



OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

April 2018

Careless Mistakes: Is there such a thing?

The fourth fire alarm of the night at a fraternity house was for a manual pull station at the front door. Someone leaving the party felt it would be funny to pull the alarm. But, was that the real story? Then, before the crew could ask any more questions - another fire alarm a few blocks away. This was updated a few minutes later as a kitchen fire - now out. This was at 3:30 AM. Unattended cooking at 3:30 AM.

Now back to the manual alarm: there are common patterns to the causes of unwanted or

malicious fire alarms in the fraternity houses. Although, these change frequently as we catch on - 'Someone smoking under the detector' is a recent cause. It used to be 'the smoke machine set off the alarm.' 'Someone discharged a fire extinguisher.' Now, 'VAPING' is the big one. Now, nearly every alarm we respond to is set off by the theme-of-the-month. It almost seems that the houses come up with these believable causes as a way of getting out of trouble. Or, so they think.

The next night, another unattended cooking fire. A pretty common incident in most college

towns. Fortunately, most are contained to the cooking device. Some, just run out of boiling water. Then, another call - this time a call for an odor of gasoline on the second floor of an eight-story building. Kind of unusual. So, was it gasoline? Natural gas? Old garbage? You are never quite sure what you'll find - until you investigate. This was really a gasoline odor. Now, figure out where it is coming from. Was it a prank? An arson attempt? Nope, just some friends that found a lawn mower a few blocks away placed at the curb for the taking. So, the friends had an idea to fix up the



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mower and make it usable - in their living room! All good intentions, just careless. With no understanding of the risk they are creating. So, you need to ask - would they do this at home? In their living room? Not likely. Would they cook at home at 3:30 AM and then fall asleep? Again, not likely. But, the parents are home to prevent this from happening.

So, how do we provide this same type of supervision while the students are living off-campus? After many years of asking myself these questions, and regularly being

disappointed or astonished as what we've found - I've learned that we will never stop the careless or foolish mistakes from occurring. After all, everyone is human. They will make mistakes. No matter how careless, most times it is a mistake. Hopefully, they learn from it.

Everlasting reminders that we need to continue our efforts to educate and train the students as they arrive in our communities each year. We need to find ways to reach those moving off-campus, to reduce these same type of fire responses and the risk of significant

injury, or death. Always needing fresh ideas and new programs. But, we can't stop with the student or the parents. We also need to include the building managers, property maintenance staff and the on-call technicians that work for these companies. These incidents also prove that we need to be ever vigilant of the fire protection systems in these buildings, both active and passive systems. We need to respond to each of these as if it was a fire - until reported otherwise. Proper inspection, testing and maintenance is essential. Making sure the owners and



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maintenance staff know how the systems work. Even explaining why removing the kick-stop or the wood wedge from the propped fire door is important. Without a properly operating fire protection system, these 'careless mistakes' may turn tragic.

Tim

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Published by The Center for Campus Fire Safety.

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