

# **MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF POLICE**

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**FALSE ALARM REDUCTION PROGRAM  
2023 ANNUAL REPORT**

**MARCH 2024**

## 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 2023, there were a total of **6,861 requests** for dispatch to which police did not respond, thereby reducing the negative impact of false alarms on the quality of service and safety.<sup>1</sup> Although this represents a 9.3% decrease compared with 2022, it should be noted that there were less calls for service made in 2023 from alarm monitoring companies, thereby decreasing the number of cancellations and calls to which we would deny response. The number of calls to the Emergency Communications Center (ECC) were down by 7.3% compared with 2022. In 2022, the ECC received 17,310 burglar alarm-related calls compared with 16,054 in 2023. This represents a decrease of 1256 calls. The time saved by Montgomery County Police by not responding to these alarm calls equates to **3,659 work hours**.<sup>2</sup>

The number of new alarm users decreased in 2023 compared with 2022. There were **4,333** new alarm users in 2023, which was a **6.7%** decrease compared to 2022. In the more than 29 years since the program was initiated, the section has consistently maintained the number of alarm users who experience zero false alarms. **In 2023, over 81,000 alarm users, about 92%, 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 2023, police officers responded to *fewer* alarm calls in 2023 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.

## 2023 FALSE ALARM REDUCTION

### Alarm Users

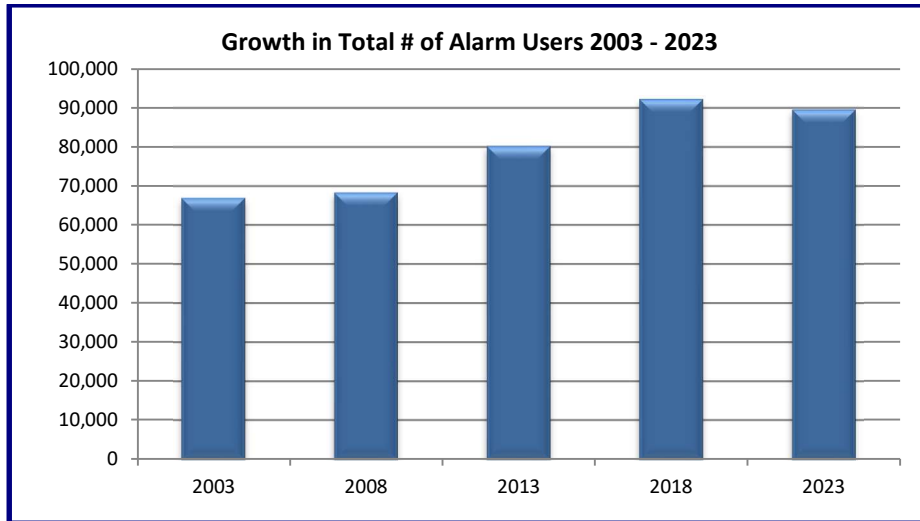
Montgomery County is the most populous jurisdiction in the state of Maryland, consisting of nearly 1.1 million residents. In 2023, FARS received a total of 4,333 new alarm user

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 3A, Alarms, defines specific requirements for requesting dispatch to alarm calls. Failing to meet the requirements will result in no response by police unless there is a panic or duress signal. Examples include the alarm user's system is not registered, the alarm company did not provide required alarm user registration number or their business license number.

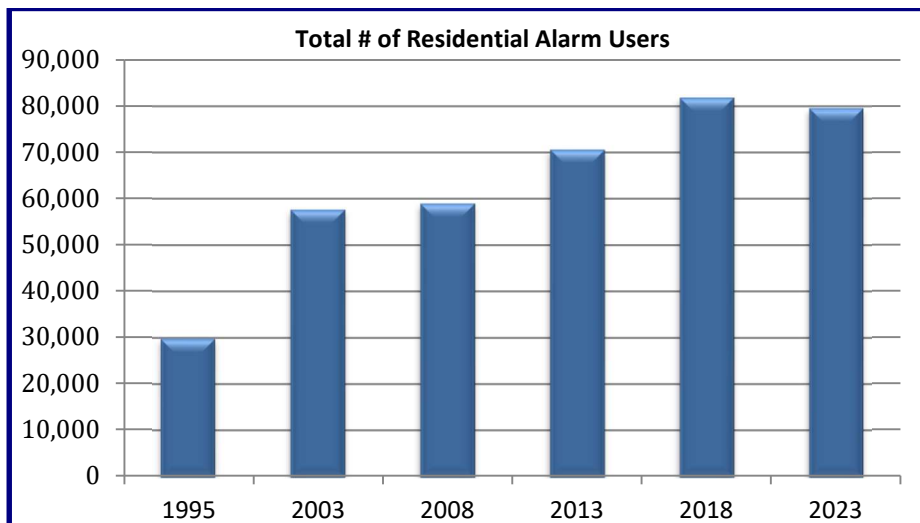
<sup>2</sup> This figure is based on an average time of 16 minutes each for two officers per alarm call.

registrations (both residential and commercial). This represents a decrease of 6.7% in the total number of new registered alarm users between 2022 and 2023. However, the number of alarm users remained above 89,000, of whom 79,120 were residential users and 9,997 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 199% increase in total alarm registrants since 1994, which has mainly been driven by the 169% increase in the number of residential alarm users (an increase of more than 50,000 users) since 1995.

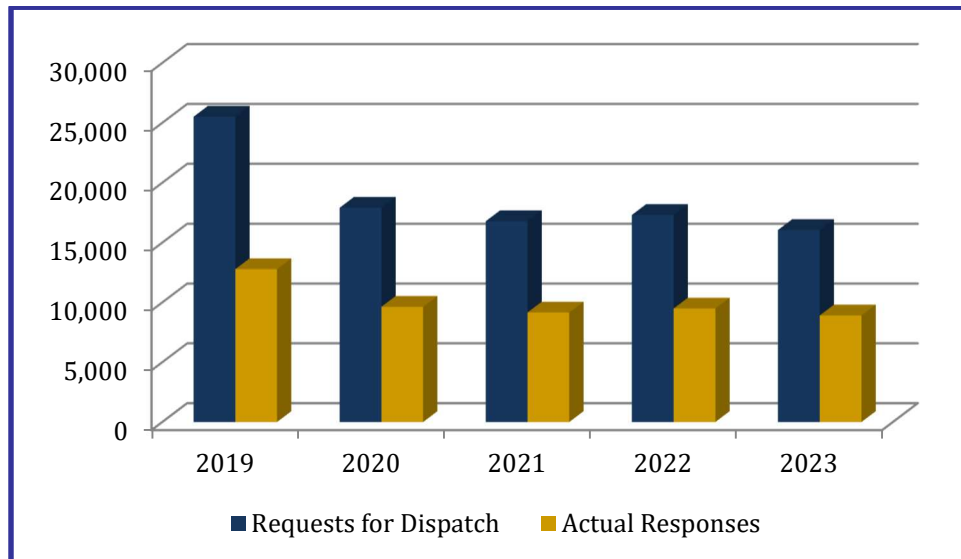


## Alarm Responses

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 2023, alarm companies cancelled 2,797 requests for dispatch, constituting about 17% 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 63% over the last 29 years and by 41% over the last five years. In 2023, the number of dispatch requests decreased by 7.3%, from 17,310 in 2022 to 16,054 in 2023. The number of actual responses to alarm calls decreased by 581, which was a decrease of 6.1% in 2023 compared to 2022. It is reasonable to deduce that the variation in responses to burglar alarm calls may be connected to the decrease in calls received by the ECC in 2023. The percentage of dispatch

requests that resulted in a response was the same in 2023 (55%) as in 2022. Both the number of dispatch requests that resulted in a response and the number of burglar alarm-related calls decreased in 2023.

### 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
2023	87,827	8785	0.10

\* 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 29 years, the false alarm dispatch rate has continued to drop. In 2023, there was a slight change in the dispatch rate compared with 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 2023, a total of 81,793 alarm users had ZERO false alarms, meaning that 92% 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 29 years. The table below compares false alarm numbers for 1995, 2005, and 2023.

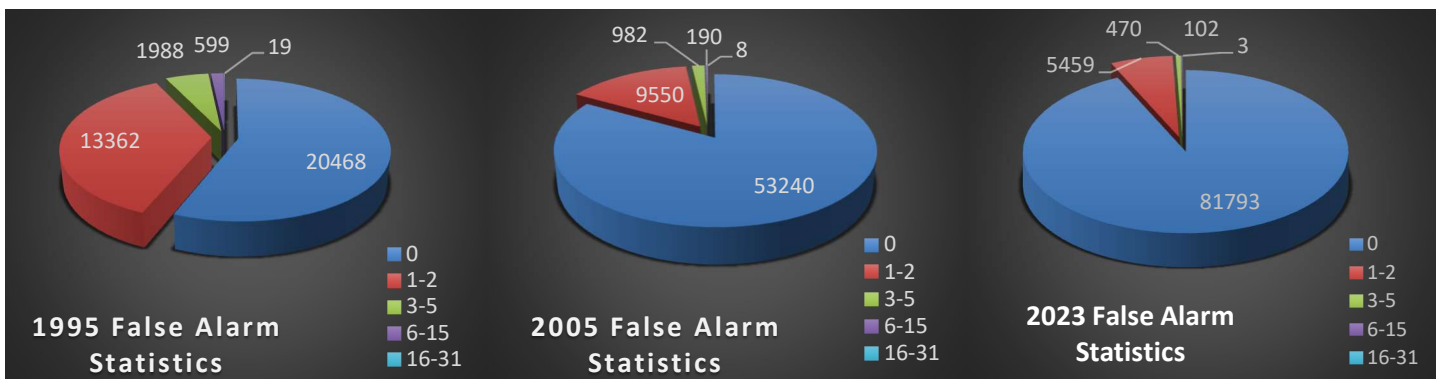
1995 <i>Total Users = 36,436</i>		2005 <i>Total Users = 63,970</i>		2023 <i>Total Users = 87,827</i>	
False Alarms	Alarm Users	False Alarms	Alarm Users	False Alarms	Alarm Users
0	20,468	0	53,240	0	81,793
1-2	13,362	1-2	9,550	1-2	5,459
3-5	1,988	3-5	982	3-5	470
6-15	599	6-15	190	6-15	102
16-31	19	16-31	8	16-31	3

A closer examination reveals that false alarms among commercial alarm users have decreased by 233% since 1995, while among residential users, they have decreased by about 307%. In 1995, nearly 22.4% of all commercial alarm users had six or more false alarms. In

2023, 105 alarm users had six or more false alarms, of whom 96 (or about 91.4%) were commercial alarm users. However, this represented only 1.21% of all commercial alarm users in 2023 compared with 1995 where it was about 5%. On the residential side, there were 9 alarm users or 8.6% who had six or more false alarms in 2023. This represented 0.01% of all residential users in 2023 compared with 1995.

Number of Users with No False Alarms				
	1995	2005	2023	% Change
<b>Commercial</b>	2,352	5,730	7,905	233
<b>Residential</b>	18,116	47,510	73,883	307

The charts below show in graphic form that more alarm users (as a percentage of total alarm users each 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 6,861 alarm calls that did not require police response in 2023. Using the averages established by the police department, this equates to approximately **3,659 hours of police officer time or an estimated \$939,957 in cost avoidance**. The monetary cost avoidance, calculated at an average cost<sup>3</sup> of \$137 for a 16-minute alarm response by two officers, decreased by about 9.3% in 2023 compared with 2022. This reduction was partially attributed to a 7.3% decrease in burglar alarm calls to the ECC. The COVID-19 pandemic was officially declared concluded in 2023. Despite businesses resuming normal operations and more alarm users returning to work, there was a noticeable decline in reported burglar alarm-related calls from alarm monitoring companies. This suggests that a considerable number of alarm users were not using their alarm systems as frequently. While there was a decrease in the number

<sup>3</sup> This includes fringe benefits, operating expenses, and vehicles but does not include costs related to policing, such as training or the cost of dispatching.

of alarm users registering in 2023 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 2023. The second chart is a calendar year comparison of the last three years.

CALENDAR YEAR 2023	ACTUAL REVENUES
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$110,400
Commercial	<u>12,240</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$122,640</b>
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Renewal Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$250,520
County Attorney Collections	<u>2,070</u>
Total Residential	<b>\$252,590</b>
Commercial	\$ 28,569
County Attorney Collections	<u>350</u>
Total Commercial	<b>\$ 28,919</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$281,509</b>
<b><u>False Alarm Response Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$ 54,312
County Attorney Collections	<u>15,550</u>
Total Residential	<b>\$ 69,862</b>
Commercial	\$191,763
County Attorney Collections	<u>15,380</u>
Total Commercial	<b>\$207,143</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$277,005</b>
<b><u>Alarm Business Fees</u></b>	
License	\$ 63,000
Civil Citations	199,000
Administrative Fees	<u>0</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$262,000</b>
<b><u>Appeal Filing Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$ 0
Commercial	<u>0</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ 0</b>
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>\$943,154</b>



CALENDAR YEAR COMPARISON	ACTUAL REVENUES		
	2021	2022	2023
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Fees</u></b>			
Residential	\$122,280	\$116,450	\$110,400
Commercial	<u>12,1300</u>	<u>14,500</u>	<u>12,240</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$134,410</b>	<b>\$130,950</b>	<b>\$122,640</b>
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Renewal Fees</u></b>			
Residential	\$241,624	\$232,348	\$250,520
County Attorney Collections	<u>1,370</u>	<u>1,875</u>	<u>2,070</u>
Total Residential	<b>\$242,994</b>	<b>\$234,223</b>	<b>\$252,590</b>
Commercial	\$ 28,960	\$ 29,490	\$ 28,569
County Attorney Collections	<u>600</u>	<u>590</u>	<u>3500</u>
Total Commercial	<b>\$ 29,560</b>	<b>\$ 30,080</b>	<b>\$ 28,919</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$272,554</b>	<b>\$264,303</b>	<b>\$281,509</b>
<b><u>False Alarm Response Fees</u></b>			
Residential	\$ 51,540	\$ 51,562	\$ 54,312
County Attorney Collections	<u>11,191</u>	<u>14,954</u>	<u>15,550</u>
Total Residential	<b>\$ 62,731</b>	<b>\$ 66,516</b>	<b>\$ 69,862</b>
Commercial	\$233,723	\$225,159	\$191,763
County Attorney Collections	<u>49,504</u>	<u>27,584</u>	<u>15,380</u>
Total Commercial	<b>\$283,303</b>	<b>\$252,743</b>	<b>\$207,143</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$346,034</b>	<b>\$319,259</b>	<b>\$277,005</b>
<b><u>Alarm Business Fees</u></b>			
License	\$ 66,600	\$ 58,800	\$ 63,000
Civil Citations	289,000	285,000	199,000
Administrative Fees	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$355,600</b>	<b>\$343,800</b>	<b>\$262,000</b>
<b><u>Appeal Filing Fees</u></b>			
Residential	\$ 0	\$ 0	\$ 0
Commercial	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ 0</b>	<b>\$ 0</b>	<b>\$ 0</b>
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,108,598</b>	<b>\$1,058,312</b>	<b>\$943,154</b>

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 a 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 to 83% in 2023 compared with 85% in 2022. 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 2023 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 2023. However, collections for false alarms in 2023 are extending into calendar year 2024, and therefore the chart reflects different totals than the Calendar Year Revenue Chart. Furthermore, this chart does not include any monies received in 2023 from accounts that owed for previous years.

<b>Calendar Year 2023 Billed versus 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	\$ 190,175	\$ 158,138	\$ 1,125	\$ 30,657
Residential	\$ 61,275	\$ 50,295	\$ 400	\$ 10,550
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 251,450</b>	<b>\$ 208,433</b>	<b>\$ 1,525</b>	<b>\$ 41,207</b>

*\*Represents fees collected in 2023 and 2024 against false alarm response fees billed in 2023.*

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 \$41,207 listed above either has or will be referred to the Office of the County Attorney for collection in early 2024, and the accounts of the affected alarm users will be put into denied response status until payment is received.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, the 2023 Annual Report on the status of the program remains positive. In 2023, revenue was down by about 11% compared with 2022. This decrease was directly associated with revenue being down in three of the five financial categories: Alarm User Registration Fees, False Alarm Response Fees, and Alarm Business Fees. Although the COVID-19 pandemic was concluded in 2023, there were fewer registrations and renewals than in 2022. Additionally, there were over 1,200 less burglar alarm calls received by the ECC. While the volume of calls to the ECC was down by 7.3% in 2023 compared with 2022, 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. Failure to provide this information will result in police not being dispatched to that location unless the alarm signal is panic or duress. The legally mandated denied response provisions

of the alarm law resulted in 503 requests for dispatch that were denied as a result of violations of these requirements by the alarm user or alarm business in 2023. This constituted about 3.1% of all requests for dispatch in 2023.

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. FARS' major offender project 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. Due to staffing shortages, for part of 2023, the major offender project was paused. Although the project was paused for part of 2023, FARS managed to contact enough alarm users in this category to have an impact. The number of alarm users who had 16 to 31 false alarms remained the same in 2023 compared with 2022, with only three commercial alarm users being in this range. In 2024, FARS staff will continue to ramp up efforts to reduce the number of alarm users in this range.

In 2023, 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. In 2023, FARS resumed our efforts to educate residents and businesses in the county through the bi-weekly social media postings. Additionally, FARS staff consistently contacted alarm users experiencing their third false in a calendar year to determine if intervention was needed or if the alarm user required additional education on the proper use of the alarm system. FARS has an abundance of information to release and plans to continue the education initiative indefinitely.

In 2023, FARS employees maintained their roles within the False Alarm Reduction Association (FARA). Alberto Hook continued as the President of FARA International, Autumn Meza continued her role on the Training and Symposium Committee, and Billy Davidson became a member of the Marketing and Membership Committee. 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.

In 2023, FARS strengthened its process to educate alarm users and raise awareness of the false alarm dilemma. FARS continued visiting 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 added 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. Residential site visits will continue to be a goal in 2024. 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 2024, 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, the Patrol Services Bureau, and training academy 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.

In 2024, 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. Do it yourself (DIY) and monitor it yourself (MIY) systems continue to grow in Montgomery County and across the nation. The data on their impact to police resources is scarce but we are focused on their potential impact to police resources responding to the burglar alarm calls associated to this type of system. The goal is to coordinate with other alarm law coordinators to gather data on this system's impact on resources and to determine if any action is needed to bring awareness if a problem exists. 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.

For more information on the alarm law and frequently asked questions, feel free to visit our website's Related Documents section at [fars.montgomerycountymd.gov](https://fars.montgomerycountymd.gov).