

Fire Safety

Fire Safety

The Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life (OFSL), Off Campus Student Life (CI), the undergraduate students, the alumni house corporations and the Town of Chapel Hill take the issue of fire safety very seriously. To ensure this level of safety, the OFSL-CI Fire Safety program was created in 1996, following the tragic fire at the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity house. Annually this program is evaluated and new components are added, in keeping with our overall belief in continuous improvement.

Each semester, each fraternity and sorority that operates a house is required to participate in fire safety training co-hosted by OFSL-CI and the Chapel Hill Fire Department (CHFD). Following the training, each house conducts a fire safety self-inspection to prepare for their official inspection. The fraternity and sorority houses are inspected by the Chapel Hill Fire Department as the houses are in the Town of Chapel Hill, pay over \$350,000 in property taxes, and thus are under the jurisdiction of the CHFD. The inspections occur within the first 6-8 weeks of the semester along with a fire drill monitored by CHFD. During the inspection, the Fire Department looks for any violations of the National Fire Safety Code. If a violation is found, the chapter is written up in a report and assigned a time period during which they must rectify the problem. This report is sent to the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life at UNC-Chapel Hill, who compiles the results and monitors compliance. Each chapter appoints an undergraduate member to the position of Fire Marshal. The Fire Marshal is responsible for attending the training, conducting the self-inspection, and accompanies the Fire Inspector during the inspection.

[Show Video Transcript](#)

9 Fires

Flames that destroyed a Brookline apartment building earlier this week. An amazing story of survival is now being told.

Nine fires broke out on campuses across the nation over three weeks in January and February 2012. A fire is in the headlines but then is quickly replaced by other breaking news and we never hear of the true impact of these fires. This documentary tells of this impact, what happens after the headlines fade. It tells the rest of the story.

In January and February 2012, fires broke out on the campuses of the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse, Arizona State University, Portland State University and Hampden-Sydney College. All in on-campus student housing. They all provide valuable lessons on what can go right, but also what can go wrong.

At the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse, a fire started in the middle of the night in a basement lounge. The fire caused significant damage to the building's infrastructure. Smoke spread throughout the four stories through unprotected openings and pipe chases. The good news is that no one was injured in the fire. However, the building was closed down for an entire semester, forcing the university to find new housing for 271 students.

If you think this can't happen on your campus, you're naive, because it can.

My room was just off of the lobby, it was the first room to the left. So, I was sleeping in bed when the fire alarm went off.

We started to advance into the room. Conditions in the room were very hot, very smoky, visibility was down to zero.

Once I got outside and all of the doors were open, the oxygen was let in, then the smoke started piling up into the lobby and into the stairways and that is when I realized that something was actually going on.

All of the students were very concerned about the fact that there might be someone in the building. At that point we didn't know for sure everyone was out safe so everyone was very worried about the other people in their community.

Having a good evacuation and emergency plan in place comes in very handy if you actually have an emergency.

People said, 'ok, I'm going to evacuate, and I'm going to relocate, but hey, I've got all kinds of you know...my books, my computer, my clothing. When can I get back in there to get those things?'

We are in Drake Hall where we had the recent fire and not many of us get to see what a fire looks like and I thought when I came in and saw this that it was so devastating that it really impresses upon you the seriousness of being safe when you hear a fire alarm. This is where the investigators believe the fire began in this couch area. And you can see this is completely devastated. And thank God no one was down here at the time when that happened because I don't know how they would have got out. This is why it is so important when we hear a fire alarms in our building, you might think, 'oh, it is just an alarm or a drill,' but it can be the real thing and it has really changed the way I think about fire safety and we wanted people to see that for themselves because this will get cleaned up and life goes back to normal but it is important for people to see the devastation.

I fully anticipate we will have students from Drake Hall who will have had academic difficulty and there will be conversations and appeals about probation and things like that and we'll have to take this into account, you know, what impact this experience had on that student's experience to do the typical academic performance.

I pushed it out of the way, you know was reorganizing people to help them get their stuff back in, to kind of just cope with how I was feeling and didn't really want to think about the actual reality of what was happening and then that night I definitely had little bit of a mental breakdown like, oh my gosh,

I don't have a place to live, I am futon hopping, it was really difficult and the week after was definitely hard, I skipped meals, stuff like that, because, you don't think that something like that . . . you got out of the building fine, you didn't get burned, none of your friends died or anything, you don't think it is going to have that much of an impact on you, but just the fact that you are homeless and your life is completely thrown for a loop.

Had there been sprinklers in the dormitory, this would have been a non-issue. It would have been what I called more of a routine fire. Probably within say two, three hours maximum, the students would have been back in the dormitory and the only thing that would have been shut down would have been that particular area. There probably would have been little to no damage to the communications system. There would have been little to no disruption in the UW's mission of providing education to their students.

Narrator: Drake Hall opened six months later after extensive repairs to the electrical system and telecommunications. Vertical pipe chases which had spread the smoke throughout the building were repaired and sealed. The building had to be cleaned and painted because of the smoke damage on all four floors. Unfortunately, an automatic fire sprinkler system was not installed in the building during the six month renovation. However, the university does plan to add fire sprinklers to all its residence halls over the next few years.

There were two fires in residence halls that had automatic fire sprinklers, one at Arizona State University and one at Portland State University in Oregon. At Arizona State University the fire department found smoke coming from a room on the upper floor of a high-rise residence hall, and just as they opened the door, the sprinkler head activated, controlling the fire which started in a trash can.

At Portland State University, the fire department responded to a 10-story residence hall. A trash chute ran the height of the building and the trash had backed up from the basement to above the second floor. A cigarette was thrown into the chute, setting the trash on fire. Fortunately, an automatic fire sprinkler system put out the blaze.

Both of these sprinkler saves were short stories on the news as opposed to the fire at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse. They had very little damage and the students were back in their rooms within hours, demonstrating the roles that sprinklers can play in protecting students in residence halls.

At Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, some students are housed in college-owned theme houses which are similar to a fraternity. In one such house, students spotted a fire in a couch on the attached porch and thought they had put it out using cups of water. In the middle of the night, the fire broke out again and then

spread into the house. All of the students got out, but one student didn't realize his friend had escaped and went back in to find him, crawling on his hands and knees below the smoke. He was severely burned and the building was totally destroyed.

Andrew Thacker: Basically, I woke up with Matt Maloney, the other guy in here. He ran upstairs and woke all of us up. Apparently, he had woken up first because his roommate woke him up and they had realized there was a glow coming in and they smelled smoke and the fire alarms actually had not gone off so our porch outside was completely up in flames by the time we were awake. So they tried to go put it out but the flames burst in the windows and started coming into the house. It was about the time that they ran upstairs to wake us up. By the time we got to the stairs the fire had gotten into the house and the smoke had really gotten thick and we couldn't even see. So, there was only one real exit on the back of the house, outside of the porch exit, which was complete flames, we couldn't see anything so we didn't really know what we were running into we were going down. This is definitely something I'll never take lightly again, especially considering my family and everything, smoke detectors just beeping, won't take the battery out. Just, actually be mindful of your surroundings, it's very simple thing you can do that will go a long way because you never know when some kind of tragedy like this will strike.

Narrator: A number of fires have started in upholstered furniture on porches and some of these have been fatal fires. The problem is the fire gets a good head start on the porch where there are no smoke detectors or fire sprinklers, before it spreads into the building. Now it is growing, cutting off escape paths, spreading smoke. Preventing these types of fires is vitally important, but knowing what to do when they do break out can save lives.

Laboratory fires don't often get much attention outside of the university, but they can have a devastating impact when they go wrong. Two fires, one at the University of Maryland in College Park and the other at SUNY in Canton, New York, had dramatically different outcomes.

The fire in Maryland was in a high-tech research laboratory that housed a number of highly toxic gases and chemicals. Fortunately, this lab had an automatic fire sprinkler system that controlled the fire.

Alex Kozen: We had a fire on January 26, I believe, in the ceiling of our lab here at the University of Maryland, and it was inside our clean room. Now we're not exactly sure what started the fire. Fortunately, no one was injured in the actual fire. Two students were in the lab at the time. They called 911 and got the firemen here as soon as possible so the damage was really mitigated by the quick response of the firemen and the quick discharge of the sprinkler system. If the sprinkler system hadn't gone off the damage may have been much more severe and the fire could have spread and either destroyed the lab or destroyed the entire building. So we're actually very, very lucky that it was somewhat contained and that the damage was minimal. Now if the fire had been much worse and our tool had actually burned down and some of the steel had melted, then these chemicals would have been released into the environment and this could have been incredibly dangerous and our lab is adjacent to three other labs which are still in full working order and there was no damage there, so business can continue as usual in these other labs.

Fire started in a fan in the ceiling up here in our filtration system in the clean room so the fan caught on fire and then the air filter up here caught on fire which lit this whole ceiling panel on fire. Now that discharged the sprinklers, one sprinkler is right here and one sprinkler is over there. These are the only two sprinklers in the building that went off, above this ALD system and another ALD system which was right underneath this fire, which we've removed from the

lab now.

So we had the haz mat team came in and tested the water and everything that was in the lab and we were allowed back in about three hours after the fire, when they declared it safe. So we got to come in and start cleaning up right away three hours after the fire happened which we think helped us save quite a bit of equipment and quite a bit of our electronics and things that we had in the lab.

Narrator: A fire broke out in a chemistry laboratory at SUNY Canton. This lab did not have an automatic fire sprinkler system and the damage was extensive. But that's not the end of the story. Because of the environmental impact caused by the toxic byproducts from the fire the campus was shut down for an entire week and all the students were sent home while the damage could be assessed and cleaned up. The volunteer fire department had to have fire fighters on campus for the entire week. Because of the possibility of contamination, fire trucks, breathing equipment and turnout gear was bagged, quarantined and cleaned, a major impact on fire department operations. This fire in an unsprinklered chemistry lab, had a significant effect upon the mission, continuity of the school, and the community.

Narrator: The most tragic fires in January were the ones that occurred off-campus. Boston University students were trapped when a fire broke out in their off-campus house. The fire happened on a cold, snowy, Sunday morning, forcing students to jump from windows on all three floors of the building.

David Goldenberg: Life rides on the edge of a dime and that you can have a tragic accident happen that can change your life forever - within minutes.

Alex Epner: Around 7 am, I think it was, we woke up to the sound of the smoke detector. I thought that, we both actually thought that it was just my roommate's alarm, at first, no I tried to roll over and go back to sleep like nothing was happening. When it didn't stop, my girlfriend actually got up and noticed, mentioned to me, that there was smoke coming in through my door. And that's when I first realized that something was actually going on. My roommate Benjy had to jump out of the second floor. Josh jumped out of the third floor, he was the only one who lived up on that floor.

Josh Goldenberg: I think the first thing I remember is waking up in the rehab hospital for the first time, looking around, looking at my feeding tube, and looking at my bandages on my neck and just being really mad.

David Goldenberg: Josh was hospitalized for about 11 weeks after his accident, two of them he was in a coma in the ICU at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital and then for the remainder of his hospitalization he was recuperating at Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital. So one of the first problems was that we had to drop everything in our lives to be at the bedside.

Josh Goldenberg: I can't see, I can't speak, I can't walk, it's like, I don't know, it's just weird, it's been a weird new existence. My speech is not what it used to be because of my brain injury. I'm not sure if it affected my hearing because I think it actually helped my hearing because my sight is really poor right now.

David Goldenberg: I am sure, I am sure that every single parent that I interacted with, parents of college age students are a lot more vigilant at this time about checking smoke detectors and checking for sprinkler systems and checking for fire escapes and checking for college policies about these sort of things because every single one of them understands that devastating accidents like this can happen very, very quickly and it is just another risk that you have to add to all the other risks that you send with your child off to college.

Alex Epner: Fire safety is definitely a concern to me now. I couldn't imagine living in a place without a smoke detector or a sprinkler system or a fire escape. The fire has really put things in perspective for me. It's not all the things that you have that really are important. Everything can always be replaced. It's the people who are around you and your family and everyone who comes out to help you when you really need it, that really make the difference.

Narrator: A fire broke out in the basement of a four-story, off-campus apartment building where a Suffolk University student lived. The fire spread quickly up a stairwell into apartments on all four floors of the building.

Allie Wheeler: I woke up to the fire alarm.

Newscaster: Then came the engine sirens

Allie: I assumed that we probably would have to be evacuated.

Newscaster: Allie Wheeler hurried to the living room.

Allie: Down the hallway, I couldn't see anything, out the front door I couldn't see anything.

Newscaster: She panicked and called her roommate who was outside.

Allie: I'm like, what am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to get out?

Newscaster: Her roommate said the rear staircase.

Allie: I couldn't see anything, I didn't put my glasses on, I just basically tried running.

Newscaster: A second roommate tried to find her.

Allie: He tried to come up and rescue me but he made it to level 2 and couldn't make it up past that.

Newscaster: Smoke consumed everything. Fire fighters raced to knock down the flames,

Wheeler pressed her face to the screen to find oxygen.

Allie: I passed out, I woke up, you know, on the stairs, on my face.

Newscaster: She grabbed her cell phone and called her roommate again.

Allie: All of a sudden I heard a fireman climbing the stairs, yelling.

Newscaster: What was he yelling?

Allie: Like 'hello, hello' and I just yelled out 'hi, help me, I'm here.'

Narrator: The worst fire was one that happened at Poughkeepsie, New York. Eva Block, Kerry Rose Fitzsimons and Kevin Johnson were killed in an off-campus fire at Marist College.

Bob Fitzsimons: 9/11 in New York was the most devastating day of my life. I was part of the rescue and recovery down there for a couple days afterwards. I never thought I would see or feel as devastated as that. When I found out that Kerry was gone, this is my personal 9/11 right now. I know Maryanne and I have to be strong because we have two other children. We'll never have a normal life. People say well there's, you know, there's, you have to reinvent yourself. I don't know how we're going to do that, I really don't. Life will never be the same, it just won't be the same. You go on, you go through the motions every day, it's just extremely difficult, extremely difficult. Kerry Rose was awesome. Good days, a good day I guess would be a day that we didn't cry. We haven't had a good day yet. Just be extremely careful where your

children live. Make sure every possible fire safety device that could be installed in the house is there. Just tell your kids, make them so aware of the dangers that could happen to them. You know what Kerry's mistake was? She went to bed that night. That was her only mistake. She couldn't know.

Source URL: <https://carolinaunion.unc.edu/departments/fraternity-sorority-life/fire-safety>