

Downtown Baltimore hotels are nearly full, but not fully staffed

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Inest Whitfield is one of many Tremont Plaza employees who is working through the blizzard.

While most downtown Baltimore businesses were locked and dark Wednesday as bursts of new snow swirled then stuck to last weekend's accumulation, local hotels reported high occupancy rates with rooms filled by essential workers from nearby hospitals as well as by the hotels' own staff, some of whom haven't been home since Friday morning.

Instead of being 20 percent full, as is typical of mid-week in February, the Tremont Plaza Hotel, which housed some Daily Record staff members Tuesday night as well as patients and employees from Johns Hopkins Hospital and Mercy Medical Center, was sold out.

This meant some of the approximately 50 workers were staying three to a room, but in a tough economy, most seemed happy to log the overtime hours.

Inest Whitfield, who was vacuuming the lobby of the St. Paul Street hotel Wednesday morning, said she had been on site since Tuesday morning and probably wouldn't leave until Sunday, but it was "no problem" because it's "a J-O-B."

"You've got to do what you've got to do, right?" said Whitfield, a 43-year-old Northwest Baltimore resident.

Typical procedure for hoteliers is to house enough employees overnight to get them through the next day's workload. Hotels in Baltimore with between 300 and 400 rooms housed about 40 to 50 employees to stay properly staffed for Wednesday. Housekeeping and food service were taxed Tuesday night and Wednesday morning as a lower-than-usual number of staffers struggled to keep up with a higher-than-usual number of guests.

The Tremont's housekeeping staff was down to 15 people from about 34, and guests have been told they'll get limited service in their rooms. But the restaurant, deli and bar were hopping Tuesday evening as guests had nowhere else to go.

"The good thing is they spend in your facility because they can't go anywhere else," said Michael Haynie, the hotel's general manager. "We absolutely were challenged [Tuesday], but think we met it. ... There were about 400 people in the building last night and it seemed like half of them wanted to eat in the restaurant."

At boutique properties like the Hotel Monaco on Charles Street, a staff of about 30 employees can get the job done. According to Associate General Manager Awet Sium, 40 of the hotel's roughly 200 rooms were occupied by guests and about 15 employees stayed the night on Tuesday.

"Occasionally we have employees stay over if we feel like the occupancy warrants it," he said. "But if not, we completely understand if they're somehow stranded and they can't come into work."

Stephanie Spencer, who was behind the registration desk at the Quality Inn across from the closed Clarence M. Mitchell Jr. Courthouse Wednesday, said she usually takes the bus in from Woodlawn but has been sleeping at the hotel since Friday.

"It makes it a lot easier in the morning getting here, I'll tell you that," she said with a smile.

According to Spencer, the Quality Inn is hosting employees from Mercy, the city Police Department, the University of Maryland, Union Memorial Hospital and the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, among others. According to a woman at the Tremont's front desk, Amtrak, BGE and CitiFinancial employees are staying there.

On the restaurant side of the industry, it's much more common to close during extreme weather conditions because there aren't customers to worry about. Restaurant managers typically weigh two factors when making the decision to close, said Dean Haskell, a hospitality consultant with Denver-based National Retail Concept Partners.

"It's a judgment call based on the safety of the employees primarily and then, secondarily, whether it makes sense for business to even open at all," he said.

For mom-and-pop shops, it's a little easier to make that call, said Haskell, because there are fewer hoops to jump through. For chain restaurants, the decision is typically made by a regional manager with approval from corporate.

For ownership groups, like Pikesville-based Big Steaks Management, decisions are made on a case-by-case basis. Big Steaks operates nine Ruth's Chris Steak House restaurants in three states (including three in Maryland) and the Havana Club in Baltimore.

Chief Operating Officer David Sadeghi said Big Steaks' four Maryland restaurants were closed last weekend for the snowstorm and closed Wednesday and Thursday this week.

"We make a decision based on, a), if the population is able to come to us and, b), if you can actually get people to work to take care of that population," he said. "And in this case neither of those is happening."

While February is normally a slow time for the restaurant business, Sadeghi said the lost days still hurt. And he hopes to have the establishments open again by Friday because not opening for Valentine's Day weekend could really punch a hole in this month's bottom line.

"I've told all my team, 'Stay home, take care of your family and hopefully, when things change, we will have a fantastic week,'" Sadeghi said. "I have to be the positive thinker."

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