



## OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

May 2016

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### 20 Years of Victims: and the battle goes on

This summer I will be completing my 20<sup>th</sup> year as a fire code inspector, fire safety advocate and instructor promoting fire safety in campus communities across the U.S. During this time there have been many successes and saves, as well as a lot of extremely good luck as we try to protect students that live both on- and off-campus. Unfortunately, there have been too many tragedies that have wrecked families and friendships by taking fire victims while they were in their prime.

In two weeks we will mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chapel Hill fraternity fire that claimed five students

on Graduation Day. It was also Mother's Day! Just 18 months earlier a similar fire struck at a fraternity in Bloomsburg, also taking five students.

This time it was on Homecoming Weekend. These two fires helped to shape my career early on and had an impact on my life ever since. But, the fires and the victims didn't stop. One occurred in my community, close work colleagues had fire deaths occur in their communities, and scores of others. One mentor of mine perhaps said it best - "This fire occurred on my watch. These were my kids."

Over the years I have met too many parents, family and friends that are survivors of campus related fires. I've done enough research of the

victims that I feel like I knew most, or all of them. All of these people have provided me with the drive and passion to continue the battle to make a change, and to save lives.

The worst part of all of this tragedy is that we know the answers. We know how to prevent fires through education, only if people will take heed. Too often people don't think a fire can happen to them. Even many of the parents think this way, so no wonder their kids do too. Everyone needs a plan and must practice their plan. We know how to detect and stop fires, only if we could get modern codes adopted in our states without the opposition from the special interest groups that influence legislation.



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If we don't start protecting lives in new construction, we will never catch up. We know how to retrofit existing high-risk buildings, such as residence halls and fraternity houses with new detection and suppression systems with little impact to the occupants. But, the dollar still drives too many decisions over safety. Even after a fire, some buildings are rebuilt without adding fire protection because it 'isn't required by the code'.

A recent report issued by the US Fire Administration, entitled [Campus Fire Fatalities in Residential Buildings](#) is a must read. Even if you only read the executive summary you may find the following numbers as a

shock, or as USFA's Tim O'Dowd best describes as 'ASTONISHING'

- 94% of all campus related fire fatalities occurred off-campus
- Alcohol was involved in 76% of all campus related fire fatalities
- Smoking is the leading cause of these fires, nearly 40%
- 74% of these fires occurs between midnight and 6:00 AM

This is where our focus needs to be for the next 20 years so we can bring a sharp decline to these unnecessary tragedies. Then, maybe I can retire.

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### 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.

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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