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Hillsborough County hotel executives express frustration over lack of state support 🔑



Tampa Marriott Water Street

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The Hillsborough County hoteliers' group is advocating on behalf of local hotel employers and employees who are financially suffering and say they are not receiving enough help.

The Hillsborough County Hotel Motel Association sent a letter to the Hillsborough County Legislative Delegation members to garner support from local leaders, saying the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity funds are still not forthcoming or, in many cases, unemployment claims have been inappropriately denied.

"In some instances, the basis for the denial is incredibly placed on the hotel. You can

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imagine the frustration and helplessness hoteliers feel as they make every effort on behalf of their employees with little, if any, success to show for those attempts. We need your immediate support to help clear up Florida's inability to process claims," according to the April 29 letter signed by HCHMA Executive Director Bob Morrison.

The hospitality sector was among the top industries to take the hardest economic hits in the state, with hotels being forced to conduct mass layoffs as well as restaurants – a huge threat to the \$86 billion hospitality industry, according to the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council.

To date, the HCHMA has yet to receive a response, Morrison said. Representatives from the DEO and the Hillsborough County Legislative Delegation did not return requests for comment.

The association has 17 board members, mostly hotel owners, and more than 130 members.

"What also triggered the call to action are the calls we are getting from employers that are becoming more desperate with rent being due and other service expenses that can't be postponed," Morrison told the Tampa Bay Business Journal.

He and HCHMA recommend that the DEO do the following:

- Create a collective effort by state elected officials to insist that immediate assistance be provided to hospitality employees so that their claim status can be confirmed, the process completed without further delay and funds dispersed.
- Insist upon a state communication plan that provides daily updated information about accessing federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act funds now that

the process has been streamlined. It could include a separate call center or online page with step-by-step instructions.

Ron McAnagh,

HCHMA President

and general manager of the Tampa Marriott Water Street Hotel, said he's experienced the frustration at his own hotel. McAnagh, like many others, had to furlough and lay off 400 employees – but he has no efficient way of tracking their claims' statuses.

"There's been some improvement in the past five to seven days [regarding the state processing more unemployment claims], but we have furloughed and laid off about 400 people. We don't get to talk to them all," McAnagh told the TBBJ. "We have no visibility on what's going on. We should be able to understand how many of our people applied and received."

The Tampa Marriott Water Street Hotel remains open and is running on less than 10 percent occupancy with 25 employees. McAnagh said the majority of the guests staying are those having surgeries done at Tampa General Hospital, now that elective surgeries are permissible, as well as guests proceeding with having weddings.

"A lot of hotels around us have closed, but we think in the long term it would be better to stay open instead of closing because you'd have to make a hard decision on when to open – and no matter what, the building still needs to be maintained," he said.

McAnagh remains hopeful as the hotel will be the main hotel for 2021 Super Bowl, which is expected to attract hundreds of hotel guests.

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