

Two Tragedies in Two Weeks Demand Attention to Poisonous Carbon Monoxide

Newburyport, Massachusetts ... January 19, 2009. A second death of a college student living off campus from carbon monoxide poisoning occurred when 22-year old Kyle Oser and a female friend were found in a bedroom on Saturday January 17 afternoon. The unidentified woman, found unconscious and treated at an area hospital, is expected to recover, but Oser is the second victim in less than two weeks to succumb to the odorless, poisonous gas. The deadly level of carbon monoxide was attributed to a space heater in a room without proper ventilation. Oser was a senior at Louisiana State University enrolled in General Studies major in the LSU College of Art & Science.

This year, the first campus-related fatality from carbon monoxide occurred on Monday January 5. The University of Denver campus community suffered a tragic loss when graduate student Lauren Johnson (23) died of carbon monoxide poisoning in her off-campus apartment where concentrations of CO were as high as 1,500 parts per million (1,200ppm is fatal, homes without a gas stove have between .5 and 5 ppm) according to the Denver fire department. Johnson was from Washington State and studied international relations. Other neighbors were treated for carbon monoxide exposure.

What you don't know about carbon monoxide can kill you. Carbon monoxide is an odorless, colorless toxic gas which is produced when fuels burn incompletely and are not properly ventilated. Carbon monoxide is the leading cause of accidental poisoning deaths in America, killing 500 people and sending more than 18,000 to the hospital each year, according to the CDC. The Center for Campus Fire Safety recommends that using CO detectors (which cost about \$30 and are battery operated) or combination smoke/CO detectors in homes is a critical preventive measure to ensure the safety of the occupants and residents.

"Many students studying at colleges and universities decide to live off-campus in apartments and houses, and our outreach to them always begins with the importance of smoke and CO detectors," explained Mike Halligan, President of the Center for Campus Fire Safety. "Luckily many jurisdictions require these detectors for residential occupancies with multiple units."

Combination smoke and carbon monoxide alarms should be installed according to the manufacturer's instruction and outside each sleeping area. Other tips for using a carbon monoxide detector safely include:

1. Have a qualified technician inspect fuel-burning appliances at least once each year. (furnaces, hot water heaters and stoves)
2. Be alert to the danger signs that signal a CO problem with your appliances or chimney
3. Be aware that CO poisoning symptoms (low concentrations causes fatigue in healthy people and chest pain in people with heart disease... higher concentrations cause impaired vision and coordination; headaches; dizziness; confusion; nausea)
4. Install a UL Listed CO detector outside sleeping areas and avoid placing your detector directly on top of or directly across from fuel-burning appliances.
5. If your alarm sounds, immediately open windows and doors for ventilation of the problem.

When looking for a place to live off-campus, be sure to research the following:

1. Is this a licensed rental unit?
2. Do I have a working smoke and carbon monoxide alarm?
3. Is there a fire escape ladder for upper floor apartments?
4. Is the kitchen equipped with a usable fire extinguisher?
5. Is the furnace inspected every year?

Before your student moves to off-campus housing, be sure they are fire safe:

1. Batteries in their smoke and carbon monoxide alarms
2. Renter's insurance
3. Using candles safely
4. The proper disposal of smoking materials
5. Turning off appliances after use
6. Always, always, always evacuating during a fire alarm

The Center for Campus Fire Safety is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to protecting life and property from fire at our nation's institutions of higher learning. Based in Newburyport, Massachusetts, the Center provides public education and support to the professionals who spend their life's work making our campuses and communities safer.

For more information about fire and life safety on- and off-campus, visit www.campusfiresafety.org.