

THE NEW  
STANDARD



Hilton, whose properties include the Waldorf Astoria Chicago (shown), was quick to show support for staff

## Hotels With Heart

International chains and boutique outfits alike are doubling down on their commitment to their communities—to the benefit of all

**Local** has been a favorite word of hotels for years, used in reference to everything from partnerships with small-batch gin distilleries to artist-in-residence programs. But what does it mean to be local in the midst of a crisis? Despite the enormous financial hit the pandemic has inflicted on the hospitality industry, many of the world's leading hotel brands have sought to use their resources to help communities, particularly those where their properties are located, deeming it both a sensible long-term business strategy and the right thing to do.

Hilton teamed up with American Express to offer nearly 1 million rooms across the U.S. to frontline medical staff, while Marriott harnessed its Bonvoy loyalty program to let members donate points toward providing rooms to relief organizations like the American Red Cross and UNICEF. Large- and medium-size companies from Hyatt to Rosewood similarly launched efforts to help first responders. Hilton also established a job-placement service for the employees it was forced to furlough, setting them up with temporary gigs at companies like Amazon and Walgreens, and issued a grant through its philanthropic arm, the Hilton Effect Foundation, to provide personal protective equipment to communities in need. “The challenging reality is our funds are limited,” says Kate Mikesell, vice president of global corporate responsibility at Hilton, “so we are rethinking how we can be more innovative with the resources we do have—whether that’s an open kitchen at a hotel or team-member volunteer hours—in order to have the greatest impact in our communities.”

Independent hotels have likewise been responsive to the needs of their neighborhoods. Brooklyn's Wythe Hotel took in 40 medical workers from nearby hospitals and fed staff at two intensive care units, managing to avoid any on-site cases of the virus in the process. When the Wythe reopened its popular restaurant, Le Crocodile, the public demonstrated its appreciation—



The Wythe Hotel in Brooklyn put up workers from local hospitals

and perhaps its confidence—by submitting more than 300 reservation requests over a few days. On the opposite coast, the Surfrider Hotel in Malibu used its kitchen and common spaces to prep meals for frontline workers and launched an initiative allowing the public to purchase hotel-stay vouchers and donate them to workers.

For the Surfrider, these kinds of actions were nothing new. After the Woolsey Fire the winter before last, the hotel pledged all of its lodgings to area residents. Since opening three years ago, it has hired locals almost exclusively, and before COVID-19 it had started working with nearby colleges to offer hospitality students training and leadership development courses. These choices aren't necessarily convenient, but the team behind the Surfrider believes that strong ethics garner trust, particularly during a crisis. “Guests will be naturally attracted to places with soul and a little lightness,” says the hotel's co-owner Emma Crowther Goodwin. “It's not something you can create overnight, though. Those things have to be earned—and shown through action.” —**Shivani Ashoka**