



THE OTHER SIDE

From the students point of view

Fire Safety (or lack of?) in Off-Campus Housing: Fraternity Houses

By Kevin Cox, **FIREPRO®** Incorporated

After studying fire protection engineering at a well known engineering university, I would like to share my experiences regarding fire safety in off campus housing. With more understanding of fire safety than the average student, I was well aware of some of the risks and also the benefits of certain aspects of fire safety. After living in a fraternity house for four years, I would like to discuss my first hand experiences with fire safety issues in off-campus housing. Some were good, some bad, and some downright scary.

Things started off on a good note upon moving in at the start of sophomore year. The house accommodated about 40 people, and one of the first things we were told was “Don’t hang anything from the sprinklers or sprinkler pipe, and don’t bump into the sprinkler heads or they will break.” Well that’s good, at least the house has a sprinkler system. The sprinkler system was in good shape, and appeared to be relatively new and well maintained. We were also instructed that the beds could not be moved to any location that did not have a sprinkler head located directly above it.

From there forward things got a lot more laid back when it came to fire safety. For example, in the dorms there were no open flame candles allowed, nor was cigarette smoking permitted. Here, each room commonly had scented candles right in the center of the room on the coffee tables. Major life safety features were main-

tained, such as fire exits and exterior fire escape stairways, but there was a lack of attention to the smaller things that could likely be ignition sources.

Fire inspections from the City were the only rules or regulations that we were required to follow other than those that we internally enforced based on our own

knowledge of fire safety. The fire inspector for the City would visit once a year to complete his inspection and allow us to renew our housing permit. His visits were scheduled well in advance, and we knew from the previous years what had to be fixed or modified to fit his needs. Some fire safety features were inherent and did not get changed, such as the sprinkler system, fire alarm system, and emergency exits. However, there were many things that we knew the inspector was looking for that would get fixed right before he

came, and returned to their every day location after he left. Some things that were commonly changed just for the inspection included removing wires that were run under carpets, removing curtains from the sides of bunk beds, and removing locks from doors leading to fire exits. Candles, lighters, and other obvious ignition sources were put out of sight. Once the inspector came and gave us his passing score, everything went back to the way it was before the inspection.

At the time, none of these small fire safety modifications seemed all that important to us, and in the grand

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scheme of things it would be very difficult to get a group of 40 young men to change the way things were done year to year. In hindsight, those rules were there for a reason and should not have been only fixed temporarily. I have not lived in any off-campus college apartments, but I have visited plenty. They are in similar situations, possibly with even less rules and inspections than fraternity houses.

The problem with fire safety in off-campus housing is enforcement. While privately owned apartments are commonly not associated with the colleges, fraternities are. A monitored approach from the college, similar to what is commonly used in dormitories, could be a possible solution. Inspections should be done more frequently, which would encourage fire safety issues to be fixed permanently, rather than only fixed for the inspection day.

There should be a direct relationship between the college and all off-campus housing, regardless if it is a fraternity or a privately owned apartment. If there are

students from the college living there, it is important that they are well informed of fire safety issues, and frequent inspections would be a good method to accomplish this. The fire inspections from the city would be a perfect place for the college or university to intervene. In our case, the inspections were coordinated directly between the fraternity and the city, with no involvement from campus. If the inspection process was overseen by someone on campus, it would provide more incentive to follow their rules as well as an opportunity for discipline if the requirements were not met.

Even during my short time living in off-campus housing at college, there were several fires in fraternity houses and apartments. Progress towards reducing the frequency of these fires has been steady, however it would only take a few more minor improvements to make a few major steps forward.

Kevin Cox, Engineer, *FIREPRO*® Incorporated

“The Inspector” by Philip Chandler

Wow! What a ride so many of us have had since our last chat! Earthquakes, hurricanes, tropical storms, punctuated by a tornado; which of the ten plagues is next? Of course some of you are still besieged by the twin perils of unrelenting drought and wild fires. When will life return to what we used to call normal?

For the past three weeks I have been entombed deep underground in our state’s emergency operations center—leaving the house at the crack of dawn, returning after sunset. I have been busy routing emergency resources to communities that have literally struggled to keep their heads above water. Against this backdrop, alternating between bursts of sheer chaos and mind deadening tedium, the Inspector has had little time and even less inclination to do that which has earned him the aforementioned moniker, inspecting.

And at first blush, that’s perhaps the way it should be. Who needs a code inspection when people are still clinging precariously to rooftops? Or more particular to the campus scene, what college would welcome a fire

inspector with open arms when the student union is under three feet of water and students starting their first week of classes have not had a hot meal or a shower for days? One has to have one’s priorities straight. In the face of disaster, the role of the inspector, the code enforcement officer, may just seem a tad irrelevant.

Yet, nothing is farther from the truth. It takes catastrophic occurrences, the likes of which so many of us have just experienced, to understand the value of a robust code enforcement program. Upon reasoned reflection, regulators and regulated parties must conclude that in many instances, on many campuses ravaged by Irene and Lee, things might have been a lot worse were it not for pain-in-the-neck inspectors persistently and conscientiously performing their duties in the weeks and months leading up to the start of the new school year.

As is often the case, large-scale incidents have a way of shaking loose everything that is not nailed down, of probing for the weakest link and then tearing it asunder. This is just as true of emergency management organizations as it is with building systems. Perhaps, as