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Dormitory Fires—What Occupants Need to Know

During the period 2007 through 2011, dormitory fires caused a yearly average of thirty injuries, two deaths, and more than \$9 million in property damage. The following information can be used to guide occupants on fire safety in dormitory-type properties, including fraternities, sororities, and barracks.

Cooking accounted for a yearly average of eighty-four percent of the fires in dormitories, caused approximately \$1 million in property damage, and resulted in twenty-nine percent of the injuries.

- Never leave the stove unattended while cooking. If you need to step away from the stove, turn it off. Wear tight-fitting clothing when cooking over an open flame, and keep towels and potholders away from the flame.
- If food or grease catches fire, smother the flames by sliding a lid over the pan and turning off the heat. Do not try to use water to extinguish a grease fire.
- When deep-frying, never fill the pan more than one-third full of oil or fat.
- Make sure the stove is kept clean and free of grease buildup.
- Turn pot handles away from the front of the stove, so they cannot be knocked off or pulled down.

Rubbish and trash-related fires accounted for four percent of the fires, two percent of the injuries, and only minimal property losses.

- Remove combustible materials, such as trashcans, paper, and cardboard boxes, from the area in front of and to the sides of outlets, panel boxes, or other heat-producing electrical equipment as well as cooking equipment.

Improperly discarded smoking materials accounted for four percent of the fires, eleven percent of the injuries, and eleven percent of the property losses.

- If smoking is permitted, only smoke in designated smoking areas.
- Extinguish smoking materials in non-combustible receptacles designated for such use.
- Do not empty ashtrays directly into the trash. Place them in a non-combustible container (i.e., metal can) partially filled with water. Wait one hour before putting in trash.

Candles accounted for one percent of the fires, three percent of the injuries, and less than \$1 million in property losses.

- Only use candles in the container in which they were supplied or other holders specially designed for such use.
- Monitor areas where candles have been in use for at least 30 minutes after candles have been extinguished.
- Use a candlesnuffer, instead of blowing out a candle.
- Keep candles at least 3 ft. (91 cm) from combustible materials, such as drapes, chairs, and clothing.

Dormitories protected by automatic sprinkler systems experienced sixty-five percent less property damage than those not protected by sprinklers.

- Never tamper with, shut of, or block access to a sprinkler system.
- Keep storage and furniture at least 18 in. (457 mm) between the top of storage and a sprinkler head.

Seven percent of the fires and twenty-seven percent of the injuries related to fires in dormitory properties originated in the bedroom.

- To maximize life safety and property conservation, both smoke detection and automatic sprinklers should be provided for all areas of a dormitory.
- Smoke detection and fire alarm systems should be provided for each enclosed room or area.
- Smoke detectors should never be disabled, blocked, or otherwise tampered with.

During a Fire

- Get Out and Stay Out. Leave as soon as possible.
- Do not try to gather personal possessions or attempt to extinguish a fire.
- Do not use the elevator.
- Once out, do not go back inside.
- *Test the Doors Before Opening Them.* Using the back of your hand, reach up high, and touch the door, the doorknob, and the space between the door and the frame. If anything feels hot, keep the door shut and use your second exit. If everything feels cool, open the door slowly and exit as low to the ground as possible if smoke is present.
- *Stay Low and Go.* Crawl low and keep under the smoke if you are physically able; if not, try to cover your mouth and nose to avoid breathing toxic fumes, and make your way to safety as quickly as possible.

What to Do If You Are Trapped

- Close all the doors between you and the fire.
- Fill cracks in doors, and cover all vents with damp cloth to keep smoke out.
- If possible, call the fire department and tell them where you are located.
- Signal rescuers from a window with a light-colored cloth.

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What to Do If You Are on Fire

- Stop, Drop, and Roll.
- If any part of you catches fire, do not run and do not try to extinguish the flames with your hands.
- Cover your face with your hands.
- Drop to the ground, rolling over and over.
- If you have a disability that prevents your taking these actions, try to keep a flame-resistant blanket or rug nearby to smother any flames.

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