Expect The Unexpected: Always Be Ready For A Disaster

By Dr. Richard Kelley

Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and other natural disasters are an inevitable – but, thankfully, not too frequent – part of life in the global hospitality business. For companies like Outrigger and OHANA Hotels & Resorts, with operations throughout the “Ring of Fire” around the Pacific, it is something of which we are particularly mindful.

The term Ring of Fire suggests volcanic activity, which is certainly the case. But this unstable “ring” is also the planet’s “earthquake central.” In fact, about 90 percent of the world’s earthquakes, and 80 percent of the world’s largest earthquakes occur along this ring. As a result, at Outrigger and OHANA, we focus on the potential for disaster with planning, training, and drills.

This week, we were all reminded of the importance of preparation and how quickly and unexpectedly disaster can change our lives.

Ian Swain, a longtime friend and CEO of Swain Tours, and I were relaxing with our spouses in our Denver, Colorado, home a few days ago when Ian’s cell phone rang urgently. His office told him that a major earthquake had just struck Christchurch, New Zealand, causing severe property damage and extensive loss of life. Swain Tours had at least 25 clients in the city who needed help immediately.

We switched on the TV and jumped on the Internet to get the details. The report: A magnitude 6.3 earthquake with an epicenter just 5 km deep and only 10 km away from the central business district, had devastated the city. Almost all the hotels in the area had been damaged and were under lockdown for safety and security. Aftershocks were continuing, causing more damage.

The most severe hotel damage was at the Grand Hotel Chancellor Christchurch. The 26-story, deluxe building was visibly sagging and in imminent danger of collapsing. Search and rescue teams had given up on finding survivors and pulled back two blocks for their own safety.

Peppers Clearwater Resort, formerly the Outrigger Clearwater Resort, a few miles from the central business district, reported it had escaped damage, although it was struggling to re-establish utility services.

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Over the next two days, we determined that all of Swain’s customers were safe and accounted for, including four who had just arrived in Christchurch.

One Swain customer reported she had fled the Ibis Hotel when the quake started, leaving all personal items behind in her room. Now, police would not permit her to return to her room to retrieve luggage, wallet, passport, etc. Fortunately, a local family had taken her into their home for food and shelter.

Others had not been so lucky. At press time, the death toll exceeds 100, and over 225 are reported missing. Total property damage is currently estimated to exceed $15 billion (US).

At Outrigger & OHANA Hotels & Resorts, Director of Security & Safety Jerry Dolak has developed plans, manuals, and procedures to help our ‘ohana handle almost any disaster.

Recently, teams from the Outrigger Waikiki on the Beach and the OHANA Waikiki Malia completed Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training. The three-day course included both classroom work and practical, hands-on exercises in the bunkers of Diamond Head, the extinct volcano that provides a picturesque backdrop to Waikiki.

If disaster strikes, these CERT-trained members of our ‘ohana will have the skills and knowledge to assist others, including community first responders who, in a situation like what is currently unfolding in Christchurch, are often stretched to the limit if not overwhelmed.

We hope to continue and expand our training and preparation so that more and more members of our ‘ohana will be ready in the event that disaster strikes any of our properties.