

“Not on my watch” - Guest Safety

The death of Liam Payne of the band One Direction in Buenos Aires on October 16, 2024, served as a stark reminder of the hospitality industry's responsibility to uphold the highest standards of guest safety. Reports indicate that the singer fell from a balcony, with concerns that fainting and substance use may have played a role.



Toxicology tests later revealed traces of non-prescription drugs in his system. While investigations continue to uncover the precise circumstances, this incident underscores the need for hotels to reassess their safety measures and reinforce their commitment to protecting guests. You cannot fall from a balcony with a six-foot-high railing, but you also cannot fully enjoy the view—showing that architectural beauty was prioritized over safety.

Guest safety should never be reduced to a mere liability issue, especially in locations where lawsuits can result in settlements in the multi-million range, as seen in the USA. Instead, it must be ingrained in the very culture of hotel operations—where proactive measures, diligence, and genuine care create a secure environment for all. A robust safety framework is not about checking off a list of requirements; it is about fostering a space where precautionary actions become second nature rather than merely a procedural commitment or building code obligation. Even hotel architectural planning must consider the reality that someone may attempt to misuse the property.

At the core of every hotel's mission is the well-being of its guests; however, safety protocols can only be truly effective when seamlessly integrated into daily operations. This requires consistent reinforcement and, most importantly, leadership that views safety as a continuous commitment rather than a one-time implementation. Hotel management must champion this cause, ensuring that security measures are not just policies on paper but practices that shape the everyday experience of both guests and staff. To protect themselves, as was found out in the 1990s with open atrium hotels, safety protocols must be more than just written policies—they must be living practices.

All hospitality venues should regularly update their safety precautions, exceeding the government-mandated “basic” requirements. Waiting for a tragedy—such as a fire—before improving fire safety equipment and protocols is both negligent and dangerous.

To strengthen guest protection, hotels should focus on *three* key pillars:

1. **Emergency Preparedness Training**

Comprehensive emergency training should be a standard practice, not just for security personnel but for all hotel staff. This includes regular drills, clear evacuation procedures, and crisis response protocols to handle incidents such as medical emergencies, structural hazards, or security threats. Employees should be equipped with the knowledge and confidence to respond swiftly and effectively to any situation.

2. **Guest Safety Awareness**

Educating guests about safety measures is equally crucial. Hotels can enhance awareness by providing clear guidelines on balcony safety, fire escape routes, and emergency contacts upon check-in. Digital resources, in-room safety instructions, and staff engagement can reinforce the importance of personal vigilance while ensuring that guests feel supported in their surroundings.

3. **Mental Health and First Aid Support**

The hospitality industry must acknowledge the intersection between guest well-being and mental health. Hotels should consider having staff trained in mental health first aid, equipping them to recognise distress signals and respond appropriately. Additionally, accessible resources—such as crisis helplines, discreet support services, or partnerships with local mental health organisations—can offer guests assistance in times of need.

Beyond all else, a reactionary approach to safety is insufficient. Hotels must be proactive in identifying potential risks and taking preventive measures before an incident occurs. Proactivity demands foresight, investment, and an unwavering commitment to preparedness at every level. This includes regularly assessing vulnerabilities, refining response protocols, and instilling a mindset of vigilance across all departments.

One of the most effective ways to enhance preparedness is through *what-if?* scenario planning. Simulating emergency situations—such as active shooter incidents, cyberattacks, and public health crises—ensures that staff are not only familiar with protocols but also equipped to respond under pressure. Running routine drills strengthens decision-making skills and eliminates hesitation in critical moments. For example, if a guest experiences a medical emergency, like fainting or sustaining an injury, well-trained staff can intervene immediately to prevent confusion and delays that could worsen the

situation; however, training must go beyond procedural knowledge—it should cultivate adaptability and awareness. Staff members should be trained to recognise subtle behavioral cues that may indicate distress or risk. If a guest appears disoriented, impaired, or unusually withdrawn, a proactive approach—checking in on them, offering assistance, or notifying security—can prevent potential dangers before they escalate. In an industry built on hospitality and care, attentiveness can be just as vital as policy enforcement.

Equally important is fostering a team that operates with clarity and composure. A well-prepared team is not just knowledgeable but also mentally resilient. Incorporating mindfulness techniques, such as guided breathing exercises before shifts or brief meditation sessions during team meetings, can enhance focus and reduce stress. When employees remain calm under pressure, they are better equipped to handle emergencies effectively and provide reassurance to guests.

Just consider the miracle on the Hudson River and last month's crash at Pearson Toronto Airport. Trained personnel ensured there were no fatalities—especially remarkable given that the plane in the Hudson was sinking, while the plane in Toronto lay upside down in flames.

The tragic loss of Liam Payne is a sobering reminder that guest safety is not just a policy—it must be a living, breathing part of hotel operations. A safe hotel is not one that merely reacts to crises but one that actively prevents them. By fostering a culture of vigilance, equipping staff with the right tools, and continuously refining safety measures, hotels can create environments where guests feel secure, valued, and truly cared for.

Each guest who walks through a hotel's doors deserves more than just comfort—they deserve protection. As leaders in hospitality, the responsibility lies in our hands to turn safety into a non-negotiable standard, ensuring that tragedies like this one serve as a catalyst for lasting change rather than a cautionary tale. A steadfast commitment to safety is not just an expectation—it is the foundation upon which the future of hospitality must be built.