

MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF POLICE



FALSE ALARM REDUCTION PROGRAM 2021 ANNUAL REPORT

MARCH 2022

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 to which police must respond each year. False alarms can take police officers and other public safety personnel away from other events, which endangers the responding authorities and the community and wastes public resources.

In 2021, there were a total of **7,481 requests** for dispatch to which police did not respond, thereby reducing the negative impact of false alarms on the quality of service and safety. Although this represents about a 7.8% decrease compared with 2020, it should be noted that this decrease was partly due to the continuation of restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that homeowners and businesses were staying at home or were otherwise impacted by the restrictions throughout the year. Additionally, the number of calls to the Emergency Communications Center (ECC) were down by 6.3% compared with 2020. In 2020, the ECC received 17,912 burglar alarm related calls compared with 16,788 in 2021. This represents a reduction of about 1,100 calls. The time saved by Montgomery County Police by not responding to these alarm calls equates to approximately **3,990 work hours**.¹

There was a slight increase in new alarm users in 2021 compared with previous years. There were **4,878** new alarm users in 2021, which was a **2.8%** increase compared with 2020. In the more than 27 years since the program was initiated, the section has consistently maintained the number of alarm users who experience zero false alarms. **In 2021, over 84,000 alarm users, or about 91%, had zero false alarms.**

FARS continues its success in reducing false alarms and maintaining 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 increase in registered users in 2021, police officers responded to *fewer* alarm calls in 2021 than in 1994 when the enforcement of the amended burglar alarm law first went into effect. These statistics, coupled with a 211% increase in the number of registered alarm users over the same period, demonstrates that a substantial and *sustained* reduction in false alarms has been achieved.

FARS plans to continue its amplified enforcement initiative and to maintain its standing as subject matter experts in the field of false alarm management and reduction.

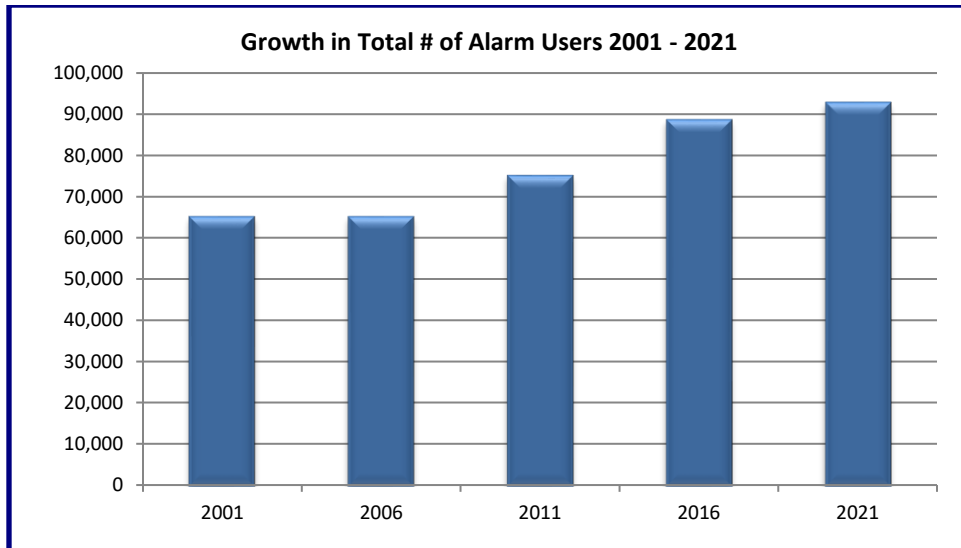
2021 FALSE ALARM REDUCTION

Alarm Users

Montgomery County is the most populous jurisdiction in the state of Maryland, consisting of nearly 1.1 million residents. In 2021, FARS received a total of 4,878 new alarm user registration forms (both residential and commercial). This represents about a 2.8% increase

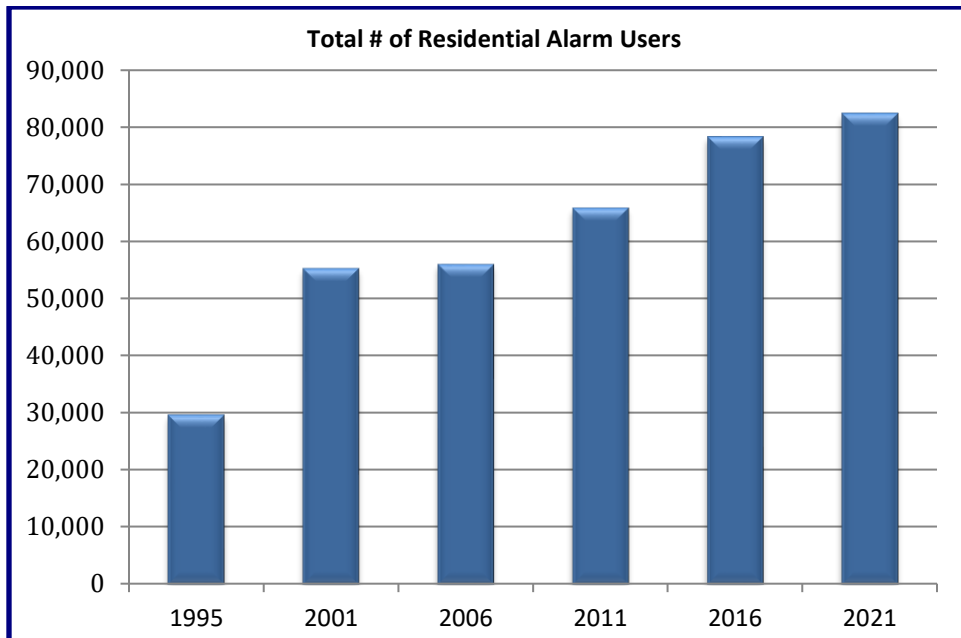
¹ This figure is based on an average time of 16 minutes each for two officers per alarm call.

in the total number of new registered alarm users between 2020 and 2021. Although this is only a slight increase, the number of registered users remains above 92,000 users. Of this number, 82,186 were residential users and 10,278 were commercial users.



The alarm user registration renewal process enables FARS to keep the alarm user database current by removing those users who no longer have an alarm system or have moved out of the county. This enables FARS to perform statistical analysis using more accurate numbers, which results in more meaningful reporting.

Overall, Montgomery County has experienced a 211% increase in total alarm registrants since 1994, which has mainly been driven by the 180% increase in the number of residential alarm users (an increase of more than 82,000 users) since 1995.

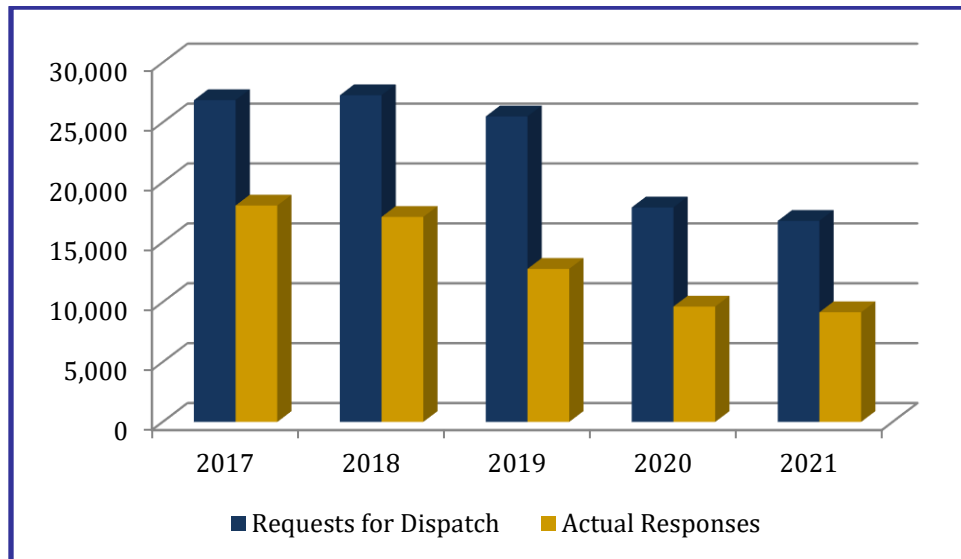


Alarm Responses

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, including accidental alarms caused by, for example, house/pet sitters, house cleaners, or contractors.
- Pets.
- Weak or depleted system batteries.
- Open, unlocked, loose-fitting, or defective door/window sensors.
- Drafts from air conditioners/heaters or open windows that result in the movement of plants, curtains, or other loose objects.

The graph below shows the number of requests for dispatch versus actual responses. *Requests for dispatch* include the number of times that an alarm monitoring company calls 9-1-1. *Actual response totals* include the number of times that an officer arrives at a location and investigates the cause of the alarm. Alarm companies are required to cancel a police response if they determine that the alarm activation is false or that a response is not needed. **In 2021, alarm companies cancelled 3,462 requests for dispatch, constituting about 21% of the total number of requests for dispatch.** These cancellations freed up officers to spend more time on other more critical law enforcement activities and community policing initiatives.



Historically, the number of dispatch requests has been declining: the numbers have dropped about 62% over the last 27 years and about 38% over the last five years. In 2021, the number of dispatch requests decreased by about 6.3%, from 17,912 in 2020 to 16,788. The number of actual responses to alarm calls decreased by 475, which was a reduction of about 5% in 2021 compared with 2020. This decrease in responses between 2020 and 2021 was only modest because Montgomery County's COVID-19 restrictions remained in place during most

of 2021. The percentage of dispatch requests that resulted in a response was the same in 2021 (55%) as in 2020. The number of dispatch requests that resulted in a response stayed the same in 2021, even though the number of burglar alarm related calls decreased by about 5% compared with 2020.

False Alarm Rates

The false alarm rate is the most common measure of false alarm reduction as it represents 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*	1.44
2004	63,748	19,190	.30
2009	71,011	17,533	.25
2014	81,513	16,709	.20
2021	90,186	9162	.10

* The number of verified calls for 1994 is unknown. The total number of alarm dispatches was 42,821.

This table demonstrates that, although the total number of registered users has increased over the last 27 years, the false alarm dispatch rate has continued to drop. In 2021, this dispatch rate was down to 0.10 compared with 0.11 in 2020, which equates roughly to a 9% decrease. As a result, Montgomery County’s false alarm dispatch rates remain among the lowest in the country.

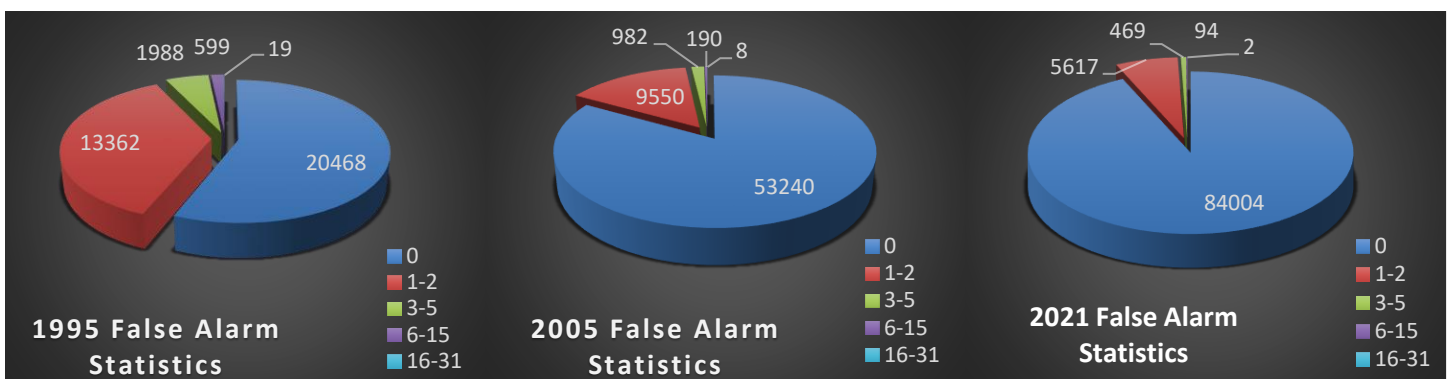
Another measure of program effectiveness is the total number of registered alarm users who had NO false alarms. In 2021, a total of 84,004 alarm users had ZERO false alarms, meaning that 93% of all alarm users in Montgomery County successfully managed their alarm systems. This contrasts with 1995, the year after the county alarm code was implemented, when only 56.2% of the registered alarm users had no false alarms. This is a significant improvement, especially given the increase in the total number of users over those 26 years. The table below compares false alarm numbers for 1995, 2005, and 2021.

2021 <i>Total Users = 90,186</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	84,004	0	53,240	0	20,468
1-2	5,617	1-2	9,550	1-2	13,362
3-5	469	3-5	982	3-5	1,988
6-15	94	6-15	190	6-15	599
16-31	2	16-31	8	16-31	19

A closer examination reveals that false alarms among commercial alarm users have decreased by 234% since 1995, while among residential users, they have decreased by about 320%. In 1995, nearly 22.4% of all commercial alarm users had six or more false alarms. In 2021, 96 alarm users had six or more false alarms, of whom 87 or about 91% were commercial alarm users. However, this represented only 0.85% of all commercial alarm users in 2021 compared with 1995. On the residential side, there were 9 alarm users or 9% who had six or more false alarms. This represented 0.01% of all residential users in 2021 compared with 1995.

Number of Users with No False Alarms				
	1995	2005	2021	% Change
Commercial	2,352	5,730	7,876	234
Residential	18,116	47,510	76,128	320

The charts below show in graphic form that more alarm users (as a percentage of total alarm users in 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 in the context of the steady increase in the number of alarm users each year. This is a positive measure of the program’s impact on the county’s resources.



Cost Avoidance

As a direct result of FARS’ strict enforcement of the alarm law, there were 7,481 alarm calls to which police officers were not required to respond in 2021. Using the averages established by the Police Department, this equates to approximately **3,990 hours of police officer time or an estimated \$845,353 in cost avoidance**. The monetary cost avoidance figure is based on an average cost² of \$113 for an average alarm response of 16 minutes by two officers. Cost avoidance was down by about 8% in 2021 compared with 2020. This was due, in part, to the ECC receiving about 6.3% fewer burglar alarm calls in 2021. Additionally, more county residents were working largely from home, which reduced the need to have alarm systems

² This includes fringe benefits, operating expenses, and vehicles but does not include costs related to policing, such as training or the cost of dispatching.

in their homes. Even with the number of calls to the ECC being down and more alarm users closing their accounts, we were still able to amass a significant cost avoidance for the county.

REVENUE

The charts on the next two pages reflect the revenue collected by 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 2021. The second chart is a calendar year comparison of the last three years.

CALENDAR YEAR 2021	ACTUAL REVENUES
<u>Alarm User Registration Fees</u>	
Residential	\$122,280
Commercial	<u>12,130</u>
TOTAL	\$134,410
<u>Alarm User Registration Renewal Fees</u>	
Residential	\$241,624
County Attorney Collections	<u>1,370</u>
Total Residential	\$242,994
Commercial	\$ 28,960
County Attorney Collections	<u>600</u>
Total Commercial	\$ 29,560
TOTAL	\$272,554
<u>False Alarm Response Fees</u>	
Residential	\$ 51,540
County Attorney Collections	<u>11,191</u>
Total Residential	\$ 62,731
Commercial	\$233,723
County Attorney Collections	<u>49,580</u>
Total Commercial	\$283,303
TOTAL	\$346,034
<u>Alarm Business Fees</u>	
License	\$ 66,600
Civil Citations	289,000
Administrative Fees	<u>0</u>
TOTAL	\$355,600
<u>Appeal Filing Fees</u>	
Residential	\$ 0
Commercial	<u>0</u>
TOTAL	\$ 0
GRAND TOTAL	\$1,108,598

CALENDAR YEAR COMPARISON	ACTUAL REVENUES		
	2019	2020	2021
<u>Alarm User Registration Fees</u>			
Residential	\$135,210	\$139,150	\$122,280
Commercial	<u>14,100</u>	<u>12,990</u>	<u>12,130</u>
TOTAL	\$149,310	\$152,140	\$134,410
<u>Alarm User Registration Renewal Fees</u>			
Residential	\$200,200	\$165,859	\$241,624
County Attorney Collections	<u>1,975</u>	<u>1,340</u>	<u>1,370</u>
Total Residential	\$202,175	\$167,199	\$242,994
Commercial	\$ 30,788	\$ 24,285	\$ 28,960
County Attorney Collections	<u>545</u>	<u>350</u>	<u>600</u>
Total Commercial	\$ 31,333	\$ 24,635	\$ 29,560
TOTAL	\$233,508	\$191,834	\$272,554
<u>False Alarm Response Fees</u>			
Residential	\$ 65,135	\$ 28,397	\$ 51,540
County Attorney Collections	<u>19,302</u>	<u>14,333</u>	<u>11,191</u>
Total Residential	\$ 84,437	\$ 42,730	\$ 62,731
Commercial	\$245,430	\$268,158	\$233,723
County Attorney Collections	<u>24,382</u>	<u>18,225</u>	<u>49,504</u>
Total Commercial	\$269,812	\$286,383	\$283,303
TOTAL	\$354,249	\$329,113	\$346,034
<u>Alarm Business Fees</u>			
License	\$ 74,425	\$ 73,400	\$ 66,600
Civil Citations	424,250	279,000	289,000
Administrative Fees	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
TOTAL	\$498,675	\$352,400	\$355,600
<u>Appeal Filing Fees</u>			
Residential	\$ 45	\$ 0	\$ 0
Commercial	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
TOTAL	\$ 45	\$ 0	\$ 0
GRAND TOTAL	\$1,235,787	\$1,025,487	\$1,108,598

The collection of false alarm response fees is always a priority for FARS. Strict enforcement of this aspect of the alarm law clearly shows that Montgomery County is serious about the issue of false alarms. If alarm users fail to remit the required false alarm response fees, FARS can put their account into a denied response status. Denied response means that the police will not respond to an alarmed location, unless the alarm signal is panic or duress, until the financial obligation associated with the alarmed location is satisfied. Also, FARS refers these accounts to the Office of the County Attorney for collection action when appropriate.

FARS' collection rate was down slightly to 87.4% in 2021 compared with 91% in 2020. FARS' ability to collect on unpaid bills is greatly enhanced by the combination of the Office of the County Attorney being the FARS Collector and the existence of the legal sanction to suspend police response for failure to remit false alarm response fees as specified in Chapter 3A, Alarms.

The following chart reflects the amount billed for false alarm response fees in 2021 and the amounts collected for both residential and commercial alarm users. Please note that the "collected" amount in the following chart reflects payments made against bills for false alarms that occurred in calendar year 2021. However, collections for false alarms in 2021 are extending into calendar year 2022, and therefore the chart reflects different totals than the Calendar Year Revenue Chart. Furthermore, this chart does not include any monies received in 2021 from accounts that owed for previous years.

Calendar Year 2021 Billed versus Collected False Alarm Response Fees				
False Alarm Response Fees	Billed	Collected*	Past Due (>30 & <51 days overdue)	Delinquent (>50 days overdue)
Commercial	\$ 218,650	\$ 195,920	\$ 4,850	\$ 16,700
Residential	\$ 62,075	\$ 49,565	\$ 1,300	\$ 11,250
Total	\$ 280,725	\$ 245,485	\$ 6,150	\$ 27,950

**Represents fees collected in 2021 and 2022 against false alarm response fees billed in 2021.*

FARS is in the process of attempting to collect the past due amounts listed above. FARS has sent the overdue notices to all affected alarm users. The \$27,950 listed above either has or will be referred to the Office of the County Attorney for collection in early 2022, and the accounts of the affected alarm users will be put in a non-response status until payment is received.

CONCLUSION

Although COVID-19 continued to impact the False Alarm Reduction Program, overall, the 2021 Annual Report on the status of the program remains positive. In 2021, revenue was up by about 8.1% compared with 2020. This increase was directly associated with the county lifting some COVID-19 restrictions throughout 2021, allowing businesses to get back to somewhat normal operations. While the volume of calls to the Emergency Communications Center (ECC) was down by 2.3% in 2021 compared with 2020, alarm companies were doing better at managing the alarm systems that they installed or monitored, and homeowners were being increasingly more responsible with their alarm systems.

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 1,150 requests for dispatch that were denied as a result of the violation status of the alarm user or alarm

business in 2021. This represents about 7% of all requests for dispatch in 2021, which was the same as in 2020.

There must be a continued effort to provide education and early intervention to alarm users who are experiencing false alarms so that these unnecessary alarm calls do not reach unacceptable thresholds and waste valuable resources. In 2021, FARS continued its enforcement efforts in the major offender project aimed at educating alarm users, who experience excessive false alarms, about their alarm systems and about the negative impact that false alarms have on police resources. There were fewer alarm users with 16 to 31 false alarms in 2021 than in 2020, with only two commercial alarm users being in this range. In 2022, FARS staff will continue to ramp up efforts to intervene and educate alarm users who experience excessive false alarms to ensure that we continue to reduce the number of alarm users in this range.

In 2021, FARS continued its initiative of notifying alarm dealers and monitoring companies of any discrepancies in the information that they relayed to the 9-1-1 center. By providing them with this erroneous information early, the workload on FARS, ECC, and the alarm industry was reduced, thereby increasing compliance and the accuracy of information going forward. FARS has received praise from alarm dealers and monitoring companies alike as this effort helps to reduce the number of civil citations that they receive as a result of the discrepancies.

Alarm user education is vital to the success of any false alarm reduction program. Educating alarm users about false alarms, their impact on police resources, the responsible management of alarms systems, and how to reduce the false alarm epidemic is essential to our mission. One of the many ways in which we educate our alarm user base is by sending out a bi-weekly false alarm bulletin on all police social media webpages. Unfortunately, the bi-weekly upload was suspended temporarily as some individuals were using this platform to make derogatory statements about the police and its employees, which distracted from the message that we were trying to convey. The information contained in these bulletins ranges from tips and tricks for reducing false alarms to what to do in the event of unexpected inclement weather. It is imperative that we resume our efforts to educate residents and businesses in the county. FARS has an abundance of information to release and plans to continue the initiative indefinitely.

In 2021, FARS employees maintained their roles within the False Alarm Reduction Association (FARA). Alberto Hook continued as the President of FARA International, and Maureen Tonczykyn was re-elected as President of the East Chapter of FARA. By holding these two positions in FARA, Montgomery County has a direct impact on the burglar alarm industry through participation in industry association meetings and direct contact with the alarm industry. Our goal is to raise awareness of the false alarm issue and collaborate with all stakeholders to find ways of reducing false alarms in Montgomery County and across the nation.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way in which many jurisdictions conducted business, and Montgomery County was no exception. In 2021, the restrictions enacted to combat the

pandemic were lifted and reinstated depending on the number of infections in the county. This presented FARS with challenges, most importantly, how to effectively provide the residents of Montgomery County with the service that they were accustomed to receiving. Regardless of where the county was with respect to the restrictions, FARS never faltered in providing the residents and businesses of the county with optimal service. Advances in technology afforded FARS staff the ability to perform their duties from remote locations and still meet the section's mission of reducing false alarms.

There was a major win for FARS in 2021 that marked the beginning of a new era for alarm users and alarm companies alike. FARS management envisioned a process where both alarm users and alarm companies could register their locations or customers via a web portal. For over two and a half years, FARS staff worked with the false alarm reduction software vendor to build this portal. After many trials and tribulations, on December 6, 2021, that vision became a reality. The new registration web portal makes it easy for either the alarm user or the alarm company to register any location that has an alarm system. Since the release of the web portal, we have seen a drastic increase in alarm user registration from alarm companies who previously had been struggling to get their customers registered with the county. We have received over 500 new registrations within about five weeks, and the number increases daily. We are hopeful that the web portal will become the primary method for registering alarm users going forward.

Looking ahead to 2022, FARS will continue its efforts to pioneer new strategies to reduce the wasted allocation of police resources by: 1) increasing engagement with department stakeholders, including the ECC and the Patrol Services Bureau and 2) enhancing engagement with alarm users and alarm companies through outreach activities. This will include maintaining an open discussion with alarm companies and alarm monitoring companies about the county's alarm law, with a view to educating them on how to operate in Montgomery County and how to navigate issues that they face daily. FARS will leverage the FARA platform to involve the alarm industry in conversations regarding their impact on police jurisdictions and how they can assist in reducing the strain on police resources associated with false alarms. FARS management was informed that technology has been created that will help alarm companies to determine whether an alarm signal that they receive from an alarm system is false or valid. FARS will work with the alarm companies to understand this technology and identify how it can best be used to assist police jurisdictions going forward.