

MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF POLICE



FALSE ALARM REDUCTION PROGRAM 2022 ANNUAL REPORT

MARCH 2023

OVERVIEW

The False Alarm Reduction Section (FARS) of the Montgomery County Police Department 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 2022, there were a total of **7,566 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 a 1.13% increase compared with 2021, it should be noted that COVID19 restrictions were lifted in 2022, thereby increasing the number of homeowners returning to work and businesses returning to normal operations. Additionally, the number of calls to the Emergency Communications Center (ECC) were up by 3.06% compared with 2021. In 2021, the ECC received 16,788 burglar alarm-related calls compared with 17,310 in 2022. This represents an increase of 522 calls. The time saved by Montgomery County Police by not responding to these alarm calls equates to **4,035 work hours**.¹

There was a slight decrease in new alarm users in 2022 compared with 2021. There were **4,642** new alarm users in 2022, which was a **4.84%** decrease compared to 2021. In the more than 28 years since the program was initiated, the section has consistently maintained the number of alarm users who experience zero false alarms. **In 2022, over 82,000 alarm users, about 93%, had zero false alarms.**

FARS continues its success in reducing false alarms and in maintaining the number of alarm users with zero false alarms – both positive signs. The *total* number of registered alarm users continues to rise, and, despite the increase in registered users in 2022, police officers responded to *fewer* alarm calls in 2022 than in 1994 when the enforcement of the amended burglar alarm law first went into effect. These statistics, coupled with a 197% 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.

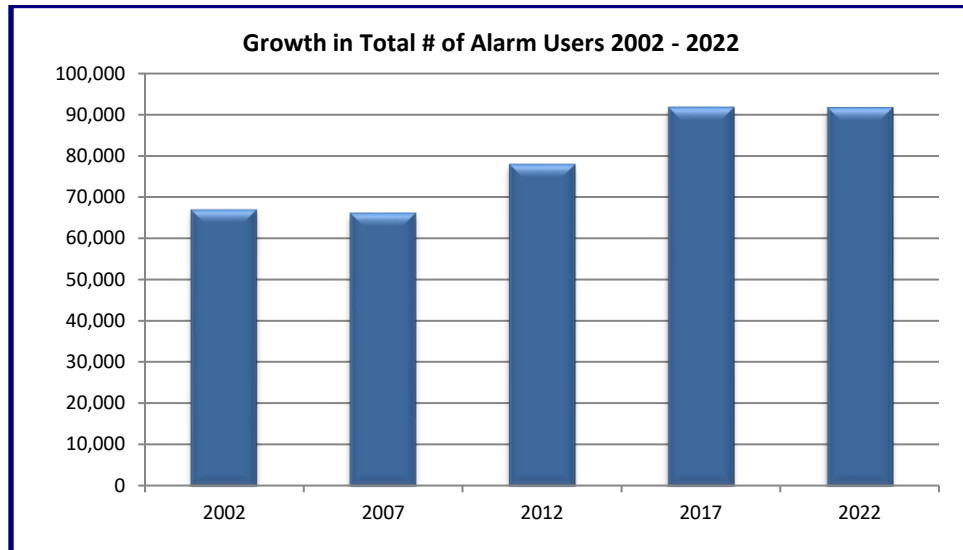
2022 FALSE ALARM REDUCTION

Alarm Users

Montgomery County is the most populous jurisdiction in the state of Maryland, consisting of nearly 1.1 million residents. In 2022, FARS received a total of 4,642 new alarm user registrations (both residential and commercial). This represents a slight decrease of 4.84% in the total number of new registered alarm users between 2021 and 2022. However, the

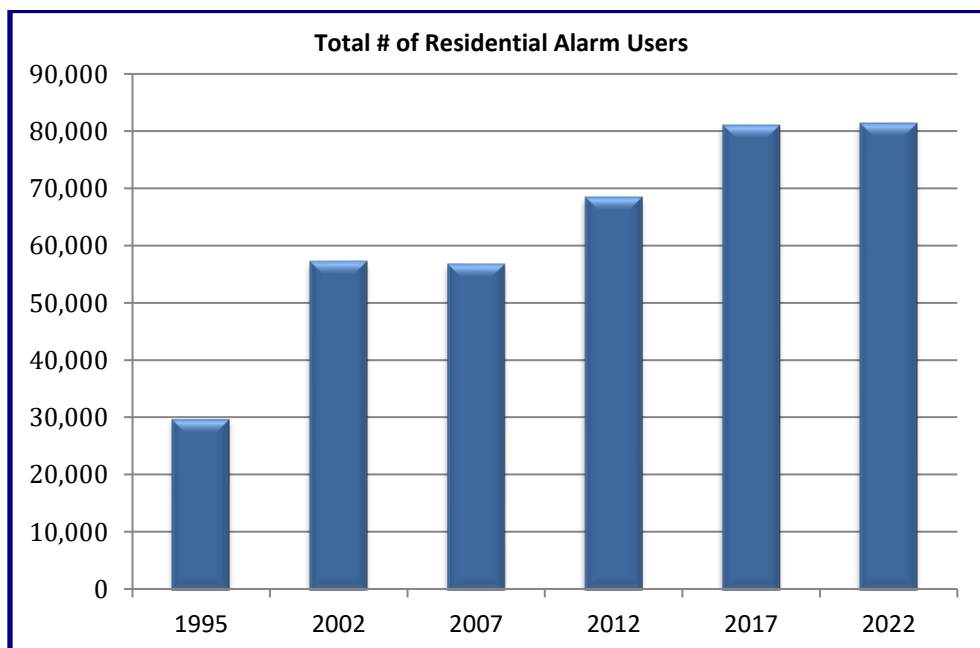
¹ This figure is based on an average time of 16 minutes each for two officers per alarm call.

number of alarm users remained above 91,000, of whom 81,093 were residential users and 10,228 were commercial users.



The registration renewal process for alarm users enables FARS to keep its 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 198% increase in total alarm registrants since 1994, which has mainly been driven by the 176% increase in the number of residential alarm users (an increase of more than 62,000 users) since 1995.

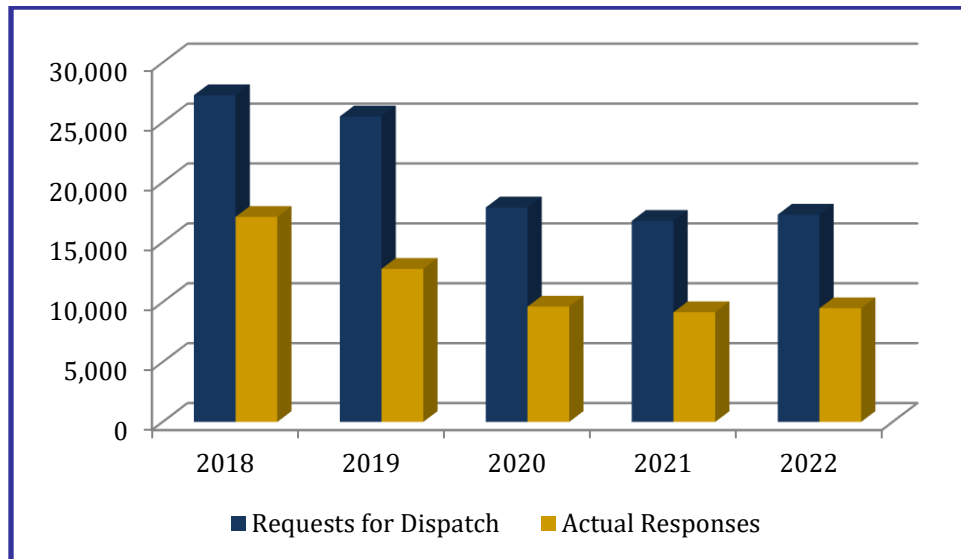


Alarm Responses

A false alarm is the activation of an alarm system 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 to access the system, such as house/pet sitters, house cleaners, or contractors, resulting in accidental alarms.
- 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 over the past five years. *Requests for dispatch* consist of the number of times that an alarm monitoring company calls 9-1-1. *Actual response totals* consist of 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 2022, alarm companies cancelled 3,212 requests for dispatch, constituting about 19% of the total number of requests for dispatch.** These cancellations enabled 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. They have dropped by 61% over the last 28 years and by 36% over the last five years. In 2022, the number of dispatch requests increased by 3%, from 16,788 in 2021 to 17,310. The number of actual responses to alarm calls increased by 331, which was an increase of 3.6% in 2022 compared to 2021. This increase in responses between 2021 and 2022 was only modest because Montgomery County's COVID-19 restrictions were removed during most of 2022. The percentage of

dispatch requests that resulted in a response was the same in 2022 (55%) as in 2021. The number of dispatch requests that resulted in a response stayed the same in 2022, even though the number of burglar alarm-related calls increased by about 3% compared with 2021.

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	0.30
2009	71,011	17,533	0.25
2014	81,513	16,709	0.20
2022	89,080	9499	0.11

* 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 28 years, the false alarm dispatch rate has continued to drop. In 2022, there was no change in the dispatch rate compared with 2021. Even with no change between 2021 and 2022, Montgomery County’s false alarm dispatch rates remain among the lowest in the country.

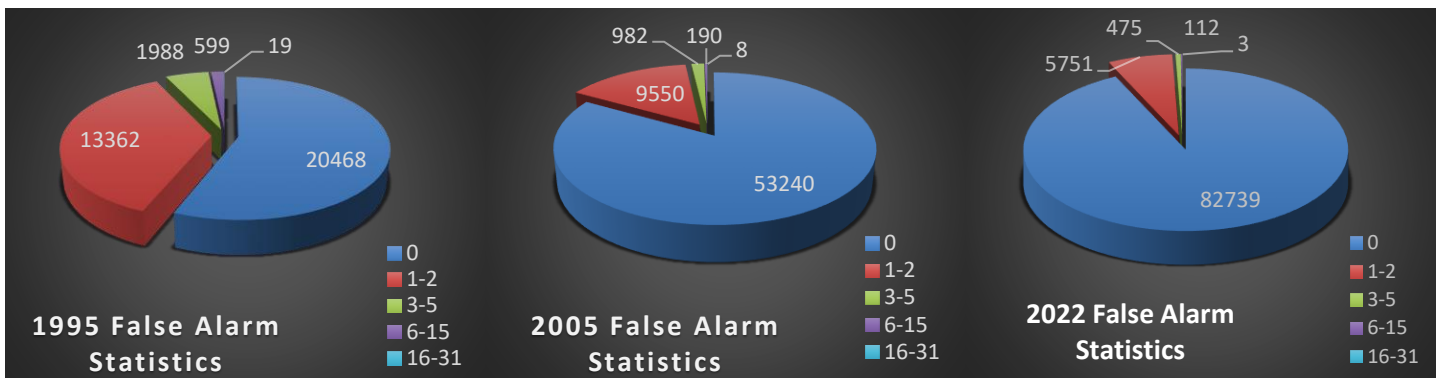
Another measure of program effectiveness is the total number of registered alarm users who had NO false alarms. In 2022, a total of 82,739 alarm users had ZERO false alarms, meaning that 93% of all alarm users in Montgomery County successfully managed their alarm systems. This contrasts with 1995, the year after the county alarm code was implemented, when only 56.2% of registered alarm users had no false alarms. This is a significant improvement, especially given the increase in the total number of users over those 28 years. The table below compares false alarm numbers for 1995, 2005, and 2022.

1995 <i>Total Users = 36,436</i>		2005 <i>Total Users = 63,970</i>		2022 <i>Total Users = 89,080</i>	
False Alarms	Alarm Users	False Alarms	Alarm Users	False Alarms	Alarm Users
0	20,468	0	53,240	0	82,739
1-2	13,362	1-2	9,550	1-2	5,751
3-5	1,988	3-5	982	3-5	475
6-15	599	6-15	190	6-15	112
16-31	19	16-31	8	16-31	3

A closer examination reveals that false alarms among commercial alarm users have decreased by 230% since 1995, while among residential users, they have decreased by about 312%. In 1995, nearly 22.4% of all commercial alarm users had six or more false alarms. In 2022, 115 alarm users had six or more false alarms, of whom 108 (or about 94%) were commercial alarm users. However, this represented only 1.06% of all commercial alarm users in 2022 compared with 1995 where it was about 5%. On the residential side, there were 7 alarm users or 7% who had six or more false alarms in 2022. This represented 0.01% of all residential users in 2022 compared with 1995.

Number of Users with No False Alarms				
	1995	2005	2022	% Change
Commercial	2,352	5,730	7,766	230
Residential	18,116	47,510	74,670	312

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 in terms of saving the county’s resources.



Cost Avoidance

As a direct result of FARS’ strict enforcement of the alarm law, there were 7,566 alarm calls to which police officers were not required to respond in 2022. Using the averages established by the police department, this equates to approximately **4,035 hours of police officer time or an estimated \$854,958 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 up by about 1.14% in 2022 compared with 2021. This was due, in part, to the ECC receiving about 3.06% more burglar alarm calls in 2022. Additionally, more county residents were returning to their work locations, which is likely to have increased the

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.

use of the alarm systems in their homes. While there was a slight decrease in the number of alarm users registering in 2022 and more alarm users closing their accounts, we were still able to amass 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 2022. The second chart is a calendar year comparison of the last three years.

CALENDAR YEAR 2022	ACTUAL REVENUES
<u>Alarm User Registration Fees</u>	
Residential	\$116,450
Commercial	<u>14,500</u>
TOTAL	\$130,950
<u>Alarm User Registration Renewal Fees</u>	
Residential	\$232,348
County Attorney Collections	<u>1,875</u>
Total Residential	\$234,223
Commercial	\$ 29,490
County Attorney Collections	<u>590</u>
Total Commercial	\$ 30,080
TOTAL	\$264,303
<u>False Alarm Response Fees</u>	
Residential	\$ 51,562
County Attorney Collections	<u>14,954</u>
Total Residential	\$ 66,516
Commercial	\$225,159
County Attorney Collections	<u>27,584</u>
Total Commercial	\$252,743
TOTAL	\$319,259
<u>Alarm Business Fees</u>	
License	\$ 58,800
Civil Citations	285,000
Administrative Fees	<u>0</u>
TOTAL	\$343,800
<u>Appeal Filing Fees</u>	
Residential	\$ 0
Commercial	<u>0</u>
TOTAL	\$ 0
GRAND TOTAL	\$1,058,312

CALENDAR YEAR COMPARISON	ACTUAL REVENUES		
	2020	2021	2022
<u>Alarm User Registration Fees</u>			
Residential	\$139,150	\$122,280	\$116,450
Commercial	<u>12,990</u>	<u>12,130</u>	<u>14,500</u>
TOTAL	\$152,140	\$134,410	\$130,950
<u>Alarm User Registration Renewal Fees</u>			
Residential	\$165,859	\$241,624	\$232,348
County Attorney Collections	<u>1,340</u>	<u>1,370</u>	<u>1,875</u>
Total Residential	\$167,199	\$242,994	\$234,223
Commercial	\$ 24,285	\$ 28,960	\$ 29,490
County Attorney Collections	<u>350</u>	<u>600</u>	<u>590</u>
Total Commercial	\$ 24,635	\$ 29,560	\$ 30,080
TOTAL	\$191,834	\$272,554	\$264,303
<u>False Alarm Response Fees</u>			
Residential	\$ 28,397	\$ 51,540	\$ 51,562
County Attorney Collections	<u>14,333</u>	<u>11,191</u>	<u>14,954</u>
Total Residential	\$ 42,730	\$ 62,731	\$ 66,516
Commercial	\$268,158	\$233,723	\$225,159
County Attorney Collections	<u>18,225</u>	<u>49,504</u>	<u>27,584</u>
Total Commercial	\$286,383	\$283,303	\$252,743
TOTAL	\$329,113	\$346,034	\$319,259
<u>Alarm Business Fees</u>			
License	\$ 73,400	\$ 66,600	\$ 58,800
Civil Citations	279,000	289,000	285,000
Administrative Fees	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
TOTAL	\$352,400	\$355,600	\$343,800
<u>Appeal Filing Fees</u>			
Residential	\$ 0	\$ 0	\$ 0
Commercial	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
TOTAL	\$ 0	\$ 0	\$ 0
GRAND TOTAL	\$1,025,487	\$1,108,598	\$1,058,312

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. This 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 paid. Also, FARS refers these accounts to the Office of the County Attorney for collection action, when appropriate.

FARS' collection rate was down slightly to 85% in 2022 compared with 87.4% in 2021. 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 2022 and the amounts collected from 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 2022. However, collections for false alarms in 2022 are extending into calendar year 2023, and therefore the chart reflects different totals than the Calendar Year Revenue Chart. Furthermore, this chart does not include any monies received in 2022 from accounts that owed for previous years.

Calendar Year 2022 Billed versus Collected False Alarm Response Fees				
False Alarm Response Fees	Billed	Collected*	Past Due (>30 & <51 days overdue)	Delinquent (>50 days overdue)
Commercial	\$ 220,500	\$ 192,160	\$ 8,650	\$ 18,945
Residential	\$ 62,550	\$ 47,750	\$ 2,275	\$ 12,200
Total	\$ 283,050	\$ 239,910	\$ 10,925	\$ 31,145

**Represents fees collected in 2022 and 2023 against false alarm response fees billed in 2022.*

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 \$31,145 listed above either has or will be referred to the Office of the County Attorney for collection in early 2023, and the accounts of the affected alarm users will be put into denied response status until payment is received.

CONCLUSION

In 2022, all COVID-19 related restrictions were lifted in the county, thereby allowing businesses to return to normal operations. Overall, the 2022 Annual Report on the status of the program remains positive. In 2022, revenue was down by about 4.5% compared with 2021. This decrease was directly associated with revenue being down in all categories. Although the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, there were fewer registrations and renewals than in 2021. While the volume of calls to the ECC was up slightly (by 3.06%) in 2022 compared with 2021, alarm companies were doing better at managing the alarm systems that they installed or monitored, and homeowners were being 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 denied response provisions of the alarm law resulted in 1,115 requests for dispatch that were denied as a result of violations of these requirements by the alarm user or alarm business in 2022. This constituted about 6.4% of all requests for dispatch in 2022, which was slightly lower than 2021.

There must be a continued effort to provide education and early interventions to alarm users who are experiencing false alarms so that these unnecessary alarm calls do not reach unacceptable thresholds and waste valuable resources. In 2022, FARS continued its major offender project, which aims to educate alarm users who experience excessive false alarms about their alarm systems and about the negative impact that false alarms have on police resources. There was a slight increase in alarm users who had 16 to 31 false alarms in 2022 compared with 2021, with only three commercial alarm users being in this range. In 2023, FARS staff will continue to ramp up efforts to reduce the number of alarm users in this range.

In 2022, FARS continued to notify alarm dealers and monitoring companies of any discrepancies in the information that they relayed to the ECC. By informing them of this erroneous information early, the workload on FARS, the ECC, and the alarm industry was reduced, thereby increasing compliance and the accuracy of information going forward. FARS has received praise from both alarm dealers and monitoring companies as this effort has helped to reduce the number of civil citations that they receive because 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 alarm 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 has been by sending out a bi-weekly false alarm bulletin on all police social media webpages. The information contained in these bulletins has ranged from tips and tricks for reducing false alarms to what to do in the event of unexpected inclement weather. Unfortunately, we have had to suspend this bi-weekly notification, as there have been concerns over some individuals using this platform to make derogatory statements about the police and its employees, which distracted from the message that we were trying to convey. It is imperative for us to resume our efforts to educate residents and businesses in the county. FARS has an abundance of information to release and plans to continue the education initiative indefinitely.

In 2022, 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 by participating in association meetings and coordinating with other members. 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. Regardless of where the county was with respect

to the restrictions, FARS never stopped providing the residents and businesses of the county with optimal service. Advances in technology afforded FARS staff the ability to perform their duties without restriction and still meet the section's mission of reducing false alarms. In 2022, the restrictions enacted to combat the pandemic were lifted, thereby returning operations to their pre-pandemic status.

In 2022, FARS re-established another process to educate alarm users and raise awareness of the false alarm dilemma. FARS instituted site visits to commercial locations that had six or more false alarms in a calendar year. This effort not only draws the alarm user's attention to the issues associated with false alarms but helps to identify any problems that they may not be aware of at their location. In addition to working with the alarm user, FARS informs the alarm company of the issues at the location so they can assist in the process of reducing the number of false alarms. In 2023, FARS will be adding site visits to residential alarm users, and our goal is to have the relevant alarm companies join FARS on these site visits to help to resolve any issues as quickly as possible. This has been tried in other jurisdictions, where involving the alarm company in the site visit has prompted the company to take swift actions to replace faulty equipment or retrain alarm users on the use of their alarm system.

Looking ahead to 2023, 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 about their impact on police jurisdictions and about how they can help to reduce the strain on police resources associated with false alarms. FARS management continues to monitor technological advances and have conversations with the alarm industry about new and improved technology that will help to reduce false alarms. As technology continues to advance, FARS will work with the alarm companies to identify how it can best be used to assist police jurisdictions going forward.