



## OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

May 2015

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### Elected Officials Must Be Willing to Impose Change:

Too many tragedies have occurred in college communities across the country causing elected officials to consider changes to their local codes. Some make the right choice and require the properties to be improved. Others, give in to the opposition mostly in the name of cost or feel that fire officials are overreacting. Or, the belief that these events “won’t happen here.” Worse, is when mandates are overturned by new officials or so called “new evidence” that cause some to pause.

Maybe yet even worse is when officials make promises of change, but do little to keep their word. These examples have occurred in many communities, and they know who they are.

In April of 2005 in State College, PA an early morning fire claimed the life of a 21-year old senior, just weeks away from graduation. This fire was all too typical of what we have seen across the country since off-campus fires most recently came on to our radar in 2000, soon after the Seton Hall tragedy.

The conditions found in the aftermath were

much like we had seen before, and unfortunately continue to find in every town. The early morning hours after a party, disabled smoke alarms, older structures that have not been kept up with current codes, and of course - the lack of automatic sprinkler systems.

What is different from what we have experienced in some communities is that the local elected officials immediately wanted answers on how to keep this type of event from happening again. And, they also took action to implement many of the recommendations.



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Although we all knew that a sprinkler retrofit would have the most dramatic improvement, with upwards of 15,000 rented dwellings throughout the region this was an unrealistic expectation. However, there were two significant changes that have already saved lives and will continue to do so for years to come.

The first and most significant change was for all rented dwelling units to be retrofit with smoke alarms in accordance with the codes in 2005. This meant that dwellings had to include smoke alarms in every sleeping room, the hallway

outside each sleeping area and every additional story as well as interconnected. To help ensure this recommendation would get approved, the newly released wireless smoke alarms were considered as an acceptable alternative to the 110-volt power supply and wired interconnection for the properties that already had rental permits.

The second change required that any rented dwelling with living space on the third floor, single family homes included, be provided with two means of egress from this floor. In lieu of the

second MOE the owners could opt to install sprinklers in accordance with NFPA-13D. In fact, a number of property owners did.

This is not the first time that the local elected officials have made improvements to the local rental codes. All rented dwellings utilizing fossil fuels have been required to install carbon monoxide alarms since 2005. And in 2003, an ordinance was passed requiring all fraternities to be retrofit with sprinklers in accordance with NFPA-13 or NFPA-13R within five years.



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Each of these retrofit requirements were met with some opposition, but the elected officials didn't waiver in their commitment to safety and didn't alter any of the requirements. Today, the rented dwellings in the community are much safer than they were once were and will continue to be. We have many documented saves from fires and CO exposure that may have otherwise been an all too familiar headline.

It is important to evaluate fire statistics in your community as well as those occurring across the country. Just because the fire

hasn't happened yet, rest assured that it will. Use examples from communities that have made changes. Also look at the communities that have experienced these tragedies and have done nothing. Let your elected officials decide what they would like to be remembered for.

It is important to note that State College is not alone in adopting retrofit requirements. We learned from others such as Lawrence, KS and Boulder, CO and the State of New Jersey to name a few. Some or most of all code changes requires a tragedy to occur first.

But, these officials took action to reduce the likelihood of future events. If your elected officials have made the hard decisions and choices that saved lives, please let me know. I'd like to recognize their efforts as well.

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properties, and coordinates the life safety education for the community including off-campus and Greek housing.

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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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