What’s the Worst that Could Happen?

When people think about the law, they often think about “intent.” It is no accident that one of the Law & Order spin-offs was named “Criminal Intent.” When considering criminal and legal consequences, however, focusing on intent is only part of the equation. The law can also hold us responsible for unintended consequences. Let’s look at a recent example from Greek life.

Earlier this month, the unintended consequences of a hazing incident at Syracuse University led to arrests and suspensions. Two fraternity brothers decided to have pledges do outdoor exercises in the snow late on a Saturday night. The brothers provided hand warmers for the pledges, indicating that there was no intent of harm. And, the brothers will likely argue the session only lasted 30 minutes, and the brothers were also present.

Regardless of what was intended, however:

- One pledge was diagnosed with severe frostbite in four of his fingers.
- Two brothers were arrested and are currently facing criminal charges of hazing.
- The fraternity has been suspended.

In the long run, whether the brothers at Syracuse had any intentions of harm may not matter. When rules are broken, the law can always look to the unintended consequences when placing blame. Unintended consequences can lead to university sanctions for the group, lasting physical injuries, civil sanctions in the form of damages, or even criminal sanctions like jail.

For more information on the ongoing Syracuse case:

- “[Syracuse Fraternity Nu Alpha Phi Suspended After Suspected Frostbite Hazing](https://www.nbcnews.com/),” 5 March 2015, NBCNews.
- “[Syracuse police arrest 2 SU Nu Alpha Phi fraternity members for hazing incident](https://www.dailyorange.com/),” 4 March 2015, The Daily Orange.