

# THE ALARMING TRUTH

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## SCREENING GUIDE



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Department of Homeland Security Fire Prevention and Safety Grant to:*

*In Partnership With:*



**CAMPUS**  
**Firewatch**

Rowan University

University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia Fire Department

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## **GRANT INFORMATION**

**This project was funded by federal grant EMW-2012-FP-00696 from the Department of Homeland Security Fire Prevention and Safety Grant program to the Clery Center for Security On Campus.**

Assisting in this project are:

- Ed Comeau, Campus Firewatch
- Gail Minger, Michael H. Minger Foundation
- Rowan University
- University of Pennsylvania
- Philadelphia Fire Department

## **ABOUT THE CLERY CENTER**

The Clery Center for Security On Campus is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) dedicated to preventing violence, substance abuse and other crimes on college and university campuses across the United States, and to compassionately assist the victims of these crimes.

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## WHAT IS THE ALARMING TRUTH?: A Message from the Filmmakers

Since 2000 there have been more than 165 fire deaths at colleges and universities, with four out of five happening in off-campus housing.

There's a gap in fire safety education between the time students learn about it as children in grade school and grow into young adults attending a college or university. *The Alarming Truth*, a video project that chronicles a reality-based fire in an off-campus house, is a film that can be used by colleges, universities, and other partners in safety to help provide critical education that could potentially save lives.

*The Alarming Truth* addresses three common factors related to off-campus fires -

- disabled smoke alarms,
- careless disposal of smoking materials, and
- knowing two ways out of any location.

The lessons of *The Alarming Truth* apply not only in college, but also in life. Rather than overloading students with many messages, this film focuses on these three specific areas. Whether you're using *The Alarming Truth* to start these conversations at your own institution or in the community or integrating it as one of many tools you're using to provide this type of education, know that the work you're doing is extremely important.

This screening guide will give you suggestions and resources on how *The Alarming Truth* can be used. Every college or university is different, so it's important to consider the unique dynamics of each institution. As you explore what works best for you, we hope you will share your own experiences using *The Alarming Truth* and connect with the many other resources there are available.

[www.alarmingtruth.org](http://www.alarmingtruth.org)  
#AlarmingTruth  
@alarmingtruth





# THE ALARMING TRUTH LESSON

**Time:** 30 minutes - 1.5 hours

**Goal:** To increase students' knowledge around fire safety

## Objectives:

Students will come away with increased awareness and knowledge about fire safety, specifically:

- The role of smoking in fatal fires
- The value of working smoke alarms in providing early warning
- The importance of knowing two ways out of any location

## Materials:

- *The Alarming Truth, 9 Fires (Off-Campus)*, and the *Station Nightclub* video on a flash drive, computer (hard copy or through web browser), or DVD (*You can download these materials at AlarmingTruth.org*)
- DVD player and television or a projector and computer
- Large white paper or white board

## KEEP AN EYE OUT...

### WHY?

The “Why?” logo throughout the screening guide will help clarify why each topic or theme is incorporated into the training. It will note important elements in each section and help you communicate to students why each piece is so critical.



The exclamation logo will remind you of the “action items” or takeaways that each section should reinforce.

## Introduction

- Introduce yourself and your organization/affiliation with the college, university, or community.
- Point out the location of the exits (primary and secondary) from the room and the building and acknowledge that in the event of an emergency, the audience will evacuate.
- Let the students know that you want the session to be an open discussion, so they can feel free to interject or ask questions at any time.
- Highlight that the program will cover three topics in particular:
  - exits,
  - smoking, and
  - smoke alarms.
- These topics are covered because
  - smoking is the leading cause of fatal fires and has been for many years;
  - smoke alarms provide early warning but so often are disabled or missing in fatal fires; and
  - knowing two ways out can save a person's life.
- It is important to avoid message overload. While there are many things students need to know, covering too many topics in one session makes the information difficult to retain. These three topics make the most difference in preventing a fire and surviving one should a fire occur.

### WHY?

**Disposal of smoking material, lack of working smoke alarms, and lack of knowledge regarding exits are three identified risk factors that contribute to campus-related fire deaths. They are all factors that are within a student's control.**

## Icebreaker: Escape Planning Exercise

- Have the group stand up, close their eyes, and spin around in a circle slowly several times. Quietly move to another location in the room and then direct participants, with their eyes still closed, to point to the location of the exits. Changing the location of the instructor is important because it disorients participants who assume the instructor remained in the same location. Still pointing, have participants open their eyes and see where they are pointing. Discuss how easy it was to become disoriented in a space they thought they knew well.

### WHY?

**This activity can be used to demonstrate how easy it can be to become disoriented in a smoke-filled environment.**

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## The Alarming Truth Video

- Inform participants that this film was written, filmed, and produced by students at Rowan University in New Jersey. It is based on real-world fires that have claimed the lives of students.

### WHY?

**Giving students background on the video gives it credibility - they will recognize that it was created by peers but draws from real experiences.**

- Show the video to participants.



## The Alarming Truth Discussion

- Take a few minutes to invite participants to offer some of their own initial thoughts after watching the film. This portion should be kept completely open. Be primarily a listener and allow them to fully share their thoughts.
- Don't try to lead the conversation just yet. Students will appreciate having the space to share their thoughts and it will give you a great opportunity to see how to best tailor the discussion going forward. It also allows you to tie things back to what they've already shared, making the conversation more relevant for them.
- Further the conversation with focused information about smoke inhalation and the impact of fire on communities and individual lives and the real results that occur such as devastation, injury, and death.

### Discussion Question: *In the film, how did smoke inhalation impact Zack?*

- Zack became disoriented and eventually lost consciousness because of the toxic smoke he breathed in. He was not able to find his way out. His alternate escape route, the window, was jammed.
- Zack's experience can easily happen. Even though a person might think he is familiar with his room, his house, or his apartment, when a room is dark and filled with smoke and panic sets in, even the smallest obstacle can become disorienting.
- The smoke makes it difficult to breathe. The person becomes weak. The carbon monoxide robs the brain of the oxygen it needs to think clearly and stay conscious.
- Zack was not near the location of the fire but the smoke traveled upstairs into his room.
- Note that you'll discuss more about Zack's lack of exits later in the program.

## Smoke Inhalation

- People are often injured and die in fires. Smoke will travel far from the fire, putting many more people at risk.
- According to a report by the National Fire Protection Association, smoke inhalation is the most common cause of fire deaths.

## How fast fire spreads

- Note to participants that within the film, it only took a short period of time for the fire to spread and the couch and the table to be engulfed in flames.
- When a fire starts, there is no time to gather items from a home. Smoke spreads, causing complete darkness and disorientation. There is no guarantee that loved ones or pets are able to find their way out or that family members or roommates are easily able to find one another.
- Let participants know that all of these reasons are why it's important to make an escape plan ahead of time and that safety planning will be discussed further later in the session.
- If there is time, you can show the following video from the National Institute of Standards and Technology to help show in real time how fast a fire can spread. <http://tinyurl.com/spreadfast>  
*Source: National Institute of Standards and Technology*
- The facilitator could also start an egg timer and begin the next activity, focused on the impact of fire. After the egg timer goes off, he or she can reinforce how within that short period of time, fire can destroy lives.

## Activity: Impact of fire

- Draw a circle on the board with the word "IMPACT" inside of it. On the left side of the circle, write the word "Who?" On the right side of the circle, write the word "How?"



- Talk about *The Alarming Truth* and ask participants to share the impact of the fire on the characters. After discussing the film specifically, you can broaden the conversation to things not covered in the film. Examples of who: victim (Zack), friends, family, community  
Examples of how: psychological, emotional, material - losing a loved one, survivor's guilt, depression, loss of a home, of things, semester's worth of work, etc. People might feel afraid, unsafe, or hopeless.  
*Source: adapted from: U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Marketing Fire Prevention in Your Community, August 2001*

## Case Study:

Show the *9 Fires Off-Campus* video clip to highlight how fires can impact the lives of students and to introduce the fact that, in some situations, an escape ladder might be necessary. In this clip, a Boston University student named Josh and his father talk about Josh's serious injury after jumping from a third story window to escape a fire. Josh lost a year of school and suffered a brain injury.

**Discussion Question:** *If you were a character in *The Alarming Truth*, what could you have done to prevent the outcome of this situation?*

- Keep the battery in the smoke alarm.
- Know two ways out of the house.
- Dispose of cigarettes properly - and call out friends who are practicing unsafe behavior. It isn't always the smoker that dies in the fire. One out of four times, it is someone other than the smoker that dies.

**!** In addition to the questions you pose to the group, keep the conversation as fluid as possible. Expand on the comments students provide and explore participants' own beliefs (or possible biases) about fire safety, as well as their perception of the film. The goal is to have the group think critically not just about what they viewed in the film, but their own environments and situations. Encourage them to share stories relevant to their own lives if they're comfortable doing so.

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## Smoke Alarms

**!** The purpose of this section is to emphasize the importance of having working smoke alarms. Students and their parents should consider this when looking for off-campus housing. It is not only important to have working smoke alarms, but also to recognize the low battery warning beeps.

**Discussion Question:** *Where should smoke alarms go?*

### One on each level

**WHY?** You never know where a fire may break out, so there should be smoke alarms in different locations that can activate early, letting you know to get out.

### One outside of each bedroom

**WHY?** So it is easily heard when it goes off.

### One inside of each bedroom

**WHY?** In case the fire starts in the bedroom, like those caused by smoking or candles.

## Case Studies (Optional)

- In 2004, Daniel Rigby, a senior at Georgetown University, was killed in an off-campus fire. He was living in an illegal basement apartment next to the building's furnace. Metal bars were welded to the basement windows, exit doors were blocked, and the basement did not have smoke alarms. The cause of the fire was determined to be either candles, smoking materials, or faulty wiring in the area Daniel was living, which is also where he died.
- Two Boston University students were killed in an off-campus fire in 2007. The fire broke out in a three-story apartment and was caused by candles they lit during a power failure.
- As can be seen in the film and the Georgetown University case study, disabling or not having working smoke alarms can result in death.



**Discussion Question:** *Have you seen someone disable a smoke alarm? Why?*

- People might disable smoke alarms because they are beeping due to a low battery or they keep going off while cooking. If the alarm goes off often enough, it's easy to think of it as a nuisance and forget its importance if a fire were to break out. Without it, a person may never know the fire occurred until it is too late.
- If a smoke alarm keeps going off while cooking, don't disable it or take it down. Instead, move it further away from cooking areas.
- Smoke alarms can also get dirty, which makes them more sensitive and likely to go off when there isn't a fire. Alarms can be vacuumed out or a can of air can be used to blow out the dirt.
- Smoke alarms have an expiration date of ten years. The back of a smoke alarm should be examined for a manufacture date on it to determine whether it needs to be replaced.

**Discussion Question:** *Do you have a working smoke alarm? How do you know?*

- Most people think they have working smoke alarms, but find out when testing them that the alarms do not work. Oftentimes it is because the batteries were taken out or died and were not replaced.
- Emphasize the importance of not only having smoke alarms, but also knowing they're working. To add some levity, you could compare it to a remote control; it might be sitting on your couch, but it's sure not going to turn on Game of Thrones without batteries.
- Give students ideas on where they can buy smoke alarms and let them know that some fire departments will help install them upon request. If this practice is used in your own community, provide students with a number they can call to request a smoke alarm installation.

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## Smoking

**!** **Since smoking is the leading cause in fatal fires, the goal of this section is to reinforce how important it is that smoking materials are disposed of properly. It is important that students know the intent is not to discuss smoking as a positive or negative behavior but rather how it relates to off-campus fires.**

**Discussion Question:** *What led to the fire in *The Alarming Truth*? How common do you think that kind of fire is?*

- In the film, smoking materials (a cigarette) that were disposed of improperly started the fire.
- Smoking is the leading cause of fatal fires across the United States and has been for many years. It is often a factor in many off-campus fires.
- It is not always the smoker who dies in the fire; as seen in the film, others are often impacted.
- One out of four times, it is someone other than the smoker that dies, just like in *The Alarming Truth*.
- It's useful to note that the victim in this case was not the smoker and that the smoker himself was not trying to be careless. Revisit how it happened - in a rush, the smoker threw the cigarette into a plastic cup, and then his friends hastily threw it into a trash bag.
- With smoking, as in other areas of fire safety, there are actions that students can take to help prevent these tragedies from occurring:

#1 - Use ashtrays and wet them down before putting them into the trash.

**WHY?** **A typical scenario in off-campus fires is that fire smolders and then breaks out during the night.**

#2 - Take the trash outside.

**WHY?**

**If a cigarette does catch fire while in the trash, at least the trash will be outside of the house when a fire starts.**

#3 - Check seat cushions before going to bed.

**WHY?**

**If a cigarette falls into a seat cushion and goes unnoticed, the fire can smolder and break out in the middle of the night. This is especially common on front porches and decks that have upholstered furniture on them. In these cases, usually a cigarette rolls down into the cushions. The fire breaks out in the middle of the night, grows, and spreads into the house.**

### Case Studies (Optional)

- In 2007, Peter Talen, 23, a student at the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse was visiting his brother, a student at the University of Wisconsin Madison. He was sleeping on a couch in the living room when a fire broke out in the couch on the front porch. The couch became fully involved and the fire broke the window right above where Peter was sleeping, killing him. Since the couch was out on the front porch, there were no smoke alarms that would have detected the fire and provided the early warning needed to escape from the fire.
- A fire in Ann Arbor, Michigan, claimed the life of Eastern Michigan University senior Renden LeMasters. The fire broke out at about 5:30 in the morning in a couch on the front porch and then spread into the building through several open windows and doors. The fire was spotted by a passerby who called the fire department. As a result of this fire, Ann Arbor now bans couches and upholstered chairs on front porches.

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### Exits

**!** **Participants should understand the importance of identifying and testing a second exit out of any location.**

- As was discussed earlier, when a fire starts, it spreads quickly.
- Instructors can show participants a clip of the first few minutes of *The Station Nightclub* video. This nightclub fire killed 100 people. Many tried to leave using their original entrance even though there were closer exits available. It demonstrates that a fire can start any time in any place and shows the value of knowing two ways out no matter where you are. NOTE: This video is very graphic, so it is useful to let students in advance that they can make the decision to step out of the room if the video will be too upsetting for them.
- You can also relate this discussion to the language that flight attendants use before a flight departs - “keeping in mind that the nearest exit may be behind you.” It is natural for many people to assume they will or must exit in the same location they came in without recognizing that another exit may be more accessible, particularly in the case of a fire. It’s important to consider ahead of time where other exits may be.

**Discussion Question:** *In The Alarming Truth, what were Zack’s two ways out? What was the problem he faced?*

- The only ways out of Zack’s room were using the bedroom door and the window, but he couldn’t get out of the window because it was jammed.

- It's important to use the "two ways out" rule no matter where a person is (house, apartment, restaurant, movie theater, etc.). Reinforce how and why students should the "two ways out" rule:

#1 - Going through smoke may be more dangerous than staying in place or using a second exit.

**WHY?** A number of people have died trying to get out of a building through smoke instead of using a second exit or sheltering in place.

#2 - A person's second way out may be a window. Traditionally, when students think of exits, they automatically assume that a second exit must be a door. In reality, many houses may not have second stairwells (although many apartments do). It's important to emphasize that an exit is anything that can get you out of that location.

#3 - Make sure your second exit is clear (not blocked by anything) and works.

**WHY?** Because a second exit is not always a common exit, students should make sure they know the path to the second exit and that they are easily able to access it (for example, a window is not blocked by objects or stuck).

- Let students know that if they are able to get out, they should stay out. They should not go back inside for anything, as they could then become overcome with smoke, collapse, and be trapped inside.
- Roommates should plan in advance where they would meet in the case of a fire, such as at a mailbox or the end of the driveway. This helps to identify if someone is missing so firefighters can look for that person. Firefighters should be notified if everyone is accounted for.

### Case Studies (Optional)

- In 2013, a fire broke out on the second floor of a three-story off-campus house in Cincinnati, Ohio. The fire was caused by a space heater too close to a bed and it ignited the bedding. The student in that room was able to get out, but the fire blocked the only stairway leading up to the third floor, trapping two students from the University of Cincinnati, Chad Kohls and Ellen Garner, who were killed.
- In 2013, a fire in an off-campus house in Boston killed Boston University student Binland Lee. She was living in an illegal attic apartment and was trapped by a fire that blocked her only way out. The building had 19 people living in it in a series of illegal apartments on all four levels (basement, first, second, and attic.) The second exit out of the basement was through a bulkhead. One of the students on the third level was able to escape only because he was a rock climber and was able to climb out of the window to safety on a porch roof below. The students didn't know the apartments were illegal and the building had not been inspected since the early 1990's. As a result, Boston enacted a more stringent rental ordinance and inspection program.
- In January 2012, a fire broke out in a couch on a porch in a theme house at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia. Earlier in the evening, the students saw the fire and thought they had doused it with cups of water. Later on that night, it reignited and spread into the house. The smoke alarms alerted everyone to the fire and they got out, but since they did not have a meeting place, one of the students thought his friend was still inside and crawled in on his hands and knees to find him, suffering third degree burns. His friend had gotten out safely on his own, but was on the other side of the building.

## If a Person Can't Get Out in a Fire

- Note that it is sometimes more dangerous to go through smoke and provide students with information on what to do if they cannot get out of a room.
- #1 - Close the door. It can be amazing to see what a difference a closed door can make in stopping the smoke.
- #2 - Stuff a towel or some clothing at the bottom of the door to stop the smoke from coming in.
- #3 - Call 911 using a cell phone and provide the location of the room. The responder will notify the firefighters who will make it a priority to first help anyone still trapped inside the building.
- #4 - Go to the window. If there isn't any smoke or fire outside of it, open it.
- #5 - If it's possible to get out through this exit, use it. For individuals living on the second or third floor, buying an escape ladder can help a person get out in the case of a fire.
- #6 - If it's not possible to get out using that exit, wave something and scream to get the attention of the firefighters.
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## Moving Off Campus

- Let students know that in most jurisdictions, property rentals need to be inspected annually.
  - When considering a new property, students and parents should check with the property owner on when the property was last inspected.
  - Anyone can request an inspection by the fire department if there are any safety concerns at all. Reliable landlords will not try to talk tenants out of the inspection and should not have any problem with having the fire department come in and do an inspection. If they do, it might be best to find another apartment.
  - There are also checklists available for property owners which can be used by prospective tenants when walking through a unit for the first time.
  - Provide students with a checklist that can be used when moving off campus. (*You can find an example in the resources section at [AlarmingTruth.org](http://AlarmingTruth.org)*).
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## Closing

- Ask the students to share ideas on how to increase their own safety or prevent a fire from occurring. Answers might include:
  - Have working smoke alarms.
  - Know two ways out of any location and make sure both options work (for example, be sure there is no clutter blocking a window, that the window opens, and that it's possible to get out using that exit.) It's better to know what options are available before an actual emergency occurs.
  - Carefully dispose of cigarettes. Check seat cushions before going to bed if someone chose to smoke on or around a sofa. Wet down cigarette butts before throwing them in the trash. Take out the trash before going to bed.
  - Keep an eye out for other unsafe behaviors.
- Thank the students for taking the time for this discussion. Ask if there are any final questions or issues they would like to raise. Distribute any handouts or additional resources you have available.

# THE ALARMING TRUTH LESSON PLAN TAKEAWAYS

## Smoke Alarms

- Smoke is what kills four out of five people in fires.
- Smoke travels fast and far from the fire.
- Smoke alarms give you the fast warning you need to react.
- Many fire departments will install smoke alarms for free.

### Action Items

#1 - Test your smoke alarms to make sure they are working.

**WHY?** Most people *think* they have working smoke alarms, but when they test them, they find out they do not.

#2 - If you don't have smoke alarms, install them.

**WHY?** For the price of a pizza, a smoke alarm can save your life.

#3 - Have working smoke alarms in the following locations:

#### One on each level

**WHY?** If a fire starts in the basement, a smoke alarm on the second floor won't sense it until it is too late.

#### One outside of each bedroom

**WHY?** Most fatal fires happen in the middle of the night. You want to be sure you can hear the smoke alarm.

#### One inside of each bedroom

**WHY?** Alarms within the bedroom can help detect fires that may start in that location, such as those started by candles or smoking or electrical fires.

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## Smoking

- Careless disposal of smoking materials is the leading cause of all fatal fires across the nation and has been for many years.
- One out of four times, it is someone other than the smoker that dies, just like in *The Alarming Truth*.

### Action Items

#1 - Use proper ashtrays. Don't improvise.

**WHY?** Using proper ashtrays helps avoid the problem of items being used as ashtrays getting tipped over by mistake (like, for example, a red cup) or thrown into the trash by accident.



#2 - Wet down the ashes before throwing them into the trash.

**WHY?** This makes sure all the butts are completely out.

#3 - Check seat cushions before going to bed.

**WHY?** Many fatal fires have been started by smoldering cigarette butts in seat cushions that break out into a fire in the middle of the night. This is particularly a problem with couches and chairs on front porches where there are no smoke detectors and the fire gets a good head start before spreading into the house.

#4 - Take out the trash before going to bed.

**WHY?** If a fire does break out, it is outside of the house.

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## Exits

- Knowing two ways out is important in any emergency, whether it involves a fire or not
- This applies to any location, whether it is your house, apartment, classroom, movie theater, or a restaurant.
- Going through smoke may be more dangerous than trying to use a second exit.

## Action Items

#1 - Look around and identify your second way out, no matter where you are.

**WHY?** It only takes a few seconds and the habit can save your life.

#2 - When you go home, identify what your second exit is.

**WHY?** It might be a location you didn't originally think of, such as a window. Will it open? If you have to use it, how will you get down? Jump? An escape ladder might be necessary, so it's important to plan in advance.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FROM THE ALARMING TRUTH PROJECT PARTNERS**

# CAMPUS Firewatch™

Campus Firewatch, in publication since 2000, is a social enterprise focusing solely on campus fire safety issues. It has been a leader in raising awareness of the importance of fire safety at our nation's campuses and a catalyst for numerous projects and efforts over the years.

You can find fire safety month proclamations, safety tips, and other resources at:

**[www.campus-firewatch.com](http://www.campus-firewatch.com)**



The Michael H. Minger Foundation was formed after the death of Michael Minger in an arson fire in his residence hall at Murray State University in Kentucky. The foundation works to improve awareness of fire safety on campuses everywhere with a focus on fire safety for students with disabilities.

You can find posters, videos, guides, and other downloadable resources at:

**[www.mingerfoundation.org](http://www.mingerfoundation.org)**

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