



By HAL BRUNO

Legislative Safeguards Needed To Protect College Students from Fire

“Fire Season” 2006-07 Underway at America’s Colleges and Universities

While there is growing awareness of the fire danger in housing for college students, progress has been painfully slow in passing the local codes, state laws and national legislation that are needed to aggressively attack the problem. Only four states require sprinklers in residence halls, only one city mandates sprinklers in fraternities, and hardly anything is being done about the off-campus apartments and rooming houses where two-thirds of the students live and almost 80% of the fatalities occur.

This month marks the start of “fire season” at America’s colleges and universities as 17 million students begin the 2006-07 academic year. According to the Center for Campus Fire Safety, there were 11 fatalities at eight schools in the last academic year and all but one of these victims died in off-campus housing. In the past six years, 89 students have been killed in fires and many more injured from burns, smoke inhalation and jumping from windows. “The problem and the pattern are quite clear,” says Ed Comeau, the Center’s director. “In many of these cases the fire was preceded by a party with heavy drinking, careless disposal of smoking materials, missing or disabled smoke detectors.”

Also at fault were inadequate exits, overloaded electrical outlets and extension cords, hot plates used for cooking, space heaters for warmth, candles lit for atmosphere and arsonists who set fires as a prank or to cover-up a crime. Most of the fatal fires occurred in the pre-dawn hours when everyone was asleep – which means there was a delayed discovery and delayed alarm because the buildings were not protected by sprinkler systems.

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The solution is obvious: require sprinklers in every building that houses students, whether it’s a residence hall, a fraternity or sorority, an off-campus rooming house or an apartment converted into a dormitory. Unfortunately, knowing the solution and achieving it are two different things; you keep trying to reach the ultimate goal, but you also have to settle for whatever you can get at this time. After every multi-death fire, sprinkler bills are introduced in the state legislatures, but only Illinois, Kentucky, New Jersey and Pennsylvania have passed laws that require sprinklers in new and old college residence halls. State College, PA, is the only town we know of that has forced fraternities to retrofit with sprinklers.

When it comes to off-campus student housing – which accounted for 70 of the 89 fire deaths since 2000 – no one seems to know what to do. Since these buildings are not on university property, the schools claim they have no jurisdiction and can’t impose any regulations. That leaves it up to local fire departments to make the inspections and take whatever steps are necessary to force the landlords to comply with local codes, as weak as they may be. “Off-campus housing has become a local responsibility by default,” Comeau points out.

The Center for Campus Fire Safety convened a second summit conference of college administrators, fire organizations and legislators in Washington this past summer. Comeau reports that more administrators are facing up to the fire problem and seem willing to cooperate with fire officials. That would be a big step forward, since there have been in-

cidents in which they were hostile and uncooperative in dealing with their local fire departments. The national Campus Fire Safety Right to Know Act, which would require colleges to provide information on their fire prevention programs, has passed the House, but remains buried in a Senate committee.

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Perhaps the most important legislative battle is to get the moribund Fire Sprinkler Incentive Act out of the House and Senate committees where it has been locked up for 18 months. This bill would grant significant federal tax breaks to

building owners who retrofit with sprinklers and give the fire service a weapon to beat back the grandfather clauses that hamstringing so many fire code revisions. In addition, having a sprinkler would lower the owner’s fire insurance rates. It would make retrofitting more affordable and help put sprinklers in every building where there is the high risk of a multi-death fire.

Realistically, it’s unlikely that much will happen in what’s left of this session of Congress. Until it happens, Comeau believes that fire safety education at the high school and college levels can help save lives right now. “Most of these young people have not had any education in fire safety since they learned ‘stop-drop-and-roll’ in the fourth grade,” Comeau says. “We’ve got to make them aware of the fire dangers that surround them.”

To call attention to the danger, 17 states have proclaimed September as “Campus Fire Safety Month” and Comeau hopes that Congress will do the same. That would be a helpful gesture, but the real gift of life would be to pass the Fire Sprinkler Incentive Act.