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News for the Hospitality Executive

Amenity Creep Making It Almost Impossible for Housekeepers to Clean a Hotel Room in 30 Minutes, the Pace Required to Clean 15 Rooms per Shift

By Oscar Avila, Chicago Tribune
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Aug. 23, 2005 - Hotel chains are rolling out super-thick mattresses, mountains of new pillows, extra sheets and hefty duvet covers in a competition to create the most restful sleep experience. Even budget chains are joining the fray, upgrading rooms with a rainbow of soaps, shampoos, teas and specialty coffees.

But the effects of this pillow fight have strained the nerves and backs of one group: the housekeepers who restore the rooms to pristine condition every day.

Hotel workers and union representatives say employees are running ragged trying to clean the same number of hotel rooms even as the list of tasks becomes longer. They say injuries are piling up, too, as they have to handle heavier mattresses and bedding each day.

The union that represents housekeepers cited the amenities war as a primary justification for a new state law that guarantees two, 15-minute paid breaks for hotel housekeepers in Cook County hotels.

The law took effect last week, but on Thursday a judge issued a temporary restraining order putting it on hold. Hotel industry officials want to scuttle the law, arguing the rest breaks will hurt productivity and profits, and ultimately jeopardize the comfort guests are starting to expect.

Margarita Arellano, a housekeeper at the W Chicago City Center hotel, said she understands that her job depends on the profitability of the hotel industry. But she said cleaning rooms is no longer the straightforward task it was when she began eight years ago.

Arellano said it is nearly impossible to clean a room in 30 minutes, the pace she must keep in order to clean the required 15 rooms on her shift. And Arellano, 54, said the stepped-up pace has caused a sore shoulder and back that force her to pop painkillers each day.

"They want you to work like a robot," she said. "But even machines break down, much less a human."

Gloria Gomez, 49, said she gets tired just thinking about her daily routine as a housekeeper at the Sheraton Chicago Hotel & Towers.

If a guest has checked out, Gomez first cleans the trash cans and checks the drawers.

Then, she strips the bed, removing the five pillows on each double bed (there used to be only two), the feathered duvet covers she estimates are three pounds heavier than the old bedspreads, and two sheets per bed.

To make the beds, she must lift the mattresses that she says are noticeably heavier than the old ones. She replaces the pillows and sheets.

Then it's off to the bathroom.

There she washes the four water glasses (it used to be two) and the two coffee cups and coffeepot. She adds two packages of regular coffee, one of decaffeinated coffee, two packages of sugar and two of tea -- a task once handled by the minibar staff, she said. Gomez then loads kits with shampoo, conditioner, lotion and mouthwash.

Only then does she start the scrubbing, dusting and vacuuming.

"You're running around so much, you don't know which direction you're going half the time," Gomez said. "You're just trying to keep up however you can."

As hotels scramble to lure travelers in a wobbly tourism market, amenities are becoming more crucial.

Many industry analysts say Starwood Hotel & Resorts Worldwide Inc. fired the first shot when it introduced its Heavenly Bed in 1999. The ten-layer bed -- with extra pillows, three sheets instead of two and a pillow-top mattress -- has proven so popular that the company has

actually sold 4,000 fully-loaded beds for home use.

Hilton Hotel Corp. has weighed in with an overhaul that includes plush-top mattress ("outperforms a pillow-top") and five pillows on king beds instead of the previous three.

Crowne Plaza Hotels & Resorts has added duvet covers and down pillows as part of a "Sleep Advantage" program that includes eye masks, sleep CDs and ear plugs.

Not to be outdone, Marriott International Inc. plans to change 628,000 beds this year to offer "softer sheets, plusher mattresses, stylish duvets, more pillows," a \$190 million investment. The company had already rolled out a feathered mattress topper and a decorative bed scarf.

William Frye, associate professor of hotel management at Niagara University, said the bedding war came at a time when hotel chains were slashing staff and forcing housekeepers to clean even more rooms. The chains were trying to squeeze out the last bit of revenue after the slowdown caused by the 2001 terrorist attacks, Frye said.

Although some hotels have eased the pain by giving guests the option of keeping the same sheets and towels during a multiple-night stay, the overall workload still has increased, Frye said.

Phyllis King, chair of the occupational therapy department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, said there is a link between injuries and the added sheets and other bedding. King said bedmaking traditionally has been one of the most grueling tasks for hotel housekeepers because of the potential for back injuries, the most common ailment for those workers.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported 20,410 injuries and illnesses among maids and housekeepers in 2003 that resulted in work days missed. Nearly 30 percent of cases were back injuries.

"The work isn't getting any easier," said King, co-author of an ergonomics guide for hotel housekeepers.

In addition to the bedding boom, which causes both physical and time demands, hotels have unleashed a snowball of amenities in the bathroom and main guest room.

Even Howard Johnson International, often thought of as the stopping point for family station wagons, in May announced the rollout of a bathroom package that includes citrus-scented soap and shampoo.

The coffees, ice trays and shampoos do not strain the back but do slow a housekeeper down. Housekeepers usually are the ones who must tuck the lotion and shampoo bottles into a washcloth folded into a seashell or some other appealing pattern, and arrange it on the bathroom vanity.

State Rep. John Fritchey (D-Chicago) said he co-sponsored the law, signed last week by the governor, after hearing these kinds of complaints from the UNITE-HERE labor union that its members were being taxed by the room amenities. "Everyone has a breaking point," he said.

The union estimates that the bill will affect about 5,000 workers in Chicago and suburban Cook County.

But Marc Gordon, president and CEO of the Illinois Hotel and Lodging Association, said the bill is an attempt to increase benefits through a backdoor legislative maneuver instead of at negotiations for a new union contract. Gordon said the breaks, plus the paperwork to document them, will hurt an industry already reeling from the 2001 terrorist attacks and hikes in lodging taxes.

"We've gone through four very bad years, starting with 2001. Things look like they're on the way up to recovery. Yet we face continuous pressure of higher taxes and obstacles for us to deal with. This is another obstacle. It's difficult," Gordon said.

Fritchey said the bill would actually help the industry by reducing days missed because of injuries.

Arellano said she hopes the debate over the bill will shed light on their difficult jobs.

"Without us," she said, "what would the guests do? What would the hotels do?"

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