

Accepting Minor Guests in Your Hotel; A Checklist for Handling the Challenges of Underage Guests

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Spring is here. Prom, graduation and college social events are scheduled to occur in the next few months. Are you ready? Is your staff well trained on how to handle underage guests in your property? Many prom attendees look upon this event as their right of passage into adulthood. How can you make this evening memorable yet protect your property and your employees? You can assist these young adults in complying with the law by implementing and consistently enforcing reasonable rules and regulations on your property.

Some hotels enjoy the revenue these special events provide to their properties with little or no concerns about disruption in operations. Others dread the thought of large groups of young people gathering in their lobby without any regard for the damage a can of silly string can do to a chandelier.

Many hotel and motel managers are not aware of the laws that govern minor guests while on, in or about your property. The likelihood of loud disturbing noise, drug use and underage drinking should be on your high priority list. There are steps you can take to meet the needs of your underage guests while protecting your employees, other guests and your property.

Must you accept minor guests in your property? Generally speaking, the answer is yes. Innkeepers have a general duty to admit all persons who seek accommodations, unless the innkeeper has "just cause" to refuse accommodations. Just cause may include lack of available guestrooms, failure of the guest to pay for the charges and a reasonable belief that the guest may harm employees, other guests or your property. Failure to allow a minor as a registered guest in your property may be grounds for an unfair discrimination charge against the innkeeper. Since state and local laws differ, it is prudent for you to confirm your legal rights and obligations in your particular area with a qualified and competent attorney.

You can, however, implement clear and reasonable rules and regulations as preconditions to accepting minors in your hotel. You must be consistent with your implementation and enforcement of these rules and you cannot discriminate.

Below is a checklist to review with your staff to make sure you are ready to receive these memory-seeking guests.

- As soon as possible, contact all the local junior high schools, high schools and colleges to learn about all upcoming dates for spring formal dances, proms, graduation, sorority and fraternity parties.
- If you are fairly new to your property, find out all you can about the history of these types of events occurring at your property and surrounding hotels and motels. Does your property have a reputation that you would like to change? Perhaps tighter rules are in order or consistent compliance efforts are needed. Review the areas that need improvement and address the situation before your underage guests arrive.
- Train your front desk in the proper procedures for admitting minor guests. Ask for photo identification. If the identification looks suspicious, ask for secondary identification. The Internet makes it very easy to obtain fraudulent identification cards.
- All states prohibit underage drinking. An innkeeper can lose his/her liquor license and may be subject to liability for accidents that occur as a result of guests driving while intoxicated. Do not allow front desk personnel to give honor bar keys to underage guests. If your honor bars are not key controlled but are accessed through an easily breakable plastic ring, have all alcohol removed from the honor bar when minor guests rent the room. In addition, make sure alcohol is not delivered to guestrooms used exclusively by minor guests either through room service or as part of a frequent guest amenity program (such as a thank you to the parents for their patronage).
- Anticipate the needs of small and large groups. Make it clear that guestrooms cannot sleep more than four people (if that is your policy depending on guestroom dimensions). Make sure you comply with your local fire codes on the number of occupants in the guestrooms at one time. Offer a hospitality suite or other meeting room space to minor guests late in the evening to lessen the chances of disturbing other guests.

- Add additional security measures on the evenings when your hotel hosts these types of events. For every group of fifty attendees, you might want to consider requiring the group to provide a security officer at their own expense. In addition, you may want to provide favorable room rates to parents in order to encourage the parents to stay the evening and chaperone the event. You may also want to provide, at your expense, additional security officers to walk the premises, including the parking lots, during these events. Make it known to all minors checking in to your property that security has been increased for their protection. Make sure security is visible to the minor guests and that they know they will be observed. Providing notice in advance of what is unacceptable conduct or behavior on your property, coupled with a visible security team, will confirm to your minor guests that you mean business and intend to uphold the law.
- As an innkeeper you need to protect yourself from the risks imposed by a minor's legal status since a minor may revoke a contract and refuse to pay for room charges. Request that payment be made in advance either with cash or a valid credit card. Verify authorization of the credit cards used by minor guests. Verify ownership of the card and the right of the minor child to use the credit card.
- Remind minor guests that disturbing noise, illegal drugs and underage drinking will not be permitted anywhere on the hotel property. As for intolerable noise levels, your rules may provide for an initial warning prior to any unregistered guests being escorted off property. Subsequent warnings will be grounds for the removal of the registered guests without a refund of the advance payment for room charges.
- Upon check in, a minor guest should be asked to provide parental contact information in the event the rules and regulations are not complied with during their stay and a call to the parents becomes necessary. Alternatively, you may request that the parent register the minor child or children so that the parents become aware of the rules and accept all responsibility for damage or injury during their children's stay.
- Your rules may require that minor guests be required to sign a form upon check in acknowledging that they are familiar with the house rules and regulations and agree to comply with them during their stay. When you must take appropriate action to remove the guest, having a minor guest's signature on this type of form will help defeat the guest's claim that they didn't know the rules.
- Training your employees on these rules and regulations is also essential. Each and every employee needs to know the rules to ensure consistent enforcement throughout your property.
- If you remove a minor guest from your property for failure to comply with the rules and regulations, you must exercise reasonable care. Depending on the specific circumstances, you may want to consider calling the parents or the police. Treat the guest as you would any other guest. For your guests protection and yours, don't let a guest who is noticeably intoxicated or under the influence of drugs to get behind the wheel of an automobile.

Providing a safe, memorable evening for a young adult can create long term customer loyalty and possibly result in future revenues for other life changing events such as weddings, anniversaries, and the like. Make sure the rules you create are enforced consistently, provided uniformly and are non-discriminatory.