



Jake Steinman (center), Founder of TravelAbility, and Kristy Durso (left), TravelAbility Ambassador and Founder of Incredible Memories Travel, moderate a panel session featuring hoteliers, including Steven Yang, CEO of Yang Capital. Panelists discussed their perspectives on accessibility in hospitality at the TravelAbility Emerging Markets Summit on November 14 at the Hotel Argonaut in San Francisco.

Proposal to Remake Salt Lake City Convention Center Stirs Controversy

By Jonathan Trager

A proposal from the mayor of Salt Lake County to divert millions of dollars in transportation funds for a Salt Palace Convention Center rebuild has met with pushback from some local leaders.

The Salt Lake County Council voted 7-2 on November 5 to allocate \$10.5 million to explore a convention center renovation using money from a transportation fund. The idea is part of the revitalization project in downtown Salt Lake City with Smith Entertainment Group.

However, local news outlet KSLTV reports that Salt Lake County Mayor Jenny Wilson is calling for a rebuild, a project that could cost north of \$1 billion.

“There’s an opportunity on the table to not just rebuild what we have, but rebuild it better so that we can attract even bigger and better conventions and hopefully grow that revenue stream by tens of millions of dollars more [annually],” said Andrew

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TravelAbility Summit Hosts Innovative PitchFest for Travel Solutions

By Jordan Bradley

The TravelAbility Emerging Markets Summit 2024 InnovateAble Showcase PitchFest: Elevating Accessibility and Beyond! highlighted the technology of five companies at the forefront of inclusive travel solutions.

Attendees heard pitches from Be My Eyes, an AI app that guides travelers who are blind or low-vision through hotels and attractions; Aira, an app providing visual interpreting services; True Omni, an inclusive visitor kiosk that can be modified to

suit any user; Hero Door Opener, a cost-effective automatic door opener that can be accessed through an app; and 360 Direct Video, an app providing deaf conference attendees with access to American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters.

Winners were chosen by a panel of judges, with 360 Direct Video taking first place. Hero Door Opener and Be My Eyes tied for second, while Aira took third.

During the session, each of the four companies shared a video exemplifying their product, offering three-min-

ute pitches followed by seven minutes of follow-up questions from judges Ron Pettit, Director, Disability Inclusion and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Compliance, Royal Caribbean Group; Allison Rowe, Room Operations and Guest Experiences, Marriott International; Paul Kent, Founder, disABLED Life Alliance; Jeff Ossenkop, General Manager, W Hotel San Francisco; and Matthew Harrington, The Schoolhouse Hotel.

The 360 Direct Video app’s sign language accessibility tool reach-

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NYC Man Who Lived in Hotel Rent Free Declared Unfit for Trial

By Jordan Bradley

A man living rent free for years in the New Yorker Hotel due to a legal loophole in New York City has been declared unfit to stand trial following a medical evaluation, according to prosecutors and two doctors involved in the case.

In February, Mickey Barreto was evicted from the New Yorker Hotel and charged with 24 counts, including 14 felony fraud and criminal contempt, after years of attempted evictions

from the hotel’s management. He pleaded not guilty.

During the proceedings this summer, Barreto was ordered to take a psychiatric exam. The two doctors conducting the exam concluded that he did not fully comprehend the court proceedings and that he had two mental illnesses and a drug addiction, according to the *New York Times*. That prompted the judge overseeing the case, Justice Cori H. Weston of New York City Criminal Court in Lower

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NCBMP Opens Conference with Message of Hope at Historic Birmingham Church

By Todd McElwee

The pews of Birmingham’s historic 16th Street Baptist Church were full, with those occupying them standing, swaying, clapping and singing on the evening of November 13. The congregation: attendees of the National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals’ (NCBMP) 41st Annual Conference.

After learning about the church’s tragic September 15, 1963, bombing that killed four little girls, attendees

left with messages of hope, resiliency, acceptance and community.

Jason Dunn, CEO, NCBMP, told *USAE*: “The 16th Street Baptist Church is a beacon of resiliency and strength for the community and reflective of the spirit of NCBMP’s founders.”

He added the church and those involved with what happened in 1963 turned the power inward and changed the nation.

“What happened here, and outside of the church,

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NEWS

Michael Sawaya Departing as Head of New Orleans Convention Center

By Jonathan Trager

Michael J. Sawaya, President & CEO of the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center (NOEMCC), announced on November 7 that he's leaving the position to become President & CEO of the Audubon Nature Institute.

Sawaya, who has led the facility for nearly seven years, will start his new job at the beginning of January.

"When I moved to New Orleans, my mission was to gain an in-depth understanding of New Orleans," Sawaya told *USAE*. "I wanted to give all of me to New Orleans and use all of my talents and skills to give myself to the community I was committing to. This opportunity I was pursuing touches the lives of everyone and contributes more to the overall community and allows me to use my skills to the best of my ability. It's an opportunity of a lifetime."

Sawaya said the new opportunity "touches on my love of nature and conservation, and it's a dream come true." The Audubon Nature Institute operates a family of 10 museums and parks dedicated to nature, including the Audubon Zoo and the Audubon Aquarium.

During his tenure at the convention center, Sawaya has driven major advancements for the facility, including a \$557 million transformative Capital Improvement Plan, nationally recognized sustainability initiatives that led to a LEED Gold certification, the development of a new \$1 billion mixed-use business and residential neighborhood, and the commitment—with a \$500 million investment pledge by Omni Hotels & Resorts—to build a 1,000-room headquarters hotel.

"Serving as the leader of this Convention Center for the past six and a half years has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my long and blessed career," said Sawaya. "Together, we have achieved incredible success, and I am immensely proud of the work we have accomplished together as a team – enhancing our facilities and our services to remain a premier hub for conventions, exhibitions, and events and setting the standard for excellence in our industry."

Walt Leger III, President & CEO of New Orleans & Company, said the NOEMCC and Sawaya have been "an invaluable partner" to New Orleans & Company.

"In our work together, we've cultivated and maintained strong relationships between our hospitality and tourism sector and the businesses that return year after year to host some of the most complex and impactful meetings in the nation," said Leger. "We are thrilled for Mike and thrilled for Audubon, and I am confident we will continue to accelerate this important work with the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center under his successor."

Commissioners of the Ernest N. Morial New Orleans Exhibition Hall Authority are expected to launch an extensive national search process to fill Sawaya's role.

"We cannot thank Mike enough for his leadership in honing the mission and vision of our Convention Center and propelling us to the top of the national conventions, meetings and events market," said Russell W. Allen, President of the Ernest N. Morial New Orleans Exhibition Hall Authority. "As we continue to build on our shared achievements and push for further innovations and advancements in our industry, we wish Mike unbounded success at Audubon."



Michael Sawaya

Sawaya and his wife, Leslie, have two sons, Miles and Meade Farris. He enjoys golfing and said he has dined at 342 restaurants in the city.

"This is a new challenge that keeps me in New Orleans, a place I've fallen in love with," Sawaya said. "I've been in the hospitality industry for 50 years, and this is a great way to go out of it."

ASAE Calls for Proposals for Annual Meeting & Exposition

By Todd McElwee

ASAE has opened the Call for Proposals for the 2025 ASAE Annual Meeting & Exposition. This year's theme is "Harness Your Power!" By "Harnessing Your Power," Los Angeles will host from August 9 – 12.

"This leading event brings together thousands of association professionals and industry partners for a powerful exchange of knowledge, strategies, and resources, all while fostering a vibrant community," ASAE said. "Over

three dynamic days of learning and networking, attendees gain actionable insights and innovative ideas to fuel both personal and professional growth throughout the year.

Topics include business operations, conscious inclusion, leadership, ethics, finance, governance, government relations, technology, marketing, revenue and more. Proposals may address more than one area, but individuals must select the one that is the best fit.

Each year, ASAE refines its con-

tent strategy to define target audiences and guide content design. The association said the framework helps staff make informed decisions, collaborate, and create content to meet member needs and support ASAE's goals.

The four content themes for fiscal year 2025 are:

- Conscious Inclusion: Focuses on intentional actions in creating inclusive, equitable environments that value diverse perspectives.
- Artificial Intelligence: Examines

AI's role in enhancing productivity, personalizing experiences, and ethical considerations at work.

- Strategic Leadership: Emphasizes guiding teams with vision, adaptability, and collaboration to achieve lasting success.

- Workforce Development: Covers building skills, pathways, and supportive environments for a thriving, future-ready workforce.

December 10 is the deadline for submission. Find more information at www.asaecenter.org.

PitchFest

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es more than 70 million deaf sign language users globally, offering "deaf-friendly customer support and answering services tailored to the needs of the deaf and hard of hearing community," according to Craig Radford, CEO of 360 and a deaf man himself.

The app currently has three main features: "Sign Live, where trained deaf representatives can communicate directly in sign language with deaf callers; Sign Message, where users can leave messages in sign language after hours; and Sign Bots, where quick

answers can be delivered via AI sign bots or pre-recorded ASL messages," Radford said.

According to Radford, miscommunications between businesses and deaf customers cause "frustration, escalations and disparities and cost companies millions of dollars every year."

Radford described a frustrating experience being in an airport and attempting to change his flight. He spent 45 minutes waiting to connect to an ASL interpreter, then an additional 45 minutes waiting to connect with the airline's English speaking representative.

"After all that, the interpreter made a mistake. I was booked on the wrong

flight. For millions of deaf people worldwide, this is an everyday reality," Radford said.

All representatives and employees of the app are trained to handle sensitive information, such as credit card and medical data, and must adhere to strict security requirements, and the app provides ASL, Quebec Sign Language, and British Sign Language interpreters, is working on introducing French Sign Language "soon," is "in conversations in both India and Japan," and expects to have Spanish Sign Language in 2025, Radford said.

Joe Weber, Manager of Accessibility Solutions for Be My Eyes, presented the tied-for-second Be My Eyes app, sharing a video of Peter Tucic, a blind

man and frequent traveler.

Be My Eyes partnered with Hilton Hotels in October. The pitch video showed Tucic navigating his hotel room with the help of a Hilton representative. Throughout the session, the representative guided Tucic to outlets near the bed, identified which refillable containers mounted in the shower were body wash, shampoo and conditioner, and located other items in the room.

Weber said the app began as a volunteer-only service when it launched in 2015. But in 2018, the app partnered with Google and Microsoft to provide customer support services from company representatives in

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HOTS

HOTS What's in a name?... On the ground at the annual TravelAbility Emerging Markets Summit, *HOTS* embraced the San Francisco vibes of the historic Fisherman's Wharf. Just a block away from the summit's host hotel, The Argonaut Hotel, lives Cioppino's restaurant, boasting a menu filled with delectable seafood dishes, of course. Many restaurants in Fisherman's Wharf take their names from the families that first open the establishments. Cioppino's, however, takes inspiration from "a lusty

and flavorful seafood soup which is uniquely San Franciscan," according to the restaurant's menu. "We would have used our family name, but we were forced to admit it simply does not look good in lights," the owners wrote. Either way, *HOTS*—and several Summit attendees—enjoyed a meal or two at Cioppino's.



HOTS Operation Bear Claw... A group of luxury car owners in the San Bernardino Mountains of California are up a creek without a paddle, AP reports. The group—four Los Angeles residents and owners of one Rolls-Royce and two Mercedes—experienced a string of break-ins and destruction of their vehicles by "bears." They claimed almost \$142,000 in damages from their three respective insurance companies. As part of the claim, the car owners submitted video of what appeared to be a bear—but was actually a man in a bear suit—moving inside the vehicles, along with photos of the damaged interiors and scratches on the doors. Representatives of the California Insurance Department



Cartner's Christmas Tree Farm's David, Sam and Jim Cartner have been named 2024 Grand Champion Grower by the National Christmas Tree Association. Robert Downing, White House Chief Usher and Dale Haney, White House Superintendent of Grounds, recently visited the Newland, N.C. farm to select the home's tree. A 20-foot-tall Fraser fir will be displayed in the Blue Room of the White House this holiday season. Shown here (left to right): Downing, Sam and Agnes Cartner, David Cartner and Susan Strahley, Jane and Jim Cartner and Haney. Photo by National Christmas Tree Association.

reviewed the video and found that "something wasn't quite right," AP reports. The department consulted with a biologist from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, who

reviewed the videos and said it was "clearly a human in a bear suit," the insurance department said. *HOTS* thinks that's one em-BEAR-assing incident the thieves will regret for a long time.

WEEKLY NEWS OF ASSOCIATIONS, CLUBS AND HOTELS

USAE

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Salt Lake City

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Roberts, Chief of Staff for Wilson, according to KSLTV.

The 4th Quarter Transportation Fund, generated by a 0.25% local option sales tax for transportation, currently contains \$58 million. The county would still need to obtain permission from the legislature to divert the funds into something other than transportation projects.

Among those opposing the idea

of a rebuild are County Councilman Sheldon Stewart, County Councilman David Alvord, and Riverton Mayor Trent Staggs, who argue that money should be limited to its intended use. Riverton is part of the Salt Lake City metropolitan area.

"We need transportation dollars to be used for transportation and not for the construction of buildings or demolition of buildings, and so I really want to encourage the county to reconsider this," Staggs said, according to KSLTV.

When *USAE* asked Visit Salt Lake

for comment on the matter, the destination organization responded that Salt Palace is a county-owned property so the news outlet would need to speak with the county.

Liz Sollis, Director of Communications for Salt Lake County, told *USAE* the renovation concepts currently being considered don't involve a knock down of the facility but rather remaking half of the building called the west end.

"We know that with the interest in creating a more vibrant sports enter
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NYC Guest

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Manhattan, to order Barreto to attend outpatient mental health and addiction treatment.

Barreto entered treatment through the Addiction Institute of Mount Sinai West, the *Times* reported, but in a November 6 hearing Weston said she was unsatisfied with his progress and ordered him to find inpatient psychiatric care by the November 13 hearing. It was not clear at press deadline whether Barreto had followed the court's order.

Barreto first checked into the New Yorker Hotel in June 2018, according to the *Times*. He paid just over \$200 for one night stay in room 2565, but didn't check out the next day, eventually staying in the hotel without paying again for the next five years.

Barreto was able to do this due to a state housing law passed in 1969 that allowed a hotel guest to become "a permanent resident by requesting a lease at a discounted rate," the *New York Times* reported in March. The law, called the Rent Stabilization Act, applied mostly to apartments; however, a small portion of it applied to "a swath of hotel rooms, specifically those in large hotels built before 1969, whose rooms could be rented for than \$88 a week in May 1968," the *New York Times* continued.

Barreto used the obscure law to request a discount lease at the end of his already-paid night in the New Yorker, but he was refused and he and his possessions were removed from the property. Because of the wording of the law, Barreto was able to sue the hotel for unlawful eviction, delivering an affidavit detailing his removal from

the property on June 22, 2018, according to the *Times*.

At a hearing on July 10, 2018, no representatives from the hotel were present to contest or oppose Barreto's motion, and the judge ruled in his favor. This ruling allowed Barreto to lawfully return to the New Yorker Hotel, a member of the Wyndham Hotels and Resorts portfolio of hotels, just days after his initial stay and as a resident of the hotel.

Later, he took over the property—at least on paper—by declaring possession of the hotel, a word the judge used in the ruling that allowed Barreto to stay in the hotel.

Over the next five years, Barreto attempted to demand changes to the building, for the hotel's bank to transfer its accounts to him, and rent from a restaurant located in the hotel. These demands were not met.

USAE (USPS 702-930, ISSN 0894-8194) is published weekly except the week of Christmas Day by CustomNEWS, Inc. Subscription rate is \$175/year; add \$65 in Canada and Mexico. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *USAE*, 6809 Delaware Street, Chevy Chase, MD 20815.



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NEWS

Associations Slam Chicago Mayor's Proposal for 34% Increase in Alcohol Taxes

By Todd McElwee

Economic analysis by the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States (DISCUS) shows that Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson's proposal to increase alcohol taxes by more than 34% would cost 300 Chicagoans their jobs as a result of more than \$25 million in lost alcohol retail sales.

The Illinois Restaurant Association and Beer Institute also raised concerns with the mayor's idea, noting the economic damage resulting from the levy increase.

"As a Chicago-based distillery, we know firsthand how detrimental excessive taxation can be for our customers and our business," said Sonat Birnecker Hart, President of Koval Distillery. "With more than half of our bottle sales already going towards a tax or fee of some kind, we simply

can't afford a 34% increase in taxes. Businesses like ours help make up the unique and exciting hospitality experiences so many come to Chicago to enjoy. We urge alderpersons to reject this harmful proposal."

For a typical bottle of distilled spirits purchased in Chicago, nearly 56% of the retail cost already goes to pay a tax or fee of some kind. Raising the spirits excise tax would make the combined state, county and city spirits excise tax rate in Chicago 2.6 times as high as the average for similar cities.

"Chicago has the highest alcohol tax rate out of any of the surrounding areas," said Andy Deloney, Sr. Vice President and Head of State Government Relations, DISCUS. "If this tax passes, Chicago's alcohol tax would be more than double the average tax rate for similar cities. Consumers will undoubtedly feel this increase when

checking out at their favorite restaurant, local bar or distillery. Many will stop dining out and shopping in Chicago altogether in favor of lower prices right outside the city limits."

The Illinois Restaurant Association said if the hike passes, Chicago will have the second-highest wine and spirits taxes and the seventh-highest tax on beer of any major U.S. city. The association is calling on its members to contact city officials and advocate against the measure.

"Our industry operates on razor-thin margins and is still recovering from the pandemic," the association said. "It will be difficult to pass this tax onto the consumer, effectively adding another tax to our already heavily taxed industry. We can't afford another tax increase!"

The Beer Institute noted its industry employs more than 94,000 residents

and contributes more than \$17 billion to the Illinois economy. The association estimates that approximately 45.765 million gallons of beer were sold by all retailers (on- and off-premise) in 2023 in the city of Chicago, generating approximately \$13.271 million in tax revenue.

Beer Institute President and CEO Brian Crawford said: "The beer industry is essential to Chicago's economy and identity. We are proud to serve our brewers' products to residents and visitors across the city. The Beer Institute vehemently opposes a 34% tax increase on the sale of beer which will only increase inflationary pressures on consumers, retailers and manufacturers. We urge Mayor Johnson and Members of the City Council to take these points into consideration before instituting a tax hike of this nature."

PitchFest

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addition to volunteer services.

Through the beta testing for its partnership with Hilton, Weber said Be My Eyes found that artificial intelligence was able to handle requests like Tucic's well, but it was not able to handle requests related to the booking process. That's where the dedicated customer service representatives come in, Weber said.

"Ultimately, the technology integrates directly into the Hilton general Customer Care Center," Weber said, "and that is who owns this relationship, the regular customer care team, who's been advised by the Accessibility Team."

Also tied for second, the Hero Door Opener was presented by owner Pierre Paul, and included several solutions, including: the Hero Door Opener, a cost-effective device designed to turn any door into an accessible door; the Push app, which operates the Hero Door Opener; a Push fob that opens compatible accessible doors from up to 20 feet away.

The average cost to install an accessible door is anywhere from \$7,000 to \$20,000 and often involves a structural change to the door and doorway, Paul said.

The Hero Door Opener, however, is battery-operated, does not require hard-wiring into the doorframe, and costs \$1,750 to install.

"We create the Hero to ensure that there's no excuse for a small business to not be accessible anymore, because we're making it affordable and we're ensuring that it is possible without ruining the integrity of the building," Paul said.

Aira, which took third and was presented by Jill Ratliff, Vice President of Business Development, is an app that connects users who are blind, have low vision, are deaf and hard of hearing to trained visual interpreters and ASL interpreters in all 50 states. The app works by using "geofencing," which creates a virtual boundary in a geographical space wherein the app can be used.

"I think the thing that that is exceptional about Aira is that our technology, through the geofencing systems that we use, allows the end user to have accessibility on their terms, not

on the business or the organization providing access," Ratliff said.

Throughout the United States, 250 organizations are already using

the app to provide complimentary access to the subscription-based app for customers and employees, including Starbucks, Amazon, Microsoft, the

"Ultimately, the technology integrates directly into the Hilton general Customer Care Center," Weber said.



Craig Redford, CEO, 360 Direct Video, presented his app during the InnovateABLE Showcase PitchFest at TravelAbility Emerging Markets Summit 2024 hosted at the Argonaut Hotel in San Francisco on November 13.

Minnesota St. Paul Airport, Visit Salt Lake, and Visit Mesa.

Doug Ralston, CEO of True Omni, presented the accessible kiosk that allows users to customize their experience based on their accessibility needs. Currently, Ralston said, there are approximately 1,500 devices installed throughout the country, a majority of which are at visitor centers, regional airports, and convention centers.

True Omni kiosks in locations such as airports are "really upgraded," Ralston said, with every accessible feature, including screens that adjust automatically to ADA-compliant heights for wheelchair users, ADA-compliant control modules for

users who are blind or have visual impairments, and adjustable contrast, brightness, gray scale and font size settings, and the ability to share information from the kiosk directly to a personal phone.

Ralston said about 30% of their recent kiosk users have some sort of disability or impairment.

"We're trying to make sure that that experience is actually very similar to the experience that anyone else would have, so I think that's probably what's driving that increase in engagement because it's a much different experience than you would get at a typical kiosk or interactive screen," Ralston said.

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NEWS

Miami Hotel Association Leader Wendy Kallergis Announces Retirement

By Jordan Bradley

Wendy Kallergis, President and CEO of the Greater Miami and the Beaches Hotel Association (GMBHA), has announced her forthcoming retirement after 15 years with the association. Her last day with the association will be December 31.

Throughout her tenure with GMBHA, Kallergis launched several initiatives, including the Sustainable Hospitality Council, a coalition dedicated to promoting eco-friendly practices within hospitality, and is recognized for helping to shape Miami into a vibrant destination for events, meetings, and cultural tourism.

"It is bittersweet to announce Wendy Kallergis' retirement," said Amir Blattner, Chair of the GMBHA and General Manager of the Hyatt Regency Miami. "Wendy has been an incredible leader for our association, its members, and the hospitality sector. Her contributions to our organization and the industry are unparalleled, and we are immensely grateful for her unwavering dedication. She will be deeply missed. We look forward to ensuring a seamless leadership transition and to the future success of this essential organization for our community."

Before joining the Miami association, Kallergis grew up in a family

of restaurateurs, according to the GMBHA. After high school, she earned a Bachelor of Arts in French from the George Washington University. When she graduated, she traveled to France, where she attended the University of Paris, the Cordon Bleu L'Ecole de Cuisine, and the Modern Gourmet Cooking School in Annecy.

Kallergis returned to the United States and continued her work in the culinary arts in Washington, D.C., before moving to Miami to take on the role of General Manager of the Miami City Club in 2002. She has held various roles in catering, food and beverage, and events at the Biltmore Hotel, Mayfair Hotel, Delano South Beach, and Grand Bay Hotel as well as served as Director of Catering and Conference Services during the Summit of the Americas at the Biltmore, according to the GMBHA.

Prior to joining the GMBHA in January of 2010, Kallergis also served as the President of the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce from 2005–2009, according to her LinkedIn.

David Whitaker, President and CEO of the Greater Miami CVB, said Kallergis' time with and dedication to the association left "an extraordinarily positive and lasting impact" on GMBHA and Miami's tourism industry at large.

Whitaker added that Kallergis'

"decision to retire marks the end of a remarkable tenure, during which she achieved significant milestones in establishing the Greater Miami and the Beaches Hotel Association as the largest hotel lodging group in Miami-Dade County."

Kallergis has served on several boards, including GMCVB, Black Hospitality Initiative, the GMCC, and the Academy of Hospitality and Tourism. She has also served as advisor on the FIU Chaplin School of Hospitality Management Industry Advisory Board of Directors, the Miami-Dade College Culinary Institute Business Advisory Council, the International Women's Forum - Miami Chapter, and Les Dames d'Escoffier.

During her career, Kallergis was awarded several accolades and recognitions, including South Florida Business Journal's Influential Business Women Award, the American Hotel and Lodging Association's Women in Lodging Connect Leader of the Year Award, and the Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International - South Florida Chapter's 2020 Hospitality Legend of the Year award.

Kallergis was active in her efforts to create community within Miami's robust industry of travel professionals and beyond, Whitaker said.



Wendy Kallergis

"She has also played a crucial role in fostering unity and collaboration among travel, tourism, hospitality professionals, and government and business leaders at local, national, and international levels," Whitaker said. "I want to thank Wendy for her service, dedication, and friendship over the years."

Currently, the GMBHA is considering candidates for Kallergis's successor. Curtis Crider, former Chairman of Jungle Island Resort, will serve as Co-CEO to assist in the transitional period at the association.

TravelAbility Partners with KultureCity to Foster Sensory Inclusive Travel

By Jordan Bradley

TravelAbility announced a new partnership with KultureCity, a leading organization creating sensory inclusion in travel, on November 14 at the TravelAbility Emerging Markets Summit held in San Francisco.

The pair of organizations will create more inclusive environments within the travel industry for people with sen-

sory processing challenges through certifications for destinations and locations, ensuring that at least half of their consumer-facing employees pass an exam following KultureCity sensory inclusion training; a team of "secret shoppers" conduct-

"We have been looking for an autism or sensory partner for quite a while that not only has the experience and the reputation, but also has an affordable format for destinations and for your partners."

ing audits at certified locations to maintain standards, and distribution of five sensory bags per location.

Jake Steinman, Founder of TravelAbility, said the partnership is a "significant step" toward achieving the goal of enhancing inclu-

sive travel experiences for everyone.

As part of the partnership, TravelAbility will work with KultureCity to create a pilot program through the Destination Ally Club partners top 10 list of "family-oriented" destinations and attractions that are considerate and accommodating to sensory inclusion.

"We have been looking for an autism

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NCBMP Conference

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was a visual reminder of the brutality and hate in the country, he said. "But if we love each other and collectively unify, whether you're black, white, brown, gay or straight, we can change history. That's why we brought this event here. We want to remind folks of their power, who they are as humans and that together we're more powerful than we are individually."

Just before 11 a.m. on September 15, a bomb exploded under the steps of the church, the National Park Service said. In the basement, four little girls

were killed—14-year-olds Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and 11-year-old Cynthia Wesley. Addie's sister Sarah survived but lost her right eye.

NCBMP attendees heard from survivors of the bombing, relatives of those killed, NCBMP officers, Greater Birmingham CVB leadership, the city government and other Birmingham officials. Speaking from the pulpit, their stories and addresses differed, but a welcoming theme of love, strength and perseverance was strewn throughout each address.

"No matter your race or religion; no matter your politics or social status—everyone paused upon hearing that

the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed, killing four little girls and providing a whole new perspective on the STRENGTH & RESILIENCE of Birmingham," NCBMP said.

Following the program at the 16th Street Baptist Church, attendees moved across the street to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BRICI). Visitors to the museum experienced a rendition of a segregated city in the 1950s, as well as examined a replica of a Freedom Riders bus and even the actual jail cell door from behind which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. penned his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The institute is also home to an expansive archive of documents from

the Civil Rights Movement and nearly 500 recorded oral histories relevant to the period.

"Hosting the opening event for the Coalition at the 16th Street Baptist Church and the National Civil Rights Institute was appropriate to introduce so many attending the conference, many who had not yet been born, to experience the sacred ground of our Civil Rights district, which is now a U.S. Park Service National Monument," J. John Oros Jr., President & CEO, Greater Birmingham CVB, told *USAE*. "The sacrifice that that generation made in 1963 changed the world for the benefit of future generations to come."

NEWS

NCBMP Looks to “Strength & Resilience” in Birmingham

By Todd McElwee

“Strength & Resilience.” The phrase was everywhere during the National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals’ (NCBMP) 41st Annual Conference in Birmingham from November 13–16.

Organizers and attendees took heed, connecting and learning under the banner during their time in Magic City.

“The conference agenda, the education, was specifically designed to remind people of their inner strength, to remind people of how courageous we are as a unit and to remind people that the objectives on which our organization was created are still relevant today,” Jason Dunn, CEO, NCBMP, told *USAE*. “If we waver from why we were created, if we waver from the courage of our founders, then we have lost the fight.”

Dunn added he hopes everyone leaves the event inspired, educated, empowered and with the notion that

we are more powerful together.

Five general sessions set the foundation for the educational agenda at the conference. Leadership, technology, travel’s status and more are on the docket with academics, religious leaders and meetings industry executives set to lead the discussions.

“We Are The Leaders We Have Been Looking For” kicked off the general session slate on the morning of November 14. Dr. Eddie S. Glaude Jr., James S. McDonnell, Board of Trustees, Morehouse College, and Distinguished Professor Chair, African American Studies Department, Princeton University, facilitated the session.

Additional keynote speakers on the agenda included Dr. Ruha Benjamin, Professor of African American Studies, Princeton University, and Founding Director, Ida B. Wells JUST Data Lab; Zeek Coleman, Vice President, Americas, Tourism Economics; The Hon. Dr. Michael A. Battle, Sr.,

U.S. Ambassador to Tanzania; Sharon Blaylock, Director of Meeting Management, AME Church Finance Department; Segi Desta, Vice President, Global Accounts, ConferenceDirect; Steve Paganelli, Sr. Head of Americas Partnerships, Tripadvisor; and Rev. Dr. Frederick Douglass Haynes III, Sr. Pastor, Friendship-West Baptist Church.

The Annual Conference’s social agenda was just as packed, with each of its four days designed with connection and celebration in mind. Following the opening event at Birmingham’s historic 16th Street Baptist Church and Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BRICI), the evening wrapped up with the Afterglow Celebration at the Sheraton Birmingham.

Taking it back to the 1990s, the flyer for the NCBMP Celebration included host Yo-Yo, with DJ Vader and DJ Nate the Great battling on the turntables.

The 41st Annual Gala included Christette Michele Payne, a Grammy-win-

ning R&B and soul artist. Attire was black tie or African apparel.

An excursion into Birmingham helped wrap up the conference, with the John Crump Golf Classic also on the schedule.

Mike Gunn, CMP, Sr. Vice President, Greater Birmingham, CVB, said: “Having NCBMP gives us the opportunity to showcase our city, food scene and many one-of-a-kind attractions. It was 19 years ago since NCBMP was in Birmingham, it’s now a whole new generation of planners who will get to experience our city for the very first time. It’s one thing to hear about a city, but nothing compared to actually experiencing it. Birmingham sells itself; getting them here was half the battle. We’ve looked forward to hosting this prestigious conference and showing our attendees why Birmingham is a ‘Magic City.’”

Portland, Oregon, will host the NCBMP 2025 Annual Conference.

Destinations International Introduces Newly Enhanced Career Center

By Jonathan Trager

Destinations International (DI) has announced its newly enhanced Career Center, which allows visitors to explore job opportunities, post open positions, and access valuable career resources.

In a Community Spotlight email on November 13, the association said the resource is “designed to connect top industry talent with exceptional opportunities”.

“As part of DI’s ongoing efforts to provide exceptional services to our

members and strengthen industry workforce development, we’re excited to offer a new platform for our members and industry partners to advertise their open positions,” said David Breisch, Sr. Director of Marketing at DI. “This refreshed experience makes it easier and more seamless to get available opportunities in front of as many job seekers as possible, particularly those interested in the travel and tourism industry.”

Featured jobs as of November 14 when *USAE* went to press include Director of National Accounts for Visit

Phoenix (posted on November 13), Sr. Sales Manager for Visit Williamsburg (posted on November 13), and CEO of Visit Estes Park in Colorado (posted on November 11), Chief Sales Officer for LA Tourism (posted on November 7), Director of Destination Sales for Visit Alexandria (posted on November 6), and Chief Financial Officer for Visit Dallas (posted on November 6).

Benefits of the upgraded Career Center include the following:

- Refreshed user interface
- Better integration with our CRM/

AMS/member database

- Single sign-on compatible: members can now use their DI member login credentials to access the member discounts

- New technology partner: Web Scribble is a leading provider of career technology services for associations, and it partners with our other technology vendors to offer a more seamless user experience

Discounted rates are available to DI members. To view the site, go to careers.destinationsinternational.org.

Sensory Inclusive

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or sensory partner for quite a while that not only has the experience and the reputation, but also has an affordable format for destinations and for our partners,” Steinman said.

KultureCity to date has trained more than 5,000 locations in sensory inclusion, including all National Football League and Major League Baseball stadiums, National Basketball Association arenas, barbershops, and LEGO theme parks.

A small portion of that portfolio of sensory inclusive locations include Travel Oregon’s seven welcome centers.

“You can’t go wrong with KultureCity,” said Allison George, Manager

of Industry and Visitor Services at Travel Oregon. “The sensory bags they provided to each welcome center were a great compliment to their training highlighting the positive impact of their programs.”

KultureCity was founded by Dr. Julian Maha after his son was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a developmental disability that creates sensory processing, social and behavioral challenges.

Salt Lake City

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culture and convention district we need to look at the layout of the Salt Palace,” she said. “We’re going to get some concepts and then we’ll start looking at further discussions.”

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Inspiring travel throughout The Classic Coast

President | CEO Opportunity

Discover Newport is the official destination management organization dedicated to promoting the City of Newport and the eight (8) surrounding coastal Rhode Island townships of Barrington, Bristol, Jamestown, Little Compton, Middletown, Portsmouth, Tiverton, and Warren. Discover Newport's primary goal is to promote the region as an exceptional destination for both business conferences and leisure travel, showcasing authentic New England charm with curated, innovative experiences. Through strategic partnerships across tourism and hospitality, Discover Newport enriches the lives of visitors and delivers measurable benefits to residents. Funded by a dedicated hotel tax, the Discover Newport program proudly promotes the timeless spirit and rich heritage of The Classic Coast.

Discover Newport seeks a dynamic and collaborative leader to drive economic impact and elevate the region's appeal for a new generation of travelers. The ideal candidate will demonstrate a strong history of innovation and an ability to unite business, government, and community stakeholders around shared goals. They will bring a fresh perspective while honoring the unique historical, geographical, and cultural treasures of this unique coastal destination.

Reporting to the Board of Directors and overseeing a team of 14 talented professionals, the President | CEO will develop and execute strategies to meet and exceed organizational objectives. The role requires an enthusiastic advocate for destination marketing, management, and sustainable tourism who has a proven track record of enhancing resident well-being while promoting tourism growth.

Experienced leaders with a background in luxury or high-profile destination management with a passion for community-centered tourism are encouraged to apply. Please send a resume, letter of interest, and references to DiscoverNewport@winnerpartners.net.

Scene at TravelAbility Summit



Scene at NCBMP Conference

