

2017 ISHAE AWARDS OF EXCELLENCE APPLICATION

Entries must be for projects completed by **January 1, 2016 through September 30, 2017.**

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Association Staff Size: 10

Associations Annual Budget (not including AH&LA dues): X Over \$500,000

Entry Category: Communications

Please respond to the following questions on a separate piece of paper.

1. Goals & Objectives of Program
2. Target Audience
3. Results of Program
4. Evaluation Measures
5. How was the program presented to the Target audience?
6. Addition information

ENTRIES MUST BE RECEIVED NO LATER THAN OCTOBER 3, 2017

2017 ISHAE Awards of Excellence
Texas Hotel & Lodging Association (THLA)
Communications

Title or Description of Entry: Hurricane Harvey preparations and response

In late August 2017, Texas faced its worst natural disaster in modern history. Hurricane Harvey left a path of destruction from the Coastal Bend, the greater Houston area, to Southeast Texas. Millions of Texans were affected by Harvey's winds, rain, and flood waters. Scientists discovered that so much rain fell on Southeast Texas that the Earth's crust sank under the weight of the water.

The efforts of first responders, neighbors, and Texas hoteliers in response to this disaster was breathtaking. From our industry's perspective, hoteliers donated thousands of hotel room-nights to people affected by Hurricane Harvey or responding to its aftermath. Many hotels temporarily housed the hotel's own employees and their families who were left without a place to go. In Houston, Hotels opened their ballrooms as temporary shelter. Convention centers served as emergency shelters for the masses, and staff worked around the clock to provide meals for those in need.

From the hotel industry's perspective, the challenge and the need for communications, was this: In a natural disaster, there is no central governmental agency or authority to disseminate targeted, useful information to businesses affected by the disaster or to the public fleeing the disaster's aftermath.

When a disaster such as a major hurricane affects Texas, Texas Hotel & Lodging Association steps into the role of providing important, timely, and helpful information to hotel operators; local, state, and federal governmental agencies; the traveling public; and the news media.

During and after a major disaster in Texas, THLA staff become engaged around the clock to coordinate responses from governmental agencies and to push valuable information out to hoteliers.

Goals & Objectives:

Responding to a major disaster presents a wide variety of challenges. Our primary goals were the following:

Months before a hurricane comes ashore. Annual hurricane season planning:

Every spring, THLA re-establishes points of contact with relevant governmental agencies in preparation of the upcoming hurricane season, and THLA has a procedure in place for preparing for storm season. There is often a great deal of staff turnover in government agencies regularly, so we must get up-to-date contact information for the following:

- Texas Governor's Office. The Governor is the highest authority for the State's response to a disaster. We work to establish lines of communications for Governor disaster proclamations, and to serve as a chief point of contact for supplying information on hotel room supply and availability.

- Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS). The DPS coordinates evacuation routes for the public. The DPS also coordinates first-responder response in the aftermath of a disaster. We work to establish points of contact on these issues, and reiterate our role as representative for the hotel industry statewide.
- Texas Attorney General (AG). The Texas AG’s office is responsible for enforcing Texas’s price gouging laws that become effective on the advent of a declared disaster. Texas’s statutory definition of “price gouging” is vague, particularly in light of demand-based yield management pricing prevalent in our industry. Prior to the start of hurricane season, THLA works with AG staff on an agreed definition of price gouging so we can best advise hoteliers on how to avoid problems in this area.

Additionally, THLA serves as a mediator between the public and a hotel when a complaint against a hotel is lodged with a governmental agency. If there is some concern about possible price gouging at a Texas hotel, the AG first refers the case to THLA, and we attempt to resolve the issue.

- Texas Comptroller’s Office. The Texas Comptroller is responsible for state tax policy. After a major disaster, the Governor often exempts hotel occupancy taxes for people affected by the disaster. THLA works with the Comptroller on defining who is exempt from the tax, how the exemption will be administered (e.g. what documentation hotels must obtain), and coordinating the ongoing status of any tax exemption.
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). FEMA provides longer-term disaster response to people affected by the hurricane. When a hurricane strikes a large area and many people are displaced from their homes, FEMA will active a lodging assistance program for the public. THLA coordinates with FEMA on the scope and duration of any assistance program, as well as providing information on the need for participating hotel rooms in a given geographical area. We also negotiate with FEMA on points such as the federal government continuing to pay hotel taxes, so that our CVB partners do not take a large funding hit due to reduced tax collection.
- FEMA’s lodging assistance contractor, CLC. CLC is FEMA’s contractor for administering the temporary lodging assistance program. THLA works with CLC to provide information for Texas hotels on how to enroll in the program, easily bill for guest stays, and resolve issues for hotels participating in the program.
- Local governments. Prior to the start of hurricane season, THLA works with our local associations in various areas that are prone to hurricanes to establish pertinent points of contact with the local government. This is particularly relevant in Houston and Corpus Christi, where we worked with the mayor’s offices on the needs of local governments for temporary housing for first responders and city officials.

In the days and hours leading up to a major hurricane coming ashore:

1. **Coordinate with state government officials.** Once it is certain that a major hurricane will strike Texas, THLA makes contact with the state and local government agencies.

- a. Texas Governor's office.
 - i. We ascertain whether the Governor is going to issue a disaster proclamation, and the scope of that proclamation. We determine whether the Governor will begin exempting hotel taxes.
 - ii. A proclamation will also trigger the applicability of price gouging laws.
 - b. Texas Department of Public Safety.
 - i. We communicate with DPS on whether there will be mandatory evacuations, and the probable routes and locations evacuees will flee to. This will help us determine where a surge in demand for hotel rooms will occur.
 - ii. We ascertain whether DPS will have an immediate need for hotel room nights for first responders such as law enforcement officers, the national guard, medical personnel, utility workers, etc.
 - c. Texas Attorney General.
 - i. THLA contacts the AG to reconfirm messaging THLA will send out to hoteliers on avoiding price gouging.
 - ii. THLA also reconfirms our role as mediator for public complaints about hotel operators.
 - d. Texas Comptroller. THLA contacts the Texas Comptroller to confirm messaging THLA will send out to hoteliers on the procedure and scope of hotel tax exemptions.
 - e. Local Government. THLA contacted local hotel associations and local governments in Corpus Christi, Port Aransas, and Houston to offer assistance, and to ensure that lines of communication remain open.
2. **Establish contact with federal agencies.** THLA will again make contact with FEMA and CLC to confirm we still have good points-of-contact for responsible officials. We also reiterate that THLA is the primary contact for all issues pertaining to the hotel and lodging industry, and request that the FEMA and CLC please use THLA for messaging and questions about the Texas hotel industry.
 3. **Begin communications with Texas hoteliers.** With the relevant information from our governmental actors, THLA begins pushing information out to the hotel industry. We anticipate the most relevant information needed by hotel operators, and we provide that information in an format that is easy for hotels to digest while working through a disaster. Our primary method of communications to hoteliers at-large is through email, and we also activate a banner on our webpage that directs both hoteliers and the public to information about the disaster. Samples of these communications are attached.

We also utilize our relationship with partner associations to reach as many hotel operators as possible. This includes communicating with our contacts at the Asian American Hotel Owners Association, the Small and Independent Motel Association, local hotel associations, and the major hotel brands.

In the days and hours leading up the hurricane, our communications are primarily focused on the scope and contents of the Governor’s proclamation, where we anticipate a need for hotel rooms, avoiding price gouging, and relevant tax exemption information.

Where there is a particular need for hotel rooms for first responders, THLA individually contacts hotel brand representatives to hold hotel rooms available.

4. **Internal staffing plan established.** When a major storm is imminent, THLA staffs our office 24-hours a day. We must respond to calls and requests from governmental actors and the traveling public. In the peak of the disaster, we receive hundreds of phone calls per hour.
5. **Begin to determine hotel availability.** THLA begins collecting information on which areas of Texas continue to have hotel rooms available, and which areas are nearing capacity. We use this information to direct government agencies and the public to areas where lodging remains available.

During the hurricane’s active period:

As Harvey ravaged Texas, THLA remains in contact with governmental agencies to determine where hotel resources were needed. We pushed out information and make requests to targeted hotel groups and geographic areas. As just one example, the Texas National Guard needed hotel rooms in Beaumont and Corpus Christi. THLA worked with CVBs in each city to secure hotel rooms.

Hurricane Harvey presented unique challenges because of its size and duration. Usually, hurricanes come ashore, do a great deal of windstorm damage, and then dissipate or move on to other areas. However, Hurricane Harvey followed an unusual pattern. The hurricane came ashore as a Category 4 storm, creating a great deal of windstorm damage to communities immediately north of Corpus Christi. The windstorm damage was catastrophic; and many communities and hotels were literally blown apart. Then, Harvey moved towards Houston and the Southeast Texas area. The storm lingered over Texas for days, dropping almost 52 inches of rain in a region inhabited by six million people. Roadways became flooded, making it difficult for the public to find adequate shelter. Tens of thousands of homes became uninhabitable and flooded, and dramatic water rescues dominated the news stories.

Hotels were established as emergency shelters. A number of Houston properties temporarily converted their ballrooms into shelters, and convention centers sheltered tens of thousands of displaced residents. THLA served as a clearinghouse for availability. We stayed in contact with hotels across the affected regions to determine availability. We use our partner association contacts to reach hotel owners by mobile phone to find hotels with the ability to take in displaced individuals.

In the immediate hours and days after the hurricane:

Once Harvey finally cleared Texas, we had several immediate tasks: Determine hotel damage and inventory, work with FEMA on getting the public into emergency lodging, continue to place first responders into hotel rooms, push communications and resolve issues related to price gouging, and provide support for individuals trying to find lodging.

First, we needed to determine hotel availability in the affected areas. This involved assessing the damage to hotel properties themselves, determining whether open hotels were accepting guests with FEMA assistance, and determining overall occupancy numbers. After a major disaster, as hotel GMs and owners are working to remain open, the only way to obtain this information is by actually calling each affected hotel. THLA employees worked around the clock to call every single hotel in the affected to get the relevant information. This involved calling approximately 2,000 hotels. Once we had this data, we were able to appropriately direct our contacts with the governmental agencies. We were pleased to learn that while a number of hotels experienced extensive damage, many were open or partially open, and we were able to start placing affected people in those accommodations.

Second, in the immediate period after the storm, FEMA had not yet activated its emergency lodging program. THLA continued to communicate with FEMA and ask for information on when the program would be operational. Discussions involved the scope of the program (who would be eligible for assistance), how hotels could enroll in the program, the time period in which assistance would be available for individuals, and how hotels would administer the program from a front desk agent's perspective.

Third, we needed to send repeated communications to hotels about the following topics: FEMA's lodging assistance program, hotel tax exemption procedures, avoiding price gouging, finding rooms for first responders, and resources for hotel employees and the hotel property if the hotel itself was affected by the Hurricane. We accomplished this primarily via our website and email notifications, and we also used social media.

Fourth, we needed to provide information about available lodging to the general public, many of whom were desperate to find a place to stay. We worked with our governmental entity partners to provide information on hotel availability. Our office fielded thousands of phone calls for people in search of lodging. And, we kept our website updated with contact information and up-to-date information about hotel availability. We also conducted numerous interviews with the news media to broadcast information about hotel room availability and resources.

In the weeks following the hurricane:

To this day, work continues on Hurricane Harvey recovery. Texas is still under a disaster proclamation, and we continue to work with individuals affected by the Hurricane. Hotels are still housing thousands of displaced residents who are unable to return to their flooded or wind-damaged home. We continue to resolve issues between hotels and governmental entities, and we are actively engaged with the Governor's office to find accommodations for responders and guests.

Longer term, we are attempting to address issues we identified with governmental partners. On our list of items to improve response to the next disaster is the following:

- 1) Have FEMA provide for some sort of damage guarantee program for hotels. Hotel operators are often reluctant to accept FEMA voucher guests because of past experiences with room damages. FEMA only pays for basic lodging costs, and does not offer reimbursement for hotel room damages, pet fees, or other charges. Longer term, we would like to see a program where FEMA offers some basic guarantee for hotel room damages.

- 2) Have FEMA incorporate an online reservation system for guests. FEMA still relies on a guest calling a hotel to determine availability, and FEMA offers no way for a guest to secure a confirmed reservation. Instead, FEMA could utilize a booking process where a guest could make a confirmed reservation at a hotel.
- 3) Increasing federal per diem rates in affected areas. Because FEMA uses the federal per diem rate, and we now expect occupancy will be greatly affected for months to come, we are working with the U.S. GSA to increase per diem rates in Houston and Southeast Texas.

Target Audience:

Responding to the storm was a massive undertaking, with multiple target audiences:

- Hotel community: Information related to governmental announcements, legal advice (price gouging, tax information, disaster assistance programs, avoiding group cancellations, etc.), and room availability.
- Governmental agencies: Hotel availability, first responder lodging options, assisting with communications between agencies (e.g. tax exemption information between the Comptroller and Governor; providing real-time information on the lodging assistance program between FEMA and CLC).
- Tourism partners: Assistance programs, resources, and legal advice.
- Traveling public: Hotel availability, resolving complaints, providing information about lodging assistance programs.

Results of the Program:

Our efforts in responding to Hurricane Harvey has been received very positively. We have received numerous accolades from our governmental partners and the news media. Additionally, we have mediated hundreds of consumer issues, and handled virtually all price gouging complaints. Texas hotels have a central resource for all information related to hurricane recovery.

Evaluation Measures:

We evaluate our effectiveness by the feedback we have received from our audiences.

How the program was presented to the target audience:

We utilized direct communications, email, website messaging, social media, and news media interviews to communicate with our target audiences.

Additional information:

We are attaching sample messages sent to THLA members on Hurricane Harvey. This includes various emails sent to members, THLA website screen captures, and social media messaging.

Although the attachment is 47 pages, it is but a small representation of the of communications work completed by our Association. We literally worked around the clock to communicate with our members, governmental agencies, and the public by phone, email, social media, and conducting media interviews.

Additionally, our Hurricane Harvey Response webpage remains active. Visit it here:

<https://texaslodging.com/hurricane-harvey-resources>.

Any questions or comments may be addressed to Justin Bragiel at THLA: 512-474-2996,

jbragiel@texaslodging.com.