

Lee County FLORIDA

A Case Study in Putting
Guests First



fort
MYERS
ISLANDS, BEACHES
& NEIGHBORHOODS

AHLEI
AMERICAN HOTEL & LODGING
EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE

Lee County | 20+ Years of Putting Guests First

1999



STARTED
Customer service
training

2010



FOCUSED
on guest service
and soft skills
training

2013



INTEGRATED
AHLEI's Guest
Service Gold
into Guests
First Program



Guests First

2017



ADOPTED
Guest Service
Gold Tourism

2018



CHALLENGED
businesses to
certify individual
team members
and work toward
Certified Partner
designation

2019



PARTNERED
with organizations
to provide
Guest Service Gold
training and
certification to
job seekers, giving
them the CGSP
designation before
applying for jobs

2022



1,000TH

**TEAM MEMBER
DESIGNATED AS
CERTIFIED GUEST SERVICE
PROFESSIONAL**

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“

Guests First has helped my employees be more understanding with guests. It has instilled in them the ability to change bad days into good days by listening, empathizing, and offering solutions. They have learned that I'm not the only one who can do that as the owner—we all can.”

FRAN PETERS, CGSP

Owner of Island Vacations of Sanibel & Captiva
A Certified Guest Service Property

Lee County | By the Numbers

1,015  **CGSP**
CERTIFIED GUEST SERVICE PROFESSIONALS
 As of 4/1/2022

1 IN **5** **LOCAL JOBS**
TIED TO TOURISM

140 **BUSINESSES**
IN LEE COUNTY
WITH AT LEAST **1** **CGSP**

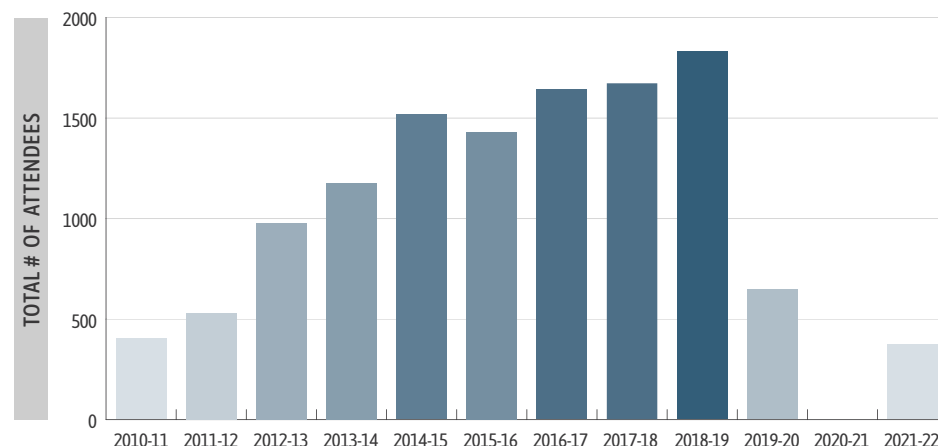
59 **Tourism business partners**
have hosted Guests First
training at their location

7 ELEMENTS of Guest Service Gold Tourism

- 1 RECOVERY:** Turn It Around
- 2 PERSONALIZATION:** Provide an Individualized Experience
- 3 KNOWLEDGE:** Be in the Know
- 4 PASSION:** Inspire Others
- 5 COMMITMENT:** Be All In
- 6 INCLUSION:** Include Everyone
- 7 PERSONALITY:** Be Yourself

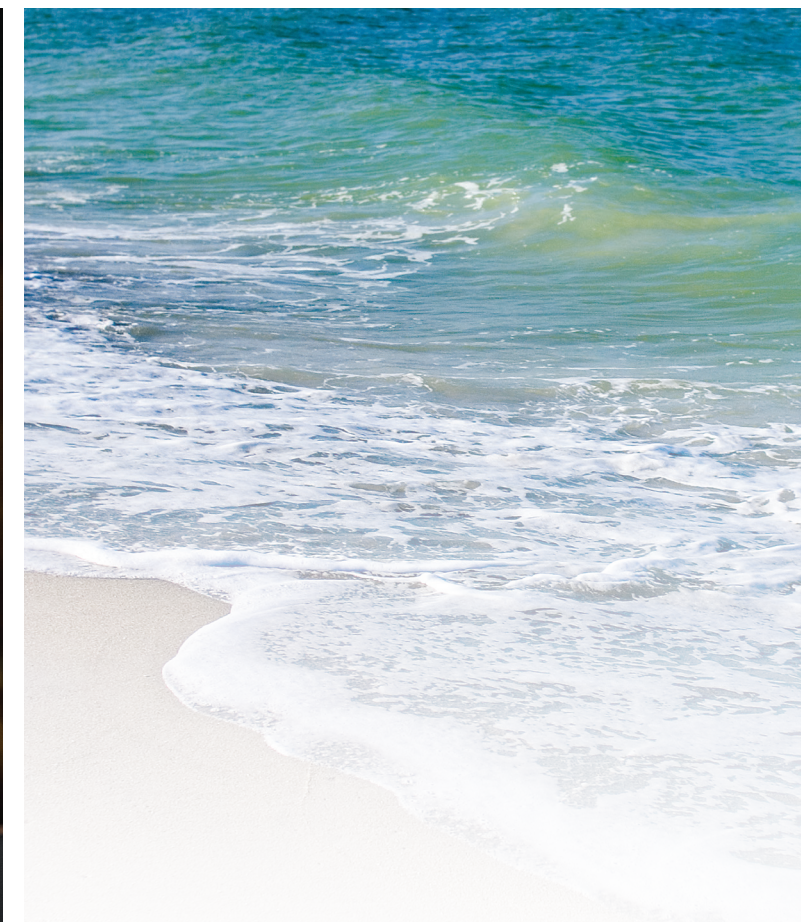
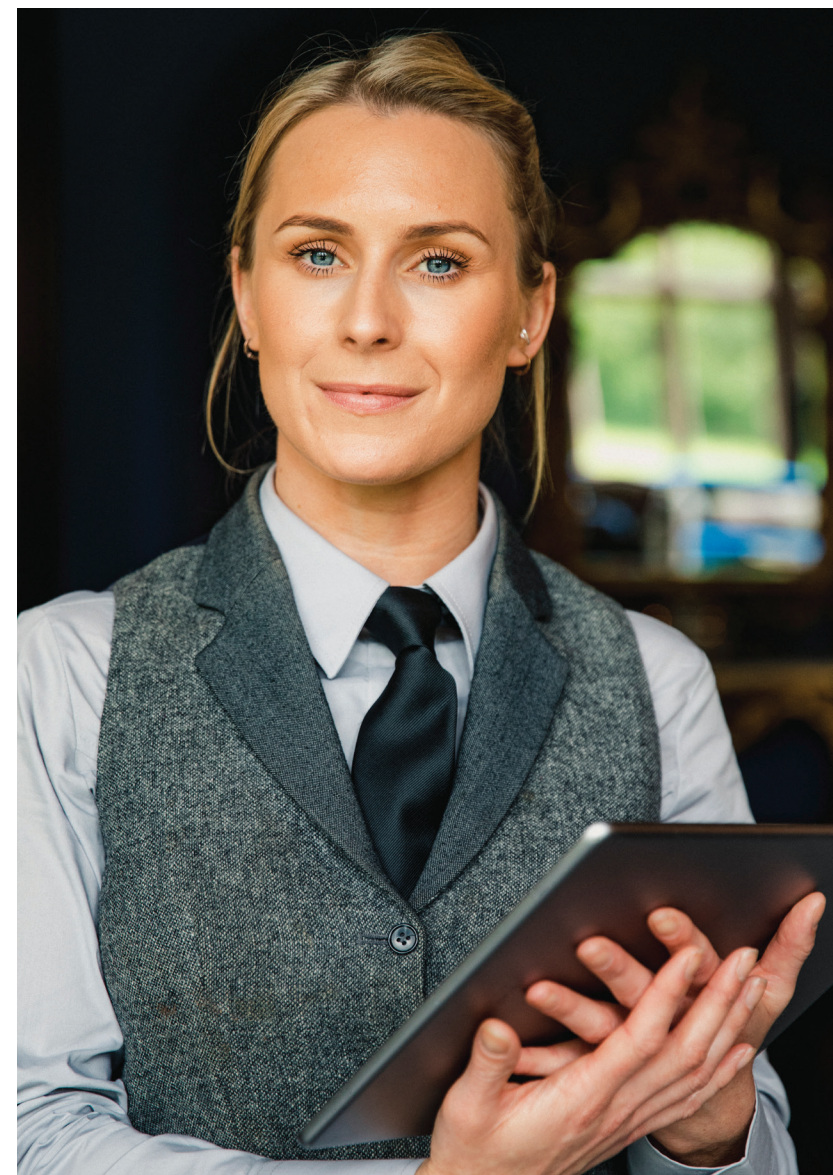
16  **CERTIFIED**
PROPERTIES / PARTNERS
In Lee County | **40% TURNOVER**
 Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina,
 thanks to Guests First training

Guests First Program Participation



“
*We send as many people as we can through the training.
 We make a point of going to people we see showing promise and select them.
 It’s how we say, ‘We believe you have a future with the hotel.’”*

MARY ROSE
 Director, Talent and Culture for the
 Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina



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Lee County | VCB Guest Service Gold

With more than five million visitors per year,

Lee County, Florida, includes popular cities such as Fort Myers, Sanibel & Captiva Islands, Bonita Springs and Cape Coral to name a few. To stand out as a tourist destination among tourist destinations, in 1999, the Lee County Visitor and Convention Bureau set a goal to transform the county into the most friendly and helpful vacation spot in the nation.

Lee County tourism leaders asked some big questions to achieve their goal:

How do we set ourselves apart?

How do we revitalize our area?

How do we create interest in our region?



A roundtable of area hotel general managers revealed a need to focus on guest service and soft skills training. The Guests First program was born.

Creating the “Going the Extra Smile.”

In 2013 Lee County took their mission to a new level when it partnered with the American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute (AHLEI) to add its Guest Service Gold (GSG) training program and the Certified Guest Service Professional (CGSP) professional certification into Guests First.

In the Guest Service Gold program, trainees learn how to anticipate guest needs, deliver memorable experiences, and turn around difficult situations. No time in position is required to earn the certification, giving trainees a marketable edge when applying for their first hospitality job.

The training program is easy to implement: It features seven brief video vignettes designed to motivate and inspire hospitality employees to “go for the gold.” All three programs are available in English or Spanish, leading to the CGSP designation upon successful completion of the exam with a score of 70% or higher.

Fun, Helpful Training for Five-Star Results

Fran Peters, CGSP, owner of Island Vacations of Sanibel & Captiva, a Certified Guest Service Property, said that her employees were reluctant about the training initially but quickly became enthusiastic about the opportunity to attend.

“They find the training fun and helpful. They come back from the sessions talking about who they met and what they learned,” she said. “It’s important for them to meet people in other businesses, to exchange stories, make connections, and see how others respond to the various challenges that arise in hospitality.” Peters’ team recently celebrated the company’s 22nd anniversary and, more importantly, their five-star rating on Trustpilot.

Nicole King-Smith, Ph.D., CHT, CGSP, Lee County VCB hospitality, and tourism training manager, said that the Guests First and CGSP certifications are much sought after by employers in Lee County. “People want to make this part of their professional development, and C-suite executives are excited about sending their teams to this training, even though it means taking time away from work,” she says.

Building a Pipeline of Qualified Employees

Lee County VCB also partners with several organizations to provide the Guest Service Gold training and certification to those seeking employment, so they already have the CGSP designation before applying for tourism jobs in the area.

“With 1 in 5 local jobs tied to tourism, there is a need to fill those positions with people who possess soft skills like guest service,” said King-Smith. “We decided to offer free training that leads to the CGSP certification.” The only cost is the CGSP exam fee covered by the local chapter of the Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association (FRLA) for students who need financial assistance.

“

Our goal with this program is to ensure every visitor touch point within our community is a positive interaction—from the time they arrive until the moment they leave.”

TIMOTHY LAMONTAGNE, CGSP
Operations Manager
for Lee County Solid Waste

Ready to Recover

Although slowed by the coronavirus pandemic, Lee County has continued its dedication to providing excellent guest service through training and certification. They recently surpassed the milestone of having 1,000 CGSPs working in its area businesses while also providing training and certification opportunities for those who aspire to work in Lee County’s hospitality and tourism organizations.

Because of this commitment to certification, the VCB earned the distinction of becoming the first—and to date, only—Certified Guest Service Destination.

Becoming a destination of choice takes dedication, and reconnecting and retaining visitors post-pandemic is essential to economic recovery. With a trained, enthusiastic workforce in place, Lee County is ready to welcome tourists.

Implementing the Guest Service Gold training and Certified Guest Service Professional certification into a city or county-wide training program is easy and can help attract and retain new visitors.

For more information, visit [AHLEI.org/GSG](https://www.ahlei.org/GSG)



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6751 Forum Drive
Suite 220
Orlando, FL 32821