

Casino executives face security concerns

By A.D. Hopkins
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Some casinos keep marked money to pay extortion demands. At least one has made the decision never to pay ransom. Some executives have uniformed security guards patrolling their homes at night.

But are these the right steps? "I don't think the casino industry is careless about this," said Mike Manning, chief of security at the Desert Inn. "They (security departments) are typically well-qualified and take the threat seriously."

But Larry Carpenter, an executive protection specialist, disagreed. "When we try to make arrangements with the gaming industry, their usual attitude is, 'It isn't going to happen to me. It never has happened here.'"

"But, of course, it has." Security concerns were underscored this week with the kidnapping of Kevin Wynn, the 26-year-old daughter of Mirage Resorts Inc. Chairman Steve Wynn.

But there have been at least four other ransom plots against the Nevada resort industry. In the early 1950s, the children of casino owner Benny Blanton

were targets, but an informant tipped off the family.

In 1969, Dean Petersen, a real estate millionaire with resort properties, was kidnapped but escaped before ransom was paid. In 1976, members of the prominent Gaughan family were held for ransom.

And in 1980 a hotel itself was held hostage: An extortionist demanded \$3 million for instructions how to defuse the monster-size bomb in an office at Harvey's Resort at Lake Tahoe. The bomb exploded, doing \$18 million worth of damage.

"A lot of hotels keep marked bills in their cages, and they call that 'extortion money.' A lot of them do that because of the Harvey's deal," said a source who declined to be identified. "It (the amount) varies from property to property. It could be \$100,000, it could be \$500,000, depending on the size of the operation."

Another industry source said casino security officers often guard the homes of key executives—including Wynn. Another said his organization has a rule: no ransom, ever.

How should an executive protect himself and his family?

Start with a professional threat assessment, advises everybody in the business.

"We go to their home, their business, churches and schools, and over the roads they travel," said Carpenter, head of Investigative Specialists, a detective agency with a division devoted to executive protection. "We see, if an attempt is going to be made, where it would likely happen."

"Then we give the client a list of recommendations, usually prioritized. You might put up cameras and landscape lighting. In some cases you bulletproof windows and cars."

Sometimes they suggest the family designate a "safe room" in the home, equip it with good locks and separate communications, and perhaps even its own food and water supply and separate ventilation.

A lot of the recommendations won't be for hardware or guards, but for behavioral changes.

"We worked for a guy in Denver who drove a different car every day. He'd already had one blown up," Carpenter said. "So we made him pick one out, stripped it and examined it completely, then put it back together

and had somebody watch it around the clock."

It's rare that an executive requires 24-hour bodyguards, Carpenter said. Bodyguards are more useful at public appearances, or to take children to and from school. "But a lot of hotels try to take a guy from uniform and put him in plainclothes. That's a mistake. It takes special training to be an effective bodyguard."

Executive protection specialists put a high priority on training the target, himself, in "counter-surveillance."

"People don't just jump out of a crowd and grab you," said Chuck Vance, an ex-Secret Service man who heads a Washington-area service. "They determine where they are going to take you, when and how."

There's one firm rule he advises every potential extortion target.

"Don't make the decisions in a vacuum," he said. "Get some professional advice, immediately, from somebody who has been involved in something like this. Somebody with no emotional stake in the issue."

Review-Journal writer Dave Palermo contributed to this report.