

LODGING

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Hotel Security: Protect Guests and Prevent Legal Action

Recent tragedies have shown how vulnerable hotels are to safety and security threats. When a guest became trapped in an unlocked hotel freezer in Chicago earlier this month, or weeks earlier, when a front-desk clerk was shot during an apparent robbery of a Texas hotel, the threats became clear.

Threats abound. However, many hoteliers have the tools, technology, and strategies they need to better protect their patrons, employees, and properties.

Negligent security claims can result from hotel management failing to implement or maintain adequate security measures. If an investigation by law enforcement reveals that management was aware of high crime risks and did little to protect its guests, it might be easier to prove negligence.

It's not enough to have cameras or bright lighting situated around the property, or signage warning patrons of the potential for crime. It's up to the hotel owner or manager to take all sensible precautions to ensure the reasonably safest property. Such measures can include the following.

Hire a security expert. With the potential for violence and crime, hiring a security consultant can help identify weaknesses in a property’s protective net. By reviewing criminal activity statistics, or the “crime grid” available from most police departments, a security expert can help layer appropriate protective measures. Ignore those stats, and a plaintiff’s lawyer can spot trends that may highlight negligence.

Enlist on-site security. If the crime grid reveals the presence of violent crime in the area, hiring a uniformed or armed guard or requesting increased police patrols can serve as a deterrent. Of course, added personnel raises costs of doing business. But one crime prevented can more than pay for itself in litigation and legal fees avoided.

Who’s watching whom? In the 2001 movie, *Ocean’s 11*, a hotel manager warned, “in my hotel, there’s always somebody watching.” Can the same be said of every property? Surveillance cameras watched by hotel staff can help spot criminals or trespassers. Bright perimeter lighting and well-trimmed foliage can reduce hiding spots and improve guest safety, without sacrificing aesthetics. Moreover, signage prominently displayed and alerting people to the presence of video surveillance often can serve as a deterrent.

Run—and repeat—employee background checks. Criminal background checks are standard for many businesses. While some services are inexpensive, they may sacrifice accuracy—and it’s indefensible to have on staff an employee with a record of violent criminal acts. Back up the check with calls to references. Consult with an HR attorney about what can and cannot be asked about a job candidate.

Diligence as a state of mind. Trying to identify weaknesses, spot criminals, or prevent crimes of opportunity—or behavior that could put guests or employees in danger—is not an act, but a habit. If a guest is consuming alcohol in public areas against the rules, or if a party upstairs is getting out of hand, it’s critical to curtail the behavior before it becomes unruly.

How clean is an establishment? Cleanliness also can boost safety. From the smallest scrap to large debris, remove litter, mop up spills, and have maintenance repair uneven floor surfaces, doorways with low ceilings, or exposed wiring to prevent incidents and injuries.

While recent violent episodes have hoteliers worried about their vulnerability to security threats, many of these can be prevented with the tools, technology, and strategies already in place. This can ensure patrons, employees, and properties alike are protected.



About the Author

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