

State Facilities

Dorm sprinklers: Retrofitting is in

BY LISA COLLINS

Meeting Kentucky Gov. Paul Patton should have been an exciting moment for Gail and John Minger. Instead, the meeting was a painful reminder of the death of their son, Michael. Patton met with the couple to discuss the dormitory fire at Murray State University that took Michael's life Sept. 18, 1998.

Michael Minger, 19, was killed in an arson fire inside Hester Hall, a high-rise dorm without sprinklers. Like dozens of other university buildings in Kentucky, it was built before 1972, when sprinklers were made mandatory in high rises.

Campus housing without sprinklers is not a problem unique to Kentucky. Though most states require sprinklers be installed when a housing facility is constructed, most dorms were built before these state laws were enacted.

Only recently, New Jersey and Wisconsin became the first states to require sprinklers be added to existing dorms. Expense has deterred colleges and universities from retrofitting dorms with sprinklers, but schools and state governments are finding ways to pay for sprinklers so that dorm fires do not cost students' lives.

Four times every day, firefighters respond to fires in college dorms, accord-

ing to the National Association of State Fire Marshals. The National Fire Protection Association has no record of a fire killing more than two people in a public assembly, educational, institutional or residential building that was fitted

universities and gave the schools the responsibility of making residence halls safer.

Murray State University made fire-safety improvements after the deadly 1998 fire. The nine dorms on campus now have sprinklers, said Larry Anderson, the university's assistant director for Environment, Safety and Health. The sprinklers were installed in two years at an estimated cost of \$4.5 million.

Morehead State, another Kentucky university, was planning to add sprinklers to its dorms at the time of the Murray State fire.

"We felt [the campus dorms] were very safe," said Joe Planck, Morehead State's physical plant director.

There have been no major fires in the campus' 15 dormitories, Planck said. The state fire marshal and the university's safety department inspect dorms annually. Fire drills are conducted twice each year, and the school's custodial staff inspects fire extinguishers monthly.

Morehead State recently completed the third phase of sprinkler installation in its dorms. Installation has gone smoothly, Planck said, except for discovering the need to build two pump houses to increase water pressure to the high-rise

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Morehead State University in Morehead, Ky., is installing pumps to increase water pressure at high-rise dorms.

with a properly functioning sprinkler system. These statistics reveal why states are looking at retrofitting campus housing with sprinklers.

Kentucky: One killed

After Minger's death, Kentucky's Council on Post-Secondary Education studied the need to improve fire safety on state campuses. The council developed a sprinkler installation plan for the state's

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structures. The project will be completed in summer 2003 at a cost of \$8 million, which was financed by the sale of university bonds and increased residence-hall rates.

Kentucky has not introduced legislation to mandate sprinklers in dorms.

New Jersey: Three killed

Three students died and 62 were injured in a highly publicized dorm fire at New Jersey's Seton Hall University on Jan. 19, 2000. The fire inside six-story Boland Hall was deliberately set.

The New Jersey Legislature swiftly acted to prevent another tragedy in the state. The New Jersey Senate unanimously passed a bill (SB 891) requiring the state's public and private colleges and universities to install sprinkler systems in all buildings used to house students. The legislation is unprecedented because it also applies to sorority and fraternity houses, as well as to boarding and military schools with dorms.

Then-Gov. Christine Todd Whitman signed the bill, the Dormitory Safety Trust Fund Act, at Seton Hall University six months after the tragedy. The act requires sprinkler installation to be completed in four years, but the deadline can be extended in certain cases. The act also established the Dormitory Safety Trust Fund, which provides loans to the schools to install the sprinkler systems.

Almost a year after the deadly fire, a fire started in a trash can in Boland Hall. Fortunately, a sprinkler system had been installed. One sprinkler head activated and extinguished the fire without any reported injuries to the 600 residents.

State sprinkler legislation introduced in 2001

Maine	LD 1561
Massachusetts	H 1073
Oregon	HB 2851
Pennsylvania	HB 209, SB 256, SB 593, SB 789

Source: *Campus Firewatch*, 2001



Morehead State University installed fire alarms in each dorm room after a student was killed in a fire at Murray State University in Kentucky in 1998.

Wisconsin: Zero killed

Wisconsin Rep. Rob Kreibich introduced sprinkler legislation in 1999 after talking with firefighters about the state's dozen high-rise dorms. He was concerned to learn that the dorms did not have sprinklers and that firefighters did not have the proper equipment to reach the upper stories should a fire occur.

"Why should we wait until students die before enacting legislation?" Kreibich said, speaking of Wisconsin's proactive planning.

The bill (AB 203) was about to be defeated when the tragic fire occurred at Seton Hall in New Jersey. After legislators saw what could happen, the bill sailed through the Legislature.

The Wisconsin law requires all residence halls more than 60 feet tall in the state's university system to have a sprinkler system on each floor before Jan. 1, 2006. The estimated cost of installing sprinklers in the dorms is \$7.5 million, which will be spread over the six-year period and is covered by a reserve in auxiliary funds. All residence halls built after the law's effective date must be fitted with an automatic sprinkler system on each floor during construction.

Kreibich said that installation has started in all the dorms, and he is confident full installation will be completed before the deadline. The Wisconsin law does not cover fraternity and sorority houses, but Kreibich said that later legislation may address those structures.

What next?

The tragedies in Kentucky and New Jersey have heightened awareness about campus fire safety. They prove that fire drills and smoke alarms are not always enough.

Following the lead of New Jersey and Wisconsin, at least five states introduced legislation to retrofit sprinklers in college housing this year.

In addition, Connecticut's fire marshal and commissioner of higher education recommended that each public and private institution of higher education that houses students develop and implement a plan for sprinkler systems in residential facilities.

At the federal level, Sens. Christopher Dodd of Connecticut and John Edwards of North Carolina introduced the College Fire Prevention Act (SB 399) in February 2001. The bill provides for sprinklers or other fire suppression or prevention equipment to be installed in all public and private college and university housing and dorms, including fraternity and sorority housing. The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions is studying the bill. ★

Lisa R. Collins is a program associate with the National Association of State Facilities Administrators.

Internet Resources

National Association of State Fire Marshals

www.firemarshals.org

The association represents each state's senior fire official.

Campus Firewatch

www.campus-firewatch.com

The site provides an electronic newsletter on campus fire safety, as well as news, reports, and state and federal laws and legislation.

National Association of State Facilities Administrators

www.nasfa.net

The association serves facilities professionals in state government.