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# College Prep- An Ounce Of Gas Detection Can Prevent A Tragedy

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by **John V. Carvalho III**

You're a facilities manager at a college or university in New England. Given the long history of many of the schools in the region, there's a very good chance there are some very old buildings on your campus. With old buildings comes older other things. As we all know, older things are more likely to break down than newer

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things. And that's where bad things may happen.

So, as a facilities manager, with all that said, when was the last time you had your gas detection system checked for your dormitories, labs, and other buildings on campus?

Chances are, if you have to look at your calendar, it's been too long. And that can leave your institution—and lives—vulnerable to a potential gas or toxic leak.

In Massachusetts, by law, buildings where people sleep like nursing homes, hotels, residences, and dormitories are required to have carbon monoxide (CO) detection system. Connecticut and Rhode Island also have laws requiring schools to have carbon monoxide monitoring systems in residences (see the National Conference of State Legislatures' website at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/environment-and-natural-resources/carbon-monoxide-detectors-state-statutes.aspx>;) the other New England states do not.

While a CO leak is more dangerous in buildings where people are sleeping, people can be just as vulnerable in a classroom, lab, cafeteria, or athletic center without the correct system in place and a maintenance/monitoring program.

In dormitories, it is required by a Massachusetts state statute called "Nicole's Law" for each dorm building to be equipped with CO detection. It's recommended that each CO detector be calibrated or tested at least once every six months. Each time a CO detector is inspected by a gas detection technician, the technician checks the CO detector to ensure that it is accurately reading CO and that the detector itself has not expired. In either case, the detector should be replaced immediately on the spot by the gas detection technician.

Larger colleges with stadiums and indoor athletic centers that can attract large crowds for sporting and other can pose its own set of challenges when it comes to hazardous gas detection. Gas detection manufacturers such as RAE Systems by Honeywell, have developed a wide range of products that can be deployed around a



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venue with readings being sent back to a central command post. This gives those monitoring a sporting event the capabilities to set up a perimeter around the venue and monitor what threats could be found inside a venue.

Laboratories present different challenges. All labs should be equipped with some sort of gas detection monitoring system that can alert you to combustible or toxic gases. The recommended type of system for most labs is a constantly monitoring, hard-wire stationary gas detection system with a monitoring panel and sensors located throughout the laboratory.

Other opportunities in educational facilities can produce hazardous gas, for example a broken propane tank pipe or trucks idling in a confined space, such as a parking garage or loading dock, and could produce a CO leak could cause a major incident if undetected.

Unfortunately, some institutions feel the investment in a gas detection system to be sufficient and don't take the extra step of having the system maintained on a regular basis. Regrettably, many facilities managers go by the mantra that if the gas detection system doesn't detect anything that nothing is wrong. If you could be 100 percent sure the system was working properly, you can understand that logic. Unfortunately, you can't know a gas detection system is working unless it's tested with the appropriate gases. Since most facilities managers do not intentionally have those gases on them in a safe form to test their system, there's no way for them to know if the system is actually reading gas.

Consequently, by not having a routine maintenance system in place, you can put the health and safety of students, faculty, staff and visitors at risk if your gas detection equipment is not functioning properly. And when it comes to exposure to gases, it only takes one incident to put lives in jeopardy and open up your institution to tremendous liability.

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When you compare the cost of an annual maintenance plan—roughly \$1000—with the thousands of dollars associated with a wrongful death or liability lawsuit, the investment in a maintenance and monitoring program makes all the sense in the world.

As the facilities manager of any school, college or university, your responsibilities are many. The safety of the students who live on campus and the staff and visitors who are on your properties every day is perhaps the most important of those responsibilities. You can run a smooth and efficient operation for 20 years with little fanfare. One incident with your gas detection equipment system (or lack of a system altogether) can mar that reputation. Installing a state-of-the-art gas detection system with regular maintenance and monitoring buys you peace of mind that you just can't put a price tag on.

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