

April 23, 2002

## **SafePlace Corp. Works To Assure Safety For Lodging Industry**

By Matthew Pordum

Years before September 11 John Fannin, CEO of **SafePlace Corp.**, realized first hand that not all hotels are safe places to stay.

Back when he was a consulting engineer for Kita, **Fannin**, who has served as a fireman for 32 years, was staying in a hotel in Buffalo, NY when a fire broke out. He said that event was the defining moment regarding his belief that an independent third party was needed to provide safety accreditation for the lodging industry.

"I was in Buffalo doing some consulting work for a top three brand hotel on an upper floor and all of a sudden the fire alarm went off," Fannin told *USAE News*. "I opened the door and smoke was already four feet off the ceiling, stratified, I realized that the fire was on our floor in a storage room full of chairs for the hotel's meeting rooms which were made of polyurethane. So it was really burning. I went down to the lobby to see if the building was being evacuated and if the fire department had been called yet. They hadn't. I'm not saying all properties were this inept, but the event and the fact that I've worked on lodging properties and other properties for most of my life made me realize that the public, especially those that don't have a technical background don't know what to look for in concerns to safety."

**Fannin believes that if his company is successful, the only thing guests would have to look for is the SafePlace Corp. seal at the property.**

**SafePlace, which is based in Wilmington, Delaware, provides the public with an independent source of information regarding the relative safety of one facility over others. The Accreditation Program provides the owners of the property the opportunity to promote to the general public the superior safety of their facility.**

**"We accredit for fire protection, security, health and life safety provisions based on the nationally recognized codes, standards and recommended practices in existence," Fannin said. "We are very narrow at what we look at. These are standards that should already be complied with. But although the level to which local code officials do their job is great, no single jurisdiction in the country can afford to have special inspections. They have been forced to rely on designers, engineers and architects. But with us the bottom line is, we hold buildings to a much higher standard."**

**Fannin, who has been a member of The American Hotel & Lodging Association since 1994, said the accreditation process begins with contacting the company to whom an application is sent out.**

**"If we are contacted by a hotel we would send them an accreditation kit," Fannin said. "The application includes a cursory self survey, a list of all the requirements they will be measured against, and references to all the standards that we use. Seeing the requirements gives a property the ability to see right away if they can even become accredited before we get involved. By choosing against becoming accredited a property loses uniformity, loses the benefit of a third party review, loses bragging rights and what is going to become an important marketing tool to differentiate them from other properties in regards to being safe. The public as in most cases in life, are primarily responsible for their own safety, and our service provides them with a tool to make informed decisions on where it is safe to stay. We don't tell them they won't have a negative experience at a property that we accredit, but we do tell them how the place stands in concerns to safety. We can't cover all possibilities, and September 11 is an example that events can occur even if a property is secured, but we limit those chances and minimize the risk."**

The need for a hotelier to prove to the public that a property is safe was recently bolstered by the results of a study conducted by Harris InteractiveSM, a worldwide market research and consulting firm. The study found that 94 percent of travelers surveyed say that they consider hotel safety to be an important factor when making their lodging selections during trip planning. Although the study showed that travelers were this concerned with safety it also showed that only 22 percent actually investigate a facility's level of safety, primarily because travelers have no idea where to obtain this information. Furthermore, the study found that 93 percent surveyed said they would be more likely to stay in a hotel that was certified as safe versus a non-certified hotel, with more than 78 percent would be willing to pay more for a hotel that offered this extra measure.

**Fannin said that the a good comparison regarding how important it is to give travelers a way to measure the safety of the hotels is to look at the safety of automobiles.**

"There is currently no way to judge the safety of a hotel property," Fannin said. "Just imagine if the insurance industry stopped giving its ratings and safety stars for cars. The public would have no idea how to judge a car's safety and would have nowhere to turn to. Another big misconception is that the more you pay the safer the product is. An expensive car isn't necessarily the safest just as a luxury hotel isn't necessarily safer to stay at than an average hotel. I'm not saying luxury properties aren't safe, but you never know. By obtaining our accreditation travelers will know. The added bonus is that the standards we use in our accreditation are consistent across the country, because of this a brand can promote the fact that they are accredited by SafePlace for the brand across the country."

Although Americans and even travelers worldwide have a more heightened sense of security since the events of September 11, **Fannin** is in no way capitalizing on this as he incorporated SafePlace in 1993. The reason for **SafePlace's** emergence into the marketplace at this time is that it has both taken years of research to decide how to go about providing such a service and also because it takes several years to obtain the certification mark that it has successfully obtained.

**"It's a very strict and arduous process to obtain a certification in the United States," Fannin said.**

**"You have to go through a lot of hoops and hurdles to this accreditation. The amount of those who apply and are granted a certification marks are few and far between because of the message it delivers. The public is trusting the government when these are issued. The U.S. is the hardest country to receive the mark."**

**Fannin said that since the company officially launched on March 6, 2002 the company has been receiving an average of 25 to 30 inquiries a week from the hotel and lodging industry.**

**"We've especially had a tremendous response from meeting planners as well and we have their attention at the moment," Fannin said. "Hotels big and small, corporate traveler managers they are all realizing how important having accreditation is."**

**Fannin** said that it will announce the first hotel to sign on with SafePlace Corp. on May 1, an announcement that would show just how important being accredited is because "the first to sign on is a big if not the biggest player in the hotel industry."

The cost for accreditation, something that **Fannin** said he saves for discussions only with the properties that contact **SafePlace**, is based on property type and subsequently the amount of labor that would be involved to accredit a property.

**Fannin** said that regardless of the marketplace, a uniform cost exists for accreditation, meaning if a brand had a property in New York City and one of the same size in South Dakota it would still cost the same price. There are different provisions and costs, however, for properties that have more than just lodging, such as casinos. Potentially the sky is the limit for **SafePlace** as almost every facility in the country that houses people could seek accreditation.

Upon seeking accreditation from **SafePlace** a property may qualify for recognition in "The 100 Safest Hotels in America", which is planned for publication annually beginning this year.

Once the lodging sector of **SafePlace** is running smoothly, **Fannin** says that the company will go ahead with its original plans to focus on health care, educational, assisted living communities, commercial buildings and other occupancies where the safety of people is a concern.