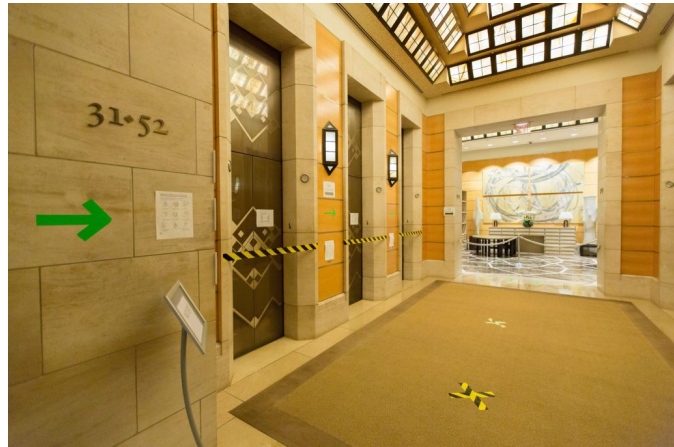


Skift.

Coronavirus and Hospitality

Sanitizer Over Room Service: Luxury Hotels Pivot to Healthcare During Coronavirus

Cameron Sperance, Skift - Apr 17, 2020 4:00 pm



Skift Take

Empty hotels are getting put to use for medical staff during the coronavirus pandemic, but it will be just as tough restoring these properties as it was to prepare them for emergency service providers.

— Cameron Sperance

Hoteliers are transforming their properties into temporary healthcare facilities and self-isolation wards during the coronavirus pandemic. But it isn't easy dropping five-star service for a new normal.

As coronavirus exploded over the first quarter of 2020, global hotel room occupancies plummeted. Operators temporarily closed properties due to the dwindling revenue, and companies like Hilton and Marriott have both indicated more closures are likely until the crisis stabilizes. But some hotel owners are keeping the lights on by handing over properties for emergency uses like housing frontline healthcare staff. It is an arduous but increasingly necessary transformation going from the business of thousand-dollar suites to health aid.

"We worked out every product and procedure we had to turn this into a utilitarian

operation,” said Four Seasons Hotel New York General Manager Rudy Tauscher. “We’re a very service-oriented hotel, and we needed to move away from that and all guest interaction.”

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The Four Seasons Hotel New York’s owner, Ty Warner, responded in late March to New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s call to action. Cuomo turned to the private sector to help reduce the supply constraint the state, a coronavirus hotspot, had in safely housing frontline medical staff. Warner volunteered his hotel to house doctors and nurses working shifts at nearby hospitals. The hotel team worked with Dr. Robert Quigley, senior vice president and regional medical director at medical and travel security services firm International SOS, to transform the luxury property into temporary quarters for healthcare providers.

“We spent a lot of our first day having town halls and educating staff,” Quigley said. “We stripped down the hotel as you’d know it and created different zones in the hotel to allow the employees to continue to operate and work and mitigate the likelihood they’d be exposed.”

Tauscher, Quigley, and their respective staff spent about five days training employees and reconfiguring the hotel in order to start accepting its first nurses and doctors on April 2. The team repeatedly walked the hotel to learn how to combine the typical workflow of a Four Seasons staffer with proper safety precautions and coronavirus social distancing guidelines. The walkthroughs resulted in a 65-page document on how to repurpose the hotel, Quigley said.

There is now only one point of entry for the hotel, and arriving guests have to space six feet apart even outside while nurses at a temporary front desk process medical personnel individually. Incoming guests have their temperature taken and are asked about any potential coronavirus symptoms. If they show no signs of illness, they are handed a key card in



The temporary check-in desk at the Four Seasons Hotel New York City.

an envelope and can proceed to an elevator – which only handle a single guest at a time – and directly to their room.

Should a guest have a fever or show other signs of illness, they are quarantined in a red zone, where they are looked after until they can be transferred to a different care center.

“Rudy and the Four Seasons team made it clear they would not jeopardize the health of any employee,” Quigley said. “There was some pressure from the state to open up, and we wanted to help as quickly as possible, but we were not going to cut any corners.”

SERVICE AND SOCIAL DISTANCING

Safety and health procedures at the Four Seasons extend beyond screening and self-isolation.

While about 100 of the hotel’s normal 280-person staff is currently working, Tauscher said there is little to no guest interaction and they are prohibited from entering an occupied hotel room. Decorative linens and bathrobes have been removed, in-room safes closed (security wouldn’t be allowed inside a room if a guest forgot their code), and minibars emptied to reduce potential touch points.

Room service and other food and beverage services are suspended, but guests can pick up boxed meals. Guests place used linens in a biodegradable bag outside their door, and staff members wash laundry in the bags, which dissolve in the machines.

Once a guest checks out, the room has to be empty for 48 hours before a third-party clean-up crew arrives to do a deep clean, Tauscher said. The regular housekeeping team then services the room. Operators guarantee at least a 72-hour gap between guests in a single room. Boutique stores in the lobby have been emptied, artwork draped, and signs covered – all to avoid even the smallest chance of someone stopping to look at something and interacting with someone else.



“We don’t want any point where people stop to admire something, and then others stop and engage in conversation,” Tauscher said. “We deliberately broke down every point that could narrow down that six to

A sign reminds guests to the Four Seasons Hotel New York City to maintain at least a six-foot distance between others.

eight-foot distance. Everyone here moves to the elevator and up to their room.”

Establishing stringent social distancing measures is one thing but eliminating the Four Seasons mindset is another.

“Service is in our DNA. There was a long discussion on whether we could serve coffee. That was a no. We normally never say no,” Tauscher said. “Dr. Quigley said this is not what we’re doing right now. If a guest called for something, we’d rush out and get it for them, even in the middle of the night. But we have to approach this differently.”

THE HOTEL INDUSTRY’S NEW PURPOSE

The Four Seasons transformation comes as hotels across the country look to offer their services during the coronavirus crisis.

More than 16,000 hotels have signed up for the American Hotel & Lodging Association’s Hospitality for Hope program, which connects hoteliers with the public sector on potential emergency health uses. Hilton and Marriott have both offered rooms to frontline medical staff to use between shifts. Architecture firm HKS has even released a study outlining various concepts to transform hotels into hospitals to relieve pressure from healthcare facilities operating above capacity during the crisis.

“We had never contemplated reopening until various government authorities said so and when we could see travel coming back,” Chicago-based Hickory Street Capital Senior Vice President Eric Nordness said. “When this came onto our radar, it seemed like the obvious thing to do right away was to offer rooms to healthcare workers sacrificing themselves to help the community now.”

Hickory Street Capital owns the 173-room Hotel Zachary next to Wrigley Field. The real estate company had temporarily closed the hotel, but it has since reopened to frontline medical staff working at the nearby Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center. After taking a week to work with its management company, Davidson Hotels & Resorts, Marriott International – the hotel is part of Marriott’s Tribute Portfolio Hotel brand – and Advocate Health Care, the Hotel Zachary team was ready to welcome its first healthcare providers, free of charge.

The AHLA is providing lease templates for hoteliers to garner some level of income from government agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot estimated the city was spending about \$1 million a hotel on various plans to shelter healthcare workers or residents looking to self-isolate with mild cases of coronavirus. But the Four Seasons and Hotel Zachary are both working directly with local hospitals to provide complimentary lodging.

“Advocate just needs to provide us with the room request, we make up a key, a team member who is socially distanced at the front desk does an ID check, and the healthcare workers goes to their room,” Nordness said.

About half of the Chicago hotel has been set aside for the healthcare workers. On the first day of operations in Manhattan, Tauscher said the Four Seasons took 1,400 calls from people looking for rooms. But due to precautionary measures to keep guests and employees safe, the hotel aims to only have between 170 and 180 rooms occupied at a time.

Based on conversations with Advocate Health Care and projections on when the Masonic Medical Center will reach its peak in treatments, the Hotel Zachary is slated to continue serving medical staff through the end of April. In New York, the Four Seasons doesn't have a timeline on its current operation and when it might revert back to its five-star normalcy.

“We will see how we determine going forward on if we go one month, two months, or whenever,” Tauscher said. “There's a lot of internal discussion.”

But even with the Four Seasons' new — albeit temporary — purpose, its typical service level still manages to occasionally peak through.

“A doctor sent us a note the other day, thanking us profusely. He somehow got an espresso machine, so somebody must have snuck up and left one at his door,” Tauscher said with a laugh.

Tags: ahla, coronavirus, four seasons, hilton, marriott

Photo Credit: The Four Seasons Hotel New York City is among the growing list of luxury hotels to reopen during the coronavirus crisis to frontline medical staff. Four Seasons Hotel New York City