



TPOP + IMA
FIELD GUIDE SERIES

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS DURING MAJOR EVENTS

Preparing Hospitality Teams for FIFA
2026 and Other High-Impact Events



RECOGNIZE CHANGES

Spot unusual behavior, crowd movement, and warning signs before situations escalate.



COMMUNICATE EARLY

Build shared awareness through timely reporting and team communication.



RESPOND WITH CONFIDENCE

Give employees practical tools to assess, assist, and escalate when needed.



**A PERFECT ADDITION TO YOUR FREE ONLINE
TPOP TRAINING, COMPLIMENTS OF IMA**

**HELPING HOSPITALITY TEAMS NOTICE EARLIER, COMMUNICATE
FASTER, AND RESPOND BETTER.**

Who's Behind This Guide

This field guide grew out of a live webinar hosted by IMA and presented by The Power of Preparedness (TPOP) - the third in IMA's hospitality webinar series, offered to clients at no cost. IMA's risk-control team partnered with TPOP to bring practical workplace violence prevention training to restaurants and hotels.

■ The Power of Preparedness (TPOP)

A workplace violence prevention training company serving food service, retail, healthcare, manufacturing, and hospitality. Its scenario-based, micro-lesson approach makes awareness practical and repeatable for frontline teams - built to build confidence, not fear.

Learn more at thepowerofpreparedness.com

■ IMA

An insurance and risk-management firm whose hospitality team partners with clients on proactive safety: on-site risk surveys, response planning, and complimentary training that helps prevent claims before they happen.

Learn more at imacorp.com

THE PANEL



Susan DeVaughn

National Hospitality Program Director, IMA - Session Host

Leads IMA's national hospitality program and opened the session. A champion of the idea that everyone can be a leader in their role by having the courage to speak up when something isn't right.



Renee Rhodes

Risk Control Advisor, IMA

Partners with IMA's hospitality clients on proactive safety strategies - risk surveys, response planning, and policy review - to prevent claims before they happen, and shared the session's standout near-miss story.



Norma Murillo

Director, HR, The Merritt Group

A former multi-year general manager, now an HR leader at The Merritt Group, focused on building a safety-and-care culture location by location through store visits, open communication, and follow-up.



Dan Stechow

Founder, President & CEO, TPOP

Works at the intersection of creativity, technology, and human behavior. Built TPOP on one belief: education, creativity, and technology can change behavior at scale. Presenter and moderator for the session.

DISCLAIMER

This field guide is provided for general informational and educational purposes only and does not constitute legal, security, insurance, or professional advice. It summarizes a live panel discussion and reflects the views of the individual panelists, not necessarily those of their organizations. Organizations should consult qualified professionals when developing workplace violence prevention policies.

The Painful Costs of Workplace Violence

In hospitality, the costs of an incident reach far beyond the moment it happens.

Workplace violence - or even the threat of it - reaches the bottom line of every hospitality operation. The session opened with the conditions that drive it in this industry: alcohol service, long wait times, late-night and 24-hour operations, and the constant mix of employee-to-employee, employee-to-guest, and guest-to-guest conflict. Beyond the human harm, those incidents drive turnover, lost productivity, manager distraction, and legal exposure - and a single bad guest experience can follow a brand online long after the moment has passed.



Cost Category	Business Impact
Employee Turnover	Often the single biggest line item - people leave where they don't feel safe.
Lost Productivity	Fear, disruption, and distraction reduce output across the whole team.
Manager Distraction	Incidents pull leadership away from running the operation for long stretches.
Legal & Liability Risk	Claims and settlements reach the bottom line - the part the IMA team knows well.
Insurance Pressure	Repeated incidents drive premiums up, and the increases compound over time.
Lost Customers & Reputation	One bad social-media post can ding a hospitality brand fast.

PART 1

Awareness Is a Shared Responsibility

"If you see something but don't say something, nothing is saved or improved."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

Safety Is Not a Department - It's a Culture

Organizations are safest when safety is owned by everyone, every day.



- **Leadership sets the tone**

Everything flows downhill from the top.

- **Everyone plays a role**

Concerns are everyone's business.

- **Teams recognize what changes**

Frontline staff are out front and see it first.

- **Communication moves concerns forward**

Observations reach the right people fast.

Safety culture is not a program or a department - it is the collection of daily behaviors that shape how teams notice and respond to concerns. Leadership sets the expectations, frontline employees see changes first, and clear communication makes sure important observations reach the right people quickly.

"It's not a department, it's a culture. It's leadership that sets the tone."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

Every Employee Is an Early-Warning System

Frontline staff often see customer behavior before anyone else.



- **Security can't be everywhere**
Coverage always has gaps.
- **Managers can't see every interaction**
Most moments go unwatched.
- **Employees observe in real time**
They see it as it happens.

Cashiers, servers, and hosts are the ones out front talking to people and getting a feel for what's happening. The goal is not to turn them into security professionals - it is to help them recognize meaningful changes and communicate them early.

Communication Is Key

Shared observations reveal patterns no single person would catch.



- **Different employees see different things**
Each vantage point is partial.
- **Multiple observations build the picture**
Pieces combine into a pattern.
- **Earlier communication is better**
Sharing closes the gap fast.

Awareness grows when information is shared - think of separate observations as puzzle pieces. In a story Renee Rhodes shared live, a QSR franchisee circulated security footage of weekend break-ins to other locations; one employee then flagged a vehicle she had seen circling the lot, the manager watched for it, and the attempt was stopped.

"Because of that communication, they were able to catch that person."

- Renee Rhodes, IMA

PART 2

What Changes During Major Events

"Major events don't create new problems. They amplify existing ones."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

Why Major Events Matter

Major events don't create new problems - they amplify the ones you already have.



- **Volume rises**

More customers than normal.

- **Pressure builds**

Greater demand for speed and accuracy.

- **Emotion runs high**

Excited crowds, lower frustration tolerance.

- **Small mistakes escalate**

Minor issues grow fast under load.

Most people picture stadiums and checkpoints when they think about FIFA. For retailers and restaurants, the challenge is closer to home: quadruple the people in your establishment - demanding, excited, intense - and whatever you already deal with on a normal day gets bigger. Situational awareness helps teams catch issues earlier and respond better.

THE RESULT

More volume, more pressure for speed and accuracy, and higher emotion with lower frustration tolerance - small mistakes escalate faster than on a normal day.

Language and Cultural Gaps

Global events bring communication challenges many employees rarely face.



- **Language barriers**
Words don't always carry.
- **Unfamiliar behaviors and norms**
A thumbs-up can mean very different things.
- **Different service expectations**
Everyone arrives with their own.
- **Misunderstandings escalate faster**
Small gaps grow quickly under pressure.

Visitors traveling across the world for a match aren't cultural ambassadors - they bring their own languages, customs, and expectations. The stage is set for misunderstandings, and small ones can escalate quickly when people are excited and on edge.

Preparing Employees for Global Visitors

A few simple service habits prevent most misunderstandings.



- **Use simple language**
Speak clearly, avoid slang.
- **Use visual aids**
Point to menus and payment options.
- **Be patient; confirm understanding**
Check back before proceeding.
- **Listen first; stay respectful**
Avoid assumptions.

This is hospitality 101, just turned up: speak clearly, avoid colloquialisms, point to what matters, and bring the same extra patience you'd offer anyone who might be challenged to understand. Under these conditions, employees will need it more than usual.

"Keep it simple. Use simple language."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

PART 3

Preparedness Begins With Awareness

"Everything starts with situational awareness."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

Situational Awareness Precedes Everything

It is the starting point for all risk mitigation, in every scenario.



- **Recognize conflict early**

Before de-escalation can begin.

- **Respond to an active threat**

Awareness comes first.

- **Catch safety hazards**

Slips, falls, and OSHA concerns.

- **Interact safely**

Homeless, impaired, or distressed individuals.

Before anyone can de-escalate conflict, respond to an active assailant, address a spill, or help someone in distress, somebody first has to recognize that something is changing. Awareness is what creates the opportunity to respond at all.

"Everything starts with situational awareness."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

Knowing “Normal” Before Seeing “Abnormal”

Awareness depends on a baseline - what this place is like on an ordinary day.



- **Take a moment to read the room**

Find a spot and get a clear view.

- **Note volume, behavior, distance**

What's the usual rhythm here?

- **Every environment differs**

A warehouse isn't a Burger King.

- **Train new arrivals on it**

They may carry a different baseline.

Every environment has its own version of normal - the noise, the movement, the way people interact. Dan compared it to knowing, as a kid, whether it was his mom or dad coming up the stairs. Once you know the baseline, the things that don't fit stand out.

"Knowing what normal is before we start seeing abnormal."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

The Recognition Window

The "lit fuse" - the interval between the first concern and the point options run out.



- **Most incidents give warning**
Something is there to notice.
- **Escalation is often gradual**
Few situations begin at full intensity.
- **Speed expands options**
Every half-second matters.
- **Early action changes outcomes**
Recognition buys time and choices.

The recognition window is the period between the first observable concern and the moment a situation escalates. Sometimes it lasts minutes, sometimes seconds - but every second that passes after something is witnessed limits the choices you have for what happens next.

"We talk about it as the lit fuse - those first few seconds can mean life and death."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

Security Cannot Be Everywhere

Awareness has to extend well beyond the security function.



- **Security can't monitor every interaction**
There is too much ground.
- **Employees notice issues first**
They're closest to the floor.
- **Staff are the eyes and ears**
The whole team extends coverage.
- **Shared awareness mitigates risk**
Many eyes beat a few.

These are increasingly violent times, and it isn't all about where the cops, security, or management are. Employees throughout the operation are usually the first to notice changing behavior - which makes shared awareness the real safety net.

The Power of Intuition

A sense that something is "off" is often the brain reading real cues.



- **The body senses danger early**
Before you can name it.
- **"Off" feelings rest on real cues**
Subtle observations add up.
- **Professionals are trained to trust it**
Treat it as a prompt to act.
- **It buys time and distance**
Acting early creates safer decisions.

Just as your hand recoils from a hot stove before your brain catches up, the nervous system is wired to flag danger. A feeling that something is wrong is often the brain processing cues you haven't consciously connected yet - and that feeling matters.

"Your body recognizes danger before you can consciously process it."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

PART 4

What “Something” Actually Looks Like

"If you hear a firecracker, move."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

1. Anything That Sounds Like a Firecracker

Real gunfire is routinely mistaken for a backfire, a balloon, or construction noise.



- **Don't dismiss loud cracks or bangs**

Unless it's clearly fireworks.

- **Assume the worst**

Under these conditions it's the right call.

- **Every second matters**

Move first, explain later.

- **Don't fear being wrong**

The cost of caution is small.

Gunshots sound nothing like the movies - by and large, they sound like firecrackers. After almost every attack, someone says they thought it was a car, a joke, or a balloon. If there is one thing to take away from the session, this is it.

"If you hear a firecracker, move. Teach your kids, teach your friends, teach the people you work with."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

2. A Recently Terminated Employee On Site

Concern rises depending on the person's behavior and the circumstances.



- **Appearing agitated or fixated**
Emotion is running high.
- **Lingering without purpose**
No clear reason to be there.
- **Contacting management aggressively**
Demanding, not asking.
- **Entering restricted areas**
Behavior, not identity, is the flag.

Most people who lose a job don't come back to cause harm - but it belongs on the awareness list. Watch for lingering, aggression toward management, and drifting into staff-only areas.

3. Aggressively Seeking a Specific Employee

A leading indicator of domestic-violence spillover and targeted confrontation.



- **Angry demands to locate someone**
"I know they're here."
- **Trying to reach staff-only areas**
Pushing past normal access.
- **Waiting near entrances or exits**
Positioned to intercept.
- **Anyone in the way is at risk**
Not just the target.

The far more likely threat isn't someone in body armor - it's an angry person trying to find someone specific. Treat targeted, aggressive searching as a serious warning sign.

"I know they're here. Tell them to come out."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

4. Escalating Emotional Behavior

Most confrontations begin with frustration, not aggression.



- **Agitation and confrontation**
Tone shifts before action does.
- **Emotional volatility or fixation**
Stuck on one grievance.
- **Aggressive pacing or invading space**
Movement turns tense.
- **Targeting of employees**
Anger aimed at a person.

Rising emotional intensity sits on the path between agitation and confrontation. Recognizing it early creates room for de-escalation and for getting a manager involved before things tip over.

5. People Suddenly Running From a Person or Area

Human and crowd reactions are often the first warning sign of all.



- **Panic movement**
A rush in one direction.
- **Rapid movement away from an entrance**
People clearing out.
- **Yelling for others to leave**
Verbal alarm spreads.
- **React, don't wonder**
The reason can wait.

If many people suddenly change direction, that movement itself is the signal. The instinct to pause and wonder why is exactly what training has to work against - when you see it, treat it as real and respond.

"You really have to train away from the wow factor."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

6. Threatening Body Language

Physical warning signs often appear before any words do.



- **Rapidly closing distance**
Space disappears.
- **Clenched fists, tightening jaw**
Tension shows in the body.
- **Invading personal space**
A deliberate crowding.
- **Sudden silence after yelling**
A quiet that signals escalation.

Employees aren't expected to predict violence - only to notice behaviors that signal elevated risk. One that's easy to miss: a person who yells and then abruptly goes silent.

7. "Casing the Joint"

Probing and information-gathering that doesn't fit normal customer behavior.



- **Unusual interest in restricted areas**
Attention where guests don't go.
- **Repeated visits, no normal purpose**
Back again, ordering nothing.
- **Questions about staffing or procedures**
None of a patron's business.
- **Photographing exits and cameras**
Mapping the room.

Any one of these can be harmless; the pattern is what matters. People intent on harm often scout a location first - cameras, exits, routines - so apparent reconnaissance deserves a look.

"In the pathway to violence, one of the stages is reconnaissance."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

PART 5

Why People Miss or Ignore Warning Signs

"The one thing you can't do is freeze up."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

“I Didn't Want to Overreact”

The biggest barrier to early action is hesitation, not awareness.



- **Raised not to “cause problems”**
A lifelong conditioning.
- **Fear of looking dramatic**
Worry about being judged.
- **Reporting confused with snitching**
A cultural hang-up.
- **Social anxiety and discomfort**
Speaking up feels awkward.

A large portion of people were literally raised not to cause problems, and many fear looking dramatic or paranoid. If the frontline feels intimidated about reporting, that is exactly what culture and training have to work away from.

Focus Locks: The Awareness Killers

Modern distractions quietly shrink recognition and response time.



- **Headphones mask auditory cues**
You can miss a critical sound.
- **Phones narrow the visual field**
Eyes lock on a screen.
- **Task fixation creates tunnel vision**
Heads-down misses the room.
- **Distraction slows reaction time**
Attention arrives late.

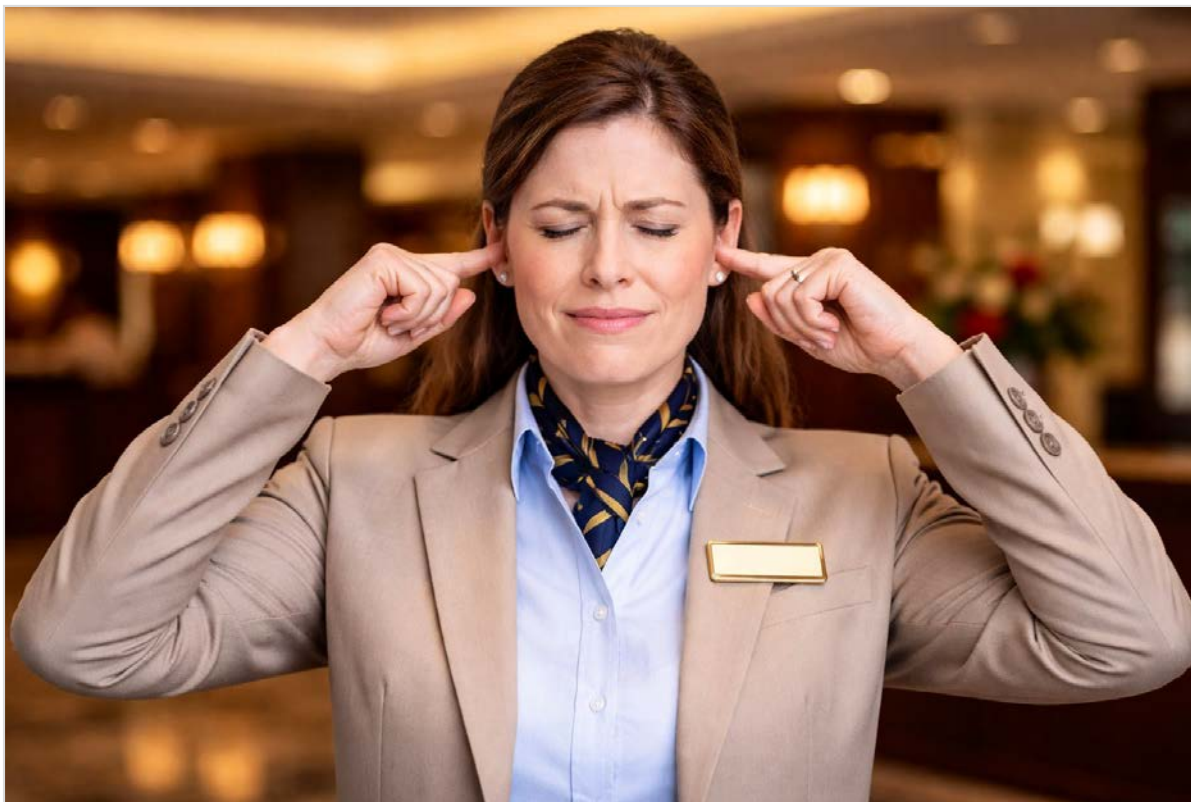
Smartphones and headphones can dramatically reduce awareness of a developing problem - or even an emergency sound. The single most practical reminder from the session was also the bluntest one.

“Don't wear headphones at work. Just don't.”

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

Normalcy Bias and Denial

The mind reaches for a harmless explanation - and the delay costs options.



- **We seek non-threatening explanations**

"It's probably nothing."

- **Concerning behavior gets rationalized**

Excuses come easily.

- **Familiar settings feel safe**

"This can't happen here."

- **Denial delays protective action**

The window keeps shrinking.

Normalcy bias is when capable, careful people convince themselves the warning signs are harmless - it could be any of us. Familiar environments create false reassurance, and the longer behavior gets explained away, the smaller the response window becomes. The deepest version is simple denial: this can't be happening.

"The one thing you can't do is freeze up."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

PART 6

Reducing the Distance Between Noticing and Acting

"The body doesn't go where the mind hasn't been."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

Culture, Culture, Culture

Training matters, but culture decides whether people actually speak up.



- **Employees follow organizational norms**

People take their cues.

- **Leadership behavior sets the pattern**

What gets modeled gets repeated.

- **Reporting must feel safe**

Embarrassment silences concerns.

- **Prepared cultures reduce hesitation**

Speaking up becomes normal.

Organizations unintentionally teach their people whether early reporting is encouraged, ignored, or discouraged. As the panel put it repeatedly, follow-through is what keeps the lines of communication open: when a concern is raised, let the employee know it was looked into - or they'll stop bringing concerns at all.

"It's culture, culture, culture."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

The 5-Minute Pre-Shift Awareness Huddle

A brief pre-shift conversation reinforces expectations and focus.



- **Expected traffic levels**
Know the day's pace.
- **Local event activity**
What's happening nearby.
- **Recent incidents**
What just happened here.
- **Behavioral reminders**
What to watch for today.

Awareness isn't built by annual training alone. A quick huddle - even a minute - gets a busy team focused before a hectic shift, especially when there's a big event in town or a recent incident worth flagging.

Reward the Behavior, Not Just the Outcome

Recognize people who speak up early, even when nothing comes of it.



- **Early reporting prevents escalation**
Speaking up changes outcomes.
- **Near misses are successful interventions**
Nothing happening is a win.
- **Recognition reinforces awareness**
Praise repeats the behavior.
- **What gets rewarded gets repeated**
Culture follows incentives.

Celebrate the people who raise a hand - the manager who 'super-sleuthed' the suspicious vehicle and the employee who flagged it are both wins. Make reporting something that ends in recognition, not a write-up.

"Celebrate near misses - make sure people understand a near miss matters."

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

One Change This Week

Turning “If You See Something, Say Something” into operational action.



- **Identify one communication barrier**

What makes reporting harder here?

- **Improve one escalation pathway**

Where do concerns get stuck?

- **Reinforce one awareness behavior**

What should the team notice?

- **Recognize one employee contribution**

Who spoke up and deserves thanks?

Preparedness improves through repetition. Pick one concrete move this week and follow through - it might take all of five minutes, and it's the kind of small, consistent change that builds real operational resilience.

MAKE IT A HABIT

Put a safety moment on the next team meeting: note the exits, ask one awareness question, and acknowledge one good catch. Routine is what makes it stick.

CONCLUSION

Four Take-Aways

Prepared organizations recognize earlier, communicate faster, and recover better.

1 Most threats begin with observable changes

Behavior shifts before violence does. A team that knows its baseline notices it.

2 Awareness creates intervention opportunities

Every moment between first observation and escalation is a chance to change the outcome.

3 Communication speed affects outcomes

The faster a concern is reported and acted on, the more options remain available.

4 Culture and training drive results

No tool or policy replaces a culture where reporting is normal, expected, and valued.

THE GOAL IS CONFIDENCE, NOT FEAR

Situational awareness is not constant suspicion. Done right it is calm and sustainable - employees stay alert without becoming fearful, and that comes from making it routine.

Stop Thinking of Training as a Cost Center

The most useful shift a leader can make is how they account for prevention training. Every dollar spent cleaning up a mess is a dollar that never reaches the profit margin. Treated as a line-item cost, training is the first thing cut; treated as protection for revenue, brand, and people, it earns its place in the budget.

STOP

Treating awareness and de-escalation training as a cost to minimize, defer, or cut.

START

Treating it as a revenue and brand protector - a measurable investment in resilience.

Move	What It Looks Like
Calculate the exposure	Turnover, liability, and lost-productivity costs are real and estimable. Put a number on them.
Reframe the spend	Position prevention training as protection for revenue, brand, and people.
Pair digital with human	Short online modules normalize the language; live discussion and huddles make it land.
Reward the behavior	Track early reports and good catches - celebrate near misses, not just incidents avoided.
Build the business case	IMA and TPOP can help you put a number on it and move the budget conversation.

Q&A Highlights

Real questions and answers from the session's live Q&A, lightly condensed.

Q How do you encourage reporting without creating a culture where every unusual behavior gets escalated?

The key word there is unusual behavior. If it's unusual in your business, you may want to report it as a notice only - it doesn't go against you to put someone on notice about something that could create an unsafe environment. You know your business best, so if it's unusual to you, it's probably unusual. Sometimes you have to trust the gut of your own people, and go ahead and get it reported.

- Susan DeVaughn, IMA

Q What's the best way to train employees on situational awareness without making them anxious or overly suspicious?

How those reports are responded to is what matters. Report, report, report - but that doesn't mean every report ends with someone being written up or sent home. The frontliners should report anything that feels odd or weird, and it will be a manager-level decision as to what should or should not be acted upon.

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

Q How does your organization help frontline people feel that their concerns actually matter?

You have to create that culture in each location - they have to know they can come to you and you're going to look into it, that you won't make them feel dumb or like they're blowing smoke. It begins with creating the culture, and like you said in the presentation, it has to start with leadership. If it's not important to the general manager, it won't be important to the employees.

- Norma Murillo, The Merritt Group

Q Have you seen organizations unintentionally discourage reporting without realizing it?

That lack of follow-through, when someone brings something to your attention, breaks that trust a little bit. It lets the employee think maybe my supervisor doesn't trust what I'm saying. Not every concern will be valid, but let them know you checked into it - and whether it was something to be concerned with or not. Keep them in those lines of communication.

- Renee Rhodes, IMA

Q Can these same awareness principles help reduce operational safety incidents, and not just security concerns?

Absolutely. Seeing something doesn't only mean a robbery or a gun - it could be a puddle of water in front of the exit that saves someone from a serious fall. The entire environmental health and safety world is a huge part of every business, and everything we're talking about transposes into all of those realms as well.

- Dan Stechow, TPOP

Q&A Highlights (continued)

Q How do you overcome the mindset of “I don't want to bother anyone unless I'm sure”?

Help people see the many times that someone did do something that mattered. We have a client, a major grocery chain near St. Louis, that had an active shooter last October. The only person who died was the shooter, and about a hundred employees said it was the training that saved their lives. Nothing teaches like reality.

- *Dan Stechow, TPOP*

KEEP GOING

Your Complimentary IMA Hospitality Training

A perfect addition to this guide - free online training built for restaurants and hotels, compliments of IMA.



WHAT'S INCLUDED

- Online training built for restaurants and hotels
- Turnkey - no IT requirements
- One year of unlimited access
- Four ~10-minute modules - assign the topics you choose

THE FOUR MODULES

- Situational Awareness
- De-Escalation Techniques
- Active Shooter / Assailant Response
- Safe Interactions with Homeless Persons

GET STARTED IN MINUTES

Go to ima.thepowerofpreparedness.com Manager code: **IMA2026**

- Set up your manager account and receive your access link.
- Share the link with current and future staff.
- Track completion on your dashboard.

Need more? Corporate-LMS integration, your own branding and locations, additional course topics, and custom scenarios are available via the IMA-TPOP site (fees apply).