



By HAL BRUNO

An Educational Approach To Campus Fire Safety

Fire Departments Must Be Aggressive in Campus Fire Prevention & Safety

It has been almost two years since we last covered the problem of college fire safety and there is both good and bad news to report. The good news is that there continues to be a growing awareness of the problem and a willingness on the part of more college administrators to cooperate with local fire authorities. The bad news is that there has been only scattered progress in dealing with the problem of off-campus rooming houses – which is where a majority of students live and where more than 80% of the student fire fatalities occur.

According to the Center for Campus Fire Safety, there have been 17 deaths with two months to go in the 2007-2008 academic year (which includes summer sessions). Twenty students died in college-related fires during the previous school year and there have been 209 student fatalities since 2000, when the Center began monitoring the problem through its Campus Fire Watch program. Ed Comeau, director of the Center, points out that more colleges and universities are putting sprinklers in new dormitories and some are retrofitting older buildings. “But we’re not getting sprinklers in the off-campus dumps, so we have to educate these students to protect themselves,” Comeau says.

The educational approach aims at warning students *and their parents* of the fire dangers in off-campus housing – e.g., insufficient exits, missing or inoperative smoke detectors, the lack of sprinklers, the use of hot plates and space heaters in bedrooms decorated with flammable draperies, careless smoking habits and misuse of alcohol. Eight years after it was first introduced,

“The Campus Fire Safety Right to Know Act” finally has passed both houses of Congress as part of the Higher Education Bill. As this is written, it’s held up in a Senate-House conference committee while they work out differences in other parts of the bill. Once those are resolved, it’s expected that the College Fire Safety Act will become law. It calls for the schools to file annual reports with the Department of Education, listing the number of fires they have had, injuries and fatalities, sprinklers and smoke detectors installed, and what they are doing to educate their students on fire prevention and safety.

A bold and unique approach has been developed by Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT, which bought off-campus houses, installed sprinklers in those that are occupied by five or more students, and started classes in fire prevention and safety. Barbara Spalding, associate director of Campus Fire Safety, relates that half of Wesleyan’s 3,000 students live in dormitories, 30% in apartments and 20% in houses. Almost all of these buildings (87%) are now protected by automatic sprinkler systems at a cost of \$9 million spent over the last three years and the goal is to make it 100%. “Our administration has been very supportive and we’ve been on a very aggressive track when it comes to fire safety,” Spalding explains.

Obviously, it takes a supportive administration and an aggressive fire safety program to tackle the college fire problem. It also requires the willingness to spend a lot of money. The challenge should be more manageable at a small

private school than it is at a huge state university. But the big schools have more resources to tap and have lagged behind in fire safety because it has been a low-priority item on their agendas; many have

been unwilling to make the effort or spend the money and have fiercely defended their jurisdictional authority.

Regardless, there are things they can do immediately in terms of educating their students, faculty and parents to the fire danger. The Peoples Burn Foundation of Indiana has produced a new training video, “To Hell and Back – College Fire Survival.” It has already gone out to 30 schools and the goal is to start distributing it to every college, university and fire department in the country. Copies can be obtained from the Founda-

tion at www.peoplesburnfoundation.org. Including parents in the equation is an important step, since they often are paying the bills and no one wants to send a child off to college to live in a fire trap.

Perhaps most crucial is for local fire departments to play as aggressive a role as their state laws allow when it comes to campus fire prevention and safety. Legal barriers that prevent fire department inspectors from inspecting college buildings have to be broken in states where they exist. When it comes to the off-campus rooming houses and make-shift dorms, the local fire department has full responsibility to provide fire protection, which should include the power to inspect premises and order corrections of code violations. And, when a fire does occur, on or off campus, the first call should go directly to the fire department – *not* campus security.

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**—Ed Comeau, director
Center for Campus Fire Safety**

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