



**SERVICES**  
OF SIGMA ALPHA EPSILON

# Don't Get Burned

How Chapel Hill Taught  
Us a Lesson

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On Sunday, May 12, 1996 – graduation day – shortly after 6 a.m., a University of North Carolina student woke to the sound of screams coming from the Phi Gamma Delta house next door. He looked out his window and saw fire coming out of every one of the fraternity's first-floor windows. He called the fire department at 6:07 a.m. Firefighters responded within three minutes only to find that the first floor of the building was already fully engulfed in flames. The first fire crew attempted rescue. However, heavy flames at the stairway and across the entire first floor, roaring out the front door and windows, prevented firefighters from entering.

At approximately 6:29 a.m., only 19 minutes after the first engine company had arrived, with no hope of successful rescues, the operation became totally defensive. The main body of the fire was extinguished at approximately 7:30 a.m., and crews were able to enter the basement and second floors at 7:40 a.m.

The night before the fire, a large graduation party was held at the house with 250 to 300 students and parents in attendance. Investigators determined that the fire was a "human hand accidental fire." Smoldering smoking materials or a carelessly discarded match probably started the blaze amid kitchen goods, clutter and trash stacked under the bar. Pine paneling of the bar and basement walls in the room of origin contributed significantly to the supply of fuel. Alcohol left on the bar might have acted as an accelerant. The open stairway and a ventilation fan also contributed to the intensity of the blaze.

The Phi Gamma Delta fire killed five and injured three, one of them critically. It appears the victims did try to escape. Four of the five victims died of smoke inhalation, and the fifth was burned beyond recognition. Four of the five students had enough alcohol in their systems to hamper their ability to escape. Alcohol combined with disorientation caused by carbon monoxide poisoning was cited in the newspaper reports as a possible factor that might have kept the students from escaping.



### FRATERNITY FIRES COSTLY

Unfortunately, the 1996 fraternity fire wasn't the first to kill young men and women. The long list decades ago and stretches to the present day. Several major contributors to fraternity-fire tragedies include:

- » buildings without installed sprinkler systems;
- » stolen, broken or vandalized fire extinguishers and smoke detectors;
- » overload of electrical circuits with TVs and stereos;
- » party guests coming and going at all hours with little or no supervision;
- » generally poor housekeeping;
- » doors and windows left open around the clock;
- » makeshift wooden lofts;
- » lack of appropriate fire walls, fire doors and lighted exit signs; and
- » less than adequate means of escape from all rooms and floors.

### SEEKING ADVICE

In helping to control such tragedies, more attention should be paid to detection and suppression systems, UL-rated fire doors and non-combustible interior finish. Chapter houses should ensure, at minimum, all current building and fire-code requirements are met and maintained. Given the ongoing deaths and injuries in chapter-house fires, installation of automatic sprinkler systems should be high-priority goals. These systems can effectively protect both life and property. Records of the National Fire Protection Association show no multiple-death fires in chapter houses which were equipped with properly functioning sprinkler systems. Additionally, sprinklers typically reduce the average property damage by 50-66 percent.

Most chapters will find that over time, sprinklers pay for themselves.

Smaller property losses and reduced risks of death and injury translate into valuable insurance savings.

Local government and fire officials are starting to recognize the importance and real value of sprinkler systems for fraternity and sorority chapter houses. Boulder, Colo., and Berkeley, Calif., have passed laws that mandate the use of sprinklers in all fraternity and sorority houses. At the University of Maryland, complete automatic sprinkler systems were installed as part of an ongoing

renovation of university-owned Greek houses. Similar systems have been installed there to compensate for fire safety deficiencies in several privately owned houses. The state legislature of North Carolina authorized Chapel Hill to enact a retroactive sprinkler law requiring Greek houses to comply with in five years.

Perhaps more fire professionals, university officials, national fraternity organizations and college communities will pursue sprinkler ordinances before the next fire turns deadly. ☀



## Burning Down the House:

Why Sprinkler Systems are More Important Than Ever

**Many of us read the headlines or watched the news in disbelief when, on Aug. 27, 2004, three of our interfraternal brothers at Alpha Tau Omega lost their lives at the University of Mississippi in a house fire that engulfed a chapter house.**

When we reflect on our own chapters, how many times have we thought that we're invincible? "That could never happen here," people say, but don't be so sure.

ΣAE Services is committed to making sure that one of our chapter houses is not the subject of the next headline we read about a fraternity house that's burned to the ground. The greatest contribution we can make to improve the safety of our chapter houses is to install a sprinkler system.

According to the National Fire Sprinkler Association, there has never been a multiple loss of life in a fully sprinkled building due to fire or smoke, aside from deaths of firefighters and fatalities from explosions. We repeat: Never. This statistic leads us to wonder why more of our chapter houses are not fitted with full sprinkler systems. But out in the Realm, there are likely misconceptions about the cost of a sprinkler system.

The reality is that there is no cost great enough to compensate for the loss of even one brother in our Fraternity. In fact, a fire-sprinkler design standard has been developed specifically for residential occupancies that are four or less stories in height.

While many states and municipalities are mandating fire sprinkler systems, you should not wait to ensure the safety of our brothers. ΣAE Services offers low-interest loans to pay for the installation of the sprinkler systems and other safety improvements. *To learn more, contact Assistant Executive Director for ΣAE Services Greg Somers at (800) 233-1856, ext. 237, or at [gsomers@sae.net](mailto:gsomers@sae.net).*

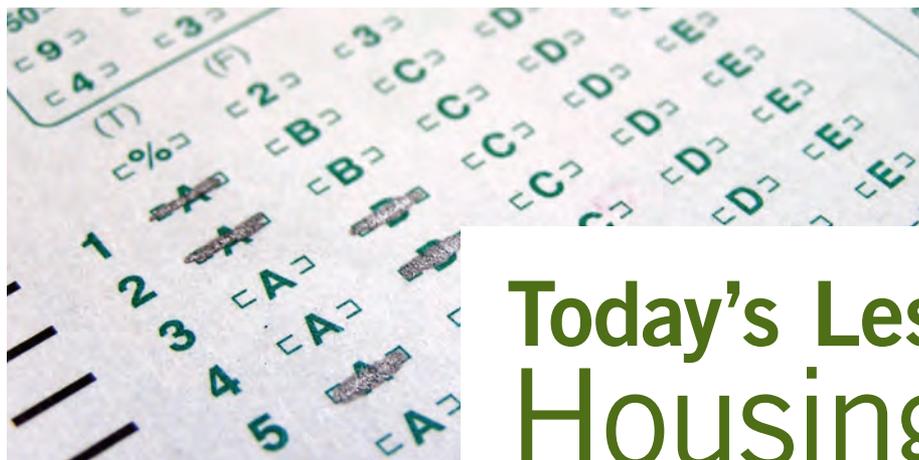


# 11 Fire Safety Tips



- one** Install smoke detectors.
- two** Plan how to escape a chapter house before a fire occurs.
- three** Designate areas outside the house for cigarette smokers.
- four** Prohibit unauthorized or untrained individuals from using the kitchen.
- five** Eliminate or restrict space heaters in the chapter house.
- six** Control and monitor the electrical load. Many chapter houses have older electrical systems and cannot handle a large number of televisions, CD and DVD players, computers and other equipment running at the same time.
- seven** Post emergency numbers near all house phones.
- eight** If you are caught in a fire, stay low! Smoke and poisonous gases rise with heat.
- nine** If you catch on fire, remember what you learned in grade school: Stop, drop and roll. Remain calm, drop to the ground, cover your eyes and roll on the ground to smother the flames.
- ten** Keep all fire doors in the chapter house shut. They are useless as fire barriers if left open.
- eleven** Keep the chapter house clean. Excess rubbish only increases the amount of combustible material in the house.





Get the Skinny  
on Services

# Today's Lesson: Housing 101

**When you mention Sigma Alpha Epsilon, most members** probably have one image that comes to mind. But in reality, ΣAE encompasses three different bodies: the Fraternity, the Foundation and Services. More importantly, is there really a difference between them? You bet. It's our job to tell you that difference, so let's focus on ΣAE Services, Inc.

Perhaps you remember the Fraternity Endowment Fund, or FEF. Its board of directors was a group of men who volunteered their time as a board while they managed several endowments of the organization, such as the lifetime subscription fund for *The Record*. During the reorganization outlined by the new strategic plan and approved at the 145th Anniversary Convention in Orlando, the FEF became ΣAE Services, Inc, a new entity that was established to provide services and build assets for Sigma Alpha Epsilon with a focus on chapter housing.

The essence of ΣAE Services is the management of that Fraternity Endowment Fund, which continues to serve as an unencumbered strategic fund of ΣAE that has been a significant source of funding for operations. And the generosity of Services makes reading this magazine possible because ΣAE Services funds the design, printing and mailing of *The Record*.

A seven-member board of directors oversees and invests the fund. These investments may include stocks, bonds and loans to house corporations for chapter-house construction and renovations. Currently, ΣAE Services, Inc., loans total more than \$3.3 million in mortgages and \$1.5 million in loan guaranties to 26 house corporations.

And if you're wondering how ΣAE Services, Inc. fits into a tax classification, consider this. ΣAE Services is an IRS 501(c)7 not-for-profit corporation, just like the Sigma Alpha Epsilon Fraternity. But keep in mind ΣAE Services is not the ΣAE Foundation, which is an IRS 501(c)3 educational and charitable organization.

**Services wears many hats, touching many aspects of Sigma Alpha Epsilon. Specifically, ΣAE Services, Inc.:**

- » funds the Fraternity's magazine *The Record*
- » provides loans and loan guaranties to house corporations for construction and renovations
- » provides low-interest loans for sprinkler systems in our chapter houses
- » maintains up-to-date information for house corporation officers on the TGI website
- » provides accounting assistance to our house corporations
- » funds housing assessments at all chapter houses to assist in risk-management reductions
- » establishes a legal-defense fund to assist house corporations in legal fees
- » publishes informational pieces related to housing in *The Record* 🌟