



OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

February 2014

When finding the “PERFECT” house: When does the search begin?

Just a few weeks into my daughter’s freshmen year it seemed like all was going well. She was living in a new residence hall with all of the latest fire and security measures a parent could want. Classes were going fine, making new friends, etc. Then, one evening the unexpected phone call...“we found a house to live in next year - all EIGHT of us.” And, “the landlord needs us to sign the lease within three days because the house will go fast.” Did I mention it was only mid-September? Now, I must put on my fire inspector hat, instead of being the understanding Dad.

My experience is not uncommon and I should have expected this. In my mind, the residence hall is like a hotel - why would anyone want to leave? But, many college students are at the time in their life when they are

becoming independent and wanting to make decisions on their own. Sometimes they make good decisions, while other times it is part of the learning process and parents need to be involved to assist.

In many communities there is such a demand for Off-Campus Housing that the units are leased at least 10 months in advance. If you don’t act fast you may be forced to accept what is left over. Often times, this deadline is ahead of the date when the on-campus housing options are offered and most colleges don’t guarantee housing for anyone other than first year students.

It is even worse to think that some students sign a lease without first consulting with their parents. Or, parents sign the lease without seeing the place themselves. In my office my staff and I get several calls every September about the house or apartment that a student lives in. The

parents are in town for parent’s weekend or another activity, and they are in shock. “How dare you allow my child to live in a place like this” the parent asks? We then follow up with a question, “who signed the lease?”

Many times these complaints are not related to life safety, more the quality of life that one becomes accustomed to. Nonetheless, parents often times find out too late that the property isn’t what they are used to at home. In some cases it may be dangerous and illegal. Hopefully, the municipality where your students live have laws that regulate rental properties and require frequent inspections.

Why is this important to consider?

We know that most (almost all) student fire fatalities occur in Off-Campus housing. Most of these fires occur in communities that are close to campus,



OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

February 2014

frequented by students and often times in older structures. The buildings may be a house or duplex, apartment buildings, even Greek housing. These buildings in most cases have not been well maintained, and few codes require retroactive requirements of the building infrastructure. While the fire causes in these buildings are very similar to any housing type, the student housing poses additional risks. Unfortunately, the presence of alcohol or drug use is present in most fatal fires. And, in almost every case there is a lack of fire protection systems (including smoke alarms). Or, the fire protection system had been disabled.

In the Off-Campus environment many landlords do a great job maintaining their property and have it ready for occupancy in the fall. But, if the tenants do not report deficiencies and the landlord does not make frequent site visits to monitor the property

the “move-in ready” condition may not last and even the nicest homes can be at risk for a fire. Other landlords are not as responsive and only provide the minimum requirements of the law. If there are no laws, the student and parents may be on their own.

It is up to the tenant or in many cases a parent to identify a hazard and report it to the landlord. Then, the landlord needs to take appropriate action. It is important for a tenant to have access to 24-hour maintenance. If the landlord does not make the corrections in a reasonable amount of time you may need to involve the local AHJ. Most times, the university will not have any jurisdiction but may have some resources for you to call.

Location, location, location!

This is what many landlords will promote. While this can be

important, make sure the students or parents have a list of what to look for beforehand.

Some of the basic items to look for regarding safety include:

- Smoke alarms in every bedroom and in the hallway
 - Carbon monoxide detector if a solid or fossil fuel is used in the building
 - Sprinklers throughout the building
 - Building-wide fire alarm system for apartment buildings
 - Fire extinguisher in the kitchen
 - Deadbolt locks on the bedroom door and the entry door
 - Window locks if the sill is within 6 feet of grade
- If you get a chance to visit the property, be sure to ask these questions:
- What type of heat is available?
 - Is the heat included in the rent?
 - When was the furnace last inspected?



OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

February 2014

- What type of cooking appliances are provided?

Although renter's insurance is relatively inexpensive, very few tenants have coverage in the event of a loss. Some students are covered by their parent's homeowners, but there are limitations. And the coverage may be different depending if they live on- or off-campus. Some landlords may even require the tenant to have insurance, but most do not.

Social Media as a tool:

Many times I'm asked to make a recommendation for a good landlord, or identify the bad ones. Working in government we are unable to make any such recommendation, so I suggest the student or parents Google™ the landlord or the complex they are considering signing with. Often times they can find out

information that otherwise may not be available. They do need to remember that there is no guarantee of the accuracy of this information.

Some other sites, such as Twitter allow you to follow information about a complex, management company or even student organizations. There are many available that you can search for, but here are a few to try:

@movingoffcampus

@studentrenter.com

@CollegeRenterIn

Depending on your job or interest with Off-Campus Housing you may be directly involved in the enforcement of codes, or be able to refer tenants and parents to those that do. Either way, it is important to understand the business side for the landlord as well as the peer pressure the students are under to commit. And, hopefully

everyone will be satisfied with their new home.

In my personal case I was lucky. My daughter visited the house and knew that there was no possible way that I'd sign the lease and she has opted for another year in the residence hall. For me, another year of peace of mind knowing she is living in a fire-safe environment.



OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

February 2014

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.



Published by The Center for
Campus Fire Safety.

www.campusfiresafety.org

978.961.0410 | [email](#)