

today's hotelier

November 2022 | todayshotelier.com

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IAN's aftermath

AAHOA gathers with elected officials to discuss recovery after massive Florida damage

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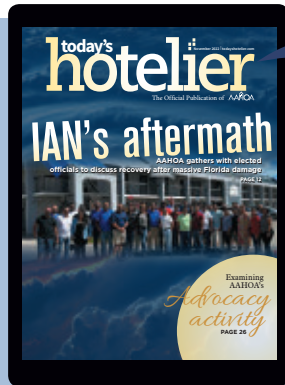
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5 Things to Know

About AAHOA This Month

1 AAHOA'S HEROWNERSHIP CONFERENCE & RETREAT A SUCCESS.

Hundreds of women hoteliers attended the 2022 AAHOA HerOwnership Conference & Retreat at the Radisson Hotel Cincinnati Riverfront last month. Attendees had the chance to hear from inspiring keynote speakers, meet other like-minded women, and advance their professional development. Thank you to everyone who helped make this inaugural event a huge success.



2 DO YOU WANT TO SERVE ON THE AAHOA BOARD OF DIRECTORS?

If you're a motivated member eager to help drive the strategic direction of a national association dedicated to advancing and protecting the interests of hotel owners, then consider serving on AAHOA's Board of Directors. For updates on open Board positions and deadlines, please visit: AAHOA.com/Candidates.



3 'TIS THE SEASON TO GIVE BACK.

November kicks off the season of giving, and what better time than now to contribute to the Kennesaw State University Michael Leven and Lee Dushoff AAHOA Scholarship for Compassionate Leadership. The scholarship honors the legacy of two leaders instrumental to AAHOA's founding and provides financial assistance to exceptional students in the hospitality program. Your donation is fully tax-deductible, so give today and make a difference in the lives of future hoteliers. bit.ly/KSU-AAHOA



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4 AAHOACON23 IS COMING TO LOS ANGELES - REGISTRATION OPENING SOON.

The 2023 AAHOA Convention & Trade Show will take place from April 11-14 in Los Angeles, CA. Six thousand-plus attendees from across the country will gather at the nation's largest and leading event for hotel owners. Explore the AAHOACON23 website and learn more. AAHOA.com/Convention



5 WHAT TO WATCH: AAHOA'S 12 POINTS WEBCAST SERIES.

As the foremost resource and advocate for America's hotel owners, AAHOA has a responsibility to ensure members have the tools and resources necessary to realize a mutually beneficial relationship between franchisors and franchisees. The 12 Points of Fair Franchising Webcast Series breaks down each point and helps franchisees better understand the implications of each point. The first video is now available. For more information, check out AAHOA.com/12PointsVideos.





**NISHANT (NEAL) PATEL,
CHO, CHIA**
AAHOA CHAIRMAN (2022-2023)

“

The one piece of feedback that we consistently receive is that AAHOA isn't just an association, it's a way of life, a community, and a sense of belonging.”

With gratitude

THANKSGIVING IS AROUND THE CORNER, AND WHILE I'M THANKFUL FOR MANY things AAHOA provides, I'm most thankful for the nearly 20,000 hotel owners who belong to this great organization.

When it comes to being an AAHOA Member, it's easy to look up member benefits. Some pertain to advocacy, exclusive discounts, world-class education, and so on. While those things are necessary and appreciated, I believe what AAHOA offers is something that can't be seen or, perhaps, even described.

It's hard to explain the connection I feel, and many members feel, being a part of something bigger than ourselves. I love the relationships we build, meeting new people, and learning new things about our members. I love the feeling of community and knowing that we're all in this together.

Anyone who has attended Regionals, Town Halls, charity golf tournaments, and AAHOACON knows that the sense of community is ineffable. AAHOA often gathers testimonials from members talking about what AAHOA means to them, and many people talk about the benefits that improve their bottom line or the connections, but the one piece of feedback that we consistently receive is that AAHOA isn't just an association, it's a way of life, a community, and a sense of belonging.

Across the United States, you'll find AAHOA's nearly 20,000 members walking around with AAHOA-branded T-shirts, pins, tumblers, backpacks, etc. This isn't just because the gear is a nice perk; it's because our membership genuinely wants to show support for the AAHOA brand. They wear their AAHOA gear with pride.

This organization has a huge influence on its members' lives. Some people who weren't the biggest raving fans of AAHOA initially are now some of our most ardent supporters.

We're made up of generations of families, independent and brand-name hotels, women, young professionals, and an incredible network of Industry Partners who also see AAHOA as a family, just as hoteliers do.

It's the members – and their incredible engagement and belief in our organization – who make AAHOA what it is. Without members, vendors, industry partners, and supporters from all walks of life, AAHOA wouldn't exist. For more than three decades, this association has grown and evolved to ensure that our industry continues to thrive.

This Thanksgiving, when you're surrounded by family, friends, and loved ones, and you go around the table sharing what you are thankful for, I hope AAHOA makes that list. I know we're thankful for all of you, the AAHOA Members.

Having the support system and safety net that is AAHOA is something none of us should ever take for granted. ■



LAURA LEE BLAKE, ESQ.
PRESIDENT & CEO

“Membership numbers are markedly higher, we have increased the levels of industry partners and vendors to drive mutually beneficial relationships for the long term, and we are raising the bar with new initiatives for the association and the industry at large.”

Our pulse is strong

IT HAS NOW BEEN SIX MONTHS SINCE I TOOK ON THE ROLE OF AAHOA PRESIDENT & CEO, and I have exerted significant efforts to reacquaint myself with the benefits, issues, and challenges facing the association. Perhaps most importantly, however, I have reconnected with so many members, colleagues, and friends I knew from the past, and every day I meet new ones.

When I think back on my previous nearly 10 years with AAHOA from 2005 to 2014, it is as if nothing has changed. AAHOA still has strong, smart, and high-achieving members who want to make a difference in the industry for their businesses, their employees, their guests, and their communities. At the same time, however, so many things have dramatically changed in the past few years. Membership numbers are markedly higher, we have increased the levels of industry partners and vendors to drive mutually beneficial relationships for the long term, and we are raising the bar with new initiatives for the association and the industry at large.

AAHOA is more than just an association to those who are a part of the community; it is a way of life. No matter what we do, we will not go wrong when our heart is invested in the betterment of our members. AAHOA is here, and we care about our members. We care about what is happening to their businesses, their families, and their communities.

To join the AAHOA community, our leaders have continued to keep the membership rates very low so it is affordable for all. For less than \$.60 per day, AAHOA Members can access all of the many amazing benefits. These benefits include free Regional conferences with access to top vendors, exclusive discounts, networking opportunities, resources, business meetings with up-to-the-minute news and updates, complimentary food, access to an amazing team of Officers, Board Members, and Ambassadors who are traveling the country and visiting their local communities to tackle the major issues of the day, legal updates, an annual AAHOACON with inspiring keynote speakers and guests, town halls, women's and YP conferences, charity golf tournaments, daily news updates that save you time and keep you informed, hundreds of educational on-demand webcasts – and the list goes on.

With nearly 20,000 members strong, AAHOA is hard at work every day to advance and protect your business interests as the foremost resource and advocate for America's hotel owners. With AAHOA on your side, you never have to go it alone.

If that was not enough, AAHOA's advocacy team continues to lobby for your top-of-mind concerns. In fact, a few months ago in September, 100 AAHOA Members and leaders from all over the country flew into Washington D.C. for AAHOA's Fall National Advocacy Conference to make their voices heard and shed light on the issues that matter most to America's hotel owners. Members met and built relationships with more than 100 offices and 70 U.S. Senators and Representatives to push our policy priorities forward.

AAHOA'S pulse is strong as we continue to strive to be the “best of the best” for you, our members. Let's join together to not only be the largest hotel owners association in the world, but the most influential in the industry, as well as with elected officials at the Federal, State, and local levels. This is a new day. A new start. This is AAHOA. ■



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Putting people first

Charting AAHOA's response to the deadly effects of Hurricane Ian

by LAURA LEE BLAKE, ESQ.

HURRICANE IAN MADE LANDFALL IN FLORIDA ON September 28, 2022, as a Category 4 storm. With up to 115 mph winds that pounded portions of Florida's western coast for more than six hours, along with torrential 20-plus inches of rain that saturated the area, the death toll continues to rise to 127 people (as of time of publication), with billions of dollars in property losses.

This hurricane, Florida's deadliest since 1935, was described by Governor Ron DeSantis as one of the worst to ever hit Florida.

The storm made three landfalls – in Cuba, Florida, and South Carolina – and for AAHOA Members with properties in the path of Hurricane Ian, the impact was devastating.

Repeated refrains of "I have never been so scared in all my life" were heard from numerous AAHOA Members as they recounted their experiences with the slow-moving hurricane, which battered their homes and hotels. Other frequent stories included those of members and their families huddling in interior restrooms for more than four hours with no power as they listened to the storm ripping off their roofs, destroying their hotel signs, and uprooting palm trees in the nearby yards.

We spoke with several AAHOA leaders who reside in Florida, including Florida Regional Director Rahul Patel and Vice Chairman Bharat Patel, and listened as they shared their stories with us.

Rahul owns five properties in Sarasota, Florida. He said, debris was flying around during the storm at such a high speed, they became like projectiles.

"We saw broken signs and signs getting torn up and some A/C units getting torn up," Rahul said. "All the roofs started flying off, including the hotel where we were, and palm trees were snapping from the base. It was a mess – a disaster zone."

"We consider ourselves fortunate because we thought it was going to be a Category 5 and hit much closer," Bharat said.



BENNY MARTY/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

AAHOA leaders held a call on the Saturday before Hurricane Ian made landfall, and about 50 hoteliers attended, ensuring everybody was aware of the dangers of the storm and directing them to available resources.

“I’m here to serve and wanted to make sure the word was out,” Bharat said. “How do you share best practices? How do you share with your members, your friends, your neighbors, and your community what’s going on and what’s impacting you? That’s the power of social media and that’s the power of being connected nowadays.”

When the storms died down, both Bharat and Rahul started visiting the local members to make sure they were OK.

“Thankfully, after the storm, every hotel owner and every guest was safe,” Rahul said, “There were no injuries or deaths among the whole network.”

In the days following, volunteers rolled in – bringing supplies, water, and hot Indian meals.

Shortly after the Hurricane, I traveled to Florida to encourage and meet with local members. During the visit, Bharat and Rahul scheduled a Town Hall with U.S. Congressman Byron Donalds (FL-R-19) and numerous local AAHOA Members to discuss the ongoing recovery from Hurricane Ian’s ruinous effects on their communities.

“AAHOA is a collective voice,” Rahul said. “Because of AAHOA, we were already in communication with [Florida Attorney General] Ashley Moody’s office, and we were already in touch with the governor’s office.”

AAHOA Lifetime Member Sandip Patel said he took every precaution to protect his property this time after living through Hurricane Charley in 2004.

“Hurricane Charley was a scary experience. I hid in the bathroom for about an hour and 45 minutes,” Sandip said. “After the storm, I came outside and saw broken windows, water was everywhere, and the hotel roof was gone.”

For AAHOA Members who lived through both storms, they uniformly agreed that Hurricane Ian was considerably worse than Charley because of the relentless and high-powered winds that continued from the late afternoon until after midnight.

“We’re Florida strong, and we’re going to build back,” Bharat said, “I’m hoping that we build back better.”



To read more about AAHOA’s on-the-ground response to Hurricane Ian and the full version of this article, scan the QR code below.



AAHOA Leaders meet with the Union Minister of State for External Affairs & Parliamentary Affairs of India to discuss entrepreneurship opportunities for NRIs and India

by EVELYN HOOVER

Foundations for the future

AAHOA MEMBERS ARE BUSINESS-SAVVY, OWNING MORE THAN HALF OF THE HOTELS in the U.S., contributing \$368.4 billion to the nation's annual GDP, and embodying the American Dream. This means, they grow the economy, create jobs, and welcome travelers from across the country and throughout the world. Even more inspiring, most members and their families are from India, having arrived in the U.S. with few resources and countless dreams.

Today, these small business owners call the U.S. home and, without a doubt, dominate the hospitality industry. But, that doesn't mean they have forgotten their Indian heritage. In fact, strengthening ties between India and the U.S. for the betterment of American entrepreneurship is top of mind for AAHOA Members.

AAHOA leaders took steps to strengthen these ties when they recently met with Vellamvelly (V.) Muraleedharan, Union Minister of State for External Affairs & Parliamentary Affairs of India. During the meeting, they discussed several key issues, including:

- Scheduling an AAHOA delegation to India;
- Participating in the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention next year to help strengthen political, economic, and industrial ties with India;
- Working with the Indian government to assess and work with the U.S. on important Visa programs to assist with the industry's labor shortage; and
- Promoting travel and tourism between the countries.



[L-R] AAHOA Past Board Member Hasu Patel, Union Minister of State for External Affairs & Parliamentary Affairs of India V. Muraleedharan, AAHOA Director at Large Western Division and current President of LPS Hitesh Patel, AAPI Chair of the Board of Trustees V. Ranga, MD, and AAHOA President & CEO Laura Lee Blake.



[L-R] AAHOA Past Chair (2010-11) ChandraKant (CK) Patel, AAHOA President & CEO Laura Lee Blake, AAHOA Past Board member Hasu Patel, Union Minister of State for External Affairs & Parliamentary Affairs of India V. Muraleedharan, AAHOA Director at Large Western Division and current President of LPS Hitesh Patel, and AAHOA Past Chair (1998-89) Mike Patel.

“I’m proud of the entrepreneurial spirit of AAHOA Members and so many hoteliers in India. The recent meeting with Union Minister of State V. Muraleedharan shows AAHOA’s commitment to creating a mutually beneficial relationship with the Indian government and fostering business opportunities for generations to come.”

– AAHOA Chairman Nishant (Neal) Patel

“AAHOA has deep roots in India, and it was a great honor to meet with the Union Minister of State V. Muraleedharan to share our views for the long-term growth of the Indian economy,” said AAHOA President & CEO Laura Lee Blake. “Given the important focus of these discussions on the ways AAHOA can foster that growth with business relations and investments in significant programs, it is clear AAHOA Members will benefit from this strong relationship that continues to be developed.”

The industry’s next generation is also on the rise in the U.S. and India. AAHOA recognizes the shift and had a productive conversation with Union Minister of State V. Muraleedharan on creating entrepreneurship platforms for youth and young professionals to contribute to the growth and achievement of long-term goals in India.

As we look ahead to 2023 and beyond, these conversations and meetings will take entrepreneurship to the next level in U.S. and India. ■

“Indian American entrepreneurship is evident at AAHOA, where our members own 60% of the hotels in the U.S. and significantly contribute to the country’s economy. With many hotel owners having deep roots in India, our conversation with Union Minister of State V. Muraleedharan demonstrates that AAHOA and the government of India are committed to collaboration and opportunities to expand in the U.S. and abroad.”

– AAHOA Director at Large Western Division Hitesh Patel

Swiftness Gearns



IMAGE CRAFT/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Prioritizing fair treatment for all, AAHOA moves full speed ahead

by NICK FORTUNA

DURING THE DEPTHS OF the pandemic, the hospitality industry's top priority was banding together to speak with a unified voice, pressing lawmakers for aid in dealing with the existential threat of COVID-19. But, with the industry's recovery underway, AAHOA is shifting strategies, with a renewed focus on helping franchisees better understand their franchise agreements and advocating for more fairness and transparency for the entire franchise system.

That's encouraging news for AAHOA Members who feel as if they've been swimming against a cascading tide for too long. Locked into long-term franchise agreements, some hoteliers feel they have little recourse when a franchisor implements business practices they perceive as unfair, charging fees that were never disclosed, or mandating vendors that don't provide competitive pricing or service.



In April, AAHOA revised its 12 Points of Fair Franchising (AAHOA.com/12Points), a document originally published in 1998 to establish best practices for the hospitality franchise system. This document serves as an educational primer for hospitality franchisors and AAHOA Members, steering them toward a better understanding of franchise agreements that benefit both hoteliers and hotel brands.

Looking ahead, AAHOA Members, including those on its Franchise and Industry Relations (FAIR) Committee and the 12 Points Franchise Reformation Ad Hoc Committee, are calling for the association to emphasize the 12 Points of Fair Franchising (AAHOA.com/12Points) at industry events and in interactions with hotel brands. “Many AAHOA Members, including my parents from the first generations, lacked the knowledge to read and understand franchise agreements,” said Dr. Jay S. Patel, Author (“Franchising Is it Fair? How to Negotiate an Equitable Franchise Agreement”) and AAHOA Franchise and Industry Relations Committee Past Chair. “Our second and third generations are much more educated and sophisticated and better understand what they’re signing. The 12 Points help guide prospective and current franchisees on equitable franchise agreements.”

The goal is to ensure that franchisees and franchisors alike have a sustainable business model in the long term, creating more stability for hoteliers, “the biggest investors” in a hotel’s brand, according to QHotels Management Chief Executive Officer Vimal Patel, himself an AAHOA Member. The LaPlace, LA-based company owns and operates about a dozen hotels in Louisiana and Texas.

V. Patel, the winner of the 2022 AAHOA Award of Excellence, said hotel brands had been charging franchisees excessive fees prior to the pandemic, but the issue reached a tipping point when COVID-19 sent occupancy rates tumbling, leading franchisors to seek out new revenue streams.

Last year, he was among the dozens of hoteliers who filed lawsuits in federal court against Intercontinental Hotels Group and Choice Hotels International, accusing the hotel giants of exploitative business practices.

“The brands are able to implement and enforce a lot

of these changes, and the benefits are one-sided,” said V. Patel, whose suit deals only with IHG. “These franchisors keep piling fees upon fees to the point where it’s no longer a profitable business for franchisees. Those small-business owners often lack the resources to defend themselves, so I wanted to take a public stance against these unfair business practices.”

PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT

The lawsuits claim that those two hotel brands require franchisees to use specific vendors and then receive payments from those vendors in exchange for giving them preferred status. As a result, according to the suit, franchisees often pay more than their peers for the same products and services, or they receive lower-quality goods and services, Patel said.

As an example, he pointed to his company’s Holiday Inn Express & Suites, a 91-room hotel in LaPlace. Just prior to the pandemic, QHotels renovated the facility at a cost of \$1.8 million, but Patel said the job would have cost only \$1.2 million if the company had its choice of vendors, including

furniture, fixture, and equipment vendors.

Similarly, V. Patel said some of his hotels pay more for telephone and Wi-Fi service than neighboring hotels and get lower levels of bandwidth despite using the same vendor. In addition, IHG mandates that franchisees use a specific credit-card processor even though the bank charges them 8 cents per transaction as a technology fee, he said. Meanwhile, some other branded properties using the same bank pay no fees for that service, V. Patel added.

In separate press releases, IHG and Choice said they're committed to the success of their franchisees and dispute the lawsuits' claims about unfair business practices. IHG said it was helping hoteliers get through the pandemic by relaxing brand standards, discounting fees, and improving procurement terms with suppliers. Likewise, Choice said it suspended some fees and permitted owners to defer others.

But, if franchisors take payments from vendors, they would be violating a "cardinal rule" of franchising, according to Joel Libava, a franchise consultant who reports on the industry at TheFranchiseKing.com. When hoteliers pay royalties and fees

in exchange for a brand's name, they should expect franchise companies to use their buying power to get them discounted products and services, Libava told ABC News last year.

V. Patel echoed those sentiments, noting that hoteliers who weathered the worst of the pandemic are now facing higher costs for labor, insurance, and essential products. Throw in excessive fees from hotel brands, and owners face an uphill battle toward profitability, he said.

"The whole objective is to level the playing field so both sides are benefiting," V. Patel said. "We shouldn't be beholden to the hotel brands' stock prices or their CEOs' incentives. Both sides need each other, so all we're looking for is to have fair and ethical business practices and to be able to work together cohesively."

CONSOLIDATION CONCERNS

Maulesh Patel, an AAHOA Member whose group owns and operates five hotels in New

Jersey and Pennsylvania, said AAHOA's shift in strategy takes on added importance given the recent mergers and acquisitions in the hotel industry.

During the past six years, the notable headlines include Choice's acquisition of Radisson Hotel Group Americas for \$675 million in June, Wyndham Worldwide Corp.'s \$1.95 billion deal for La Quinta in 2018, and Marriott International's purchase of Starwood Hotels & Resorts for about \$13 billion in 2016.

"There has been so much consolidation recently, so these companies are getting bigger and bigger," M. Patel said. "AAHOA Members are basically at the mercy of these large companies because they don't have much leverage, so AAHOA is moving in the right direction by advocating for franchisees. When a franchisee signs an agreement, the hotel brand should honor it for the term of the agreement.

““

We're not only an association for the hotel industry; we're the only association for owners in the hotel industry. They understand that now, and they have our backing.”



When a franchisee signs an agreement, the hotel brand should honor it for the term of the agreement. It shouldn't be changed midway through."

It shouldn't be changed midway through."

M. Patel said hotel brands that embrace AAHOA's 12 Points of Fair Franchising are analogous to major companies that have incorporated ESG principles into their business operations. By focusing on their environmental, social, and governance impacts, these corporations are striving to maintain profitability while operating ethically and sustainably, he said.

"AAHOA is telling franchisors, 'Hey, pick up on these 12 Points of Fair Franchising because they're actually good for your business,'" he said. "If you don't treat your franchisees fairly, how can you expect your brand to succeed long term? I think it's important for AAHOA to continue to highlight the 12 Points at events across the industry."

Neil Patel, an AAHOA Member based in Raymondville, TX, with ownership stakes in half a dozen properties, said a number of factors are eating into sustainability, including the structure of some hotel loyalty programs. When members check into his La Quinta, for example, the hotel must earmark 5% of that revenue for the loyalty program, awarding points to members, he said.

Despite paying that fee, hoteliers may face penalties of \$500-\$1,000 if they fail to meet their quota for new enrollees in the loyalty program, N. Patel said. That practice penalizes

hoteliers who focus on developing repeat business since they can sign up a customer for the loyalty program only once, he said.

Furthermore, if a hotel has an especially strong month or quarter in terms of signups, then the brand might establish that figure as the hotel's new benchmark, creating unrealistic expectations and setting up the hotel to incur penalties, N. Patel added.

"The points are at the cost of the property, and we're OK with that, but the penalties are just a stick to beat you with," he said. "Some of the brands label it as a retraining fee or a missed-enrollments fee, but you don't get anything in exchange for paying that fee, and it's an arbitrary benchmark. There's no sympathy from the brands on that issue."

REIMBURSEMENT RATES

When guests redeem their loyalty points, hoteliers often get a flat fee from brands that may not even cover the costs associated with occupancy, N. Patel said. In most cases, the level of reimbursement given to hotel owners has remained flat through the years, failing to keep pace with inflation, he said.

"We'd like to see the reimbursement rate be a true reflection of today's costs of operations," N. Patel said.

Hotel brands typically get a share of the commission when guests book rooms through online travel agencies, so

franchisors may be disincentivized from spending money to drive customers to their own websites, N. Patel said. Some brands give inventory to OTAs and may demand rate parity between those websites and their own sites. In turn, the sizeable OTA commission leaves hoteliers with a smaller slice of the pie, he said.

"The brand is making money on royalties whether the booking comes from Brand.com, a walk-in, or the OTAs, but they're going to get extra revenue if it comes from the OTAs, and they don't disclose how much that revenue share is," N. Patel said. "Part of the fees we pay to brands is supposed to be used to drive direct bookings, but we don't see any marketing nowadays.

"Before the pandemic, you would see ads on TV, online, in print publications, and on the radio," he added. "We don't see any of that now because they're relying on the OTAs."

Another area of concern is liquidated damages, or the revenue a hotel brand misses out on when an owner terminates a franchise agreement prematurely, N. Patel said.

If a hotelier exits the deal six years early, for example, the franchisor may be entitled to three to six years of lost royalties and fees. However, if a new franchisee enters that same market before the three-to-six-year period has elapsed, the hotel brand actually will get some of the money it was expecting. Still, the franchisor gets to keep the liquidated

damages collected from the original hotelier, essentially double dipping in the same market, N. Patel said.

Patel, who serves on AAHOA's FAIR Committee, said the group will continue to make recommendations to the association's board. The Franchise and Industry Relations Committee (FAIR) is laser-focused on addressing a plethora of brand issues that AAHOA-Members consistently face while actively achieving milestones based upon an aggressive list of goals and objectives set forth for the committee," said Pimal Patel, 2022-23 FAIR Committee Chair. "I am honored and grateful for the work that the committee is doing and their time and effort into AAHOA's fair franchising initiatives, but more importantly, their contributions to effect meaningful change for AAHOA-Member franchisees everywhere."

Patel praised AAHOA for shifting its focus toward franchisee advocacy and said members should benefit from the leadership of fellow Texas hotelier and AAHOA Chairman Nishant (Neal) Patel.

"Members have elected the right leaders as Officers and Board Members in AAHOA, and they're more accountable to members now," N. Patel said. "We're not only an association for the hotel industry; we're the only association for owners in the hotel industry. They understand that now, and they have our backing." ■

AAHOAC 23N

APRIL 11-14, 2023 | LOS ANGELES CONVENTION CENTER

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The 2023 AAHOA Convention & Trade Show brings together the who's who of the industry for networking, learning, and deal-making on the trade show floor.

Join us in Los Angeles for the event of the year! The largest gathering of AAHOA Members, who own 60% of the hotels in the nation, is taking place in April, and you don't want to miss it!

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EXPLORE

IN 1987, JUST TWO YEARS PRIOR TO AAHOA'S founding, American Express launched an ad campaign relying on the phrase "membership has its privileges," and that concept is alive and well inside the protective confines of AAHOA.

During the decades since its inception, AAHOA has shaped industry policies, priorities, and power dynamics, and different times have called for different approaches. Through the years, however, the constant thread through the AAHOA story is the unquantifiable benefits of belonging to the association as it provides strength in numbers that can't be found by attempting to operate a hotel alone.

The big-picture goal is for AAHOA to be the ultimate bastion of safety and security, protecting the most vulnerable, sharing information, and establishing long-lasting personal and business-related relationships.

Within the pages of this issue, we're examining the power that AAHOA membership can bring. In this article, we'll explore a few specific stories while demonstrating the strength-in-numbers power afforded to AAHOA Members.

Demand

your universe

Taking a closer look at
the benefits of AAHOA
membership in 2022

by CARTER DAVIS

Member testimonials

It's one thing to cite facts and figures or point to successes from afar. Where the rubber meets the road, however, is in direct AAHOA Member testimonials. While AAHOA is constantly collecting feedback from Members, here's a small sample taken from a recent AAHOA Regional Conference & Trade Show.



HELEN ZAVER
- AAHOA
AMBASSADOR

"AAHOA is such a great investment and is there to help with issues that arise for hoteliers – on the legislation side, as well as being able to get you up to date on new events coming up, and the new things that are coming out for hotels to make your life easier. It's a good network, and that's all you need. Get connected with AAHOA Members, especially the Board and the Ambassadors, and take something back with you and learn from it."

DAN BROWN - INDUSTRY PARTNER/VENDOR

"I recommend for anyone and everyone who's in the hospitality industry to join AAHOA, because I joined and I got to participate in their CHO (Certification in Hotel Ownership®) program. Through that, I learned a lot, and AAHOA is the only place offering that, in addition to other educational benefits. [Membership] is a great way to get into the community and a great way to meet other people with the same mindset as you. If you're in the hospitality industry, this is the place to be."



MATT LINKLATER - SILVER INDUSTRY PARTNER

"I think AAHOA conferences are always great. You're surrounded by like-minded people who are very inspirational and always looking to take their lives and business to another level. It's just a great environment to be surrounded, right? Like-minded people are always looking to invest more into hotels, how to grow their hotels, and take their businesses to another level through partnerships and learning from other members. I've never found a community that's so welcoming, and so willing to want to take care of their financial assets and take care of their family as AAHOA Members do."



The value of AAHOA membership in 2022

Nearly 20,000-members strong, AAHOA is hard at work every day to advance and protect your business interests as the foremost resource and advocate for America's hotel owners. It's during times such as those we were recently in with COVID that the true value of an association – being a part of something bigger than yourself – really shines through. With AAHOA on your side, you never have to go it alone.

With AAHOA membership, you receive:

ADVOCACY ACROSS THE BOARD

- AAHOA's Franchise Relations team continues to advocate for your top-of-mind concerns, providing timely updates to and advocacy on behalf of franchisees.
- Even during a worldwide pandemic, AAHOA's powerhouse Government Affairs team made great strides working every day to benefit you, the hotel owner, at the state, local, and federal levels.

HUNDREDS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES – DIGITAL AND IN PERSON

- Hundreds of webcasts available on demand
- Events with inspiring keynote speakers and guests
- Discounts to earn your CHO or CHIA designation
- And much more

Career calling

AAHOA Member Prasant Patel hasn't always been a hotelier. In fact, his prior career found him far from the halls of a hotel, serving in the U.S. Navy for 24 years, only opening his first property in 2019 – a Comfort Suites in Humble, TX.

Having transitioned to the hotel business relatively recently, Prasant brings a unique perspective on the industry and AAHOA itself, so we caught up with him to pick his brain and find out how a new hotelier views the industry and the association to which he now belongs.

AFTER A CAREER OF SERVICE IN THE NAVY, WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO BUILD AND OPEN A HOTEL IN 2019?

I've had family and friends involved in this industry all my life, and I've always known I would be a hotelier one day. After getting my real estate license in 2013 during a recruiting tour in my hometown of Houston, my brother-in-law and I purchased a vacant lot in 2014 for a hotel. It was a hard two years of understanding the mechanics of building a hotel and going through all the hurdles of just getting a certificate of occupancy. One year before I retired from the Navy, we opened the doors to our new hotel in 2019.

WERE THERE OTHER INDUSTRIES OR OPPORTUNITIES YOU CONSIDERED BESIDES HOSPITALITY?

The majority of my time in the Navy was spent on recruiting duty, which opened doors into HR, but I was ready to let that go. The hospitality sector in Houston had

a huge demand for GMs in 2019 since there were multiple hotel projects coming to market. It's a different feeling when you build a project from ground up rather than just purchasing something that already exists. You feel connected as if it's a part of you, so falling into the GM position at my own hotel felt natural.

WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO BECOME AN AAHOA MEMBER?

All my friends and family who own hotels are all members of AAHOA. I enjoy networking with other hotel owners and hearing about the challenges they also face with brand standards or new government policies. As an AAHOA Member, I feel like I have a voice for other hoteliers who aren't members. And, I've been pleasantly surprised at the leverage AAHOA has, which allows the association to be heard and respected among politicians, hotel brands, and other industries.

HOW HAS BEING A MEMBER OF AAHOA AFFECTED YOU?

Membership makes the most sense if you're willing to seek opportunities that can help you in your business. Take, for example, the annual events AAHOA hosts for members, where I've met vendors and brand representatives in person and have asked them questions about supplies or issues I've encountered that couldn't be resolved with a phone call. Additionally, learning about the newest labor policies and upcoming reform proposals that effect hotel business's alone is invaluable.



I enjoy networking with other hotel owners and hearing about the challenges they also face with brand standards or new government policies.”

EXCLUSIVE VENDOR PARTNER DEALS AND DISCOUNTS FROM HUNDREDS OF VENDORS

- Weekly updates from AAHOA Industry Partners regarding their latest offers
- Access to nearly two dozen opportunities to connect with vendors and make deals on trade show floors
- Exclusive discounts created just for AAHOA Members

AAHOA RESOURCES AND PROGRAMS

- Toolkits and resources that help you advance the business interests of hoteliers in your local community
- Daily news updates that save you time and keep you informed

- Networking opportunities with like-minded hoteliers from across the country
- Partnerships with other organizations to bring you no-cost resources at your fingertips
- Legal updates and alerts regarding matters that affect your bottom line
- And much more!

One of the many perks of being an AAHOA Member is access to exclusive deals and discounts throughout the year. Don't see what you're looking for? Email the AAHOA membership team at info@aahoa.com or call 404-816-5759. ■

AAHOA's advocacy momentum is stronger than ever

by EVELYN HOOVER

For the benefit of

all

THE VOICE OF AMERICA'S HOTEL OWNERS was heard loud and clear this fall when 100+ hoteliers from all over the country attended AAHOA's Fall National Advocacy Conference (FNAC). In one day, hoteliers met with 118 offices in the Senate and House of Representatives to discuss legislation that can tremendously help AAHOA's nearly 20,000 members and the industry at large thrive. In total, AAHOA Members had direct contact with 54 members of Congress in just one day! Following the productive day on the Hill, AAHOA hosted a reception for attendees and members at the Capitol Hill Club, drawing more than 30 members of Congress and their staff.

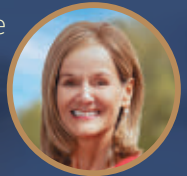
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What are they saying about AAHOA's Fall National Advocacy Conference?



“AAHOA has long understood the importance and significance of advocacy work at the state, local, and federal levels,” said **AAHOA Chairman Neal Patel**. “Having our voices heard on issues that are important to our members protects and promotes the rights of hotel owners and entrepreneurs in America.”



“From Fair Franchising to the Small Business Administration, providing lawmakers with personal, real-life stories, puts a name and a face to the American hotelier,” said **AAHOA President & CEO Laura Lee Blake**. “The next time these elected officials go to make decisions, they will remember us – the foundations we are laying in these meetings are critical to our advocacy work going forward.”



“The truth is that we don’t get any real change in this country without advocacy work from real people out in the communities. Otherwise, it just doesn’t happen,” said **Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky (D-IL)**. “With your calls and visits to members of Congress, we can get this done. What is good for you is good for your workers, and is good for your consumers as well.”



“I’m proud of the fact that AAHOA Members own almost 50% of the hotels in my state. You’re all the greatest small business owners in America. You are the backbone of our country,” said **Congressman Tom Emmer (R-MN)**.



“You are responsible for many employees, their livelihoods, and providing wonderful hospitality for people,” said **Congresswoman Carol Miller (R-WV)**. “I want to thank you so much for what you do and how you do it. My door is always open.”





Why it matters

Advocacy efforts have long-lasting effects on the industry and for generations to come. During this one-day advocacy event, AAHOA Members intentionally urged Congress to support four key issues:

- Promote access to capital by increasing SBA loan caps/limits and transparency
- Provide assistance with critical labor shortages: A new H2-C visa program and expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)
- Ensure fairness in franchising with a private right of action to address wrongful and material disclosure violations
- Provide financial relief for hard-hit hoteliers: Forgive Economic Injury Disaster Loans, waive interest, and/or defer for an additional year



Whether you're a first- or third-generation hotel owner, a franchisee working with large hotel chains, or an independent hotelier, these four issues bring solutions for our members front and center. Solutions that can uptick employment rates, profitability, state and local tax contributions, and business sustainability.

CONGRESS AND BEYOND

AAHOA didn't just make an advocacy splash in the hallways and offices of the Senate and House of Representatives. It also met with Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Commissioner Alvaro Bedoya and FTC staff involved with oversight of franchising, including Consumer Protection Bureau Director Sam Levine. The meeting covered several issues important in the industry, including the many unfair practices in franchising and the FTC's Franchise Rule.

The Fall National Advocacy Conference proved that AAHOA's advocacy momentum is stronger than ever. ■



To read the full version of this article, with additional observations from those on the front lines of AAHOA's advocacy efforts, scan the QR code below.



Protect yourself

Part 2 – Combatting the rise of wage–and–hour lawsuits

by ANKIT H. BHAKTA

This is the conclusion to this two-part series on this topic. Look for the first half in the October 2022 issue.

ON THE SUBJECT OF WAGE-AND-HOUR LAWSUITS, IN THE FIRST INSTALLMENT OF THIS TWO-PART LOOK at this topic, we talked about common pitfalls employers often encounter with regards to employee misclassification, failing to properly pay minimum/overtime wages, and failing to adhere to additional state law requirements. With the most-common liabilities out of the way, we now turn our attention to steps hoteliers can take to protect themselves from exposure to wage-and-hour lawsuits.

BEST PRACTICES TO MINIMIZE EXPOSURE

Hire a legal professional to create and regularly update your written employment policies, to ensure your policies are compliant on their face. These policies should be given to employees upon onboarding (with reminders as necessary), with acknowledgment pages for signature to document receipt and review. Have the policies translated into the employee’s native language for heightened protection. These employment policies are the first line of defense against wage-and-hour lawsuits.

Ensure supervisors and managers are properly trained regarding your written employment policies to confirm the policies are actually put into practice and items are being documented properly.

Consider using arbitration agreements with class and collective action waivers. Although some states have been pushing back on such measures, recent favorable rulings on the federal level have resulted in continued enforceability. In fact, after California’s employee-friendly Private Attorneys General Act (PAGA) survived challenge after challenge from employers across the state, employers secured an important win (for now) when the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Viking River Cruises, Inc. v. Moriana*, held that the Federal Arbitration Act requires the enforcement of an arbitration agreement that waives an employee’s right to bring individual claims through PAGA. The Court further



Attention and resources directed toward the foregoing recommendations naturally take away from other aspects of your business, but – with wage-and-hour claims on the rise, coupled with the devastating consequences that typically follow – an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

held that once the individual claims are sent to arbitration, there is no standing to bring representative claims for violations of the California Labor Code on behalf of other allegedly aggrieved employees under PAGA. There are pros and cons when it comes to arbitration agreements, and you should speak with an attorney to find out if one is right for your business. On balance, however, most employers would be prudent to adopt the measure.

4 **Have employees timely record, review, and sign off on their hours worked each pay period**, with additional attestations as needed for state and local law requirements. Supervisors and managers should also devote time to regularly monitor and review employee timecards to ensure compliance with wage-and-hour requirements. For larger employers (given the cost involved), employers should also consider hiring an expert to conduct periodic internal audits of wage-and-hour records to ensure compliance.

5 **Consult an attorney** any time you want to change an employment policy or practice or want to reward employees. Employers with good intentions often land in hot water when such changes are not properly implemented.

Attention and resources directed toward the foregoing recommendations naturally take away from other aspects of your business, but – with wage-and-hour claims on the rise, coupled with the devastating consequences that typically follow – an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. ■



Ankit H. Bhakta, Esq., is an attorney at Bhakta Law Firm, representing clients in federal and state courts in California in all phases of litigation. He also represents and advises employers on all aspects of compliance with federal and state employment laws and regulations including litigation prevention, wage/hour issues, labor relations, employment agreements, discrimination and harassment laws, and wrongful termination. He can be reached at ankit.bhakta@bhaktalawfirm.com.

Shoot your shot

Managing the capital markets' inflation playbook

by RUSHI SHAH

INFLATION CONTINUES TO BE THE talk of the town, especially within interest-rate-sensitive industries like hospitality and commercial real estate. Today's environment, however, looks very different than what we've seen during the past 15 years. In fact, it's only the second time we've seen such conditions since WWII. Because interest rates drive capital markets, investors' room for error diminishes when rates go up. These rate increases also impact capital allocators' returns on both debt and equity. As a result, no capital participant is immune from the effects of rising interest rates, including construction lenders, credit unions, debt funds relying on a warehouse line of credit, small local or regional banks working with the Federal Reserve discount window, or life insurance companies beholden to deliver higher investor returns. Bottom line, rate increases are a systemic change that reverberates throughout the entire market. With a mass of CMBS and bank loans maturing in the next 12 to 18 months, understanding the changing options and having a subject matter expert by your side is critical for success.

LONG-TERM FIXED RATE LOANS

Because long-term rates are lower than short-term rates due to the inverted yield curve, many owners are refinancing their stabilized asset's floating rate bank loans to 10-year fixed rate loans with life companies and CMBS lenders, while also removing recourse. This strategy is prudent

for large portfolios of assets that have withstood the pandemic, renewed their demand drivers, and have strong trailing 12-month cashflows. Their owners take advantage of a short window where cap rates are lower than what they may be in the future. This offers a decent portfolio valuation and borrowers can take cash out and recapitalize most, if not all, of their equity while still holding onto the assets. Owners also may benefit from a potential bump in revenue, as well value that might result due to inflation.

Owners can use this strategy to garner almost infinite return on their equity, as most of their investment is cashed out. The dry powder yielded from these cash outs can ignite exponential growth in case of an economic slowdown or market distress.

Yes, CMBS loans can be onerous and less flexible. They are best used by institutional grade sponsors who have robust reporting and can pay their debt on time. Recent tweaks based on lessons learned during the pandemic, however, have brought more clarity and responsiveness to the servicing process.

LOWER PRICED FIVE-YEAR CMBS LOAN

Select CMBS shops are rolling out a new fixed-rate loan program focused solely on five-year CMBS paper. The five-year loans are only gathered with other five-year loans, eliminating the need for a premium. At the time of writing, these loans were at 0.75% lower spread than a

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With a mass of CMBS and bank loans maturing in the next 12 to 18 months, understanding the changing options and having a subject matter expert by your side is critical for success.”

comparable five-year CMBS loan. A lower spread combined with a lower five-year SOFR index results keeps rates for these loans relatively low, and is more palatable for owners looking to acquire or refinance stabilized properties.

FLOATING-RATE LOANS

Floating-rate loans typically are interest-only with a two- to three-year term and used to finance transitional assets that haven't achieved stabilization. These loans can offer slightly higher leverage on the front end (up to 75% of total cost of value) and can be used to pay off higher priced mezzanine debt or preferred equity, or to reduce the amount of equity needed when acquiring assets. Lately, however, owners and investors are looking to floating-rate loans to ride out the storm that continues to cloud the markets. Because the loans typically require only a 12-month minimum interest period, a borrower could refinance the

loan after the first year without penalty. Those who believe higher interest rates are temporary and will be followed by an era of lower interest rates can use a floating-rate loan to bridge the time between hyper-inflation and a recession. ■



Rushi Shah is Principal and CEO of the commercial mortgage and real estate investment banking firm and AAHOA Allied Member Mag Mile Capital. As a leader in hospitality financing, Shah specializes in structuring and placing high leverage, nonrecourse bridge and permanent debt with cash out for full- and limited-service hotels nationwide. Since joining the firm's predecessor, Aries Capital, in 2015, Shah has structured and closed hundreds of millions in financing for all property types. Shah has held previous positions at Northern Trust and has an MBA from the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business.

AAHOA, the independent hotelier, and the benefits of working together

by RAVI B. PATEL

Going UP



AMANDA CARDEN/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

SIMPLY BY VIRTUE OF maintaining an AAHOA membership, independent hoteliers have the ability to acquire extensive industry knowledge while making invaluable connections with fellow independent hoteliers along the way. For all the different corners of the industry AAHOA represents, it's possible the independents are the ones best served by maintaining a membership in the association. After all, there's strength in numbers, and we can accomplish more together than we can alone, even if our preferred business model has us flying solo much of the time.

Ultimately, many hands make light work, and there's a reason why there are so many independent hoteliers among the AAHOA ranks. Creating and nurturing relationships with vendors, legislators, and fellow hoteliers are vital to long-term success because none of us operate in a vacuum, whether we own one property or 20.

Much like a rugby team working in unison to advance the ball down the field despite an overwhelming and determined opposition force, AAHOA's leadership is united with members in achieving a common goal, while making a unified run toward success that's clearer than ever based on the relationships built at events, Town Halls, Regionals, community gatherings, and AAHOACON.

THE PURPOSEFUL PIVOT

Within the past year, AAHOA has shifted priorities a bit to focus more on advocacy issues at the national, state, and local levels, and this is already proving

to be a prudent adjustment based on what seems to be a growing number of national news outlets seeking AAHOA feedback on industry issues.

But, advocacy has served as a key component of AAHOA's agenda year in and year out, and being connected to that creates a value-added benefit for any independent hotelier. Relationships with other hoteliers and vendors are a huge plus, but harmful laws often create the most industry distress.

Staying abreast of key legislation – proposed, passed, rejected, etc. – is a huge part of what AAHOA does. For example, approximately 100 Ambassadors and Regional Directors recently traveled to Washington, D.C., in a concerted effort to reach politicians and educate them on the individualized and specialized needs of the hospitality industry. In today's world, government representatives want to hear real-life stories, not theoretical scenarios and what ifs. Having a direct line of communication to your local representative is worth the value of the membership alone.

CONNECTION COUNTS

While all the brands have lobbyists, communications departments, and PR teams at their beck and call, they always will seek to protect the brand first, which is perfectly understandable. Conversely, as hoteliers, our priority is to protect our properties, but independents, especially, don't have a similar trove of resources and must get creative, which is a key reason why the value proposition AAHOA brings to the table should be irresistible for non-brand-affiliated properties.

Sure, many of those same brand resources trickle down and benefit the franchisees, especially when it comes to vendor relationships, which are a key factor in growing any business. Since the moment the association came into existence, vendor relations have played a key role in the growth of individual businesses seeking to provide great service to customers. It can be difficult for independents to adequately source trustworthy and reliable vendors on their own, but building those relationships at AAHOA – and knowing a large number of members also give that vendor a stamp of approval via their ongoing business – is crucial to finding the best vendor for a job. Would you rather work with someone based on one recommendation or thousands? Don't forget, AAHOA Members own 60% of all hotels nationwide.

Even the best-connected independent hotelier can feel isolated from the political process without the heft of an organization behind him or her. With AAHOA Members representing close to 2/3 of the country's properties, government representatives are more accessible and, thus, aware of the industry's needs with regards to legislation.

Sure, this is all great news, but the bigger story is that it's not all that difficult to put a price on connections and access like this. All it requires is an AAHOA membership. ■



Ravi B. Patel is an AAHOA Member serving as the 2022 Independent Hotelier Committee Chair, leading strategic industry partnerships for AAHOA Platinum Industry Partner Bookit N Go.

OVERSEAS expertise

AAHOA Lifetime Members Rick Patel and Jai Patel train the Taj Mahal Palace hotel staff

by EVELYN HOOVER



The employee training session with The Taj Mahal Palace hotel staff.



AAHOA Lifetime Members Rick Patel and Jai Patel's employee training session covered all aspects of running a hotel business.

WITH MORE THAN A century of history behind it, The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel in Mumbai, India, is more than a hotel. It's an eclectic architectural marvel offering majestic views of the Arabian Sea and the Gateway of India. Known colloquially as The Taj, this significant landmark is embedded in the history of Mumbai. Since opening its doors in 1903, this legendary hotel has hosted prominent figures from the world over. Today, it has more than 500 rooms and is a popular must-see location on many people's bucket lists.

A property this storied has seen every twist and turn the industry has offered, but two AAHOA Lifetime Members recently got the privilege of working with The Taj's management team to implement some adjustments to front-desk, housekeeping, and restaurant processes.

OPERATION: TAJ MAHAL IMPROVEMENT

This past Spring, AAHOA Lifetime Members Rick Patel and Jai Patel traveled to Mumbai and booked two weeks at The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, staying at the renowned hotel for the first time.

During their two-week stay, the Patels took in every detail, including the timeless

architecture, impressive history, grand design and colors, lavish furniture, welcoming locals, awestruck tourists, and so much more.

As hoteliers with two-plus decades of industry experience, the Patels couldn't help but notice how The Taj ran its housekeeping, front desk service, operations, and management. During the visit, though, they were quite surprised to find operational gaps, despite The Taj's rating as a five-star luxury hotel.

"There were things that they were doing well. But I did notice a few areas that could be improved," Jai Patel said. "Some of the tiles in the room and the bathroom needed replacing. Some tiles had cracks,

and the glass doors needed wiping down. I also saw pink on the grout, and all hoteliers know that's bacteria. Much of this could've been solved with extra attention to detail and fine-tuning the housekeeping process."

Leaning into his decades-long hotel ownership

““

The Patels immediately saw the opportunity to help, so this hotel, which means so much to India, and travelers worldwide, could continue to deliver unforgettable experiences.”





The Taj Mahal Palace hotel staff enjoyed a nearly two-hour training session.



The Taj Mahal Palace hotel staff listened attentively to opportunities to improve the guest experience.



AAHOA Lifetime Members Rick Patel and Jai Patel held a successful Q&A session at the end of the training.

experience, Rick Patel noticed operational management issues at the property.

“There were too many layers of management, which is a big issue. For example, the front desk would have a front-desk assistant manager, general manager, executive manager, and senior executive manager,” Rick Patel explained. “There were about

four to five layers of management for each department, creating a communication problem and taking away from the goal of serving the hotel guests and taking care of the hotel.”

The Patels immediately saw the opportunity to help, so this hotel, which means so much to India, and travelers worldwide,

could continue to deliver unforgettable experiences.

HEARING THE FEEDBACK LOUD AND CLEAR

During the trip, the Patels found an opportunity to take their observations and feedback to The Taj staff.

“We met one of the night managers at the front desk one night, and we sat down with him in the lobby for more than an hour and a half and discussed what was right and what needed improvement,” Rick Patel shared. “The night manager listened and took his time with us.”

The Taj’s executive team heard the feedback loud and clear and invited the Patels to a board meeting with the housekeeping executive manager and front-desk manager.

The feedback was well-received, and the executive team invited the Patels to lead an employee training session before the couple returned to the U.S. The couple was honored to use the last few days at the legendary property to equip and empower The Taj staff.

EQUIPPING AND EMPOWERING

The employee training session with The Taj’s management, restaurant, housekeeping, and front-desk teams was only supposed to last 30 minutes.

With so much ground to cover, the 30-minute training lasted nearly two hours.

“We enjoyed it,” Rick Patel said. “A lot of the employees asked a lot of questions. They learned a lot about hotel management, front desk, housekeeping, and all aspects of running a hotel business. We also held a Q&A session at the end of the training. The employees opened up and became like family to us.”

The training showcased the couple’s generosity and willingness to help the industry thrive in the U.S. and around the world.

With the training completed, the Patels offered to share their expertise with The Taj’s team members again in the future and returned home, ready to get back to the day-to-day business of operating their own hotels. ■

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Breaking free

Helping hotel owners stop human trafficking

by KATIE AMODEI

IN TODAY'S HOSPITALITY ENVIRONMENT, IT SHOULD BE A FOUNDATIONAL STRATEGY TO FOCUS ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING prevention across the industry. After all, traffickers often attempt to use hotels to commit the exploitation of vulnerable people. Unhindered, this can put a hotel in legal jeopardy, while creating reputational risks, business disruptions, negative financial implications, and – most importantly – ethical risks, since human trafficking is such a serious human rights issue.

There's no doubt that hoteliers don't want their businesses to be abused by traffickers or the safety of their guests to be jeopardized. That's why AAHOA is continuing its partnership with the nonprofit Businesses Ending Slavery and Trafficking (BEST) to help keep members informed on how to recognize and respond to potential human trafficking situations.

This partnership is helping hotel and motel owners get the most from their AAHOA Member benefits by offering a free video-based human trafficking prevention training for all lodging facility staff and managers.

BACK TO BASICS

BEST was founded 10 years ago and is the first nonprofit organization in the country dedicated entirely to working with businesses to disrupt human trafficking. BEST strives to help hoteliers learn how to prevent, detect, and report suspected human trafficking activity to keep children and vulnerable people safe from human trafficking, and to protect hotels from being a venue where traffickers can conduct their abuse and exploitation.

The hospitality industry is vulnerable to human traffickers, especially when it comes to child commercial sexual exploitation and forced sex trafficking. BEST created the Inhospitable to Human Trafficking training, sponsored by AAHOA, specifically for the hospitality industry.

The employee training takes 30-minutes, is available in English or Spanish, and can be delivered to staff as a group training or taken individually on a computer. This free, video-based training clearly shows why hotels are vulnerable to human trafficking, and examines steps to identify the critical intervention points where signs of trafficking can be spotted. Other key takeaways for staff include the difference between sex trafficking and labor trafficking, the definition of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, and how to spot the indicators of human trafficking.

BEST also created a special section of the training that's just for managers and owners to help hotel executives learn how to appropriately respond when a team member reports a suspected human trafficking situation. The manager training

module includes information on how to safely report human trafficking in a way that helps protect victims, staff, and other guests.

SEE SOMETHING. SAY SOMETHING.

An increasing number of states have passed laws requiring lodging facilities to display signage that brings awareness to the problem of human trafficking, which includes posting the National Human Trafficking Hotline number to report suspicious activity or connect victims with trauma-informed care and services. Similarly, several states have enacted legislation requiring lodging facilities to train employees to recognize and respond to the signs of human trafficking. BEST's Inhospitable to Human Trafficking Training, Sponsored by AAHOA, has been certified to meet training requirements in most of the states that mandate training. At the end of the training, employees receive a certificate of completion as proof of training. This helps hotel managers track their staff's training compliance in states that require hotels to keep documentation.



The hospitality industry is vulnerable to human traffickers, especially when it comes to child commercial sexual exploitation and forced sex trafficking. BEST created the Inhospitable to Human Trafficking Training, Sponsored by AAHOA, specifically for the hospitality industry.”

During just the past year, BEST has been able to train thousands of hotel employees to be able to spot and report suspected human trafficking incidents. In a recent study, researchers from Arizona State University evaluated the training, surveying hospitality workers before and after taking the training. Before training, 22% of respondents said they had high or very high knowledge on how to recognize sex trafficking in hotels. After completing the training, reports of high or very high knowledge increased to 83% of respondents. Additionally, 97% of the employees surveyed said the training will positively impact their ability to prevent human trafficking in their hotels. ■



Katie Amodei is the public relations and grants manager for the Seattle-based nonprofit, Businesses Ending Slavery and Trafficking. Their goal is to inspire more

employers to make a difference in the fight against human trafficking through awareness raising, consultation, training, and providing employment opportunities for survivors.

To take the free Inhospitable to Human Trafficking Training, Sponsored by AAHOA, visit the **Advocacy** tab on AAHOA’s website, and select **Human Trafficking Prevention** to take advantage of this valuable member benefit.

Hit the ground

RUNNING

Understanding SBA financing to help your business get up to speed

by ANNA SWARTZ-LOPEZ

THE SMALL BUSINESS Administration (SBA) is a federal agency dedicated to providing small businesses with support and resources, helping to provide funding important to the aspiring hotel owner. While the SBA itself does not lend any money, they provide certain guarantees to lenders who provide funds to small businesses in accordance with strict guidelines. The following isn't exhaustive but is meant to provide insight into the process.

The SBA's loan programs exist to provide funds for small businesses that wouldn't otherwise be able to find financing. Anyone hoping to use SBA financing to secure a hotel must understand the SBA's "credit not available elsewhere" requirement. Basically, the borrower's net worth and income have to be small enough that the SBA believes that borrower wouldn't readily find financing through alternative means.

Specifically, the borrower's net worth is not to exceed \$15 million, and the average two full fiscal year net income is not to exceed \$5 million. If a group of investors come together to purchase a hotel, the same rule applies. Occasionally, when borrowers with some assets combine their

resources to acquire a hotel, those combined resources can exceed the "credit not available elsewhere" test. This in itself may result in disqualification for an SBA loan and force a borrower to seek more conventional financing. It's important to work with a lender or mortgage banker with SBA-program experience, as that person will help the borrower navigate the very specific requirements for SBA loans.

KNOW YOUR ROLE

The next thing to know about SBA loans is that personal guarantees will be required for all owners with a 20% or more share. This personal guarantee means that if the investment falls apart – like, say, a global pandemic shuts down the hotel – the borrower remains personally liable for the loan payments. Legally, the lender can collect the value due from the personal property of the borrower.

There are limitations to this and, as the pandemic made clear, many lenders don't want to foreclose on loans and would prefer to make alternative arrangements with their borrowers. However, the purpose of this article is to educate the novice investor as to certain fundamentals of SBA loan programs. It's better to know these things going in than to find out after the fact.

Next, it's important to understand the basic parameters of the SBA 504 loan program, the most common form of hotel financing. Every 504 loan has two lenders holding separate pieces of the loan. Certified development companies (CDC) are nonprofit corporations certified and regulated by the SBA to package, process, close, and service 504 loans. The only thing CDCs do is issue debt on 504 loans. They typically fund 40% of the loan. The SBA sets the interest rate that CDCs charge as CDCs have no discretionary control over the interest rate.

The CDC portion of the loan will have a long-term fixed rate. The interest rate may differ slightly based on how long of a fixed term the borrowers get for that 40% portion of the loan. Because the term is typically fixed for a longer period, the CDC portion will also have a pretty steep prepayment penalty.

BREAK IT DOWN

SBA loans are attractive to borrowers mainly because of the low down-payment requirements – potentially as low as 10%, but that may be slightly higher for a hotel loan. With 40% from a CDC and 10% from a borrower, that leaves 50% of the financing to a bank in most situations, but there

are exceptions. The lender considers their exposure limited on an SBA loan, as they're financing a smaller portion of the loan. The lender will offer a shorter term for their part of the loan and the interest rate may be fixed or adjustable.

There will be some additional fees with every SBA transaction, and it helps to know what to expect. If using the services of a mortgage banker, there will be a fee. The CDC will be charging a processing fee, and the lender may charge certain fees, such as an underwriting fee, or a commitment fee. Much of these likely will be rolled into the loan amount and paid during the life of the loan.

Additional fees to expect include an appraisal report, environmental reports, title and escrow, and attorney fees. Third-party reports are paid outside of the loan, and funds typically will be collected for these purposes at the time of loan application. Sometimes borrowers try to save funds by using previously completed third-party reports, but lenders typically require the reports to have been completed within the last six months of the transaction.

There are a lot of moving pieces with any commercial real estate loan, and with SBA loans in particular. It helps to have a guide to navigate the process. The services of a reputable mortgage banking firm can transform

a difficult and complex process into a simple and easy one. Whether a borrower chooses to utilize a mortgage banker or go it alone, it's important to understand the basic outlines of the SBA 504 program. ■



Anna Swartz-Lopez is a commercial mortgage banker with Slatt Capital, providing customized debt solutions across the country. She's a California native who spent

years living outside the state, including in such diverse places as Incheon, South Korea, and Moriarty, New Mexico. She can be reached at aswartz-lopez@slatt.com or (925) 478-2271.



This article is part of an ongoing series designed to walk those newer to the industry through ground-level finance basics.

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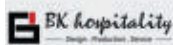
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AAHOA MEMBERS IN ACTION



AAHOA team, Members, and Industry Partners attended the Southeast Charity Golf Tournament, raising nearly \$70,000 for five local charities.



Women hoteliers enjoyed the Upper Midwest Regional Conference & Trade Show, filled with 30 exhibitors and industry leaders.



Four Southeast Charity Golf Tournament players had an incredible day of golf at the Château Élan Golf Club in Braselton, GA.



[L -R] AAHOA Chairman Neal Patel, Secretary Kamalesh (KP) Patel, Choice Hotels International Regional Vice President of Franchise Development Shweta Jani, Mid-Atlantic Regional Director Mahendra (MZ) Patel, Choice Hotels Regional Vice President, Franchise Development, Foundation Brands Cliff Wietstruk, Vice Chairman Bharat Patel, and Past Chair (2021-22) Vinay Patel at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Conference & Trade Show in Cherry Hill, NJ.



AAHOA Treasurer Miraj Patel with empowered women hoteliers at the Mid Atlantic Regional Conference & Trade Show who continue to take an active role in the industry.



AAHOA leadership welcomed G6 Hospitality Developer and friend of AAHOA Kevin Marlin (second from right) to the Mid Atlantic Regional Conference & Trade Show.



[L-R] AAHOA Lifetime Member Danny Gaekwad, Director At Large Eastern Division Pinal Patel, South Carolina Regional Director Fenil Desai, Rosen Hotels & Resorts President and COO Harris Rosen, and AAHOA Treasurer Miraj Patel met during recent site tours for AAHOACON24 in Orlando, FL. It was a unique experience as Miraj Patel pinned Mr. Rosen to become an AAHOA Lifetime Member.



Members in the Central Midwest Region attended a private reception supporting Congressman Markwayne Mullin's U.S. Senate Campaign. Congressman Mullin is a hospitality advocate!



AAHOA Members in the Central Midwest Region attended a private reception supporting Congressman Markwayne Mullin's U.S. Senate Campaign. Congressman Mullin is a hospitality advocate!



Congresswoman Beth Van Duyne (first row, center), a friend of AAHOA, showed her support for the industry at the North Texas Regional Conference & Trade Show.

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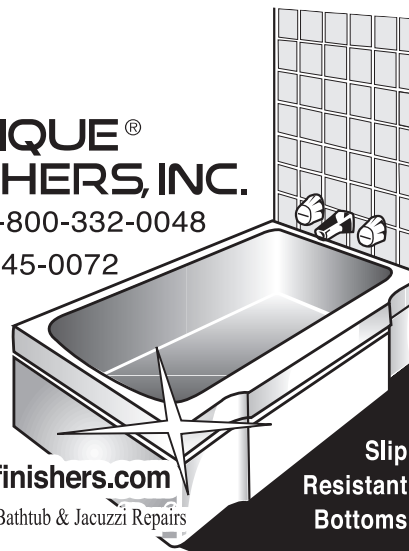
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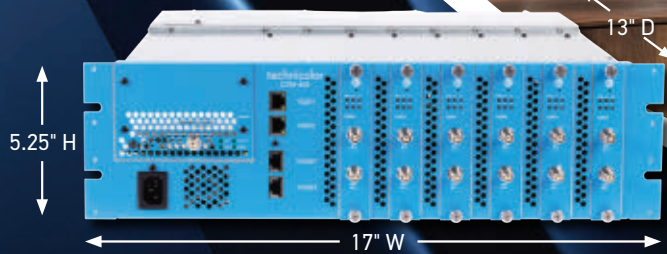
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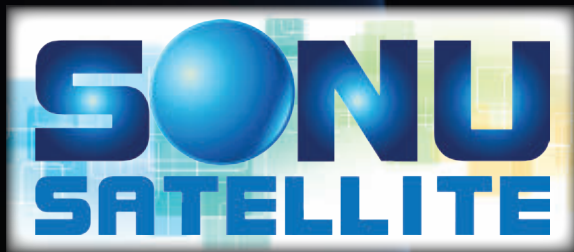
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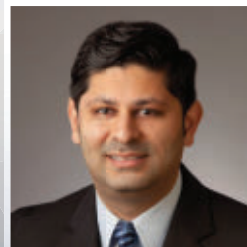


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