American Society of Safety Engineers News
Protecting people, property and the environment.

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DEADLY CAMPUS FIRES CAN BE AVOIDED, AMERICAN SOCIETY OF SAFETY ENGINEERS SAY

Des Plaines, IL (August 10, 2005) –Each year not only do many students lose their lives in a fire, but fires also cause millions of dollars in property damage, injuries and grief to victims' families, friends and classmates. As students move into college dorms, off-campus housing or sorority/fraternity houses for the new school year, the American Society of Safety Engineers' (ASSE) Fire Protection Branch urges students and parents to arm themselves with fire prevention knowledge such as what to do in case of a fire, what fire safety tools are needed, how to prevent fires and more, to avoid further tragedies.

According to the U.S. Fire Administration the top causes of college campus fires are arson, cooking, smoking, open flames, electrical distribution and appliances. And drinking alcohol can be dangerous. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services about half the adults who die in fires have high blood alcohol counts and that alcoholic burn victims had a mortality rate three times that of nonalcoholic victims. Drinking alcohol increases the chance of falling asleep while smoking in bed and greatly reduces one's ability to detect and respond to a fire and safely escape.

"These lives can be saved. As ASSE is an organization committed to protecting people, property and the environment, we are urging students, parents and college administrators to recognize this as a safety and health risk that can be fixed," ASSE President Jack H. Dobson said today. "If we can reduce the chance of fires in hospitals and nursing homes, we can do the same with dormitories and off-campus student housing."

There have been several on and off-campus fire tragedies over the years. In 2000 a fire that took the lives of three Seton Hall University (New Jersey) students began at 4:30 a.m. in upholstered furniture in the common area on the third floor of a dorm; in April, 2005 an early morning off-campus fire, considered now to be arson, took the life of one University of Maryland student and critically injured another escaped from a second-story window and suffered burn and fall injuries as well as smoke inhalation; and, in 2003 five Ohio State University students were killed from smoke inhalation and carbon monoxide poisoning in an early morning off-campus house fire following a birthday party -- the coroner reported they died while trying to escape and the fire appeared to be an arson. In 1996 a fire on Mother's Day in the Phi Gamma Delta Fraternity House in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, killed five college juniors and injured three other students.

The number one cause of death related to fires is smoke inhalation, according to the medical community. Smoke inhalation occurs when one breathes in the products of combustion during a fire. Combustion results from the rapid breakdown of a substance by heat, burning. Smoke is a mixture of heated particles and gases. It is tough

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to predict the exact composition of smoke produced by a fire since the products being burned, the temperature of the fire, and the amount of oxygen available to the fire all make a difference in the type of smoke produced.

"Unlike the typical office building, dormitories are considered to be residential due to the fact that they provide sleeping accommodations," Dobson continued. "Facility managers and school faculty should be aware of this. Hence, in addition to providing fire prevention tips for students and parents, many buildings on and off campus need their safety features updated by the schools or landlords, since many buildings are very old."

This review includes making sure that properly operating doors with self-closers are not propped open; portable fire extinguishers are in place and ready to use; fire exit signs are lit and visible, corridors are kept clear and are not blocked with storage, bicycles, etc; all heating and ventilation systems are routinely inspected and repaired for any deficiencies since improperly maintained equipment can draw power that is greater than the house is wired for and can cause a fire; and, all fire alarm systems are audible and visible. Automatic sprinkler systems are the best defense against fires in resident halls and off campus housing.

These tragedies can be avoided by developing a fire escape plan; having and knowing how to work fire extinguishers, escape ladders, fire alarms and detectors; not overloading extension cords, power strips or outlets; cooking safely; not using candles; not smoking; knowing what to do when a fire hits and much, much more. To help, the ASSE Fire Prevention Branch has developed seven free fire safety tip sheets on:

1) On/Off-Campus Fires: Statistics and Causes;

2) How to Prevent On- and Off – Campus Fires;

3) Fire Escape Planning: What to do in case of a Fire;

4) Fire Safety Equipment for Off-Campus and Greek Housing;

5) Recent On/Off-Campus Fires/Tragedies;

6) Parents Guide -- Questions to Ask; and,

7) On/Off-Campus Fires: Key Safety Resources.

For free copies of the ASSE Fire Safety Tips, go to the ASSE website at www.asse.org/newsroom or contact customer service at 847-699-2929, customerservice@asse.org. Founded in 1911, ASSE is the oldest and largest professional safety society and is dedicated to protecting people, property and the environment. Its more than 30,000 members manage, supervise, and consult on safety, health, and environmental issues in all industries, government, labor and education.

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