



# OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

February 2017

## Fraternity party hazards:

Over the years writing this column I've highlighted some of the problems that the fire department or fire inspectors may encounter in a fraternity house. These problems may be discovered during a response to an incident during a party and makes the risk even greater. An alarm, odor investigation, medical emergency or a fire. Any routine response may be an invitation to something worse.

Depending on the size of the building there may be 100 or more people on a floor, and 400 or more inside the building. When the FD arrives the house is most likely still occupied. Occupants are reluctant listen to instruction or reason let alone recognize the danger they may be in. And, this is made worse due to the presence of alcohol. Lots, and lots of alcohol.

So, how is this different than a bar or nightclub? Loud

music, large crowds, with poor lighting and an emergency occurs. Where would you rather be?

One would expect that most bars or nightclubs would meet some sort of local or state code to be in business. At least at the initial time of construction or the last fire inspection. However, we have seen where this can also lead to a false sense of security and have horrific results.

Staff working in a bar or nightclub may have training in crowd management, have studied an emergency plan or even participated in a fire drill upon their hire. A fraternity house that hosts large parties is operating like a nightclub. But, the aforementioned training rarely exists.

Does the house ownership (many are volunteer board members) understand what goes on in their houses at night? Is there a personal liability to these owners?

How about the officers of the house? Are they liable? Do

they understand the responsibility that comes with being an officer?

Now, consider other conditions that could be present:

- The exit doors are blocked, or even padlocked shut for security or 'crowd management' purposes.
- The posted exit doors do not swing in the direction of egress, and lack panic hardware.
- Exit signs and emergency lighting may not be present, or are inoperable.
- Fire protection systems are placed on 'test' or turned off to avoid responses from emergency services, bring unwanted attention to their property.
- Decorations and props beautifying the property are highly combustible.
- Overcrowding beyond the posted occupant load, if an official



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occupant load even exists.

Does anything like this happen in your town? If you have fraternity houses that host parties, I'm sure it does. Some communities have experienced student organizations renting a property away from campus and away from the rules. These properties may include farm houses, barns, restaurants or warehouses.

So, what can be done?

- What rules are in place in your town?
- Do these rules work?
- Or, do the rules force the parties underground to avoid detection?

Please let us know what you've experienced. Continue this discussion on the Off-Campus Fire & Life Safety Alliance page. If you're not already a member, [click here](#).

Keep your eyes and ears open!

Tim

## 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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