The Center for Campus Fire Safety reports that each year, nearly 1,500 fires occur in residence halls, fraternities and sororities causing $9 million in damages. The tragedies at Texas A&M in July and at the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) in August also bring home the point that fire can turn an enjoyable university experience into immeasurable sadness.

At Texas A&M, a natural gas line developed a 12 inch hole from corrosion over a long time. This large leak plus a couple of smaller fitting leaks inside a university apartment provided enough natural gas in the air to cause the July 31st explosion. Two people died. The real tragedy was that the natural gas leak was found by building maintenance workers but repairs were postponed until the following Monday (July 31st was a Saturday).

On August 27th, a fire erupted in a fraternity house at Ole Miss. Three students died—one of the students came from Atlanta. This fire is still under investigation.

These two tragedies, plus fatal fires at universities in New Jersey and Pennsylvania a couple of years ago, remind us that there is potential danger for students living away from home. For many, going away to college is their first extended stay away from home. While it is the university building management and maintenance staff’s responsibility to ensure a safety dormitory or university housing environment, there is much that students can do for themselves to prevent fires. For students living off-campus, they are “on their own’ when it comes to their safety.

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October is Fire Safety Month and this edition of the Safety Buzz is dedicated to fire safety. I’ve asked Vic Rachael, our Fire Safety Coordinator, to provide valuable information for all of us—students, faculty, and staff to protect ourselves.

Fire safety is common sense and we all can take some simple steps to prevent fires. I’ve listed a few fire prevention actions following this column.

If we can help you, call us or visit our website.

Be safe out there,

FROM THE DIRECTOR

Some Fire Prevention Actions

- Remove the opportunity for fire by cleaning up.
- Know your evacuation route; know where fire alarm pull stations are; know how to call the fire department.
- Know how to use a portable fire extinguisher (don’t be a hero and fight a fire that is too big).
- Maintain/repair detector systems; replace batteries in smoke detectors (this is the right time of year). Don’t forget to periodically test your smoke detectors.
- Keep sprinkler heads clear of obstructions—they’re not clothes hangers.
- Don’t smoke in bed.
- Don’t use candles, incense burners, or potpourri pots.
- Don’t leave food cooking unattended.
- Don’t use halogen torchiere lamps.
- Repair electrical appliances; don’t use any appliance with a frayed electrical cord.
- Use extension cords appropriately; don’t overload circuits.
- Report natural gas leaks (they stink!) to appropriate authorities.
Halogen Lamps are banned in residence halls due to their tendency to overheat.

Computers should be plugged into a surge protector that is plugged directly into the wall.

Extension cords should never be used as a long-term solution. They are usually permitted in rooms if they are less than 6 feet long, are UL approved, and not placed beneath furniture or carpeting. They also should not be tacked or nailed to any surface.

Microwave ovens must use less than 10 amps of power. Mini-refrigerators must be 4.5 cubic feet or smaller.

For fire safety, candles are not permitted in residences halls. The same holds true for incense burners or potpourri pots.

No cooking grills are allowed in dorms on-campus.

Micro Wave ovens must use less than 10 amps of power. Mini refrigerators must be 4.5 cubic feet or smaller.

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* * * Smoking is not permitted in residence halls. * * * * *
Fire Safety in the Laboratory

- Plan work. The majority of lab fires have resulted from mental or procedural errors or carelessness.
- Minimize materials. Have present in the immediate work area and use only the minimum quantities necessary to work in progress. Not only does this minimize fire risk, it reduces costs and waste.
- Observe proper housekeeping. Keep work areas uncluttered. Clean frequently. Put unneeded materials back in storage promptly. Keep aisles, doors, and access to emergency equipment unobstructed at all times.
- Observe proper safety practices.
  - Store solvents properly.
  - Observe restrictions on equipment (e.g. keeping solvents only in an explosion-proof refrigerator).
  - Keep barriers in place (shields, hood doors, lab doors)
  - Wear proper clothing and personal protective equipment.
  - Avoid working alone.
- Plan. Have a written emergency plan for your space and/or operation.
- Training. Exercise the emergency plan and learn to use the emergency equipment provided.

Candles and Fire

Candles are prohibited in Institute dormitories but many students use candles in their Greek houses or in off-campus apartments. Candles are not a fire hazard if they are properly used. However, all too often, they are not used properly, or they are left unattended. This is when the fires occur.

Safety tips for candles:
- Extinguish all candles when leaving the room or when going to sleep.
- Keep candles away from items that can catch fire such as clothing, books, paper, curtains, Christmas trees, flammable decorations, or anything else that burns.
- Make sure candles are placed on a stable piece of furniture in sturdy holder that won’t tip over. Candles should fit in the holders securely and holders should be made from material that can’t burn.
- Use flashlights for temporary lighting in power outages, not candles.
- Make sure the candleholder is big enough to collect dripping wax.
- Don’t place lit candles in windows where blinds or curtains can come into contact with them.
- Extinguish taper and pillar candles when they get within two inches of the holder or decorative material. Votives and container candles should be extinguished before the last ½

Fire Safety for Faculty/Staff

- Keep the workplace clean and orderly. Clear boxes or rubbish that may block exits. This includes recycle bins.
- Keep office kitchens clean. The microwave, toaster, and coffee machine should not give off smoke or sparks, and their cords and plugs should be intact.
- Inspect electrical equipment for cracked cords, faulty switches, or odd smells.
- Extension cords shall not be a substitute for permanent wiring.
- Do not store cleaning supplies, paper, or other combustibles near furnaces or water heaters.
- Identify any special fire hazards in your office using the Material Safety Data Sheets and determine how they can be handled safely.
- Change batteries in smoke detectors.
Test Your Fire Safety IQ

1. If fire breaks out, I should immediately
   a. Call an ambulance
   b. Call the fire department then escape
   c. Turn off the electricity
   d. Escape and call the fire department from a neighbor’s house

2. It’s OK to use an elevator to escape from a fire in a multi-story building
   a. True
   b. False

3. If someone is trapped inside a burning building, it is best to
   a. Send the strongest person back in to find them
   b. Inform fire fighters where you think the person is
   c. Go back inside yourself
   d. Assume they’ll get out on their own

4. If you have to escape through an area with smoke in it, the best thing to do is
   a. Stop, drop and roll
   b. Wait to be rescued
   c. Retreat into a closet
   d. Crawl low, under the smoke

5. If your clothing ever catches on fire, you should
   a. Run to the bathtub or shower
   b. Sit still and yell for help
   c. Stop, drop and roll
   d. Put baking soda on it

6. If trapped on the third floor of a house, it is best to
   a. Jump
   b. Break the window
   c. Wait to be rescued
   d. Throw pieces of furniture to get attention

Answers: 1-d, 2-b, 3-b, 4-d, 5-c, 6-c

In Case of a Fire:

You do need to be prepared in case a fire does occur. When the fire alarm system sounds, proceed to the nearest exit, being careful to close all doors behind you (but do not lock them). If smoke has entered the room, get down on the floor and crawl under the smoke. Keep your head 12-24 inches from the floor. Heavier toxins can gather in a thin layer below 12 inches. Cover your nose and mouth with a damp cloth. NEVER USE THE ELEVATOR UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES. Proceed outside to the agreed upon safe meeting place in the Emergency Action Plan so head counts can be taken.

In case you are trapped in your office or dorm by smoke and flames, DO NOT PANIC. Seal cracks around the doors with damp clothing. Telephone the fire department, even if they are already on the scene to tell them where you are. Open a window. Do not break the windows! You may need to close them later. Stay near the window where you can signal for help.

Fire Extinguisher operation:
P – Pull the pin that unlocks the operating handle
A – Aim the extinguisher low at the base of the fire.
S – Squeeze the lever on the extinguisher to discharge the agent.
S – Sweep the nozzle or extinguisher hose from side to side. Move slowly and carefully toward the fire, continuing to sweep the extinguisher back and forth at the base of the flames.