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Fort Collins house fire illustrates key fire-safety behaviors, serves as critical reminder

Following a multi-agency investigation, Poudre Fire Authority investigators determined that heat and embers from an improperly located and extinguished fire pit on the home's deck caused an August Fort Collins house fire that displaced five college-age men and killed one dog.

Several of the students suffered significant injuries, including smoke inhalation, and the fire caused extensive damage to the rental home at 1817 Broadview Place. This incident serves as a somber reminder of fire's quick-spreading and devastating nature, as well as the importance of having functioning smoke alarms and knowing escape routes in the event of a fire.

"The men inside this home are fortunate the smoke alarms' batteries were replaced just days prior to the fire. Without them, someone could have died," PFA spokeswoman Madeline Noblett said. "This fire also illustrates several fire-safety concepts PFA teaches community members every day: the importance of knowing two ways out of every room and closing bedroom doors while you sleep to prevent a fire from spreading."

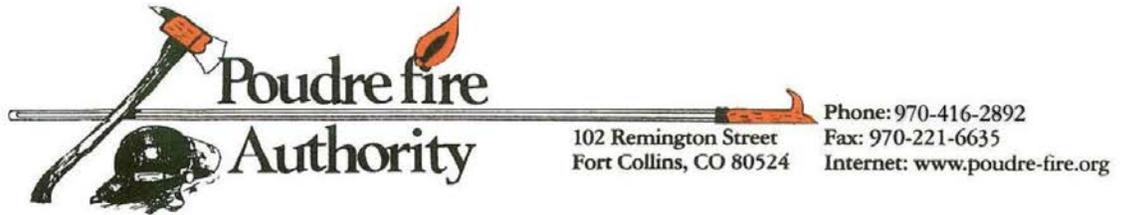
To illustrate these concepts, Poudre Fire Authority Education Specialist Michael Durkin and Ben Gondrez, digital dome manager with the Fort Collins Museum of Discovery, created a 360-degree video tour of the home using the museum's specialized camera. As part of this virtual reality experience, viewers can move through rooms in the home, see firsthand the fire's impact and learn invaluable fire-safety information. It is being shown on campus at Colorado State University the week of Sept. 18, as part of FlashPoint, a series of fire-safety events hosted by PFA and its partners with Housing & Dining Services' safety coordinators. Video: bit.ly/broadview360video

Some of the video's key educational messages address the following:

Two of the students living in the home's basement crawled through a small window, located near the ceiling, and were fortunate to successfully escape. It's important to note there was a code-compliant window in one of the men's bedrooms with an escape ladder that would have made their escape easier. However, by no fault of the men, it's human nature in emergencies to find any way out and difficult to assess a situation such as this.

PFA reminds all residents to walk through their home and map a simple escape plan ahead of a disaster and in times of no stress. Mark two ways out of any room and decide with family members or roommates where the safest meeting place outside the home is (think a stationary mailbox or tree across the street).

Another of the men's bedroom doors was shut when he went to sleep early on the morning of Aug. 20. Fire charred the door's frame but didn't enter and destroy the room and its contents, as it did in other rooms where the doors were open.



One of the men suffered significant injuries while breaking out a window to re-enter the home and rescue a dog, who ultimately succumbed to the fire. As difficult as it might be, people must never go back into a structure that's burning. The message here is, "Get out and stay out."

It's never safe to re-enter a burning home, whether for a family member, beloved pet or cellphone. Rather, tell emergency dispatchers or firefighters where the person or pet was last seen, so they can more quickly search for them. If you forget your cellphone, get out quickly and use a neighbor's phone to call 911.

This fire also serves as a reminder of how to safely use a fire pit. In this case, the saucer-shaped fire pit in which the fire originated was located on the southeast corner of the home's wooden deck.

Investigators determined that the first materials ignited with a cigarette lighter were cardboard, paper and either lumber or logs. The fire wasn't properly extinguished, and it spread to combustible materials in, around and underneath the deck, PFA investigators found.

The fire also ignited a propane tank, in a grill located near the fire pit. This and other combustible materials – such as fences, sheds, nearby structures (including decks) and shrubbery -- should be located at least 15 feet away from a fire pit. Fuel packages burned shouldn't exceed 3 feet in diameter or 2 feet in height. People should only use clean dry wood or charcoal as fuel; never burn trash or yard debris.

PFA firefighters were dispatched to the single-story home at 5:55 a.m. The first unit arrived within minutes and began to knock down the fire. Once more resources arrived, firefighters were able to make quick gains and the fire was declared under control at 6:24 a.m. A total of 27 PFA personnel responded along with three ambulances from UCHealth EMS. Officers from Fort Collins Police Services (FCPS) assisted with crowd and traffic control.

FCPS investigated the fire jointly with PFA. Fire-investigation is a time-intensive process that involves burn-pattern analysis, extensive scene documentation, witness/firefighter interviews, a deep understanding of fire behavior and more.

For this incident, a PFA drone was deployed and flown above the home to document the scene. It is part of the Larimer Unmanned Aircraft System program, a multi-agency team of federally licensed pilots who use drones in emergency incidents (visit www.larimeruas.com for more information). This saves time and money. Before PFA's drones were available, one of PFA's towers – the vehicle with the extendible ladder – would park at the scene, allowing investigators to take photos from above, providing another perspective from which to analyze a fire.

ACCOMPANYING MEDIA

PFA drone video footage – This shows an aerial view of the home/fire scene.

Photos – There are three: two aerial shots, taken by PFA's drone, and a photo showing the fire's point of origin at the fire pit on the wooden deck.

360-degree video tour of home – Made in partnership with the Fort Collins Museum of Discovery using its 360-degree camera: bit.ly/broadview360video

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