ask, they have no way to verify that the information they are given is correct and up-to-date.

That's why Wilmington, Del. based SafePlace Corp., which for 10 years has been providing safety and security accreditation to academic institutions, healthcare facilities, assisted-living communities, and other commercial buildings, now includes lodging in its accreditation offerings. "If an attendee is raped, robbed, or even murdered, and it turns out the property didn't meet minimal standards, the planners going to lose in court," says John Fannin, SafePlace president and CEO. "Because it offers a credible, independent accreditation, SafePlace minimizes their exposure to third-party claims by showing that the hotel they chose demonstrates extraordinary levels of care when it comes to security, fire, and life and health safety. A corporate travel manager in Chicago who represents about a third of Blue Cross and Blue Shield's business travel already has put in her RFP that SafePlace accreditation, now just a recommendation, will be a requirement within two years," says Fannin. "Other corporate travel managers and meeting planners are starting to do the same. They're starting to recognize the liability issues."

And Fannin believes the accreditation can help. "Without our direct involvement, we've been cited by trial lawyers," in hotel-related cases, he says. "In the case of prosecution, they said, Here is this national standard you could have adhered to--why didn't you?" In other cases where its been used by the defense, the accreditation shows that the facility lived up to this extraordinary standard of care. It certainly would be a good defense for meeting planners."

According to Tyra Hilliard, Esq., CMP, a meetings industry attorney and assistant professor of event and meeting management at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C., "Choosing a hotel that has met the requirements of an independent accreditation standard of safety is certainly prudent if that accreditation is shown to be reliable and to truly reflect the best practices in the industry. If **SafePlace** has already been accepted by some courts, that could be persuasive for other courts as the issue

arises."

What the Accreditation Is

All of the accreditation standards are based on the security, fire protection, and health and life safety provisions of selected nationally recognized codes, standards, and recommended practices. The process is developed and continually refined through the company's Accreditation Requirement Council, which includes representatives from the American Heart Association, the National Insurance Office, and the National Fire Protection Association, in addition to other safety professionals, and meeting planners.

SafePlace accreditation begins with a hotel filling out a three-part form: a profile of the facility number of rooms, size of meeting space, and other logistical considerations; a non-technical self-evaluation of the hotels security, fire protection, and health and life safety systems; and documentation on things like compliance with municipality codes, escalator and elevator inspection certificates, and records of all major systems, including water safety.

Once SafePlace has verified all the information, the company schedules an on-site, 600-point survey that is conducted by a professional surveyor, usually an engineer. The surveyor spends a full day on the site inspecting all the hotels safety and security physical features, such as closed-circuit television systems, smoke detectors, electronic locks, and the like. But more important, Fannin says, is getting a first-hand look at the staff and the hotels policies and procedures.

"When you look at the major life-loss hotel incidents in the United States, it almost always comes down to the employees, and policies and procedures," says Fannin. "How are employees hired and trained? Are background checks done? Are they subject to random drug testing? For accreditation, policies and procedures must be written, and staff must be trained and tested in them." In addition to yearly re-accreditation surveys, SafePlace conducts an unannounced visit between surveys, and generates safety bulletins on issues as they come up. For the average 150-room hotel with an average occupancy rate of 60 percent, Fannin says the cost to the hotel is about \$4,500.

Planner Perks

Soon to be added to SafePlaces Web site, www.safeplace.com, is a special planners section, where there will be a list of accredited hotels, along with their safety and security information. In addition, the company has been building a searchable database of hotels, based on planner requests for information on hotels in various regions that do an exemplary job in handling ADA requirements, or providing smoke-free environments, says Fannin. "We capture all that data, even on hotels that haven't gone through the accreditation process yet." When the company gets a request from a planner, it will send out a voluntary form that hotels in the area can fill out, and ask them if they want to take the next step toward accreditation. "In most cases, they do," says Fannin.

"So we provide meeting planners with immediate information about the properties, even if they're not accredited, and we provide extended information to follow through the accreditation process."

So far, only three hotels Hotel Du Pont, Wilmington, Del.; The Sagamore, Lake George,

N.Y.; and the Hotel Monteleone, New Orleans have received SafePlace accreditation, but Fannin says many more are coming down the pipeline. "We have approximately 400 accreditation kits out, and several properties are about to finish the process it doesn't take too long, depending on what the hotel has to do to get its act together," says Fannin. He adds that he's currently negotiating with a large 200-hotel group not a chain that's interested in joining the fold. "If they do, that'll give meeting planners a huge collection of properties nationwide to work with," says Fannin.

Andrea Thornton, director of sales and marketing with the Monteleone, which handles numerous medical meetings, including many from European-based organizations, says, "This accreditation is important because it sets a standard, kind of like having your CMP. I think meeting planners will jump on the bandwagon and start requesting SafePlace accreditation, because it [mitigates] their liability."

Hilliard says the accreditation could be challenged in court, for example, "If a hotel meets the SafePlace accreditation standards, but not the local safety standards which could be higher," it would still be possible to say the planner was negligent by relying on the national-standard-based accreditation. "Still," she says, "national accreditation is good, and hopefully SafePlace has chosen the best of the best of the national standards.

"Industry standards in the area of risk management are needed both on the hotel side and the meeting planner side," she says. "I applaud SafePlace for taking on this challenge."