Lawrence-Douglas County Fire Medical responders have used Kansas University residence halls for summertime training drills before, but not like this. Today at McCollum Hall, there's a slew of fire engines and other vehicles, and crews are dragging hoses inside the building — spraying real water — and practicing forced entries into doors — using actual force.

“That’s the advantage,” said Shaun Coffey, division chief of training for the fire department. “If we do any damage, it doesn’t really matter. When they’re occupied we have to be a little more careful.”

Fire-medical crews will continue high-rise search and rescue and fire attack training Tuesday and Wednesday at McCollum, Coffey said. They’ve recently used the vacant Stouffer Place apartment buildings for training, too, and expect to be back for more training at McCollum in a few weeks.

The Douglas County Sheriff’s Office also used Stouffer Place for some training this month and posted this story on its Facebook page:
“We’re trying to take advantage of it while we can,” Coffey said.

The Stouffer Place buildings are scheduled to be razed this fall, and McCollum is set for demolition Nov. 25. But even with the wrecking ball looming, the fire crews can’t go completely realistic. I did ask Coffey if they were using real fire and he said no — a machine is simulating the smoke, and the stand-in for actual flames is a big orange cone.

Still, I think it’s safe to say even a smoke machine and a cone are more realistic than what firefighters have usually encountered through the years when called to McCollum, aka the false alarm capital of the world — OK maybe not the world, but definitely a contender for the title in this town. Ten floors and three wings, full of college students.

In all seriousness, though, a real fire in an occupied residence hall would be a very scary situation. It is Campus Fire Safety Month, and Lawrence-Douglas County Fire Medical provides this link with lots of safety tips for fire prevention and fire escape plans for college living.