

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Editorial: WICO Recounts Its Response To Labor Day Carnival Liberty Engine Room Fire

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ST. THOMAS -- This past Labor Day, the West Indian Company, Ltd.'s rapid response plan was put to the test when fire broke out just before noon on board the Carnival Liberty.

Immediately, all available hands were on deck from every division. Staff curtailed their holiday and reported to work. A group of dedicated men and women managed a four-day long emergency while maintaining normal business operations. Level heads, high spirits and a seemingly endless supply of energy in spite of long, stressful - and yes, - often frustrating days prevailed.

The Carnival *Liberty* fire was minor compared to the 1979 *Angelina Lauro* inferno, but the priorities are the same: 1) response to the initial emergency 2) the condition of the ship, 3) immediate needs of the passengers, 4) passenger follow up and 5) day to day operations.

Although the ship's fire suppression system extinguished the fire almost immediately, the Virgin Islands Fire Department was on site to assist if needed.

The U.S. Coastguard Marine Safety Team and the ship's crew handled the follow up investigation into the cause of the fire and assessment of the ship's seaworthiness.

Fortunately, the fire was limited to the engine room. Passengers were allowed back on board after all operating systems were confirmed functional.

However, it was critical that all involved assessed the ship's ability to either continue the seven-day itinerary or return to Puerto Rico on its own power without compromising passenger comfort and safety. Responding agencies were provided with a conference room for an EOC, equipment staging areas and designated avenues of approach for responder vehicles.

September is one of the slowest months of the summer season, so attending to the needs of a disabled ship while accommodating arriving ships wasn't as critical a matter as it could have been during high season. Ships arriving on Tuesday and Wednesday were accommodated at the WICO dock without incident. It was business as usual.

WICO focused on the immediate welfare of the evacuees by identifying and directing them to designated mustering and containment areas where shelter, food and water could be delivered. Handling passenger needs and follow up required an all out community response.

Medicine, money, food, water, bathrooms, ice, transportation, comfort and, most of all, information were needed in vast quantities.

WICO was especially fortunate to receive generous cooperation and support from government agencies and the business community. The merchants of Havensight Mall, with no guarantee of sales, remained open later than usual.

Businesses delivered an abundant supply of food, water, ice and positive vibes to share with stranded guests. There was a visible presence of first responders which was most appreciated.

In addition, supporting elements such as sewage, waste water and dry garbage removal services required sustained access for the duration of the emergency.

Local media played a vital role in keeping the public informed about what was happening on our dock. WICO provided updates as often as we could when we had something meaningful to say. Our dock remained open, and the media had access to passengers and other officials.

For the most part, passengers remained in good spirits. One saving grace: the ship was in port and not out to sea when the incident occurred. People were able to move about

and keep cool, comfortable and hydrated. They also had the option of spending some time shopping and - thanks to the Department of Tourism - unwinding at no cost at two local resorts. They received status information from Carnival Cruise Line and were able to return to a fully operational, air conditioned ship and their belongings after several hours.

Passengers were able to enjoy a few extra days in our lovely port. A full refund on the cost of the abbreviated cruise, a discount on a future cruise and a host of other perks including the option of a free trip home on a chartered flight kept the majority of social media comments positive.

Did our emergency rapid response plan go off without a hitch? Nothing ever does when it includes the human element. But overall we think it went pretty well, and we will be even better prepared for the next time.

WICO remains ready to support the territory in any emergency where our facilities and services can play a role as executed with the Carnival *Liberty* incident.

Guest editorial by Joseph Boschulte, President/CEO, WICO

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