



OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

June 2014

DOCUMENTARY



Visit Shadow Campus Website: <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/specials/shadow-campus>

Shadow Campus, Boston and beyond...

In May of 2014 The Boston Globe published a very thorough and in-depth look at the off-campus housing issues that are plaguing the neighborhoods that surround Boston's colleges and universities. If you have not yet read

“Shadow Campus” AND watched the video you need to make a point to do so.

The Globe called the Boston issue a “collision of greed, neglect and mismanagement,” citing that responsibility is lacking from the owners, landlords and the universities. But, Boston is not alone in having neighborhoods

that are experiencing identical problems.

When we read about significant fire incidents that involve off-campus housing the details seem nearly identical. Very similar styles of construction and living conditions are found. Add the attic bedrooms, single points of egress, sofas stored on the porch, late night parties, careless



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cooking or maybe smoking and the recipe is set. You know how these news stories play out.

statistics in these neighborhoods.

Who are the stakeholders in your community that have

claiming poor living conditions, and they do not take any action until absolutely necessary.

Unfortunately, some of the worst landlords make the others look bad. Use the landlord as your partner to gain access to the students by sharing fire safety information. Offer to provide training to their tenants.

How about the students themselves?

It seems that some students seek out the landlord that doesn't have high standards on cleanliness or aesthetics.

Some students feel that their security deposit will never be returned so they don't want to take care of the property.



TOON S. BYUN/GLOBE STAFF

Overcrowded and at risk: a way of life and, sometimes death, for student tenants

In some of The Center's training programs we have discussed the target audiences and stakeholders that we need to reach and raise their awareness of fire safety. But a review of these is necessary in order to do everything we can to improve the

the responsibility to do the right thing?

Many will immediately identify, and possibly blame the landlord or the owner that make a profit from these properties. Often times we hear of the landlords that ignore pleas from tenants



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Students need to be informed about their rights as tenants, who to call to report deficiencies to and who they call if the landlord fails to respond. Identify student groups or leadership organizations that would take on fire safety as a project. The peer-to-peer training often has a better success rate than learning from those in positions of authority. Check to see if your fire department utilizes student firefighters.

Next, let's discuss the city and town officials. What laws are on the books to be enforced and who enforces these?

Sometimes there are no rules or requirements for owners to comply with local codes or ordinances. Other times the government is woefully understaffed and overworked. Some

inspectors have the legal backing of the city to enforce violations, yet others are powerless due to antiquated laws. When new laws are proposed to improve housing, the elected officials need to

“ We need to find every possible way to inform the Parents of the risks from fire and how to choose safe off-campus housing. ”

take action regarding what is best for the tenants and the community. Cost is a consideration, but don't be swayed only by the protests or objections of the property owners.

Take the time to inform the elected and city officials about the risks that are present and how making improvements will make the neighborhoods safe.

Last, but not least are the Parents. We need to find every possible

way to inform the Parents of the risks from fire and how to choose safe off-campus housing. Parents need to be involved in the search and they need to visit properties prior to signing the lease.

Parents need to know what questions to ask, and what to look for. If they are at the least bit uncomfortable - don't sign the lease.

Parents are likely the most important stakeholder and the key to improving fire safety.

Please refer to the [February 2014 issue of Off-Campus](#) for additional information on Choosing Off-Campus Housing”.

http://campusfiresafety.org.dnmax.com/Portals/0/Documents/Off-Campus%20Housing/2-2014_Off_Campus.pdf



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So many missed opportunities:

The Boston story tells us what happens when everything goes wrong at once, much like the perfect storm. On Linden Street the storm struck twice. Be aware that there is a Linden Street in every college community. The challenge is to find this street before the fire occurs.

We need to raise the awareness of everyone that owns, manages, leases, pays the rent, lives in or next to and those that enforce laws in these properties. Take every opportunity to reach out to these stakeholders whenever you can.

In Boston, when the Inspectional Services Department sets up a tent during move-in weekend this fall and offers their services

there should be a long line waiting to sign up for an inspection. In every city and every off-campus neighborhood there needs to be a way to offer tips and checklists to make sure that the housing is safe at the time of move-in and the remainder of the lease.

Thank you to the Boston Globe for bringing the fire safety issue to the forefront.

We can all learn from this report and, by sharing the available resources, we can help to make our own communities safer.

Tim Knisely

Tim Knisely is on the Board of Directors for The Center and the Senior Fire Inspector for the Centre Region Code

Administration in State College, PA. In this position he manages the Existing Structures Division that administers the fire and property maintenance code in all existing commercial and residential rental properties, and coordinates the life safety education for the community including off-campus and Greek housing.

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