

Gov. Murphy signs hotel panic button bill in Atlantic City

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ATLANTIC CITY — Iris Sanchez has never personally experienced violence or sexual harassment while on the job as a housekeeper at Caesars Atlantic City, but she feels safer today after New Jersey became the first state to mandate hotels provide emergency buttons to employees.

“It means a whole lot,” Sanchez, 40, said outside a ballroom at Harrah’s Waterfront Conference Center where Gov. Phil Murphy had just signed the new law Tuesday morning. “I know I’m going to be able to go home at the end of the day.”

Murphy signed legislation that requires hotels throughout the state with more than 100 rooms to provide housekeepers with a panic button device.

While speaking at an AFL-CIO conference, Murphy said the law will provide hotel workers with “greater security” and allow them to “immediately call for help, should they need it on the job.”

“We must protect the safety of workers in the hospitality industry,” Murphy said. “This new law will ensure that hotel employees performing their duties will have the means to summon immediate assistance if they are in danger.”

Atlantic County’s three state representatives were all sponsors of the legislation.

“I’m glad my colleagues joined me in answering the call of our local families, so we can take a bi-partisan step forward to provide a simple common sense method to protect our hardworking women and men in the hospitality industry,” said state Sen. Chris Brown, R-Atlantic.

The bill passed unanimously through both the state Senate and Assembly in May.

“We all have to be safe when we go to work,” said Assemblyman John Armato, D-Atlantic.

Housekeepers are often the first hotel employees to come across an emergency situation, such as smoke from a fire or a guest who is dealing with a medical issue, Armato said.

“It’s not just for their safety, it’s for the safety of the whole hotel itself,” he said.

Unite Here Local 54, the casino workers union that represents nearly one-third of the industry, was a driving force behind the legislation. There are nearly 2,000 hotel housekeepers in Atlantic City.

Local 54 members from each of the nine Atlantic City casino hotel properties joined Murphy on stage for the bill signing.

“I am so proud that my union was able to change the workplaces for all women in hotels and hospitality here, not only for union workers. Because of this new law, non-union workers in New Jersey who do not have any bargaining power over their working conditions will be covered, too, and their employers will be required to give them safety buttons to stay safe at work,” Sanchez said.

Assemblyman Vince Mazzeo, D-Atlantic, commended Local 54 members for their efforts.

“They were in lockstep with us on the path with this bill,” he said. “It wasn’t easy ... but having their support helped really push it along.”

Hotels that do not comply with the law will be fined up to \$5,000 for the first violation and \$10,000 for each additional violation, according to the legislation.

The move to provide employees with panic buttons is happening nationally, with big hotel chains like Marriott, Hilton, Hyatt, IHG and Wyndham vowing to provide personal safety devices by 2020 to all their employees who deal one on one with guests.