

PUBLIC SAFETY

Prank costs hotel \$5K

■ Callers target hotels with false emergency reports, urge guests to damage property for survival, according to fire marshal and hotel clerk

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A prankster around midnight Saturday convinced a man staying at Comfort Suites hotel on north Main Street to activate an emergency

sprinkler system, likely costing several thousands of dollars in damage, Daphne Fire Marshal Chip Martin said.

“Apparently what happened was a caller called several of the hotel rooms there and got in touch with one individual and told them there was an emergency; that there was a fire in the building and to protect themselves, (he) needed to break out the sprinkler head in his room.

“Of course, there was no emergency at the

hotel and all that resulted in was getting that individual (on the second floor) soaking wet as well as causing a great deal of damage to the room and the rooms below it.” Damage included wet Sheetrock and furniture, TVs and other appliances; and soaked carpeting.

“It’s all pretty much gone,” Rupesh Desei, Comfort Suites Daphne general manager, said of items in the affected units. He said he expects cleanup and restoration to last a month and cost

upward of \$5,000; insurance, he indicated, should cover the costs.

Though some ruined property is expected from ceiling sprinkler systems that aim to extinguish fires, officials said the trouble comes when water primarily damages—not salvages—property.

“It’s better to have wet property that can dry out than to have property that’s been destroyed by fire,” Martin said. “The sprinkler in this case was misused; there was no fire, and so it was

only causing damage.”

Police are investigating the incident, which carries criminal mischief and false-report charges, officials said.

The hotel took statements from two patrons and heard comments from others who received the prank calls, Desei said, adding that one patron identified the caller as a male whom he’d said “didn’t sound very young or very old”; that patron ignored the call.

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Another man, however, obeyed the caller's order.

"He busted the sprinkler head spicket—which, normally a fire will heat it and bust," Desei said.

An estimated nine firefighters, among other responders, arrived at the hotel within about 10 minutes of the sprinkler system's activation, which had sent signals to a monitoring service that alerted authorities, according to Martin; he said 12 Daphne firefighters regularly are on duty.

"Fortunately, (this doesn't) happen very often, and it's very frustrating when it does because those are resources that are being wasted that may be needed elsewhere in the city," Martin said. "When you have a hotel fire alarm activation, you're responding with a lot of resources and in doing so, you're maybe slowing down response to another call at the other end of town.

The incident was a first for the Daphne hotel, Desei said, adding that throughout 15 years as a south

Alabama resident, he only last weekend had heard of such incidents that seem to target lodging businesses.

"One of the hotel owners I know in Saraland, at another Comfort Suites, got (calls) the same day, same night; they told two guests that they had a gas leak. That they (would) need to put towels on the floor and break the windows," Desei said.

The Saraland patrons obeyed the calls—though causing less damage than that at the Daphne hotel. Desei said that given the circumstances he would have preferred a couple of broken windows to extensive water damage on two floors of units.

Though the Saraland establishment also was owned by Choice Hotels, lodging businesses elsewhere—and under different brands—received similar calls, which, the Daphne manager said, leaves him at a loss for explanation.

"I would have no clue why they are doing something like this," Desei said.

Martin said he didn't want to label Saturday's incident—

the only known report of such a call in Daphne—a "trend" but that the extent of these pranks seems far-reaching. An Alabama Fire Chiefs Association Internet bulletin board said false reports to lodging establishments recently were received in Mobile; Gardendale, Ala.; and in York, Neb.

Not only patrons are victims.

"They're convincing the front-desk clerks of this information as well as the individual room guests," Martin said of cases from other areas.

"In one of the instances, the individual called up, said he was with an alarm company (and) told the front-desk clerk that she needed to pull the fire alarm," Martin said. "He then directed her and said there was a problem with the sprinkler system: it was overpressured, and she needed to release the pressure by taking a chair and breaking the sprinker system out. She followed the directions and did just that."

Martin on Monday said he made stops at all Daphne lodging businesses, informing

them of the pranking problem and how they can be battled.

"The one message we're trying to get out to the checking clerks, as well as the patrons, is at no time is the alarm company or fire department going to call you on the telephone and tell you that there is an emergency; we're gonna come out in person," Martin said.

Armed with this information, lodging workers and patrons can hold would-be criminals accountable.

"If they do receive a phone call like that, get as much information as possible, including the date; the time; the phone line that it may have come in on; if they had Caller ID, what it read out as; and report it," Martin said.

Those who are cautious can call 911 to verify the claim from emergency telecommunicators who dispatch police and fire departments and would be able to assess validity, Martin said. Also, people can call police to report such—most likely false—claims. The Daphne Police Department's phone number is 621-9100.