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## Pledges burned in frat ritual at NEC

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Saturday, Nov. 15, 2008

**HENNIKER** – Several pledges suffered serious burns to the chest during an initiation ceremony at a New England College fraternity, authorities said.

Police anticipate filing criminal charges against at least three members of the Sigma Alpha Beta Fraternity, Chief Tim Russell said yesterday. The fraternity is a Greek organization affiliated with New England College but not with any national organization.

An onlooker at the ceremony, which police believe took place about two weeks ago, reported the incident to the college's safety department, Russell said.

"It came to our attention because there was somebody that witnessed the ceremony and was disturbed by it, and we're choosing not to name that person, obviously," he said. "It appears as though these kids had already been voted in and this was sort of like the last step of becoming official brothers. I'd like to think my brothers wouldn't do that to me."

Russell said that between four and seven students received single burn marks to the chest. The wounds were inflicted using an implement that he declined to identify.

"I can tell you that it was not cigarettes or anything of that nature," he said. Although the pledges did not require hospitalization, the burns "were very serious," he added.

New England College has suspended all activities associated with Sigma Alpha Beta, which rents an off-campus house in Henniker and has about 21 members, according to college spokeswoman Kathleen Williams.

"We would take a very strong stand against any activity by an individual or a group that could be interpreted as hazing," Williams said.

The college is assisting the police investigation and could discipline offenders.

"It all depends on the extent of the incident and how many people were involved and what exactly happened," Williams said.

Hazing is a misdemeanor crime under state law, both for the perpetrators and any willing participants. However, because of the seriousness of the injuries in this case, Russell said, police could file elevated charges of second-degree assault against the students who are accused of inflicting the wounds. He said no decision had been made about whether the injured students would be charged.

In the past, Henniker police have investigated allegations of hazing at New England College, Russell said, but most of the incidents amounted to little more than pranks.

"We've had nothing as serious as this," he said.

In its written anti-hazing policy, the college expressly forbids branding. Students who wish to join a fraternity or sorority must take part in an anti-hazing educational program and sign a form promising not to participate in anything that could be considered hazing.

Attempts to reach members of Sigma Alpha Beta and their faculty adviser yesterday were unsuccessful.