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Dear Member,

Through the support of the Destinations International Foundation, we are pleased to present the first edition of our Crisis Response Handbook for destination organizations. This handbook was engineered by communications experts to be a tool to educate and prepare your team for a potential but inevitable crisis in your destination.

Throughout these pages you will find a crisis communications plan template to guide you through the process of creating a plan for how your organization will speak to audiences both internally and externally. We have also interviewed destination organization leaders who have lived through crisis events in their communities and were willing to share their experiences and the lessons they learned. We would like to thank Joe D’Alessandro, president and CEO of San Francisco Travel Association, Amanda Hof, executive director of Howard County Tourism, Brad Dean, CEO of Discover Puerto Rico, Fred Dixon, president and CEO of NYC & Company, Scott Peacock, director of public relations and international tourism at Visit Raleigh, Kathy Janega-Dykes, president and CEO, and Karna Hughes, director of communications with the Santa Barbara Tourism Bureau for their candid storytelling of how their teams weathered the storms they faced.

We hope that you will take the tools provided in this handbook and adapt them to your needs. Every destination is unique, and every crisis is different, so we encourage you to use the handbook as a guide and adapt your plans to fit your needs.

Sincerely,

Don Welsh
President and CEO
Destinations International

Jack Johnson
Executive Director
Destinations International Foundation
Crisis
Response
Crisis Communications Plan Template

OVERVIEW
This Crisis Communication Plan Template is intended to be a guide for conducting communications, both within an organization and externally with stakeholders, and media in the event of a crisis. This plan provides step-by-step recommendations for how to address a variety of different crisis scenarios through coordinated communications tactics.

Assuring notification of key personnel and stakeholders, as well as a focused, controlled flow of information during a crisis is critical to successfully protecting your brand.

Responsibility for maintaining, distributing and updating a crisis plan should be assigned within every organization. Crisis plans should be reviewed and updated annually as necessary, with attention paid to points of contact and contact information.

PURPOSE
Events that may elicit a crisis communications response can vary widely from destination to destination and organization to organization. Some stories of crisis situations are included within this handbook. What is most important is outlining who is responsible for identifying a crisis situation and what responsibilities key team members hold in responding.

OBJECTIVES
Crisis communications plans are designed to provide accurate, clear and timely information in the event of a crisis situation. The goal is to provide an efficient response in emergency situations by communicating to target audiences quickly and accurately.

PROCEDURES
Key members involved in the crisis communications team may include executive team members, security, operations and public affairs representatives. An Emergency Response Team (ERT) leader should be identified prior to any event and within the regular confines of everyday business. Everyone at the organization should be clear on who this team is and their responsibilities.

It is the role of the leader of the ERT to ultimately determine if the crisis response plan is activated. If it is unclear whether an emergency has occurred, it is best to notify the ERT members and to help make a decision as to whether the incident requires an emergency response.

RESPONSE
In the regular course of business, a crisis command center should be identified. In selecting a location, it is important to keep the following in mind:
• A location relatively free of safety threats
• A location with reliable land lines as well as internet access
• A location that allows for easy ingress and egress

Key audiences to be notified may include:
• Destination executives
• Employees
• Board of Directors
• Key community stakeholders
• Law enforcement personnel
• Media
• Travel industry or business stakeholders
• Customers
• Public officials

Spokespersons should be identified prior to an incident occurring. Anyone serving as a spokesperson should be fully trained and briefed prior to an incident and should be a senior level executive. No individual should speak on behalf of a destination without the approval of the ERT.

CRISIS SCENARIOS
Every destination should identify a list of all possible crisis scenarios that may impact the organization and any necessary addendums for each crisis, such as checklists of response steps, important telephone numbers and specifications to help define the crisis.

MEDIA BRIEFING LOCATIONS
Media briefings should take place in a secure area away from the incident. Access by the media to the site of any incident should only take place after the situation has been resolved and the area has been determined to be safe. Locations for possible media briefings should be identified prior to an incident.

SAMPLE STATEMENTS AND COMMUNICATIONS
Templates for direct responses to each type of crisis identified should cover a wide variety of platforms such as email, letters and social media posts. All communications should be crafted and readily available during a crisis response.

When dealing with the media, the following guidelines should be followed:
• Designate one spokesperson to represent the organization at the scene.
• Make a spokesperson available to communicate frequently with the media.
• Double-check all information before making it public.
• Be completely factual and truthful at all times.
• Coordinate statements and information with spokespersons for other organizations such as police, fire, emergency response organizations, hotels, etc.
• Immediately correct false or misleading information.
• Repeat key messages.
• If you do not know the answer, say that.
• Keep track of media inquiries.
• Prepare statements in advance and have them approved by the ERT.
• Respond as positively as possible and keep calm at all times.

POST-CRISIS EVALUATION
Once a crisis has been resolved, the ERT should complete a post-crisis evaluation while the information is still fresh. Considerations should include:
• Was the crisis resolved?
• Was a public statement necessary to state the resolution?
• Were the proper agencies notified?
• Was the incident and resolution documented for future reference?
• Were changes implemented to minimize or prevent a reoccurrence of the incident?
• Was reasonable medical, financial and emotional support extended to personnel affected by the incident?
Emergency Response Team Worksheet

What are the details of the crisis?

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What information is needed and from whom?

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Who will be the Emergency Response Team (ERT) point-of-contact?

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What technology will be used to maintain information flow?

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Who else knows about the crisis?

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Emergency Response Team Worksheet

What assistance is needed from Emergency Response Team (ERT) for other community stakeholders?
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Who is likely to be directly impacted?
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What information is currently in the media?
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What channels are the media using?
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How active is social media and in what format?
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Who is monitoring media coverage?
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Is there any misinformation currently being circulated?
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Communications Plan Checklist

KEY AUDIENCES:
- Destination Stakeholders
- Employees
- Board of Directors
- Community Stakeholders
- Law Enforcement Personnel
- Media
- Travel Industry Stakeholders
- Customers
- Public Officials
- Residents

KEY MESSAGES:
- Internal experts
- External experts
- Board of Directors Members
- Employees
- Customers
- Media

COMMUNICATIONS TACTICS:
- Proactive or Reactive
- Press Release
- Meetings/Phone Calls
- Media Interviews
- Email Blast
- Social Media Posts
Communications Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY MESSAGES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AUDIENCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TACTIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESPONSIBLE PERSON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATUS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Incident Response Template Materials**

**INCIDENT TALKING POINTS**
This is what we can confirm at this time:

- Today, there was an emergency incident at XXX.
- We are working with local authorities and emergency agencies to assess the situation and ensure the area is safe.
- We are evaluating the situation to determine if there are any injuries and if there is any continued risk.
- We will continue to provide updates as they are available.

**EMPLOYEE EMERGENCY INCIDENT**

- We do not disclose confidential personnel information.
- We have been informed XXX was involved in an incident at XXX.
- Authorities have informed us that (incident details that are public information).
- The incident is under investigation and we are monitoring the facts as they become available.
- We will provide updates as they become available.

**DESTINATION THREAT**
What we can confirm at this time:

- Today, we were made aware of XXX.
- Local, state and federal authorities are working to determine the severity of the XXX.
- We are cooperating with authorities to help determine the appropriate response.
- We will continue to work with XXX and local media to disseminate relevant information.
- The safety of visitors and residents is our top priority.
- We encourage all visitors to remain calm and await further instruction from authorities.
- We will continue to provide updates on the situation and ask for the help of the media in providing information to the public.

**TRAVEL INDUSTRY THREAT**

- We are closely monitoring the events of XXX.
- XXX is/not expected to impact either our visitors or the local community.
- Visitors and residents planning to travel are encouraged to follow instructions of local, state and federal authorities.
Crisis Response

Case Studies
As homelessness became synonymous with San Francisco, Joe D’Alessandro, president and CEO of San Francisco Travel Association, decided it was time to take a leadership role in helping to find solutions. “We knew it was risky,” he said, “It would bring media attention to the problem but because we represent the largest industry in San Francisco we needed to talk about it and how it could negatively impact the industry overall.”

The hospitality industry has not traditionally played a critical role in solving homelessness, an issue that affects all large cities, especially those on the West Coast where the temperatures are more temperate. The issue was as important as any other faced by the destination and received media coverage both nationally and internationally.

In an effort to bring various constituents together and work through solutions that included transitional housing, mental health services, policing and street cleaning, Joe and his team worked with a variety of coalitions with the various Chambers of Commerce, neighborhood groups, the hospital association and local government. They lobbied for funding and supported activities that would make a difference in the homeless crisis facing the city.

“It’s easy to point fingers,” said Joe. “We learned the issues are extremely complicated and a lot of times the solutions were things we were not comfortable with and did not make the problem immediately better; but over the long-term, would make a difference.”

The first issue for the organization was making sure the streets of San Francisco were safe; and the second was cleanliness. “To do that we had to be sure that we were doing something meaningful.”

The challenge in getting so vocal about homelessness was the reality that the destination organization was shining a light for the world and their customers to see problems. “A lot of it made my stomach hurt,” Joe confessed. He has no regrets but is still
Homelessness

ResidentS not only recognize that tourism is vital to their community, but they now see the organization as an advocate for the community as well as the visitor.

bothered that they had to make the issue so public to start to see change.

“It was a crisis and we used that terminology. We talked about this being a crisis that we had to address.” It had the potential to negatively reflect on the brand just like any other crisis and was just as important to the brand and the customer experience.

They learned through the process that as difficult as it was at times, they had to be honest with the media and couldn’t sugar coat the truth. “We knew if we were going down this road, our credibility was at stake,” Joe explained. “I took every single media call regardless of how difficult it was. I knew I had to build credibility and tell them when things were not good because it was the only way we were going to get action. I know it was the right thing to do. We wouldn’t see the improvements we have without making the noise we made, which was challenging but necessary.”

Jumping into an issue that was not seen as directly related to tourism helped bring San Francisco Travel Association more respect as a local organization, Joe said. “Most people didn’t know what we did for the community. Because of the local media coverage of what we were doing, everyone now knows who we are and what we are responsible for. Residents realize what a destination organization does and how important it is to their lives.” Residents not only recognize that tourism is vital to their community, but they now see the organization as an advocate for the community as well as the visitor.

While every organization is different, having a seat at the table has made all of the difference in San Francisco. With funding coming through a Tourism Improvement District and not local government, the organization was able to take a stronger stand and have a commanding voice in the discussion. “The government now asks us what we can do to help them,” Joe said. “We have a seat at the table we didn’t have previously. Now they want our perspective. It’s a big change for us because the voice of the visitor is important, and we are recognized as carrying that voice.”
Flash Flooding

In 2016, Ellicott City experienced unprecedented flash floods. Then, in May 2018, thunderstorms pounded the Baltimore, Maryland region for hours. The storm morphed Old Ellicott City, Maryland into a deadly flood zone.

When flooding wiped out the Howard County Welcome Center and tourism offices in Ellicott City, Maryland, Amanda Hof, executive director of Howard County Tourism, said her world changed. The historic mill town had faced flash floods previously, but nothing like they saw in the summer of 2016 where unexpected flooding devastated the historic district and closed down 70-80 businesses.

“No one was expecting it,” Amanda said. “It hadn’t happened in our lifetime previously and we had no emergency plans in place.”

That Saturday night in July 2016, a thunderstorm dropped six inches of rain on the city, triggering flash flooding that killed two people and caused more than USD$20 million in damages.

Having no emergency plan was the scariest part, Amanda explained. “We didn’t have protocols or phone trees. It happened over a weekend. I knew we had someone at the Welcome Center, but I couldn’t reach them. I didn’t have their phone number. He wasn’t
BEING ABLE TO RUN AN ORGANIZATION FROM A SECONDARY LOCATION IS PARAMOUNT FOR SUCCESS.

on the list where he was supposed to be,” she recalled. “I didn’t know until 12 hours later that he was okay.”

Safety has become top of mind for the destination organization now, and they don’t take weather for granted. While the entire office was not completely wiped out by the flooding, they lost furniture and everything that wasn’t stored electronically in the cloud. Keeping those records updated and off-site remain priorities for the organization as well as establishing protocols for various potential incidents.

“Being able to run an organization from a secondary location is paramount for success,” Amanda says. Keeping various businesses apprised of what is happening helps to keep the community moving forward. Having a media plan and guidance on when and how to market the destination following an incident is invaluable. There is a delicate balance to maintain between businesses coming back and the community being in a place to welcome visitors. “If I invite people here and it isn’t a good experience, is that really helping?” Amanda asks. “Balancing the pressures of wanting to get back to ‘business as usual’ and making sure there can be a good customer experience is challenging.”

Learning from experience and having protocols in place paid off when a storm struck the city again in May 2018. The second “1,000-year storm” hit the city within two years. The historic district draws visitors into the city, which is especially popular on holiday weekends. It was easier to navigate, Amanda recalls, because key staff kept their laptops and cells phones with them, allowing them to access all the necessary information to keep the organization moving forward.

The safety of the staff is a priority on Amanda’s emergency response list, but being able to get back up and running regardless of the office situation is key in ensuring everyone is safe and the business is best serving the community.
BRAD DEAN, CEO
DISCOVER PUERTO RICO

Starting a new destination organization as a non-governmental agency, Brad Dean, CEO of Discover Puerto Rico knew he had to hire and onboard staff who were resilient. Just prior to Hurricanes Erma and Maria in 2017, legislation had been passed to create Discover Puerto Rico and the devastation that followed the storms made their mission more important than ever.

“Facing a crisis rewire you,” Brad contends. “It changes you personally and professionally and tests the organization. We didn’t have a crisis communication plan in place — we brought our experience, but it wasn’t necessarily perfect.”

Discover Puerto Rico was officially started after the storms in April 2018. The organization had no structure or business plan, just legislation that said there would be an official destination organization. Brad built the team that would become a trusted source in the community and the world. One of the first steps was to build a communications plan that involved how the impending anniversary of Hurricane Maria would be handled. They looked to develop a plan that would serve the business community well by sharing information that was necessary for them to succeed.

“There is a natural instinct that people have to want to get back to where they were business-wise prior to a crisis,” Brad said. “Those are certainly great goals, but when you go through something so impactful on a human level, it’s a new normal. Getting back to where you were before may not

Hurricane Maria

On the morning of Wednesday, September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico, devastating the island and plunging all of its 3.4 million residents into a desperate humanitarian crisis.
be relevant or possible.” The visitor mix had changed, Brad pointed out. Perception changed and the product changed. “We are benchmarking where we are trying to get, instead of where we have been.” The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step and making sure you are stepping forward is the goal, he said.

As a new destination organization, the team needed to put out a new campaign and deal with the first anniversary of the hurricane that devastated the island in 2017. “We knew it would be a turbulent ride,” Brad said. He looked to empower his staff, that he selected for their resiliency. “Dealing with a crisis is not in everyone’s DNA.” As a leader, he felt it was important that he provide the “north star” — constantly reminding his staff where they were going and why they were going in that direction. Everything they did was tied to their mission and delivering on its promise.

“When coming back from major natural disasters or human tragedy there are so many factors involved that it’s important to keep a focus on why we are doing what we are doing,” Brad explained. “We were getting tugged in so many different directions and we needed to keep our focus on our purpose.” It was critical from a leadership perspective that he keep his team focused on their mission.

Brad said he also had to recognize that most of his staff, and those they were working with, were going through a traumatic personal experience. “I always tried to be compassionate and respectful; I built upon it and that is why they were part of something bigger. My younger staff members could have left but they didn’t because they had a sense of strength and purpose. We could have let it become an excuse, but we didn’t. We were a special team on a very special mission.
Everyone has their own human story that goes with where we are going.”

Destination marketers are storytellers, Brad contends, who can weave purpose into what they are trying to accomplish. Having a sense of purpose throughout the staff will help propel an organization forward.

In looking to the future, Brad continues to prepare staff for the crisis they don’t think they will have to face. “The crisis that will take you under are the ones you don’t anticipate,” he says. “Don’t just prepare for the likely event, prepare for the unlikely as well. Don’t ignore the obvious threats but look at what else could happen.” Learning from what others have done well and haven’t done well is an opportunity to be better prepared. “While the crisis may be localized, the role of the destination organization is often similar.”

**PREPPING STAKEHOLDERS—BEFORE AN EVENT—FOR THE ROLE THE DESTINATION ORGANIZATION WILL PLAY IS A KEY COMPONENT FOR A SMOOTH RESPONSE.**

Prepping stakeholders—before an event—for the role the destination organization will play is a key component for a smooth response. “I’m continually amazed at how few stakeholders realize our role in unplanned events and emergencies,” Brad said. Having a defined role in the emergency management system will set expectations and get the most out of the talent available. “When it comes to managing an unexpected event or crisis,” Brad explains, “everyone’s job changes and you need to embrace it and be prepared to go in that direction.”

“We are storytellers,” Brad concludes, “Who will tell the story, if not us? Not only are we going to come back, we are going to come back bigger and stronger.” Sometimes, he says, you have to be bold and brave and challenge your community to evolve and use the crisis as an opportunity. “We don’t have those opportunities very many times in our lives. It’s a unique situation and an opportunity we shouldn’t waste — using crisis to turn stumbling blocks into stairs.”
Hurricane Sandy & Blackouts

Hurricane Sandy hit New York City on October 29, 2012, bringing with it unprecedented storm surges and flooding that devastated many communities throughout the five boroughs.

What is resilience? For Fred Dixon, president and CEO of NYC & Company, resilience is about how you absorb the hits that come your way and how you move past them. New York City is no stranger to adversity, and Fred knows that the number one concern of visitors to his city is safety. When bad things happen in a city that thrives on tourism, Fred knows he needs to speak directly to the safety concern that his visitors have, and sometimes that means telling them to wait to visit.

When Hurricane Sandy plunged Manhattan into the dark for five days in 2014, the city was flooded, people were stranded and those that wanted to get in couldn’t. “We were so disconnected; power was out in much of the city, cell phones were not working, and I didn’t know where staff was,” Fred recalls.

For the two weeks following the storm, the NYC & Company staff literally walked the streets to see what hotels were open and which weren’t. They used their resources around the world to send the message of what visitors could expect. “We told people if you are planning to go to a place that is closed, don’t come,” Fred said. If the areas visitors were planning on visiting were open, they would encourage them to visit.

Since that event, NYC & Company has put several tools in place to make responding to emergency events seamless. During the storm in 2012, all the servers were flooded,
and cell service was interrupted, making communication nearly impossible. Today, the organization has three redundant servers, and core team members have wired landlines in their homes. They have a seat in the New York City Office of Emergency Operations Center during a crisis so they know what is happening in real-time and have backed up all of their information so teams can work from any location.

Storytelling tools are templated and live in the cloud, along with daily newsletter templates and press release language. This allows the team to move quickly in the event of a crisis. They also learn from each incident by doing a postmortem with staff and the Board of Directors after any major event.

Reputational management is a huge part of the job for destination organizations even though it is rarely written down. Visitors need to know the hospitality community is prepared. In taking on the role of shaping the reputation of New York City, the organization has gone so far as to encourage the Mayor to not only talk to residents but to visitors as well.

Preparing staff is another important factor in successfully managing a crisis. “We drill our staff, we practice everything from legionnaries’ disease in a hotel to a doctor with Ebola wandering around the city,” Fred said. “We boil down the facts to the lowest common denominator and then apply our plan.”

Destination organizations really are on the front lines of a crisis. “We play a critical role in the communication and messaging for the city and the safety of our visitors,” Fred said. “We are delivering critical information at key moments for travelers regardless of if they are here yet or planning to come.” The organization plays a role in key decision making about whether the city is open or closed. “There are times when it is okay to say don’t come here; we will tell you when it is safe to come.”

NYC & Company is working to protect its brand, and while safety is an issue for visitors, being able to ensure those visitors that they are safe and will be protected and looked after while visiting is crucial. “It speaks to the power of your everyday storytelling,” Fred contends, “knowing the weaknesses and pressure points and speaking directly to them. This is core to our message and insulates the brand.”
Wildfires

In mid-July to August 2018, a series of large wildfires erupted across California, mostly in the northern part of the state, including the destructive fires in Santa Barbara. It destroyed more than 18,000 structures, becoming both California’s deadliest and most destructive wildfire on record.

For Kathy Janega-Dykes, president and CEO of Visit Santa Barbara, and Karna Hughes, director of communications, recalling the events of December 2017 and January 2018 began a period of perseverance for not only the tourism bureau but the entire community of Santa Barbara County.

The Thomas Fire, the largest in California history at the time, hit the remote, mountainous hillside above Montecito in December causing large disruptions to the key holiday shopping season in Santa Barbara because of the heavy smoke. After the fire was brought under control, a debris flow in Montecito on January 9, 2018 caused flooding of the major north-south artery on Highway 101, closing it for two weeks. The mudslide in the residential area of Montecito took the lives of 20 people, completely wiping out some homes and bringing national and international attention to the community.

The highway closure had a massive negative impact on both the tourism and business community of nearby Santa Barbara, and during subsequent rainstorms the Montecito community was evacuated several times. “Every time we had strong rains the media would look for debris flow,” Kathy recalls. The impact of the natural disaster closed two hotels for a period of time and deeply
impact both the restaurant and shopping areas of Montecito.

The destination’s public relations team had prepared messaging on the Thomas Fire when the mudslide happened, causing the team to re-examine their strategy. The rarity of the event’s concentration on the rain right over the burn scar brought an alignment of the perfect storm, Karna said, and because of the celebrity community living in the area talking about the events on national television and on social media, a negative image surfaced. “It didn’t help us recover quickly,” Kathy added, “because the stories highlighted only the negative. It had the effect of amplifying the disaster.”

To combat negative media coverage and begin to tell the story of what was open and how the business community was responding, the tourism bureau created the Tourism Business Recovery Alliance. The alliance provided an avenue to share information and support for those businesses affected by the events and brought all voices to the table, Kathy said.

As a result, we learned the community needed to be a united front. “We started having weekly calls with the business community, so we weren’t duplicating efforts, and began speaking to the media with one voice,” Karna recalls. The group continued to host those calls throughout the entire recovery process.

Aligning the message underscored the importance of having a variety of relationships within the community before a disaster strikes. “Montecito and Santa Barbara didn’t necessarily have the spirit of alignment because there are so many different types of businesses and communities within them,” Kathy said. “Had those relationships been stronger, it would have been easier to align.”

The team also took the opportunity to reassess their marketing plans after the crisis passed. “It was an opportunity to reassess everything and decide what would be most effective,” Kathy recalls, “being open to change and trying something new from that point.” Their media strategy didn’t stray to heart-warming, uplifting recovery stories but rather stayed with providing necessary information and correcting inaccuracies, focusing on what was positive. The strategy worked. The bureau ended up with a banner year in positive media coverage with Travel + Leisure listing Montecito as one of the Best Places to Travel in 2019 and Santa Barbara was named on the where to go lists for 2019 by The New York Times and Afar Magazine.
Looking back, Kathy and Karna agree that the perseverance of the staff and the community made all the difference. “Everyone responded differently,” Kathy said. A skeleton staff came into the office as some were cut off and unable to make the commute.

“We had a responsibility to the community, and we needed to begin preparing for what would be the recovery process,” she added. “Tragedies make you reassess everything. We had a solid crisis plan in place, and while we experienced a loss of business into the summer, we worked hard and by the end of the year we were able to find we had higher demand than we had previously.”

When crisis hits, destinations need to continue to do their business of attracting business and leisure travel. Being able to clearly communicate the importance of roles and responsibilities in the recovery was key, Kathy said. “We needed to bring back the business that the community needs to survive,” she added. The bureau provided a service to both the community and visitors through their education campaign.

The experience was one of the most difficult times for both the community and the organization, Kathy and Karna agreed. Today, they have a sense of pride in their communication efforts with the industry and the community-at-large and now enjoy closer relationships as a result. “Our organizations are the right ones to take the lead on these issues,” Kathy believes. “We had the resources and earned the respect of other business leaders and government officials.” You find strength, she said, that you didn’t realize you had. “You are tapping into inner resources that you may not have known were there,” Karna added, “but we are tougher than we think.”

There is something to be said for being able to connect to the meaning of what we do every day, Karna commented. The experience was a lesson to the entire community that tourism promotion really does help drive the economic engine. “We know for sure we helped lead those efforts of recovery for this community.”
Overcoming Legislation

In March 2016, the North Carolina state legislature passed House Bill 2 (HB2) and prompted a public debate on anti-discrimination.

When the North Carolina state legislature passed House Bill 2 (HB2) in March 2016, the Greater Raleigh Convention and Visitors Bureau was thrust into a public debate on anti-discrimination which saw the state lose over $400 million in investments and jobs. The legislation amended state law to preempt any anti-discrimination ordinances passed by local communities and compelled schools and public facilities containing single-gender washrooms to only allow people of the corresponding sex as listed on their birth certificate to use them. Often referred to as the “bathroom bill,” the statute prevented transgender people who did not, or could not, alter their birth certificates from using the restrooms of their choice in state buildings, including schools. The legislation was met with widespread criticism and state, county and city governments across the United States forbade their employees from traveling to North Carolina for anything other than essential business.

Scott Peacock, Director of Public Relations and International Tourism for Visit Raleigh, saw it from both a state tourism perspective and a city perspective as he moved from the state tourism office to Visit Raleigh during
the controversy. “At the state level it was challenging because we knew it was having an impact,” Scott said, “but because the legislature was in support of it, our hands were tied at that time.” While collecting data on cancellations that were occurring because of the statute, the state tourism office began working on best practices for their tourism partners. They also worked to educate the administration on the real business impact.

In the beginning, Scott recalls, staff was bombarded with calls of boycotts. “We had to figure out how we were going to respond. We had one person in the office handle all of those complaints,” Scott said, and created proactive messaging that included an invitation to come to North Carolina and express a difference in opinion. Specific messaging for the meetings and convention industry was developed as that was the largest impacted tourism sector.

There was a lot of fear and speculation around what the law meant. “It didn’t mean you couldn’t come here and use the bathroom of your choice,” Scott explained, “the only place you had that restriction was in a state-owned building but there was never any enforcement mechanism in place. We created a frequently asked questions document to let people know Raleigh didn’t stand for this and created tools for meeting planners to educate their attendees.”

As the boycott and travel bans started to go into place, Visit Raleigh continued to gather the economic impact of the statute. The destination organization along with a coalition of destination organizations around the state also worked with lobbyists to message the impact to lawmakers. They also created the “All are Welcome” campaign which included an impactful video series with local business owners talking to the LGBTQ community. Finally, the team worked to invite leisure and business travelers to come to Raleigh and let their voice be heard.

“We were keeping track of lost business the entire time,” Scott said, “but the biggest fear was we didn’t know where it would end.” It gave us an opportunity, he said, to talk about the booking cycle and how the effects would be felt in a few years from now. The immediate impact on leisure visitation was minimal at best. The true effect was the future of the meetings and convention business and the
“WE WERE KEEPING TRACK OF LOST BUSINESS THE ENTIRE TIME,” SCOTT SAID, “BUT THE BIGGEST FEAR WAS WE DIDN’T KNOW WHERE IT WOULD END.” IT GAVE US AN OPPORTUNITY, HE SAID, TO TALK ABOUT THE BOOKING CYCLE AND HOW THE EFFECTS WOULD BE FELT IN A FEW YEARS FROM NOW.

future effect of business they would not be able to get back.

We also worked hard to minimize lost business. Knowing many groups within 12 months from their event date were safe due to not wanting to pay cancellation fees, and knowing future bookings for two-to-three years out were going to be harder to come by, we focused our attention in the middle. Our sales team was able to work closely with meeting planners whose events were 12-18 months out and who were considering cancelling to get them to instead postpone their events. We did so by keeping an open, honest line of communication with them and engaging in objective dialogue, as well as our overall “All Are Welcome” messaging. In the end we were able to help them negotiate with our hotels and venues to postpone their events for future dates with hopes the legislation would be repealed by then. This proved invaluable.

In 2017, the statute was recalled and replaced by HB142. There was equal confusion around that piece of legislation and what it really meant. “We used the same type of information we had for HB2 and made sure we were communicating what it really meant,” Scott commented. They also reminded both leisure and business customers of a Raleigh city ordinance passed in 1988 that protected LGBTQ rights. That law was now back in force with the repeal and replacement of HB2.

In looking back, Scott said, “we were not quick enough to realize it wasn’t having a short-term/leisure visitation impact. Had we known that sooner, we wouldn’t have focused as much time and effort in messaging to leisure visitors and focused even more heavily around meetings, conventions and sporting event attendees even sooner if we had looked at the prediction models more closely and saw it wasn’t having an impact on short term, but on the long term, we would have curtailed our messaging from the beginning.”
The timing of the repeal coincided with the NCAA athletic events and decisions that were being made about placing tournaments in North Carolina over a six-year period. In a letter to the North Carolina General Assembly, the Executive Director of the Greater Raleigh Sports Alliance, Scott Dupree, speaking on behalf of the North Carolina Sports Association, which represents all 27 counties across the state, said “North Carolina is on the brink of losing all NCAA Championship events for six consecutive years.” The letter explained that the NCAA’s bid review and evaluation process was underway and due to HB2, all North Carolina bids would be pulled from the review process and removed from consideration. The NCAA was also expected to pull all events scheduled for the 2017-18 year and had already canceled a number of events taking place during that academic year.

“What’s more,” the letter contends, “in terms of youth and amateur sports in the United States, the NCAA exerts tremendous influence. When the NCAA decides it will no longer conduct events in North Carolina, the Atlantic Coast Conference and many other sports organizations will surely follow. When compounding the effect of losing these additional sporting events, including hundreds of youth and amateur events, plus the NBA All-Star Game, we believe North Carolina could lose upwards of a half-billion dollars in economic impact.”

The letter from the sports association, was delivered to every state legislator and explained the need for an immediate resolution to prevent the loss of future business. Making sure the legislature understood the loss of business on a local level was key.

In an effort to stay ahead of any such legislation in the future, the CVB sends a state of the industry report to the legislature at every level – state, county and local – to keep tourism top of mind. “If a bill comes up that will affect tourism,” Scott said, “our goal is to be top of mind so will call ahead of time and ask the question of how it will impact the tourism sector.”

The events led the bureau to a position in which they had not anticipated ever being. “The sales team was suddenly talking about what they were going to do to keep attendees safe,” Scott commented. The importance of having the public affairs efforts running well so the tourism industry could have a voice at the table was key, he said. “It’s an eye opener for all destinations,” Scott added, “when you realize how we can be impacted by legislation that on the surface wouldn’t appear to have anything to do with our industry. But the truth is something that impacts residents also impacts visitors. And that’s the mind-shift our industry and elected officials need to make.”

Recognizing the non-traditional issues that impact the industry and inserting tourism into those conversations is an important outcome of the events. “It’s a good lesson on understanding how much impact you can have in changing the public perception on something,” Scott stated.

The tourism industry is resilient, Scott believes. Resilience, he said, “is not giving up faith and hope and understanding that although the days are long, you have to continue to march on. Remember, nothing worth fighting for ever comes easy and it’s our role as destination organizations to fight for the visitor economy and impact it brings to our communities.”