

As Fraternity Hazing Season Begins, It's Time to Get Prepared

By David W. Bianchi

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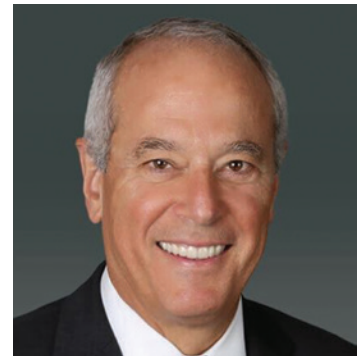
It's unthinkable: a family sends their son off to college in the fall, only for him to never return home for Thanksgiving—another victim of a fraternity hazing tragedy. Yet for far too many parents, this is a heartbreaking reality. As another fraternity hazing season approaches, preventing more senseless deaths will require a united, collective effort.

Most states have laws making hazing that causes death or injury a crime. Most colleges and universities have policies prohibiting hazing and every major fraternity has rules prohibiting it. National Hazing Prevention Week takes place every October and, on many college campuses, fraternity members are required to attend programs intended to stop it. Despite all these efforts, however, hazing continues.

Since 2000, more than 100 college students have died or been seriously injured in hazing incidents throughout the United States. College life, particularly college life in a fraternity house, can be an incubator for hazing. Young people are away from home for the first time, there is little to no adult supervision, there are fraternity traditions to uphold and there is alcohol. These conditions can get even the most mature young men to do things they would never do at home. It is the perfect environment for hazing to thrive.

Hazing is generally defined as any act that endangers the mental or physical health or safety of a student for the purpose of initiation or admission into any group, team or organization. Hazing includes, but is not limited to, hitting or beating someone or exposing the person to the elements; forcing, pressuring or coercing a person to violate state or federal law; or forcing someone to consume alcohol, drugs or other substances. In some states, hazing is a felony and those who do it can go to jail.

Hazing will never be totally stopped but it can be curtailed and, while those efforts continue, there is a growing focus on saving the victims before it is too late. Last month, Missouri Gov. Mike Kehoe signed “Danny’s Law,” Mo. R.S. 578.365 which gives immunity from prosecution under the state’s hazing statute to the first person who calls 911 or campus security to report a hazing incident and requests help for the victim. That immunity is extended to anyone rendering aid to the victim while help is on the way.



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Courtesy photo

The new law is named after Danny Santulli who was horribly injured in a hazing incident at the University of Missouri in 2021. Missouri's law was inspired by "Andrew's Law" in Florida. Andrew Coffey died in 2017 after he was hazed at Florida State University in a fraternity tradition nearly identical to the one involving Danny Santulli. In both instances, the victims would have survived without any long-term injuries if help had been called when it was obviously needed. Arizona, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Texas and Virginia have similar laws and efforts are underway to get more states onboard.

Hazing can have lifelong consequences not just for the victims of hazing but for those who do the hazing as well. Twenty years ago I tried a case involving the hazing death of Chad Meredith at the University of Miami and the jury returned a verdict in our favor. Recently, I received a phone call from someone who was considering hiring one of the fraternity officers who I sued two decades earlier. The prospective employer wanted to know more about the case and what my thoughts were about hiring the defendant in my case. Thanks to the internet, one alcohol fueled night in college decades earlier now makes it more difficult for those who haze to escape the consequences of their actions much later in life.

We know that on many campuses, pledging season starts in the fall. On others, where pledging is banned until the second semester, the pledging starts in January. Knowing when it begins can give campus security a head start on stopping it before it gets out of control.

On every weekend during the pledging season, campus security should make highly visible, unannounced visits to every fraternity house to let them know that there is a zero tolerance for

any form of hazing and campus security will be watching closely to make arrests the moment it happens. When hazing does occur, the school administration must act swiftly to expel everyone involved. No suspensions, no excuses and no second chances. That will send a strong message to those who think there are no serious consequences for those who haze.

Finally, the national fraternities must also adopt a zero tolerance for hazing. They all have anti-hazing policies but one of the reasons the hazing continues is because the nationals are not aggressive enough in enforcing those policies.

Almost all national fraternities have chapter advisers who are typically recent alumni who volunteer to act as liaisons between the national and the local chapter and they exercise some form of oversight and supervision over what takes place locally. The problem, however, is that the relationship between the advisers and the chapter is often too cozy and the advisers do not pay close enough attention to what the chapters are doing or planning. The advisers need to step up and do more and the nationals need to expect more from them. They are in the perfect position to stop hazing before it starts.

Hazing season is a crisis we have the power to prevent. It will take vigilance from universities, zero tolerance from national fraternities, accountability from advisers, and the courage of students to speak up when something is wrong. The laws are changing, the awareness is growing, and the time to act is now. If we wait until the next tragedy makes headlines, it will be too late.

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