



• Tropical storms blow hotel business into D-FW

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As Tropical Storm [Lee](#) loomed off the Gulf Coast over the weekend, Michelle Lowther, founder of Continuity Housing, was consumed with conference calls, emails and last-minute details.

Lowther's business, launched this spring in Benbrook, helps businesses in a storm's path set up contracts with inland hotels well in advance of the storm.

The inns, including 12 hurricane havens in North Texas, agree to house mission-critical workers, their families, even the pet snake, if winds sweep them from their homes.

It's a travel niche that marries emergency preparedness with group room sales, and it requires Lowther to delve into personal details of the employee's life ranging from "Does your mom need wheelchair access?" to "What does your snake eat?"

Lowther, 43, said she makes arrangements for "whatever technical infrastructure" a business might need to keep operations going offsite.

"But also, they've got to house those people," she said. "Housing is so often forgotten as an important aspect of a business continuity plan. If you can't get your folks to work, you can have major service interruptions. You can lose customers over it. You certainly can lose money."

Continuity Housing, as a brand name, launched after Lowther spent almost a year coordinating emergency housing needs related to last year's gulf oil spill and recovery.

That job was under the auspices of Conference Direct, a Los Angeles-based conference and meeting management company that uses a network of independent contractors, including Lowther.

Lowther started with Conference Direct in 2006, prompted by her experience working at a Houston hotel that housed evacuees during [Hurricane Katrina](#).

While she continues to work with Conference Direct, she launched Continuity Housing to focus more keenly on home-away-from-home needs in an emergency.

So far, Continuity Housing has six corporate clients, most of them based along the Gulf Coast or having large regional operations there.

Clients pay Lowther an annual fee to help develop an emergency housing plan, broker deals with hotels and oversee housing-related aspects of an evacuation. The fee is based on the number of cities deployed to and the number of hotels involved. Client names and fees are kept confidential.

If there is an evacuation, there is no additional cost to the client. Continuity Housing receives a commission from the hotels.

Businesses "want to know that when a storm is coming they can close down their operations locally, [and] move a portion of their personnel that they consider their critical staff to an alternate location that's out of the path of the storm," said Lowther, a Houston native who was eyeing the trajectory of the latest tropical disturbance in the gulf.

Her last evacuation to North Texas was in 2008 as workers fled Hurricane Gustav. One client used about 20 rooms, she said.

Lowther spent the end of last week coordinating housing needs for workers evacuated from eight oil platforms in the gulf. Initial plans did not include D-FW as an evacuation point, Lowther said.

Generally, "Dallas is an excellent, excellent market" for evacuations "because there's so much supply, so many hotels to work with," she said. And "it's within a good driving distance" of the gulf.

Jason Tyson is general manager of the 176-room Nylo hotel in [Plano](#), part of Lowther's local respite network.

He's seen more companies pre-plan for hotel needs, "particularly in our region after Katrina."

“It grew from there,” he said.

Technically, the season for hurricanes in the Atlantic (where gulf hurricanes are born) runs from June 1 through Nov. 30. But the peak period is early September, said meteorologist Victor Murphy of the [National Weather Service](#).

One large company with offices near Legacy Drive in Plano and in the gulf contracts with the Nylo for a block of up to 25 rooms for three weeks in September, just in case.

The company, which also uses the hotel for non-hurricane needs, gets a discount but pays for the hurricane rooms “whether they’re used or not,” Tyson said.

The arrangement helps the Nylo accommodate the needs of a key customer and also gives the hotel guaranteed business at the end of the workweek and over the weekends, when the hotel might not be booked up, he said.

If the rooms are occupied (some were for Hurricane Gustav), “we try to give them a homey feel” by adding microwaves and refrigerators, Tyson said.

For Lowther, the planning needs get much more detailed — so much so that she’s applied for a patent for her methodology.

In Lowther’s requests for proposals, she asks hotels about 42 items such as the number of wheelchair-accessible rooms with roll-in showers and what’s on the breakfast menu.

From the clients, she gets detailed rooming charts listing information on up to 17 items per employee.

Hotels are assigned based on each client’s criteria, but in general, Americans With Disabilities Act concerns and medical needs take precedence. That’s followed by people traveling with pets, followed by any other special requests, Lowther said.

“I’ve had snakes, lizards, hamsters and ferrets all appear on client rooming lists,” she said. “And we’ve had to get pretty creative with pet agreements” in the contract. “We ended up creating agreements between the guests and the hotels that stipulated everything from how and when the pets must be contained to how and in front of whom they, the snakes, may be fed, to what happens if the pets cause any damage to the property.”

One [Alabama](#) hotel stipulated that a guest’s snake could not be fed its diet of mice while hotel staff was in the room.

Up to 80 percent of Lowther’s business is hurricane-related, though she’s in talks with potential clients in the Midwest who are planning ahead for winter storms. In New York, two potential clients are creating contingencies for potential terrorist attacks and power outages.

As Hurricane Irene barreled toward the [East Coast](#) late last month, “within the span of about five days we had clients in three different regions contact us for assistance with the same storm,” Lowther said. “That was a new record.”

HOW THE PROCESS WORKS

When Continuity Housing looks for hotels to house workers displaced by storms and other calamities, no detail is too small. Founder Michelle Lowther said her company gathers information from both potential hotels and the clients who would be staying there.

Hotel checklist: 42 items, including how many rooms have king-size beds vs. two doubles, how many adjoining rooms there are, seasonal occupancy, amenities, contract concessions and hospital proximity.

Client checklist: 17 items, including name, department, mobility issues, medical needs, pet needs, infant needs and bed type preferences.

In consultation with Lowther, the clients pick the best hotel fit.

As a storm approaches, Lowther checks on room availability and fine-tunes the clients’ needs.

“After that, we just wait for the clients to pull their triggers,” she said.

Springing into action: In an evacuation, Lowther’s company books the rooms, sends confirmation information to the companies and coordinates check-in.

Cities the company evacuates from: Eight, including Houston and New Orleans.

Areas the company deploys to: 10 (D-FW counts as one area. The 12 D-FW hotels are in Allen, Addison and Plano.)

Total number of rooms held under contract for 2010: 1,705

Average length of stay for a deployment: Five nights.