

UNH Is One of the Few Universities in the Country Where All Residence Halls Are Equipped

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DURHAM, N.H. -- It may not be something that immediately comes to the mind of everyone, but one question parents of prospective students have for college admissions reps is: Do your residence halls have sprinkler systems?

At the University of New Hampshire, the answer is yes, and it is one of the few universities in the country that can say it. After the tragic fires at Seton Hall and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, fire safety on college campuses, particularly in residence halls, has become a top concern for families looking at colleges.

According to New Hampshire Fire Marshall Don Bliss and Durham/UNH Fire Chief Ron O'Keefe, perhaps only 30 percent of college campuses nationwide are fully sprinkled. "UNH deserves a lot of credit; it's an incredible achievement when you stop and think about it," says Bliss.

Bill Conk, manager of housing/facilities at UNH, has been thinking, and doing something about it, for 10 years. The son of a New York City firefighter, Conk says, "Fire safety is important to me and I really wanted to see this done." And he in turn credits Chief O'Keefe, who gave him the support and a commitment to work with UNH housing staff to get it done. "The chief and his staff were amazing," Conk says. "They were with us every step of the way."

Each and every summer, Conk and the Durham/UNH Fire Department would target another residence hall to be converted to sprinkler systems. There are 27 residence halls in all at the university -- some summers,

they could finish one large residence hall, like Stoke Hall; other summers, they could finish more smaller ones.

Each residence hall is protected by an automatic fire detection system that is connected directly to the Durham Fire Department. Upon receipt of an alarm activation, the Fire Department immediately responds to the residence hall. This system is comprised of smoke detectors and manual pull stations in every hallway, and now, sprinkler systems in individual rooms.

"I have discussed the issue of sprinklering dormitories with fire safety leaders throughout the country," says Ron O'Keefe, fire chief, and UNH has taken a leadership role in protecting students from fires. We applaud the university's efforts in this significant accomplishment, especially its Department of Housing."

UNH recently was commended for outfitting all residence halls with fire sprinklers by the New England College and University Fire Safety Officers Association and the New Hampshire Fire Prevention Society at its winter meeting on campus. President Joan Leitzel was presented a Fire and Life Safety Achievement Award for the university's commitment to fire safety. William Conk, manager of housing/facilities, and Barbara Paiton, director of housing, were also given awards for their efforts to complete the sprinkler installation project during the last 10 years.

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