

HEOA Update: Fire Incident Reporting Requirements

The Campus Fire Safety Right-to-Know Act requires universities with on-campus housing to compile fire data, report the data to the federal government, and publish an annual fire safety report.



The core components of the Campus Fire Safety Right-to-Know Act became federal law with the passage of the [Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008](#). These principal elements will prove crucial in helping campus fire officials gather the information they need to begin to gain a more accurate and defined picture of how fire affects campuses across the United States.

The new law requires colleges and universities that maintain on-campus housing to compile fire data, report the data to the federal government, and publish an annual fire safety report that gives students, parents and the public current information about fires in on-campus housing. Colleges are also required to maintain a fire log that captures specific information about fires that occur in on-campus housing.

The final regulations provide that institutions must distribute an annual fire safety report and create publication requirements for the annual fire safety report that are similar to the long-standing rules for the annual security report.

The final regulations allow an institution to publish the annual security report and the annual fire safety report together, as long as the title of the document clearly states that it contains both the annual security report and the annual fire safety report. If an institution chooses to publish the reports separately, it must include information in each of the two reports about how to directly access the other report.

Know the Key Fire Terms That Apply

To understand this regulation's applicability and impact, it is important to review any definitions contained within it. When developing the fire reporting regulation, it was determined by the negotiating team to use existing terms colleges and universities are familiar with under the security reporting regulations and to the extent that those terms would bridge logically. A primary example is 'on-campus student housing facility' (see "What is an 'On-Campus Student Housing Facility?"). New terms introduced in the fire safety regulations that required definitions include:

Fire: Any instance of open flame or other burning in a place not intended to contain the burning or in an uncontrolled manner.

Fire drill: A supervised practice of a mandatory evacuation of a building for a fire.

Fire safety system: Any mechanism or system related to the detection of a fire, the warning resulting from a fire, or the control of a fire including:

- Sprinkler or other fire extinguishing systems
- Fire detection devices
- Standalone smoke alarms
- Devices that alert one to the presence of a fire, such as horns, bells or strobe lights
- Smoke-control and reduction mechanisms
- Fire doors and walls that reduce the spread of a fire

Must Campuses Report Nuisance Alarms?

One of the most significant pieces of the legislation is the requirement that institutions maintain a current log of fires and then transition that information into annual statistical data. With that in mind, the inevitable question arose: "Do we need to report every incident where the fire alarm is activated because of burnt microwave popcorn?" The short answer is "no".

One must keep in mind that the fire log and statistics are designed to track and report fires (as defined in the regulation), not every activation of a fire alarm. Therefore a fire alarm in and of itself does not meet the definition of fire. Good judgment will be the guiding factor.

So back to the popcorn incident - if the bag broke into open flame and there was damage to the microwave, then it would be a reportable incident. If not, then it is probably just another example of the importance for continued fire safety education.

Develop the Template That Works for You

The regulation does not establish a template for the annual report; rather it leaves that to the individual institution. A college's annual fire safety report however, must include statistics on the number of fires in on-campus housing, the cause of each fire, the number of injuries and deaths, and the value of property damaged. The report will also include a description of fire systems, the number of fire drills, evacuation procedures, education and training programs, and future plans for fire safety improvement, as well as the institution's policies on appliances, smoking, open flames, and other potential hazards. Required to be complete by Oct. 1 of each year, and in addition to filing with the U. S. Department of Education, the annual fire safety report must be distributed by either publication, mailing (E-mail permissible) or posting on the Web.

The information gained as a result of these new reporting criteria will result in a more informed public. More significantly, it will begin to better identify the fire problem, compliance with fire safety plans or polices, and protective system performance. All of this data will be invaluable to those developing training programs, protocols and practices to keep the campus safe and secure from fire.

Paul D. Martin is president of the Center for Campus Fire Safety (CCFS), the only national non-profit membership organization exclusively devoted to reducing the occurrence and effect of fires on America's campuses. Additional information about CCFS, the campus fire safety regulations and CCFS' free online campus fire incident reporting program can be found at www.campusfiresafety.org.

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