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FIRE INCIDENTS IN RESIDENCE HALLS OVERSTATED Kitchens, Cigarettes, and Open Flames Contribute to Statistics

Fire statistics in residence halls have been the focus of a number of recent news stories, spurred by the release of a study, by the Consumer Products Safety Commission, the U.S. Fire Association, and the National Fire Protection Association. However, while the data in the study is correct, the assumptions derived from it do not provide the full perspective. By clarifying the facts, colleges and universities can approach fire prevention from an informed perspective.

The Association of College and University Housing Officers—International (ACUHO-I) and its members are concerned about fire safety on campus and especially in the residence halls. We support fire prevention efforts and education for the students who live in the residence halls and the staff that are entrusted with their safety. The professional experiences of our members provide a number of instances where the statistics quoted in the study do not necessarily reflect what is happening in residence halls across the United States. To that point:

- ***The increase in fires is not proportionate to the growth of college and residence hall populations.*** One statistic notes that there were 3,300 fires in dormitories in 2005, and that this number represents a three percent increase from 1980. However, it is important to note that there are several more students than there were in 1985, and their numbers — and the number of residence hall dwellers -- have increased more than three percent. To illustrate, consider these figures from the United States Census Bureau.

College and University Enrollment (in millions)

1980: 12.4
1990: 13.8
2000: 15.3
2007: 18 (est.)

The total enrollment of 2007 is 45 percent greater than it was in 1980.

Residence Hall Population (in millions)

1980: 1.8
1990: 1.9
2000: 2.1

The population of residence halls in 2000 is 16 percent greater than it was in 1980.

These statistics show that enrollees and residence hall occupancy has increased much faster than the rate of fires. ***In fact, per student, there are fewer fires today than in 1980.***

Other points to consider include:

Association of
College & University
Housing Officers—
International

941 Chatham Lane
Suite 318
Columbus, Ohio
43221-2416

Phone
614 292.0099
Fax
614 292.3205
Web
www.acuho-i.org

- ***The increasing popularity of undergraduate suites and apartments with private or common kitchen spaces has affected the recent increase in residence hall fires.*** According to the NFPA, cooking equipment was involved in 72 percent of the reported dormitory fires, including confined or contained fires between 2002 and 2005. Our members who have recently added suites and apartments with kitchen amenities report a spike in fire alarms, but not necessarily damage-causing incidents. Simply overcooking food in a suite or apartment's oven can trigger a smoke alarm.
- ***College campuses' record-keeping efforts, in regard to fires and other health and safety issues, have become increasingly stringent and detailed in the years between 1980 and today.*** Often, incidents reported as "fires" on college campuses do not result in any damage or harm, but instead are smoke alarms set off by burning food, pranksters, cigarette smoking, or candles (which are usually prohibited in residence halls). However, the fire department typically must visit and positively determine there is no fire. Thus, incidents such as these can inflate the fires-on-campus statistic.
- ***"Dormitories" do not only describe college and university residence halls,*** but also, according to the National Fire Protection Association, "fraternity and sorority houses; monasteries; bunk houses; barracks; and nurses' quarters." Sometimes our members have jurisdiction over fraternity and sorority houses, and sometimes they do not.

Residential fires are a tragedy whenever and wherever they happen, and we seek to minimize these in our facilities through prevention and education. ACUHO-I encourages students and their parents to discuss the rules of the facilities, including policies against smoking and open flames. We also encourage our residents to practice safe cooking practices. Together, we can prevent fire alarms caused by carelessness and, more importantly, we can avoid tragic episodes.

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For more information contact:
 James Baumann, Director of Communications and Marketing
 Association of College and University Housing Officers—International
 941 Chatham Lane, Suite 318
 Columbus, Ohio 43221-2416
 614.292.0099