**Preparing for Hurricane Season Together**

If this pandemic has taught us one thing it is that we can never be too prepared for adversity. Though I know it may be hard to shift our focus and think about enduring additional hardships (with many of our businesses slowly beginning to reopen) I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to remind our community that hurricane season is upon us.

At the Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, it is our job to ensure tourism industry partners have plans in place should a natural disaster strike – first and foremost to keep residents and visitors safe, but also to guarantee that recovery efforts can begin as quickly as possible following an emergency. This will always be an important message for business owners across all industries as research shows that according to FEMA, 74% of American small businesses do not have any disaster plan, while 84% do not have disaster insurance.

In recent years, we have endured Hurricane Irma, Red Tide, Blue Green Algae, and a global pandemic. Through it all, the Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau has been working to fine tune its own Emergency Communications Plan to ensure that the team is fully prepared to both assist as county employees and carry on the obligation of communicating about the destination to our visitors.

Our plan outlines action items for multiple scenarios, including a county-wide evacuation or in the event evacuees are sent to our community. It also places heightened focuses on post-event communications which are essential for any destination in the wake of an emergency.

To help its partners do the same, the BACVB hosts events throughout the year during which it reviews plans and helps businesses establish their own. Our next event is called “Business Preparedness and Crisis Communication,” is planned via Zoom for June 23 and will feature experts from Manatee County Government sharing advice and tips to help prepare both residents and businesses for this hurricane season. If you are interested in learning more or taking part, please contact our Destination Sales Manager Vanessa Zigich at Vanessa.Zigich@BACVB.com.

For those unable to join and in need of a starting point, we have created a short list of action items:

* Make an easy-to-follow emergency response plan. Design a map outlining escape routes, evacuation routes and nearby shelters and keep a list of emergency phone numbers available.
* Keep a disaster preparedness kit ready. At a minimum this kit should include flashlights, provisions, a first-aid kit and a camera to take photos of any damage sustained.
* Review and consider your insurance policy. There are many policy options for businesses small and large which can be vital should a disaster cause damage or a prolong interruption in business.
* Back-up all electronic data. All files and data should be backed up and saved somewhere safe. A business may not be able to re-establish itself without important tax, financial and client information.
* Determine a communication strategy. Communication to employees, customers and vendor/partners should begin as soon as possible after the threat has passed. Status should also be communicated to the public in a timely and appropriate manner.

For those in need of more assistance setting up an emergency plan, Manatee County has one of the best emergency management teams in Florida. The BACVB has also developed a crisis communications plan template for tourism partner use which can be found [here](https://cdn.bradentongulfislands.com/production/20200428114349-final-crisis-template-industry-2020-2-26.pdf).

As a division of the Public Safety Department, emergency management provides protection for the health, safety and welfare of the citizens of Manatee County through effective contingency planning, disaster training and more. They can be reached at (941) 749-3500.

Even though it may be hard to devote time and attention to planning for a hurricane at this time, I hope you all do. You can never be too prepared.

*Elliott Falcione is the executive director of the Bradenton Area Convention and Visitors Bureau and can be reached at Elliott.Falcione@BACVB.com or 941-729-9177, ext. 3940.*