

Delaware North Companies Travel Hospitality Services employees at MSY utilized a meeting room powered by emergency electricity to prepare nourishing meals for more than 25,000 people over seven days.



# Concessions in the Wake of Katrina

## Heroes and victims pronounced in the hospitality realm

**H**urricane Katrina certainly made deserving heroes of both Gulfport-Biloxi's Executive Director Bruce A. Frallic and New Orleans Director of Aviation Roy A. Williams who, along with their respective staff, essentially lived in their airports for weeks in remarkable efforts to resume operations following the storms.

Other heroes include Maria Cespedes, Angel Scott, Janice Scott, Stephanie Walker George and Valerie Smith. While their friends, family and coworkers fled the region, these New Orleans Air Ventures (NOAV) employees volunteered to remain at their MSY post as part of a contingency plan to keep four stores operating after the evacuation. But instead of ringing up business-as-usual transactions on the cash registers, these employees distributed complimentary water and supplies.

"Those five employees in particular stayed behind and became our fantastic representatives," said Hudson Group Chief Operating Officer Joseph DiDomizio, whom shares the pride of the named NOAV employees with joint venture partner Concourse Ventures. "We had the inventory and took it upon ourselves to distribute it. They were just heroes doing this day in and day out."

Delaware North Companies Travel Hospitality Services President Nick Biello is also pleased with the impromptu volunteerism displayed by his staff. A team of 12 DNCTHS employees were in place at the Louis Armstrong International Airport just before Hurricane Katrina made landfall. These veterans of the airport hospitality, food service and retail industry utilized company resources to provide breakfast, lunch and dinner to more than 25,000 people over seven days.

"We're proud of our people working there," Biello said. "They stayed through the relief effort and they provided food and beverage to the people there."

### Hurricane victims

While Biello beams with pride as he acknowledges this heroic dozen, he nonetheless acknowledges the saddening losses his employees suffered.

"We were so close to it when it was on the news and we were watching it," Biello said. "As time marches on the general public moves away from it, but we still see that tragedy every day when we talk to these employees."

In the initial days following the hurricane, DNCTHS could not find the

## Relief Concessions

majority of their 250 hourly employees. But Biello has seen communications with found employees spike from 20 percent to 75 percent and is hopeful the upward trend will continue.

"One thing those people need is help, and we oftentimes had a hard time helping them," Biello said. "They had lost their ID cards, their medical cards, an address to send payroll to. We've gone through different generations of trying to get money into their hands and I think we're fairly successful at it right now."

DiDomizio echoed the Biello's sentiments, noting a number of measures taken to help their staff. Of 70 employees between their Gulfport-Biloxi and New Orleans markets, Hudson Group/NOAV is yet to hear from nine.

"Getting people money and helping them find shelter and food were our first priorities," DiDomizio said, noting that a number of displaced workers utilized an 800 number that served as a 24-hour hotline. "We kept in touch with these employees weekly. We asked, 'what can we do to assist you?' and offered to get them their pay by overnight check or wire and offered additional money if they needed it."

Beyond checks and cash, Hudson Group and NOAV offered a myriad of other services to their

hurricane victims. Various employees were provided with hotel rooms through a special travel agency account designated for stranded employees. In one case, a woman needed a U-haul, so that was provided. In another case, Hudson Group paid the deposit on a new apartment.

### Transfer opportunities

The next step was to find out where evacuated employees wanted to work.

While 75 percent of DNCTHS employees are accounted for, many are dwelling in places where the company does not have operations. However, Biello predicts that nearly half of the staff will be re-employed by the company in other locations around the country. "The good news is that we do have quite a few operations in Texas with quite a few in Dallas, Houston, Austin and El Paso," Biello said, noting that Houston has proved popular with 10 transfers to date. "So it gives us the ability to bring people back into the workforce if they end up there. One little good thing can give you a spark of hope that you can help them. The nice part is that they can maintain their seniority and keep their benefits."

DiDomizio said Houston is also a popular relocation destination for displaced Hudson and NOAV

employees, as well as locations in Dallas and Atlanta.

"We were trying to give those in need some help and we're happy that we have that reach and can offer them those opportunities," he said.

### Recovery

As Hudson Group, NOAV and DNCTHS employees regroup and recover, so do their parent companies.

Although both Gulfport-Biloxi and New Orleans have resumed service, a limited number of gates are available to operate from due to damage sustained and a downsizing in service to the impacted areas. Accordingly, DNCTHS staff has downsized their MSY staff to 25, or one-tenth of its original crew of 250.

"As the airlines continue to come back, the airport – really half of the airport as I know it today – is being taken over by the federal government and the Army, so we really have two concourses – C and D – that are available," Biello said. "There is damage in those concourses, so we have a limited amount of gates to really operate from. But the bad news – or the good news, depending on the way you look at it – is that we have a limited amount of people coming in and out of New Orleans today. So we have sufficient gates and sufficient people to supply that."

DiDomizio reported that MSY sales are down in excess of 80 percent and a handful of Hudson Group/NOAV stores are closed completely since the tragedy. Locations in the A and B Concourses had ceilings collapse and water damage was sustained in the House of Blues store and in the Hudson Bookseller location.

But DiDomizio looks forward to a bright future.

"We look at these opportunities long term," he said. "I trust that New Orleans and Gulfport-Biloxi markets are going to come back better than ever." ■



**KATRINA RELIEF**  
**DONATE YOUR CHANGE. WE WILL MATCH YOUR CONTRIBUTION**  
TO THE  
RED CROSS  
HUDSON GROUP  
Help us Help Them!

Hudson Group has distributed collection boxes carrying the above message in its retail locations throughout the U.S. and Canada with plans to match the passenger pocket change donations to the Red Cross.

### Aiding the masses

In addition to multiple provisions of relief for their own personnel, Hudson Group has partnered with the Red Cross in an effort to raise money for the general population affected by Hurricane Katrina. A total of 350 boxes and banners seeking donations for the cause have been distributed to Hudson locations in the U.S. and Canada.

"Over 3 million passengers travel through the facilities that we serve, so certainly our stores see heavy traffic," DiDomizio said. "With that traffic, we have people taking out their change and that change adds up very quickly."

Donations as of Oct. 10 were upwards of \$26,000 with just one-third of Hudson Group locations reporting.

The collection boxes will remain in the stores indefinitely with a company commitment to match customers' donations up to \$50,000.

