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Preventing incidents helps guests feel safe, increases repeat stays

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By: [Dennis Blank](#)
Hotel & Motel Management

[Author Information](#)



The installation of fences, trees and walls around a property creates physical barriers that can increase the safety at a hotel.

Because of the nature of extended-stay properties, security is an issue that veteran managers tackle in most cases even before construction starts. Its importance cannot be understated, most owners agree.

Property managers and owners said they have been able to thwart potential criminal activity by manning the front desk around the clock and giving electronic key access only to their guests. Potential crime problems such as using rooms for prostitution and illegal drug use can be minimized by implementing these and other security

measures.

"We are always on the lookout to have our eyes and ears open with an overnight person on the desk and a manager who lives on property," said Gary DeLapp, president of Homestead Village of Atlanta, which owns 111 extended-stay properties throughout the United States.

"We place a premium on guest safety and security," he said. "It is very important because it is a home away from home, and we want guests to be comfortable and safe."

"Security is a factor that will contribute to repeat business," said Bob Henritze, president and c.o.o. of Sun Suites Extended Stay Hotels in Smyrna, Ga., a chain of 21 properties in the Southeast and Southwest. "It is the same as having the right mattress and TV. It is part of the lodging experience, and we have attracted business because of it."

In addition to installing surveillance cameras, enclosing parking areas and employing night security guards, many properties conduct crime trend surveys.

"I try at least once a year to obtain local police crime statistics for a five- to 10-mile radius from the hotel, and we do a comparison of previous data," said Kathy Mason, vice president of risk management for LodgeWorks, which owns 25 extended-stay hotels and manages six others across the United States. "I track all incidents from everyone to see if there is a trend."

Insurance companies also require annual crime reports, hotel owners said. If there has been an increase in crime, such as car thefts and vandalism near the properties, Mason



Installing security cameras, enclosing parking areas and employing night security guards are ways to help keep a property's guests safe.

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said the installation of walls, fences and trees, for example, acts as a deterrent.

"Physical measures create more barriers for [criminals] to go through," she said.



DeLapp

Henritze pointed out that each Sun Suites property is protected with 16 cameras installed at various locations, including elevators, the front office and the laundry area. At the front desk, monitors are in the wall.

"We want customers to see us videotaping, and we want the bad guys to see it," he said. "I do think cameras have helped. My big concern is protection of my associates. It becomes a partnership, and I want them to feel comfortable."

Building a strong relationship with customers also is an important part of security, DeLapp said.

"Those long-term guests are like a second pair of ears and eyes for you," he said. "They will come to us and say, 'We saw something in the parking lot, maybe you should check it out.' They become part of the team, and it is almost like your neighbors who look out for you."

Gregory Averbuch, president of Summit Management Corp. in Atlanta, agreed that relationships with guests pay off because they often will alert the office when something unusual happens.

Ron Johnson, president and c.o.o. of Jackson, Fla.-based Landcom Hospitality, which runs five extended-stay hotels, said having surveillance cameras paid off in solving a crime at one of the company's hotels. A woman left her purse at her table while she was getting breakfast, and a man came in and grabbed it. The videotape identified the suspect, who was apprehended.



Mason

At many of Landcom's hotels, there are signs alerting guests and visitors there are security cameras posted. Perimeter fencing has been installed at the hotels, and visitors have access to the parking areas with electronic gate cards.

"Security is extremely important," Johnson said. "Crimes and incidents are changing, and our customers are aware of that. We have a security and crisis plan at every one of our hotels."

Mitch Patel, executive vice president for the Vision Hospitality Group, said there have been no incidents at the 76-room Homewood Suites the company owns in Chattanooga, Tenn.

"We have nine cameras and somebody at the front desk 24 hours [a day]," Patel said. "Our guests like the fact there is someone there to resolve any issues."



The hotel has interior corridors, and access to the building is limited, he said. Most Vision Hospitality properties have their own security guards or hire a security service to patrol the building during the evening hours.

About the Author

Dennis Blank

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