



## **OFF-CAMPUS**

By Tim Knisely

March 2016

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### **Off-Campus Housing Options - Mom & Dad Pay Attention:**

When looking for an off-campus house or apartment to rent there are plenty of challenges to make sure your son or daughter finds the 'perfect' place. Yes, that's right Mom & Dad you need to make it your responsibility to be involved in the search and make sure that what they find is not only close to campus, their friends and at the right price - but safe. And, don't be afraid to take the time to get your questions answered. Or, sometimes we even need to say NO. I've written about this before including my personal experience with my daughter's first housing hunt, but I hear time and time again from parents that are not involved in the selection process. If you're paying for it, get involved!

All of these challenges are compounded by the pressure from the landlords, property managers and even the on-campus housing administrators pushing deadlines to sign your lease or renew your on-campus housing contract. Many times I hear from tenants that claim they didn't have time to consult with their parents, past tenants or even determine the legal use of the housing because of pushy sales pitches. And, if you're reading this and still don't have housing secured for the fall I'll bet you are feeling that pressure.

Worse yet, when a fire tragedy occurs we often hear that the living space wasn't properly permitted for the use. The student may have been living in an attic bedroom, basement bedroom or the cozy loft above the garage. Or, the house was just overcrowded with occupants to share the rent. The greatest risk with these properties always involves a safe



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and continuous means of egress and early fire detection. Early suppression is great with sprinklers if are present, but it's not common in off-campus houses or converted rooming houses. So, we need to prepare those that aren't living with sprinklers.

Be cautious if the number of occupants in a house is more than five, because it may be a rooming house. If a property is advertised as a rooming house, or single room occupancy (SRO) you should see signs that the building meets some pretty rigid building codes especially if the occupancy is six or more. Since sprinklers may not be present let's hope there is a fire alarm system that automatically calls the FD. If neither, the items on the rest of this list are pretty important. This includes a working smoke alarm in the individual sleeping room as well as in the hall. The bedroom door should self-close and latch and have a dead-bolt lock, much like a hotel room. The door to your room should be fire rated, or at least solid wood and open directly to the hall. You should never have to pass through someone else's room to get to the hall or stairs. Once in the hallways there should be illuminated exit signs and emergency lighting that works. Fire extinguishers should be on every floor, inspected within the last year and not discharged. If you are on the third floor there should be a fire escape, or second means of escaping during a fire.

If you don't see these safety features, it may be an illegal occupancy. Ask to see the housing license, the name of the inspection agency and call to see if this is legit or not. These are tough questions to ask when you're being pressured to sign on the dotted line...now. Few houses will be as nice as yours at home so you will likely need to lower your standards from what you are used to. But, if it seems dangerous it probably is. Call to find out and get some peace of mind. But, don't be surprised if the city or town doesn't have any jurisdiction and



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can't do anything to help. Many cities don't license or even inspect off-campus housing. So, you might be on your own. If you're not sure and it doesn't feel right you need to make the tough decision, and be able to sleep at night.

### **PARENTS**

*If you are in the housing hunt and need some advice or want to throw some questions our way, please sign up for the Off-Campus Fire & Life Safety Alliance [by clicking here](#).*

*A sprinkler disclaimer: I'm as big of a residential sprinkler supporter as there is, but I try to be realistic that we will never get all off-campus housing protected. I hope I'm wrong, but we can't even get sprinklers approved for new home construction in most states without outrage and legislative lobbying from the special interest groups. So, every other type of fire detection and safety equipment is even more important until and even after we break the sprinkler barrier.*

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Tim has been active with The Center for Campus Fire Safety since its inception and served as treasurer from 2007 to 2010.

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