IT'S AN EPIDEMIC—false alarms, frivolous 9-1-1 calls, and pranks such as phony bomb threats are overwhelming the emergency response system nationwide. These incidents are more than an inconvenience. They waste the time and energy of law enforcement and other emergency personnel who may be needed to respond to real life-or-death emergencies. Every year, police and fire departments waste a significant amount of time and money responding to nuisance complaints and false alarms.

Preventing False Alarms

Anti-theft alarms were designed to protect lives and property. When properly installed, used, and maintained, alarms can bring a sense of security and peace of mind. When misused, they are a liability. False alarms are usually accidental, most often caused by user error (using incorrect keypad codes, failing to train users, failing to secure doors and windows), poor installation, and faulty equipment.

There are many steps alarm owners can take to prevent false alarms.

Home or Business Alarms

- *Lock doors* and windows properly.
- *Properly train* all users (e.g., babysitters, children, relatives, visitors, etc.).
- Know what to do *if you accidentally set off the alarm system.*
- *Write down the procedures* for activating and deactivating the system, and make them available near the control panel.
- *Place the alarm monitoring* center's phone number near the phone or control panel.
- *Do not leave codes* or passwords with instructions or in unsecured places.

NATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION COUNCIL

Crime Prevention Tips From

National Crime Prevention Council
1000 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Thirteenth Floor
Washington, DC 20036-5325
202-466-6272
www.ncpc.org

and

Missouri Crime Prevention Information Center
Department of Public Safety
P.O. Box 749
301 W. High Street, Room 870
Jefferson City, MO 65102
(573) 751-4905

BJA Bureau of Justice Assistance
Office of Justice Programs ■ U.S. Department of Justice

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No Time To Waste: Tips for Avoiding False Alarms and Frivolous Calls

NATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION COUNCIL

- *Make sure your emergency* contact names and phone numbers are updated with the alarm-monitoring center.
- *If you have a local alarm* (those without monitoring companies), post emergency contact phone numbers near the front door of the premise.
- *Before activating an alarm system*, securely close and lock all windows and doors, and make sure pets, fans, plants, and balloons are away from motion sensors.
- *Service and maintain* the system (including batteries) properly.

Vehicle Alarms

- *Lock doors*, take keys, remove or hide valuables.
- *Use an anti-ignition* device or other engine-disabling device.
- *Use secured* parking.
- *Use a steering-wheel* lock.
- *Set the sensitivity* to a level where only an actual break-in will be detected. Loud or large trucks, buses, trains, or other vibrating noise should not set off your system.
- *Adjust the amount of time* the siren or horn sounds to the minimum. One or two minutes is more than sufficient.
- *Employ an alarm system* with a pager that notifies you if your alarm has been activated.
- *Place an emergency number* or pager number on the vehicle window. This will assist neighbors or the police in locating you if your system is repeatedly having false alarms or in the event of an actual crime.

False Alarms and the Law

Some jurisdictions impose fines for excessive false alarms from anti-theft systems. Some may allow law enforcement to deny police response to an alarm activation after a certain specified number of false alarms. And some offer problem alarm users the option to attend an Alarm Awareness School where they will be educated on how to correctly use their alarm systems as well as the dangers of false alarms.

Using the 9-1-1 System

Ever since Congress passed legislation in 1968 making 9-1-1 a standard emergency number nationwide, countless lives have been saved due to faster response by police, fire, and medical personnel in emergency situations. Approximately 200 millions calls are made to 9-1-1 in the United States each year, with about one-third made from wireless phones.[1]

When you dial 9-1-1 from a landline, your call goes to the nearest 9-1-1 center where the call taker receives your information and dispatches emergency help. New technology allows many call takers to see your phone number and address on a computer display. When you call 9-1-1 from a wireless phone, your call may not be routed to the nearest 9-1-1 center, and the call taker may not receive your callback phone number or your location. It is important to clearly state your telephone number and location whenever you call 9-1-1.

Non-emergency, frivolous, and prank calls to 9-1-1 are reaching a dangerous level. Dispatchers responding to these calls are forced to place 9-1-1 callers with real emergencies on hold. When seconds count, this delay can mean someone with a real emergency may not be able to get help in time.

When To Call 9-1-1

- *You need to report* a situation that threatens human life or property and requires immediate dispatch of police, fire, or emergency medical services, such as a crime in progress, a serious crime that has just occurred, a fire, a serious illness, or an injury.
- *You aren't sure whether the situation is an emergency* but want the 9-1-1 call taker to determine the type of response your situation requires.

How To Make a 9-1-1 Call

- *Dial 911* from any kind of phone, including pushbutton, rotary, wireless, cordless, or pay phone. Do not program 9-1-1 into your speed dial.
- *When the call taker answers,* remain calm and speak clearly.
- *Describe your emergency*, and state your phone number and the address where you need help.
- *Answer the call taker's questions,* and listen to all instructions.
- *Do not hang up* until the call taker tells you to unless it is not safe for you to stay on the telephone. If you call 9-1-1 by mistake, tell the call taker what happened.
- *Remember*: 9-1-1 calls are recorded and traceable. In most places, it's against the law to deliberately make false 9-1-1 calls.

Do Not Call 9-1-1

- *To get information* on local services
- *To find out about threatening* weather or to get a weather report
- *To ask for directions* or travel information
- *To complain* about a noisy neighbor
- *To report* that your power or other utility is off
- *To learn how* to pay your parking ticket
- *To report* a lost or found animal
- *To discuss* any nonemergency situation

1 National Emergency Number Association. Retrieved from www.nena.org/911_facts/911fastfacts.htm.