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Off Campus Housing Risks

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In September 1990, three students were killed and two others injured at a fraternity house in California. In May 1996, five students were killed and three others injured in a fire at a fraternity house in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, one of the most well known off campus housing fires on record. And the list goes on.

Off campus housing options including local apartment buildings, sorority or fraternity houses, and small rental homes are an affordable and attractive housing option for college students seeking independent, and often more spacious, living arrangements than on campus dormitories or apartments.

In some cases, off campus housing is the only housing option for students attending one of the growing numbers of colleges and universities whose student population has outgrown its on campus housing capacity.

Along with living off campus comes the increased responsibility for students to maintain a safe environment for themselves and other occupants. There is very little to no oversight for safety in the off campus environment as there is for university owned or managed living spaces. The risk of accidents occurring potentially leading to fire is a real threat but a few basic ideas can help to manage that aspect of the equation. When thinking about the risks of off campus housing, three areas should come to mind. These are maintaining unobstructed paths of egress, understanding and maintaining fire protection systems, and training.

For all off campus housing options, occupants must have a clear and unobstructed egress path available to them to get out of the building during a fire. One of the greatest risks to egress travel in off campus housing is blocked exits. Obstructed paths of travel to exits and the inability of students to reach a place of safety due

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to the many impediments they meet along the way can be a severe hazard to life safety. Items such as old and unwanted furniture, full trash bags, recycling bins, and mattresses get tossed in corridors, exit stair wells and in front of the lesser used and known exit doors. The risk is blocking exits that students may think are not needed, or are unfamiliar with. Students should be aware that all means of egress should remain free and clear of all obstructions as it is never known when those ways out will be needed during an emergency. Overcrowding can also hinder access to and use of these same exits. Controlling or regulating the number of students who attend social functions at these off campus housing facilities must also be considered.

Students living in off campus housing should be familiar with the presence and role of the fire protection systems in their houses or apartments and be prepared should they be faced with a fire or emergency. The 2009 edition of the *Life Safety Code*®, also known as NFPA 101®, requires that all new lodging and rooming houses, new dormitories (these include Greek housing with sleeping accommodations for more than 16 people) and new apartment buildings to be protected throughout with automatic sprinkler systems. In some cases the Life Safety Code may also require existing buildings of these types to be protected with automatic sprinklers as well. Additionally, due to the history of fires in off campus housing, many local jurisdictions are now mandating existing residential buildings such as dormitories and Greek houses to be fully sprinklered. Among the issues involving sprinkler systems in off campus housing is the potential to inadvertently damage the sprinkler and a lack of awareness for the importance of the system and its necessity to life safety during a fire. Students should be reminded not to paint, damage, remove, or hang items from sprinklers to ensure they will operate properly should a fire occur.

Another critical fire protection component is smoke alarms. The importance of the early warning afforded by smoke alarms is vital to occupant life safety, especially in residential locations where occupants are sleeping. The installation of smoke alarms is also mandated by NFPA 101 in all new and existing residential occupancies which include apartment buildings

(except existing apartments that are sprinklered), fraternity and sorority houses, and even one and two family dwellings.

Smoke alarms are typically found within dwelling units and within sleeping rooms of lodging or rooming houses and hotels and dormitories and are a critical component to student's life safety. With smoke alarms comes the need to reduce the risk of nuisance alarms and dead batteries. If smoke alarms are being activated by an event such as a cooking accident or smoking, students are more likely to remove them or the batteries to avoid the alarm. Smoke alarms should not be covered with any materials as to hinder the proper operation of the alarm.

To maintain the integrity of smoke alarms, NFPA recommends that occupants test alarms at least monthly, installing smoke alarms following manufacturer's instructions, and saving manufacturer's instructions for testing and maintenance. In addition, batteries should be replaced in all smoke alarms at least once a year. If an alarm "chirps," indicating the battery is low, the battery should be replaced right away.

Additional fire protection systems that may be installed in off campus housing include smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, and fire alarm systems. Students should be aware of these systems, what they do, how they function, and why they are there.

Even though not under the authority of the college or University, students living in off campus housing should take responsibility and be aware of what egress routes are available to them should an alarm sound. The *Life Safety Code*® requires emergency egress and relocation drills be regularly conducted in new and existing dormitories (fraternity and sorority houses are included here). As these buildings are not controlled by the college, it will be up to the occupants living in these residences to ensure these drills are being conducted and that all occupants are aware of the various routes available to them in an emergency event. The risk presented here is that the drills won't be conducted.

In new and existing apartment buildings, emergency instructions are to be provided annually for each apartment. These instructions should indicate the location of alarms, egress paths, and actions to be taken, both in response to a fire in the dwelling unit and in response to the sounding of the alarm system. These instructions may be provided by a local landlord or building manager. The risk with drills in apartment buildings is that students living there may not preserve the instructions they have been provided or may ignore the alarm should it sound. Students should practice using the egress routes available within their individual apartment unit, and within the building to the designated exits.

The luxury of off campus housing is independent living and affordability. The risk with off campus housing is negligence and lack of knowledge of fire and life safety practices. With a few simple reminders and maintenance practices the risks that accompany off campus housing can easily be reduced. The affordability of off campus housing will never outweigh the price tag of property damage, injuries or even loss of life.

References:

NFPA 101 *Life Safety Code*®, 2009 Edition

NFPA Safety Tip Sheets, Smoke Alarms. Available at www.nfpa.org/education

“STRUCTURE FIRES IN DORMITORIES, FRATERNITIES, SORORITIES AND BAR-RACKS” by Jennifer D. Flynn Available at www.nfpa.org/research



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Additional Safety Tips are available from CCFS & NFPA are on our Website:

Questions to ask Landlords—

<http://www.campusfiresafety.org/library/files/download/id/177>

Questions to ask School Officials—

<http://www.campusfiresafety.org/library/files/download/id/178>

CO Detection Facts for Students & Landlords—

<http://www.campusfiresafety.org/library/files/download/id/225>

CCFS Library of Resources

<http://www.campusfiresafety.org/library#>

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