

Associations Spirit Shines

By Patty Hull, Vice President

It was eerie to walk through the 50,000-plus square feet of meeting space of the beautiful Marriott Hotel in Anaheim, California and see no more than a handful of hotel staff members roaming the long hallways. Such a facility would normally be bustling with attendees rushing to their next education seminar, greeting old and new acquaintances, or taking part in other networking activities. However, it was just nine days after the September 11 terrorist attacks and the 30,000-attendee convention scheduled to be in progress at the Marriott had been canceled – leaving the massive expanse of ballrooms and breakout areas empty and silent.

My experience in Anaheim was not an isolated case. The unfathomable September tragedies had a dramatic impact on numerous September and October association meetings and are continuing to affect association events and operations. Although the flood of meeting cancellations has subsided, there is no doubt that associations will be different as a result of September 11. Whether it be exploring new technologies to bring together members leery of air travel, re-evaluating leadership roles and priorities for crisis management, or negotiating meeting contracts that limit association's legal and insurance risks in the event of a disaster, our work and responsibilities as association members and staff will forever be changed.

But despite the attack on America, the terrorists did not conquer the spirit of associations. Rather, it provided them with an opportunity to do what they do best and shine! As Michael Olson, CAE, President and CEO of the American Society of Association Executives says, "Associations are uniquely outfitted to respond in disastrous situations because of their strong member base, their ability to quickly mobilize volunteers, and their commitment to community." Over the past two months, associations have shone – showing their commitment to community and assisting in the nation's recovery efforts. The outpour of support and participation makes it impossible to mention all of the contributions. These are just a few examples to highlight how a diverse association community responded...

- The International Safety Equipment Association assisted with the location of the much-needed protective equipment for the Pentagon and Twin Towers firefighters and rescue personnel.
- The American Institute of Architects registered volunteers to help evaluate or assess buildings damaged by the World Trade Center attack and collapse.
- The Society of American Florists designed and delivered flowers to help heal the hurt felt by those impacted by the attacks, including victims' family members and rescue and relief workers.
- The Medical Society of the State of New York lined up physician volunteers to help in hospitals.

- The National Association of Realtors established a Housing Relief Fund to help pay the mortgages and rental costs of New York City and Washington, D.C. families.
- The American Waterways Operators mobilized nearly every tugboat company in and around New York City after the attack to assist the U.S. Coast Guard in the evacuation of victims.
- The Grocery Manufacturers Association worked with the American Red Cross to make available ready-to-eat foods for the relief workers in New York City.

Some organizations are also now taking action to stimulate the meetings industry and support New York City's recovery. One example that is close to Melby, Cameron & Hull's home is the Portland Oregon Visitors Association that sent representatives to New York City in early October as part of a delegation led by Portland's mayor with a mission to help spark the local economy.

Those of us involved with associations know their comforting attributes and ability to bring people together in good times and bad. With many associations having experienced apathy over the past several years, perhaps the events of September 11 will ignite a renewed sense of community that will help to reemphasize the importance of and need for associations.