

# **MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF POLICE**

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## **FALSE ALARM REDUCTION PROGRAM 2014 ANNUAL REPORT**

**JULY 2015**

## OVERVIEW

The False Alarm Reduction Section (FARS) of the Montgomery County Department of Police was created to administer Chapter 3A, Alarms, of the Montgomery County Code and reduce the number of false alarms that police must respond to each year. False alarms can take police officers and other public safety personnel away from other events, endangering responding authorities and the community, and wasting public resources.

Police officers responded to 268 (1.63%) more false alarms in 2014 than in 2013, but the number of new alarm users also increased by more than 1,800 in 2014.

In 2014, there were a total of **12,323 requests** for dispatch to which police did not respond, reducing the impact of false alarms on the quality of service and safety. The time saved by Montgomery County Police not responding to these cancelled alarms equates to approximately **6,204 work hours**<sup>1</sup>.

In more than 20 years since the program was initiated, the section has consistently increased the number of alarm users who experience zero false alarms. **In 2014, nearly 71,000 alarm users, or 87.1%, had zero false alarms.**

Despite some staffing challenges in 2014, the FARS was still able to reduce false alarms and increase the number of alarm users with zero false alarms – all positive signs. The *total* number of registered alarm users continues to rise, and despite the slight increase in registered users in 2014, police officers responded to *fewer* alarm calls in 2014 compared to 1994, when enforcement of the amended burglar alarm law went into effect. These statistics, coupled with a 169% increase in the number of registered alarm users over the same time period, demonstrates that substantial and *sustained* false alarm reduction has been achieved.

The FARS staff plans to continue its amplified enforcement initiative and remain in the forefront as subject matter experts in the field of false alarm management and reduction.

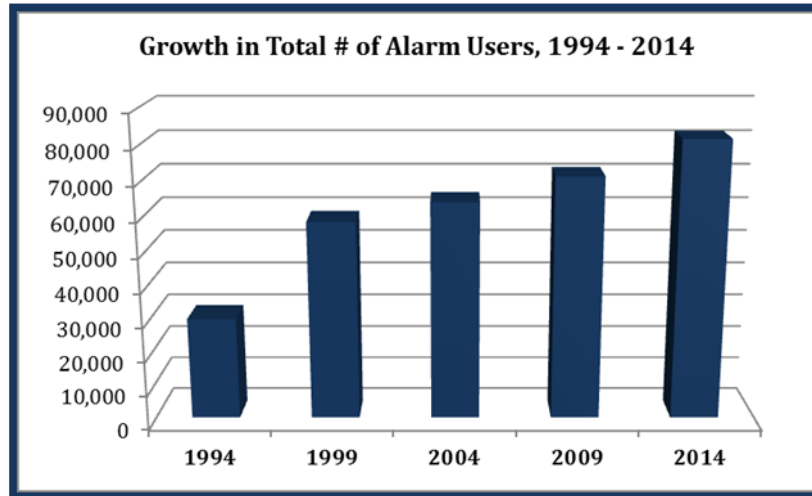
## 2014 FALSE ALARM REDUCTION

### Alarm Users

Montgomery County is the most populous jurisdiction in the state of Maryland, consisting of nearly 1.1 million residents. In 2014, FARS received a total of 5,666 new alarm user registration forms (residential and commercial). There was a 2.3% increase in the total number of registered alarm users between 2013 and 2014, accounting for more than 81,500 users.

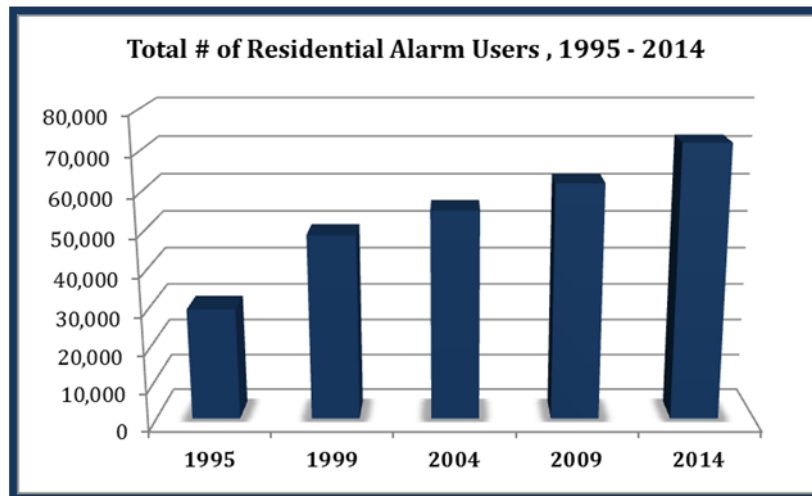
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<sup>1</sup> This figure is based on the average time of 16 minutes each, for two officers per alarm call.



The alarm user registration renewal process permits FARS to keep the alarm user database current by removing those users who no longer have an alarm system or have moved from the County. This allows FARS to perform statistical analysis using more accurate numbers, which provides for more meaningful reporting.

Overall, Montgomery County has experienced an increase in total alarm registrants since 1994 (123.7%), driven primarily by the number of residential alarm users - nearly 72,000 users - an increase of 144.7%.

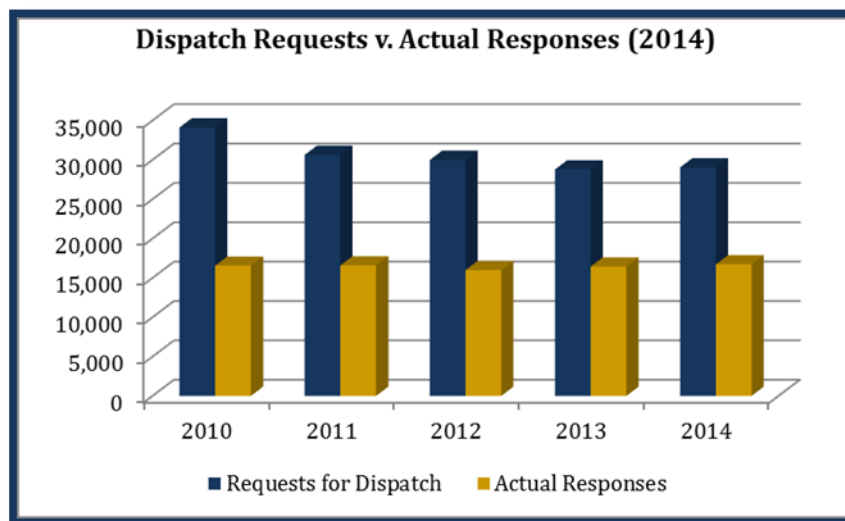


## Alarm Responses

A false alarm is an alarm system activation that results in a dispatch request that is not cancelled prior to the arrival of law enforcement at the site, and in which the responding authority finds no evidence of criminal activity to justify a police response. There are several common causes of false alarms:

- Inadequate training of those allowed access to the system. This also includes accidental alarms caused by house/pet sitters, house cleaners, contractors, etc.
- Pets.
- Weak or depleted system batteries.
- Open, unlocked, loose fitting, or defective doors/windows.
- Drafts from air conditioners/heaters, or open windows that cause movement of plants, curtains, etc.

The graph below offers visual representation of the number of requests for dispatch versus actual responses. *Requests for dispatch* include the number of times an alarm monitoring company calls 911. *Actual response* totals include the number of times an officer actually arrives at a location and investigates the cause of the alarm. Alarm companies are required to cancel police response when it is determined that alarm activation is false, or response is not needed. **In 2014, alarm companies cancelled 7,680 requests for dispatch, or 26.4% of the total requests for dispatch.** These cancellations provided officers with more time to engage in other more critical law enforcement related activities and community policing initiatives.



Historically, the number of dispatch requests has been declining: the numbers have dropped nearly 34% over the last 20 years and 15% over the last five years. In 2014, the number of dispatch requests rose slightly, less than 1%, from 28,763 to 29,032. The number of actual responses has increased for the second straight year, increasing 1.6% in 2014 over 2013. More importantly, the percentage of total calls responded to has increased over the same time period, but the 2014 percentage of dispatch requests that result in response (57.6%) has returned to levels comparable to the 1990s. This trend may be attributed to the increase in alarm users.

## False Alarm Rates

The false alarm rate is the most common measure of false alarm reduction, as it calculates the number of false alarm dispatches relative to the total number of alarm users.

Year	Total Registered Users	Total False Alarms	False Alarm Rate
1994	29,756	42,821 <sup>2</sup>	1.44
1999	58,143	24,400	.42
2004	63,748	17,624	.28
2009	71,011	16,816	.24
2014	81,513	16,017	.20

This table demonstrates that although the total number of registered users has increased over the last twenty years, the false alarm rate has continued to drop.

Another measure of program effectiveness is the total number of alarm users who had NO false alarms. In 2014, a total of 70,551 alarm users had ZERO false alarms; essentially, 86.6% of all alarm users in Montgomery County successfully managed their alarm systems/programs. In 1995, the year after the county alarm code was implemented, only 56.2% of the registered alarm users had no false alarms. This is a significant improvement, given the increase in the total number of users. As you can see from the chart below, the false alarm numbers have improved significantly over the last two decades.

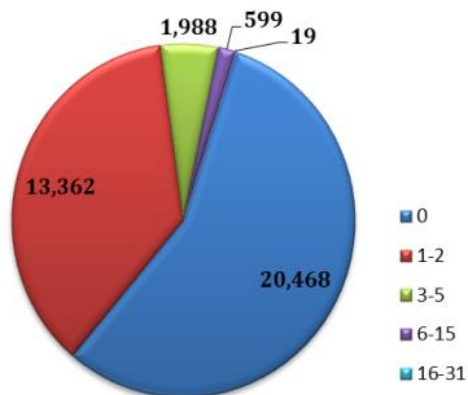
2014 <i>Total Users = 81,513</i>		2005 <i>Total Users = 63,970</i>		1995 <i>Total Users = 36,436</i>	
False Alarms	Alarm Users	False Alarms	Alarm Users	False Alarms	Alarm Users
0	70,551	0	53,240	0	20,468
1-2	9,878	1-2	9,550	1-2	13,362
3-5	876	3-5	982	3-5	1,988
6-15	203	6-15	190	6-15	599
16-31	5	16-31	8	16-31	19

A closer examination reveals that commercial alarm users have improved 187.9% since 1995 towards the achievement of no false alarms, while residential users have been 251.2% more successful in managing false alarms. In 1995, nearly 7% of all commercial alarm users had six or more false alarms. In 2014, the percentage of commercial alarm users with six or more false alarms had dropped to only 2%. The percentages of residential alarm users with six or more false alarms are already very small, but there was a reduction from 128 users in 1995 (with six or more false alarms) to only 16 users in 2014.

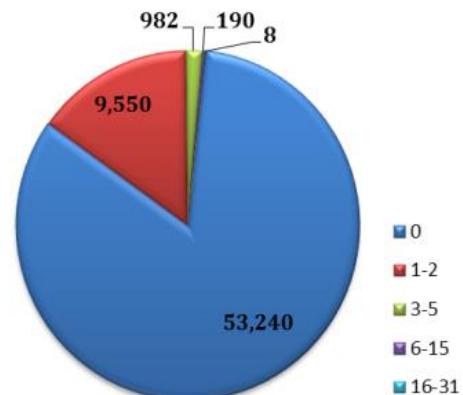
<sup>2</sup> The number of verified calls for 1994 is unknown. 42,821 is the total number of alarm dispatches that occurred.

Number of Users with No False Alarms				
	1995	2005	2014	% Change
<b>Commercial</b>	2,352	5,730	6,771	187.88
<b>Residential</b>	18,116	47,510	63,715	251.71

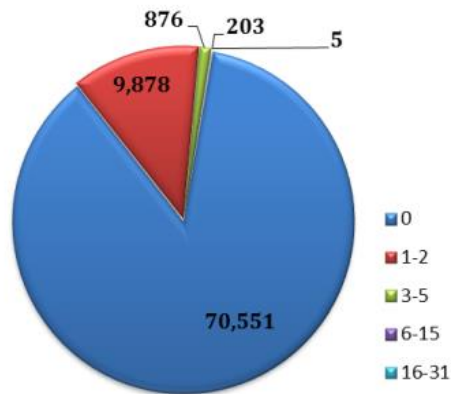
The charts below graphically show that more alarm users (as a percentage of total alarm users for a given year) are achieving the zero false alarm thresholds. This statistic, which is supported by the low false alarm rate, is indicative of the success of the overall false alarm reduction program. These reductions become more significant when viewed with the steady increase in the number of alarm users each year. This is a positive measure of the program's impact on County resources.



1995 False Alarm Statistics



2005 False Alarm Statistics



2014 False Alarm Statistics

## Cost Avoidance

As a direct result of the FARS' strict enforcement of the alarm law, there were 11,631 alarm calls that police officers were not required to respond to in 2014. Using the averages established by the Police Department, this equates to approximately **6,204 hours of police officer time, or an estimated \$1,279,410 in cost avoidance** (monetary cost avoidance is

based on an average salary cost<sup>3</sup> of \$113. Work year savings are based on an average of 16 minutes per alarm response by two officers).

## REVENUE

The charts on the next two pages reflect revenue collected by the FARS for alarm user registration and renewal fees, false alarm response fees, alarm business license and administrative fees, civil citations, and appeal filing fees. The first chart covers *calendar* year 2014. The second chart covers *fiscal* year 2014. The FY2014 chart is included only as a reference, because budget projections are based on fiscal rather than calendar years. The more accurate chart is the calendar year 2014 chart, as false alarms and the resultant false alarm response fees are calculated on a calendar year basis.

CALENDAR YEAR 2014	ACTUAL REVENUES
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$151,400
Commercial	<u>19,130</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$170,530</b>
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Renewal Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$228,060
County Attorney Collections	<u>2,210</u>
Total Residential	<b>\$230,270</b>
Commercial	\$30,665
County Attorney Collections	<u>570</u>
Total Commercial	<b>\$31,235</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$261,505</b>
<b><u>False Alarm Response Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$94,252
County Attorney Collections	<u>24,878</u>
Total Residential	<b>\$119,130</b>
Commercial	\$305,436
County Attorney Collections	<u>33,700</u>
Total Commercial	<b>\$339,136</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$458,266</b>
<b><u>Alarm Business Fees</u></b>	
License	\$ 67,300
Civil Citations	285,500
Administrative Fees	<u>504</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$353,304</b>
<b><u>Appeal Filing Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$255

<sup>3</sup> Includes fringe benefits, operating expenses and vehicle but does not include costs related to policing, such as training, the cost of dispatching, etc.

Commercial	135
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$390</b>
<b><u>Alarm User Civil Citations</u></b>	
Residential	\$ 000
Commercial	000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ 000</b>
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,243,995</b>

FISCAL YEAR 14	ACTUAL REVENUES
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$160,080
Commercial	20,770
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$180,850</b>
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Renewal Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$229,480
County Attorney Collections	3,040
Total Residential	<b>\$232,520</b>
Commercial	\$34,305
County Attorney Collections	1,060
Total Commercial	<b>\$35,365</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$267,885</b>
<b><u>False Alarm Response Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$85,209
County Attorney Collections	33,530
Total Residential	<b>\$118,739</b>
Commercial	\$293,984
County Attorney Collections	53,155
Total Commercial	<b>\$347,139</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$465,878</b>
<b><u>Alarm Business Fees</u></b>	
License	\$ 73,700
Civil Citations	244,850
Administrative Fees	998
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$319,548</b>
<b><u>Appeal Filing Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$360
Commercial	120
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$480</b>
<b><u>Alarm User Civil Citations</u></b>	
Residential	\$ 000
Commercial	000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ 000</b>
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,234,641</b>



Collection of false alarm response fees is always a priority for the FARS. Strict enforcement of this aspect of the alarm law clearly shows that Montgomery County is serious about the issue of false alarms. This tool is the ability to place accounts in which alarm users fail to remit the required false alarm response fees into a denied response status. Along with the denied response status, accounts are referred to the Office of the County Attorney for collection action. The FARS collection rate rose to 93% in 2014, from just slightly over 91% in 2013. The suspension of police response provision in Chapter 3A, Alarms, for failure to remit false alarm response fees greatly enhances the FARS's ability to collect on unpaid bills and the above statistic bears this out.

The following chart reflects the amount billed for false alarm response fees in 2014 versus the amount collected for both residential and commercial alarm users. Please note that the "collected" amount in the following chart reflects payments made against false alarms that occurred in 2014. The actual collection of monies for those calendar year 2014 false alarms extends into calendar year 2015, and, therefore, reflects different totals than the Calendar Year Revenue Chart.

<b>Calendar Year 2014 Billed v. Collected False Alarm Response Fees</b>				
<b>False Alarm Response Fees</b>	<b>Billed</b>	<b>Collected*</b>	<b>Past Due (&gt;30 &amp; &lt;51 days overdue)</b>	<b>Delinquent (&gt;50 days overdue)</b>
Commercial	\$350,900	\$334,250	\$ 9,700	\$ 6,550
Residential	\$114,425	\$ 99,475	\$ 4,075	\$10,525
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$465,325</b>	<b>\$433,725</b>	<b>\$13,775</b>	<b>\$17,075</b>

*\*Represents fees collected in 2014 and 2015 against false alarm response fees billed in 2014.*

The FARS is in the process of attempting to collect the past due amounts listed above. The FARS has sent overdue notices to all affected alarm users. The \$17,075 listed above was referred to the Office of the County Attorney for collection early in 2015 and the affected alarm users have been placed in a non-response status until payment is received.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, the 2014 Annual Report on the status of the False Alarm Reduction Program is positive. While the percentage of alarm responses that are not verified has only declined 2.8% since 1994, the number of dispatch requests from the alarm companies has declined 33.9% since 1994, and the total number of responses has declined 60.9% over the same time. This indicates that alarm companies are better managing and vetting the alarm systems and owners have become more responsible.

The FARS will continue its strict enforcement of all requirements for requesting dispatch, including providing the correct alarm user registration and alarm business license numbers. The legally mandated non-response provisions of the alarm law resulted in

1,408 requests for dispatch that were denied as a result of the violation status of the alarm user or alarm business. This represents only 4.8% of all requests for dispatch.

There must be continuing education performed and early intervention with alarm users who are experiencing false alarms so that they do not reach unacceptable thresholds and waste valuable resources. The FARS staff is working diligently to intervene and educate the alarm users that fall into this category.