

Boston Hospitality Review

www.bu.edu/bhr

Published by the Boston University School of Hospitality Administration

The Case of the Diamond Princess: Stranded at Sea in a Pandemic (Part 2)

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Special Edition: COVID-19 Crisis



Photo Source: Canva

(July 24, 2020) This Case Study is the Second of a Three-Part Series. Part I shares information pertinent to the period of the Passenger Quarantine. This document, or Part II, covers the challenge of Repatriation of the Passengers and the Crew to their Home Countries. And Part III discusses the Government Relationships and Economic Support of the Cruise Lines.

CASE STUDY

In times of crisis, government officials across the globe have the enormous responsibility of ensuring the safety of their citizens, both home and abroad. This process is known as “repatriation” and is officially defined as the act or process of restoring or returning someone or something to the country of origin, alliance or citizenship . There have been many examples of repatriation of American citizens in the past (in 2014 the U.S. government repatriated American health workers who became infected with Ebola while treating patients in West Africa and in 2006 thousands of citizens were repatriated from Lebanon during the war between Israel and Hezbollah) however, the efforts are typically focused on one area or country that may be experiencing a war or natural disaster. In the first quarter of 2020, repatriation involved citizens from countries and regions all over the world simultaneously; the repatriation of American citizens during the COVID-19 health pandemic has been, “one of the largest and most complex

international evacuations in American history,” according to United States President Donald J. Trump . As of June 10, 2020 the United States government repatriated more than 100,000 citizens from 136 countries on 1,140 flights since efforts began January 27, 2020 .

The outbreak of COVID-19 on the Diamond Princess cruise ship, which lasted for most of the month of February 2020, was at the time the largest outbreak outside of mainland China. The repatriation efforts of the American passengers was also one of the first attempts at U.S. citizen repatriation as a result of the virus. This case study explores the timeline of events involved with repatriating the passengers and crew of the Diamond Princess (from whence it was docked at a port in Japan), as well as the challenges they faced along the way.

Part II. Passenger Repatriation

Of those on the Diamond Princess cruise ship, Americans comprised the second largest contingent of passengers after the Japanese. On February 8, 2020, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended that the Americans on board remain in their cabins (on the cruise ship) for their own protection. The CDC thought, at that moment in time, that this measure would be the best approach to stop the spread of the virus, despite the fact that Japanese authorities had urged them to evacuate the cruise-goers earlier on .

Arnold Hopland, a 75-year-old doctor from Johnson City, Tennessee was a passenger on the Diamond Princess with his wife Jeanie, and was among those who helped prompt the State Department repatriation efforts. As the situation worsened on board and people continued to sicken due to the mismanagement of the virus, Hopland took matters into his own hands and began reaching out to reporters about the conditions on the ship. Hopland contacted the media, and he also connected with a former medical colleague from Tennessee, Phil Roe, now also a member of Congress.

Once in touch with Roe, Hopland found himself on a conference call on February 12, 2020 with medical professionals from the CDC, the National Institute of Health (NIH), and the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Robert Kadlec . Hopland requested that American citizens on board be evacuated from the ship to be able to return to the States where they could complete a more legitimate quarantine on U.S. soil. While some on the call agreed that the conditions on the ship warranted a full-scale evacuation, others worried that this mission would risk a major outbreak within the United States, which at the time only reported 14 domestic cases.

Hopland’s efforts were eventually successful; on February 15, 2020, all of the Americans on board the Diamond Princess received emails from the U.S. Embassy indicating they would be brought home and required to complete an additional two- week quarantine once Stateside. The guidelines at the time indicated that everyone would be tested and only those who tested negative would be able to board the charter flights back to the United States. However, this was not how the evacuation process moved forward.

The evacuation effort was organized by Kadlec who worked closely with the Directorate of Operational Medicine within the Bureau of Medical Services which had executed the repatriation

flights out of Wuhan, China earlier in the year. On February 16, 2020, one day after passengers received their email, the repatriation effort began. A total of 328 Americans were screened for symptoms, had their temperatures taken and were then evacuated by U.S. medical officials. However, the evaluation did not include an official test for the virus since Japan had reported conducting continuous testing of all passengers over the previous few days .

Upon disembarkation, the Americans then boarded 15 buses that transported them on a 40-minute ride to the airport. Once on the tarmac, they were told to remain aboard the buses while government officials from the State department and the CDC then debated how to handle a new development in the situation: It was recently brought to their attention that 14 individuals currently sitting on the buses had in fact tested positive for COVID-19.

These individuals were able to slip under the radar for various reasons: All the test-positive passengers were asymptomatic; they did not display any symptom of the virus. Additionally, the Japanese test results were not completed by the time evacuation began. The U.S. officials who helped evacuate the Americans had decided to move forward without the test results since they didn't know when the results would be available.

As aforementioned, the State Department initially said that they would not be evacuating U.S. citizens who tested positive for the virus. However, according to the State Department, the 14 positive cases were already considered “evacuees” in the evacuation pipeline and therefore should be allowed to be repatriated . Anne Schuchat, Principal Deputy Director of the CDC, was “passionately against the repatriation” and fought for the infected passengers to be removed from the buses and brought to hospitals in Japan . The State Department was the victor in this argument and the infected passengers remained on the buses and were eventually brought onto the charter planes. Schuchat requested that the CDC be left out of any news releases regarding the decision to bring the infected individuals back to the States, “a move that would nearly double the number of known coronavirus cases” domestically .

Once the decision was made to move forward with the repatriation, the 14 infected passengers boarded the plane first and were escorted to an isolation area at the rear of the jetliner. This “isolation area” consisted of a group of 18 seats toward the rear of the plane that were surrounded on all sides by a plastic tarp. According to Dr. William Walters, Executive Director and Managing Director for Operational Medicine for the Bureau of Medical Services at the U.S. Department of State, individuals in the isolation area “pose no additional risk to the passengers or crew, ” since the layout of the airflow on the 747 aircraft went from the nose of the plane to the rear.

As the American citizens were boarding the planes, the non-infected passengers were not kept informed of the evolving situation. In fact, they did not learn that some individuals on the plane were positive until after they had already landed in the United States. This upset and angered a number of the individuals who now felt they were at risk of exposure to the virus – a virus they had just spent two weeks on the ship trying to avoid. In addition, President Trump was also “furious that such a decision was made,” saying that he was not informed until the passengers were already en route to the United States.

Ultimately, two charter flights of repatriated Americans flew to two separate and existing federal quarantine facilities - Travis Air Force Base in California and Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. The first aircraft delivered 177 people (of whom seven had already tested positive for coronavirus) to Travis Air Force Base. Lackland received 151 people plus the remaining seven passengers who had also tested positive for the virus already. The passengers from both planes who tested positive for the virus did not stay at either Air Force Base; instead they were transferred once more to a quarantine facility at the University of Nebraska in Omaha where they would be able to receive care and quarantine away from the healthy passengers .

While the 328 repatriated Americans completed their quarantines in the United States, 61 Americans who had tested positive prior to the evacuation efforts still remained in Japanese hospitals. These individuals felt abandoned by their government as the information from the embassies and the Diamond Princess officials continued to be scarce and inconsistent .

(As the State Department has not updated its repatriation website since June 10, 2020, (<https://www.state.gov/coronavirus/repatriation/>), this implies that the 61 Americans who were in Japanese hospitals are either still there, or if they were brought back to the U.S., the statistics have not yet been updated on this site.)

Crew Repatriation:

Once the passengers had all disembarked from the ship on February 27th 2020 , the crew of the Diamond Princess had to begin their own two-week quarantine. The improper use and general lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) on the ship were to blame for this second quarantine. Normally, those supporting a quarantine do not have to undergo one themselves, particularly if they have taken the necessary precautions and used appropriate PPE. This was not the case on the Diamond Princess, and thus the crew was forced to spend an additional two weeks on board an already-infected location.

Of the 1,045 crew members on the Diamond Princess, 70% were from either the Philippines, India or Indonesia. Now that the passengers were no longer aboard, the crew shifted focus to disinfecting and cleaning the ship before they were due to begin their own quarantine. Not everyone was happy with the idea of spending an additional two weeks on board the ship. For example, most of the Filipino workers favored evacuation, with which their government agreed, stating that they “want them home now,” according to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Loscin . However, the Indian and Indonesian employees did not have similar experiences. The Indonesian government expressed their concern for their citizens by sending care packages, while the Indian embassy in Tokyo simply provided regular updates to its citizens .

The Diamond Princess finally sailed from Japan on May 16, 2020. It was originally scheduled to sail to Malaysia, but it actually arrived in Manila instead. There it joined the more than 20 other cruise ships waiting out the no-sail order in the waters off the coast of the Philippines, until cruising could resume sometime in Fall 2020.

As of July 16, 2020 the CDC extended the No Sail Order for cruise ships through September 30, 2020 . Before it was extended the order was due to expire on July 24, 2020 as that day would

have been 100 days since the date of the order's first publication in the Federal Register, which was one of the original criteria for the lifting of the order. However, prior to this official extension, the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) had voluntarily agreed on June 19, 2020 to suspend cruise operations originating from U.S. ports until at least September 15, 2020. (CLIA is a "leading cruise industry trade association that accounts for major companies like Carnival, Disney Cruise Line, Royal Caribbean International and Princess Cruises.")

According to CDC data from March 1 to July 10, 2020 there have been 2,973 cases of COVID-19 on cruise ships and 34 deaths (this data does not include the cases and deaths from the Diamond Princess cruise ship or any other cruise ship outbreak prior to March 1, 2020). These cases came from 99 outbreaks on 123 different cruise ships and during this time frame, 80% of cruise ships were affected by COVID-19. This current suspension will be in place until the earliest of 1) The expiration of the Secretary of Health and Human Services' declaration that COVID-19 constitutes a public health emergency, 2) The CDC Director rescinds or modifies the order based on specific public health or other considerations, or 3) September 30, 2020.

The repatriation of crew members around the world was exceptionally challenging since the process began after most of the world had already suspended commercial flights and closed borders. While some crew members, such as those from the Philippines, were able to board charter flights back home, many were forced to wait in limbo on their ships until the COVID-19 situation settled in their home countries.

The Miami Herald reported that some countries are not allowing (any) cruise ships to dock at their ports for fear of the ship's passengers bringing a coronavirus outbreak to their shores. Thus, the workers have been "stranded" at sea since cruising operations were suspended in mid-March. Efforts are in place to bring the remaining crew members home, however it has been a slow process. Earlier this summer, 3,000 Carnival Cruise Line workers were allowed disembarkation in Croatia where they will now be able to use other modes of transportation to return home to locations throughout Europe. Other examples of recent crew repatriation efforts include MSC flying more than 1,000 Indian crew members back home on charter flights from Europe and South America, and Royal Caribbean bringing more than 1,200 Filipino workers from Greece, Dubai, the United States and Barbados

The CDC now has a comprehensive set of guidelines for cruise ships to use as their go-to resource for detecting, managing and preventing further COVID-19 outbreaks on board. However, these guidelines only apply to ships "originating from or stopping in the United States," and are thus not enforced on a global scale.

As of July 10, 2020 there are 67 cruise ships at sea with 14,702 crew workers still on board waiting to finish their quarantine or meet the requirements for certain testing.

Discussion Questions

1. As also shown during the initial quarantine, the treatment of and the safety protocols put in place for the passengers was vastly different than those for the crew members. Was this justified

since the crew were expected to provide a service to the passengers? Or should there be certain emergency situations where the customer and service provider relationship is put on hold while professionals step in to help all of the individuals equally?

2. What was the cruise company doing during this time? How were they communicating with employees and passengers?

3. When one country decides to impose guidelines on repatriation efforts, should that be enforced worldwide to maintain consistency?

4. What can be done to standardize the quarantine process across the world so that countries don't feel it necessary to require additional quarantining of citizens who have already completed one elsewhere? Whose responsibility is this? Who should be involved in this effort?

5. How can training of cruise employees be enhanced so that employees themselves are protected in a time of crisis?

6. What role might the World Health Organization be able to play in a situation like The Diamond Princess during a time of COVID?

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The authors wish to thank Dr. Makarand Mody, Assistant Professor Boston University School of Hospitality Administration for his review of Part I and Part II of this case study.