

The Stute

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E-cigarettes setting off fire alarms in dorms

Tyler Romeo / 5 days ago

Those living in on-campus housing are all too familiar with unwarranted fire alarms. Recently though, there has been a spike in the number of these false alarms, with more than six just this week. According to the Stevens Fire Safety Coordinator Daniel Cunning, the culprit is electronic cigarettes, otherwise known as e-cigarettes. These alternatives to traditional cigarettes have become quite popular, and are a source of controversy, specifically regarding which existing cigarette laws apply to e-cigarettes, and whether they should apply at all.

E-cigarettes function by creating an aerosol vapor, possibly containing nicotine and flavoring, as opposed to the traditional delivery method: smoke. Each device contains a rechargeable battery, which powers a resistance coil that atomizes the fluid and pushes it the mouthpiece. There are different ratings of batteries, different sized coils, different fluids, and other variations of e-cigarettes; it is from these variations that the number of false fire alarms has been rising.

According to Cunning, one of the rising risks of e-cigarette use stems from misuse of the device. Just like any other portable electronic device, using the incorrect charger or modifying the device in a way not intended by the manufacturer can cause it to become a fire hazard. However, even beyond that, the fluid itself, which is traditionally mixture of propylene glycol, glycerin, water,

nicotine, and flavorings, can set off smoke alarms on its own, even though it is not actually smoke.

Some students are wary of this explanation. A student who wished to remain anonymous said, “I have been [smoking e-cigarettes] in my room and other rooms in Palmer for the entire year, and nothing has happened.” One explanation the student gave is that only certain types of smoke detectors are set off by the “e-juice” (another name for the liquid in e-cigarettes).

Nonetheless, both students and Cunning’s office are aware that using e-cigarettes indoors is illegal. As a result of a 2010 amendment to the New Jersey Smoke-Free Air Act (P.L. 2009, c. 182), e-cigarettes are banned in indoor public places and workplaces. This includes student dorms.

Similar laws, including those restricting the sale of e-cigarettes to minors, have popped up in many other states and countries over the past few years. As such, it is official policy that operating these devices inside is strictly not allowed.

Cunning, however, is not as worried over the actual use of the e-cigarettes as he is over the false fire alarms being caused by them. As he pointed out, it is an inconvenience to the students living in the building, and is a safety issue for the firefighters who are sometimes injured diagnosing these false alarms.

Students are urged to not smoke e-cigarettes inside, and to make sure they are using the proper charger with their devices in order to avoid a possible fire hazard.