



## OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

September 2016

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The Witching Hour:

10:30 PM, 1:27 AM, 2:39 AM, 2:42 AM, 3:33 AM, 4:24 AM

These are the times of fire department responses to off-campus housing properties from a recent weekend in a college town. These responses are for the normal types of incidents; including automatic alarms, electrical fires, unattended cooking fires, fires from smoking materials, heating system malfunctions and the ever popular dumpster fire.

The types of incidents aren't always the problem we encounter during these hours, as this is what the fire service trains for. But, the people that we interact with at these late-night/early-morning hours

are often times drunk, rude, obnoxious or have the feeling of invincibility. Sometimes, all of the above.

These include the people that walk in front of a responding 80,000 lb. ladder truck traveling at 15 MPH. The speed is only 15 MPH to what may be a true emergency, but necessary to avoid those that ignore sirens and air horns and walk into the roadway and the fire truck's path.

These people on the street at times may tamper with parked fire trucks or steal hydrant wrenches if either is left unattended. So, a firefighter must be detailed to monitor the equipment.

The fraternity houses or apartments may be

overcrowded with party goers in a house that isn't built to hold so many people. More importantly, the fraternity house likely isn't built with enough exit or approved exits to allow a safe rush of fleeing occupants when an emergency occurs. Hopefully, the fire alarm is in working order - and not placed on 'test' for the duration of the party to avoid unwanted visitors from the PD or FD. Some have turned off the sprinkler to avoid a flood just in case someone intentionally breaks a sprinkler as has happened in the past.

Apartment occupants and fraternities don't always evacuate when the fire alarm sounds. Many believe the alarm to be false, or don't evacuate



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because the fire isn't on their floor. They gather on their balcony or at their windows to watch and sometimes ask 'what's going on?' instead of leaving. Some stay inside and hope that the alarm will silence soon and they can continue the socialize, study or sleep. Unlike residence halls there is no mandate to leave. Fortunately, some actually do evacuate.

Still, others return home after a night of celebration and are hungry, so decide to cook some dinner on the stove top, oven or microwave. Next, they fall asleep while their food is cooking and only awake to - not the times, but the smoke alarm. Or, the firefighter dragging them from the couch because the alarm has been disabled.

No matter how much fire safety education we provide during the semester or through the years, most of it goes out the window on Wednesday, (yes Wednesday) Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings.

The USFA report **Campus Fire Fatalities in Residential Buildings (2000-2015)** has some very telling statistics about fire in these properties. Some of the more notable stats include:

- Alcohol is involved in 76% of all campus fire fatalities
- 73% of fatal fires occur between 12:00 AM and 6:00 AM.
- 29% of fatal fires were caused by smoking materials

If you haven't yet read this report it is well worth your time and can determine where to direct your fire prevention efforts.

In closing, it has been nearly two years since the last recorded campus related fire fatality.

There have been some improvements at all levels of housing, especially the campus owned residence hall. But, our work is far from over. Each August we have a new group of first year students moving on-campus, and a new group of second year students moving off-campus. We need to prepare all students for the challenges that wait ahead, especially the early morning hours.

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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.

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

He is a frequent presenter at Campus Fire Forum, an instructor for the Fire-Wise Campus program and served as project manager for Campus Fire Data.

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