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Workers alarmed cruisers

Emergency response haphazard, Crown Princess passengers say

BY DONNA BALANCIA
FLORIDA TODAY

Cruise-passenger advocates are pushing for better emergency training of crew members, following the chaos that took place Tuesday aboard the Crown Princess, which tilted soon after departing Port Canaveral, and left hundreds of people injured.

Passenger Will Molina is among them. After the ship tilted and then righted itself, Molina climbed out from behind the plastic chairs and debris that pinned him against the glass wall on the top deck.

He said he was wet, his legs were bloodied, and he felt as if his ribs were broken. He and his wife were alive, but they needed medical help.

"I asked the crew for help, but they didn't know what to do," Molina alleged. "It was bedlam for at least the first half-hour. There was conflicting information. They didn't direct us, they didn't comfort us, and they didn't help us."

The cause of the incident remains under investigation by the U.S. Coast Guard, the National Transportation Safety Board and British authorities representing the ship's flag nation, Bermuda.

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Princess officials did not respond Friday to questions from FLORIDA TODAY about crew's performance during and after the incident.

In a statement issued Thursday, Princess said: "We wish to again express our sincere apologies to our passengers and crew for this regrettable incident, and also extend our thanks for their understanding and cooperation during these difficult circumstances."

Seven local hospitals treated 116 people injured in the incident, hospital officials said about 240 people were treated aboard the ship for various injuries.

In all, the ship carried about 3,400 passengers and 1,200 crew members, Princess said.

Cruise victims and advocate groups have long pushed the cruise industry to better train onboard employees for emergencies. Many of the workers are foreign-born and so have little or no English.

"With regard to emergency situations, I've heard complaints about how the crew members appear to be super-knowledgeable about the procedures," said Brett Rivkind, a maritime lawyer with Miami-based Rivkind Pedraza & Margulies. "When you start having language barriers and crew members who just got on the ship, and with this industry growing as quickly as it is, the training programs seem to be ineffective."

The Crown Princess, christened on June 14, was on the last leg of its fourth cruise night cruise from New York to the Caribbean and back -- when the incident occurred.

Molina, a 36-year-old health-industry worker from Astoria, N.Y., said the simplest safety procedures were being disregarded during the crisis.

"People with broken bones were being moved, and where people were in triage, I saw crew members not wearing gloves, where there was blood all over," he said. "Wearing gloves and keeping them from cross-contamination. They need to be more prepared. They need to train every crew member on what to do in an emergency."

But the International Council of Cruise Lines stands by the procedures cruise lines use for training onboard employees.

"All ICCL member cruise ships meet or exceed the regulations contained within the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers developed by the International Maritime Organization," said Lyndsay Rossman, public relations manager for the International Council of Cruise Lines.

That process "addresses the requirements for training and experience needed by seafarers in order to be permitted to qualify for a maritime license or certificate," Rossman said. "The convention specifies knowledge, understanding and proficiency standards that must be demonstrated and evaluated for competency before an individual receives a maritime license or certificate, and is otherwise permitted to perform their duties onboard ship."

Tim Albright, a victims'-rights advocate, said the cruise industry needs to hire specially trained security people and emergency workers to avoid problems in the future.

"If we had independent security personnel on each ship, they could make sure the all incidents was accurate and timely," Albright said. "They could also maintain a training to make sure all staff is trained before they take their positions."

"We really loved our crew, but they didn't know what to do," Molina said.

Crew members should be trained in, at the very least, comforting and directing the to minimize further injuries, said Tonya Meister, maritime attorney with Miami-based Lipcon, Margulies & Alsina.

"All of the crew members should be trained to deal with this type of situation," Meister said. "They should expect that this type of disaster can happen, and they should plan to deal with the worst."

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