



OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

January 2015

Heating Systems:

Now that winter weather has taken a firm grip in many parts of the country there is an increased risk of a fire involving the heating systems in off-campus buildings. Every year we can find articles or reports from a number of fires that occur are related to the heating system itself, or the misuse of a system.

Safety starts with the initial installation being proper and safe. Unfortunately, many of these systems are ancient and we must rely on the technicians being competent and properly trained to maintain these systems in proper working order.

Heating systems, much like other appliances in a dwelling rely on the tenants to understand the operating instructions, as well as the limits of the system. This starts with the landlord properly explaining these instructions. Some may seem simple, such as

providing details on how the thermostat works. Or, not to use the furnace room as a storage area to help reduce the risk.

Most heating appliances are designed to withstand a mechanical failure or breakdown without causing a fire. This is done through safety sensors or even the housing of the appliance. Many times when you have a fire caused by a heating system there is typically a secondary contributing factor. These other factors may be storage in close proximity to the furnace. Or, improper clearances of exhaust pipes within the structure. For example, when a gas-fired boiler malfunctions and overheats the exterior housing is designed to contain this heat until the unit shuts down. If there is storage placed up against this exterior housing, the heat can conduct through the housing to the combustible storage causing the fire.

Supplemental heating equipment can also be a concern. First, is this permitted in the lease? Or, are space heaters permitted or limited by the local codes? If space heaters are permitted, landlords must provide instructions on how to safely use the heater, especially how to maintain clearances. Chances are, this is the first time a tenant has used this type of appliance. If space heaters are able to be used only allow the use of electric space heaters. And, prohibit the use of fuel-fired space heaters such as kerosene or wood-burning appliances. These appliances create an unnecessary risk in student housing. For other types of supplemental heating systems refer to the manufacturer's instructions for safe use and maintenance.

Reminder about smoke and CO alarms:

This time of year is also a good time to remind



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property managers and tenants to test their smoke and carbon monoxide alarms. If maintenance staff are visiting properties to perform maintenance or preventive maintenance, have them test the alarms at this time and make any necessary repairs. Verify the manufacturer date of each alarm and replace as recommended or required by your local codes.

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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