



COVID-19 Effects on Campus Fire Safety

The world is currently dealing with the crisis of the century with Coronavirus COVID-19. There is virtually no aspect of life that hasn't been affected here in the United State and abroad. The Campus Fire Safety world has never been faced with the challenges we're navigating through currently. Items we're collectively working on includes but is not limited to; Limited access to campus and working remotely from home, managing construction progress during the crisis, maintaining or altering frequency of fire protection systems testing and inspections, maintaining a fire protection emphasis during active research occurring on campus during the crisis, accommodating the use of campus facilities by other entities, and lastly planning on restoration of campus operations once students and staff are "hopefully", permitted to return the fall.

The abruptness of many of our campus to close doors, suspend and eventually postpone on-campus activities was unexpected for many of us. Although we had some sense that the virus was spreading rapidly around the world, the need to evacuate and isolate the campuses resembled a hazardous materials incident and put everything in the reactive mode. Many campuses, depending upon their location and virus occurrence numbers, were able to keep skeleton crews/staffing on campus to respond to emergencies, perform building walkthroughs and support campus operations in other ways. Many campuses on the east coast where concentration numbers were high. At the University of Delaware where I work, the fire protection staff is working from home. Each member alternates for responding to campus emergencies or other needs throughout the week. We're all attending weekly project meetings via Zoom and other teleconference programs. Updating standard operating procedures and campus fire training presentations on Canvas (academic on-line course program) are now common practice. The term "social distancing" will soon be the norm for campuses and teleconference meetings, a likely result of those preventative measures.

In many states, construction work has been classified as "essential" with work on campus projects ongoing. Some campuses are allowing only new construction work that's occurring outside an existing building envelope to continue, while suspending internal renovations to prevent virus exposure inside the buildings that will re-open

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and may not need extensive “deep cleaning”. Of course buildings undergoing renovation/construction are most vulnerable to fire. A challenge for us all, is to still maintain a level of fire prevention oversight, while at the same time be on the lookout for proper fire stopping of wall/ceiling penetrations and sprinkler protection coverage. More and more photos taken in the field and 360 degree virtual video programs are used more frequently to offset the inability to be on site live. It’s always a risk of not seeing conditions first-hand, some conditions not readily identified could be concealed and unknown if not picked up during progress and hydro-test inspections. Let’s hope that’s the exception and not the norm.

Just as the construction trades being classified as “essential work”, most fire protection inspection companies are also sharing the classification and performing work. Unlike many of the fire protection vendor’s clients, college and university campuses are like small cities, and the risk of exposure contamination of closed buildings are decisions that were or are being made to keep up the frequency of fire protection systems and fire extinguisher inspections. NFPA and FM Global have published guidelines for dealing with the coronavirus. Their recommendation is to keep fire protection system inspections current as it is critical not to fall behind and place buildings at risk. In discussions I’ve had with other campus fire safety officials, the sheer number of fire protection systems and allowing them to fall out of frequency will cause spikes in future frequencies, unless the frequencies are adjusted to return to normal, even if the work was performed 30, 60, or 90 days after the due date. It appears that most that have paused the testing and inspections, still have a campus presence touring buildings with visual surveys of control valves and control panels; some oversight is better than nothing.

Many of our campuses are contributing to research for coronavirus vaccination development, advanced testing, and PPE development. Some campuses also have on-going research that needs to be allowed to continue. Lack of a fire protection presence on campus is a bit risky. During the absence of fire protection staff, collaboration efforts with the research community is necessary to keep their level of fire safety awareness high and experiments safe. Some campuses have stopped all non-essential research which helps to reduce the risk of lab fire incidents, while reducing risk of exposure contamination by occupants who may frequent the buildings. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, suspension of fire protection system inspections, especially in laboratory and research buildings, raises the risk of fire and is concerning.

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Some campuses have become the site for COVID-19 operations by the federal, state or local government, or local hospitals. Facilities may be converted to other uses. Dormitories and arenas may become health care or storage occupancies. This can be challenging because of the different fire and life safety requirements for different occupancy types. It may require planning with other government jurisdictions. Due to the extraordinary circumstances, all code requirements may not be able to be met making critical judgement decisions necessary, Pre-engineered temporary medical facilities placed in parking lots or other open areas may be designed specifically for the purpose and may not require extensive inspections or plan review. The current situation may require us to work in ways that are different from our normal course of business.

Hopefully it won't be too much longer that our campuses will come back to some sense of normalcy. During the months of May and June, campuses with lesser coronavirus cases are considering returning. Fire protection staff will be faced with many challenges. Everything from restoring fire protection systems/fire extinguisher inspections, calculating "social distancing" occupant loads, fall semester training of Resident Assistants (R/A's) to newcomers orientation and other start of the academic year activities. Fall sports to include but not limited to football season may or may not occur. All of those paused renovation projects will also be seeking to get restarted in a prompt manner. Of course with the loss of revenue, many of our program budgets are vulnerable to cuts. Traveling for training and conferences will be looked at closely for need. We will all be pressed hard for ways to overcome the effects of the coronavirus. Collectively, the Board of Directors at the Center are available to bounce off ideas and help make suggestions to help you through. We're here for you and wish you and yours good health,

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