

# **MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF POLICE**

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**FALSE ALARM REDUCTION PROGRAM  
2015 ANNUAL REPORT**

**MARCH 2016**

## 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 **258 (1.54%)** more false alarms in 2015 than in 2014, but the number of new alarm users also increased by about 4,600 in 2015.

In 2015, there were a total of **10,096 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 **5,384 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 2015, about 74,300 alarm users, or 87.3%, had zero false alarms.**

Despite some continued staffing challenges in 2015, 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 significant increase in registered users in 2015, police officers responded to *fewer* alarm calls in 2015 compared to 1994, when enforcement of the amended burglar alarm law went into effect. These statistics, coupled with a 186% 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.

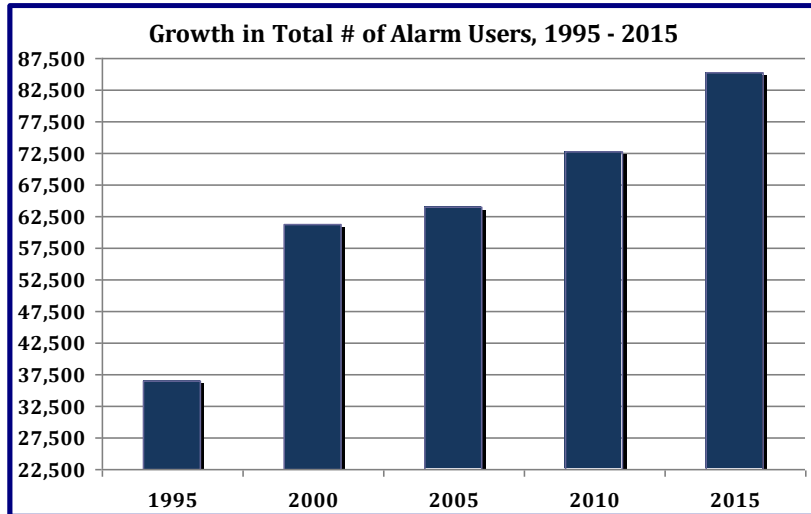
## 2015 FALSE ALARM REDUCTION

### Alarm Users

Montgomery County is the most populous jurisdiction in the state of Maryland, consisting of nearly 1.1 million residents. In 2015, FARS received a total of 5,850 new alarm user registration forms (residential and commercial). There was a 4.3% increase in the total number of registered alarm users between 2014 and 2015, accounting for more than 85,000 users.

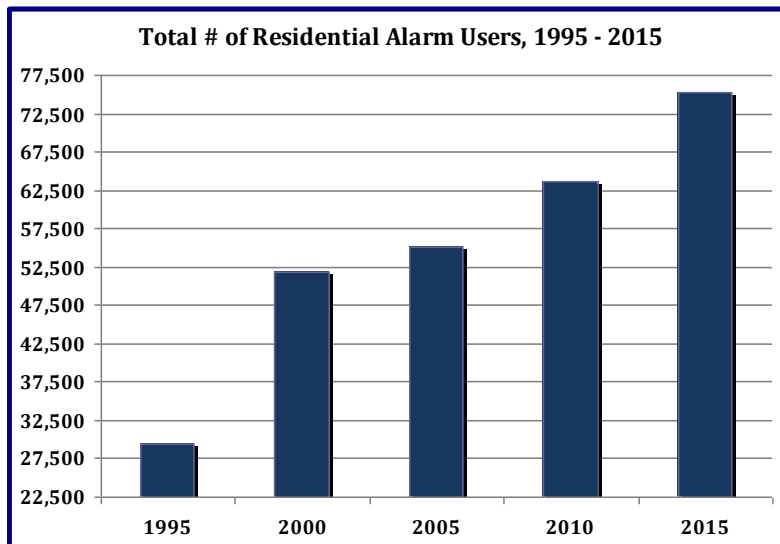
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<sup>1</sup> This figure is based on the average time of 16 minutes each, for two officers per alarm call.



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 (134%), driven primarily by the number of residential alarm users – more than 75,000 users - an increase of 156.2%.

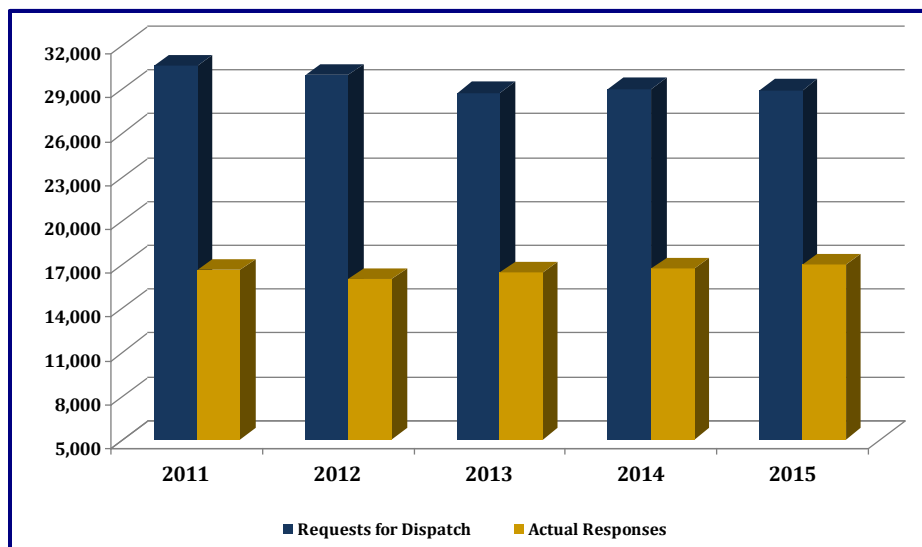


### Alarm Responses

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 door/window sensors.
- 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 2015, alarm companies cancelled 7,740 requests for dispatch, or 27% 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 2015, the number of dispatch requests dropped slightly, less than 1%, from 29,032 to 28,945. The number of actual responses has increased for the third straight year, increasing 1.6% in 2015 over 2014. More importantly, the percentage of total calls responded to has increased over the same time period, but the 2015 percentage of dispatch requests that result in response (58.6%) has returned to levels comparable to the mid-2000s. 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
2015	85,167	16,967	.20

This table demonstrates that although the total number of registered users has increased over the last twenty years, the false alarm dispatch rate has continued to drop. Montgomery County's dispatch rates remain among the lowest in the country.

Another measure of program effectiveness is the total number of alarm users who had NO false alarms. In 2015, a total of 74,313 alarm users had ZERO false alarms; essentially, 87.3% 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. The chart below represents the false alarm numbers over the last two decades.

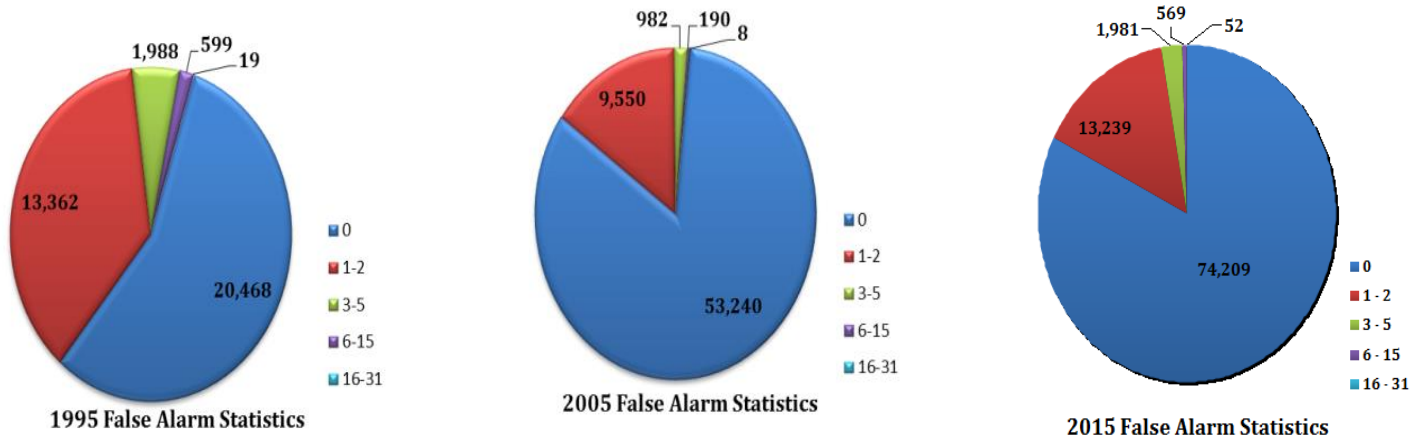
2015 <i>Total Users = 85,167</i>		2005 <i>Total Users = 63,970</i>		1995 <i>Total Users = 36,436</i>	
False Alarms	Alarm Users	False Alarms	Alarm Users	False Alarms	Alarm Users
0	74,313	0	53,240	0	20,468
1-2	9,708	1-2	9,550	1-2	13,362
3-5	934	3-5	982	3-5	1,988
6-15	199	6-15	190	6-15	599
16-31	13	16-31	8	16-31	19

A closer examination reveals that commercial alarm users have improved 208.4% since 1995 towards the achievement of no false alarms, while residential users have been 271% more successful in managing false alarms. In 1995, nearly 7% of all commercial alarm users had six or more false alarms. In 2015, commercial alarm users accounted for all users with six or more false. The percentages of residential alarm users with six or more false alarms are already very small, but there were no residential users in 2015 in this category as compared to 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	2015	% Change
<b>Commercial</b>	2,352	5,730	7,253	208.40
<b>Residential</b>	18,116	47,510	67,204	271.00

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.



## Cost Avoidance

As a direct result of the FARS' strict enforcement of the alarm law, there were 10,096 alarm calls that police officers were not required to respond to in 2015. Using the averages established by the Police Department, this equates to approximately **5,384 hours of police officer time, or an estimated \$1,140,848 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.

<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.

The first chart covers *calendar* year 2015. The second chart covers *fiscal* year 2015. The FY2015 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 2015 chart, as false alarms and the resultant false alarm response fees are calculated on a calendar year basis.

<b>CALENDAR YEAR 2015</b>	<b>ACTUAL REVENUES</b>
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$158,825
Commercial	<u>17,970</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$176,795</b>
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Renewal Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$258,780
County Attorney Collections	<u>1,228</u>
Total Residential	<b>\$260,008</b>
Commercial	\$31,895
County Attorney Collections	<u>170</u>
Total Commercial	<b>\$32,065</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$292,073</b>
<b><u>False Alarm Response Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$100,343
County Attorney Collections	<u>9,153</u>
Total Residential	<b>\$109,496</b>
Commercial	\$441,547
County Attorney Collections	<u>22,942</u>
Total Commercial	<b>\$464,489</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$573,985</b>
<b><u>Alarm Business Fees</u></b>	
License	\$ 56,400
Civil Citations	112,500
Administrative Fees	<u>464</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$169,364</b>
<b><u>Appeal Filing Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$315
Commercial	<u>105</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$420</b>
<b><u>Alarm User Civil Citations</u></b>	
Residential	\$ 000
Commercial	<u>000</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ 000</b>
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,212,637</b>

FISCAL YEAR 15	ACTUAL REVENUES
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$151,740
Commercial	<u>18,420</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$170,160</b>
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Renewal Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$241,900
County Attorney Collections	<u>1,200</u>
Total Residential	<b>\$243,100</b>
Commercial	\$27,060
County Attorney Collections	<u>200</u>
Total Commercial	<b>\$27,260</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$270,360</b>
<b><u>False Alarm Response Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$100,436
County Attorney Collections	<u>12,970</u>
Total Residential	<b>\$113,406</b>
Commercial	\$335,802
County Attorney Collections	<u>18,267</u>
Total Commercial	<b>\$354,069</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$467,475</b>
<b><u>Alarm Business Fees</u></b>	
License	\$ 70,200
Civil Citations	270,500
Administrative Fees	<u>432</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$341,132</b>
<b><u>Appeal Filing Fees</u></b>	
Residential	\$285
Commercial	<u>165</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$450</b>
<b><u>Alarm User Civil Citations</u></b>	
Residential	\$ 000
Commercial	<u>000</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ 000</b>
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,249,577</b>



CALENDAR YEAR COMPARISON	ACTUAL REVENUES		
	2013	2014	2015
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Fees</u></b>			
Residential	\$163,190	\$151,400	\$158,825
Commercial	<u>20,850</u>	<u>19,130</u>	<u>17,970</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$184,040</b>	<b>\$170,530</b>	<b>\$176,795</b>
<b><u>Alarm User Registration Renewal Fees</u></b>			
Residential	\$243,605	\$228,060	\$258,780
County Attorney Collections	<u>2,250</u>	<u>2,210</u>	<u>1,228</u>
Total Residential	<b>\$245,855</b>	<b>\$230,270</b>	<b>\$260,008</b>
Commercial	\$30,610	\$30,665	\$31,895
County Attorney Collections	<u>890</u>	<u>570</u>	<u>170</u>
Total Commercial	<b>\$31,500</b>	<b>\$31,235</b>	<b>\$32,065</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$277,355</b>	<b>\$261,505</b>	<b>\$292,073</b>
<b><u>False Alarm Response Fees</u></b>			
Residential	\$ 84,172	\$94,252	\$100,343
County Attorney Collections	<u>28,240</u>	<u>24,878</u>	<u>9,153</u>
Total Residential	<b>\$ 112,412</b>	<b>\$119,130</b>	<b>\$109,496</b>
Commercial	\$305,161	\$305,436	\$441,547
County Attorney Collections	<u>36,135</u>	<u>33,700</u>	<u>22,942</u>
Total Commercial	<b>\$341,296</b>	<b>\$339,136</b>	<b>\$464,489</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$453,708</b>	<b>\$458,266</b>	<b>\$573,985</b>
<b><u>Alarm Business Fees</u></b>			
License	\$ 79,000	\$ 67,300	\$ 56,400
Civil Citations	208,600	285,500	112,500
Administrative Fees	<u>1,036</u>	<u>504</u>	<u>464</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$288,636</b>	<b>\$353,304</b>	<b>\$169,364</b>
<b><u>Appeal Filing Fees</u></b>			
Residential	\$255	\$255	\$315
Commercial	<u>105</u>	<u>135</u>	<u>105</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$360</b>	<b>\$390</b>	<b>\$420</b>
<b><u>Alarm User Civil Citations</u></b>			
Residential	\$ 000	\$ 000	\$ 000
Commercial	<u>100</u>	<u>000</u>	<u>000</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ 100</b>	<b>\$ 000</b>	<b>\$ 000</b>
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,204,199</b>	<b>\$1,243,995</b>	<b>\$1,212,637</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 dropped from 93% in 2014 to 85% in 2015. The combination of the Office of the County Attorney as the FARS Collector and 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. In 2015 staffing shortages impacted the FARS ability to place alarm users in denied response and this had a direct impact on the collection efforts which resulted in an 8% difference.

The following chart reflects the amount billed for false alarm response fees in 2015 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 2015. The actual collection of monies for those calendar year 2015 false alarms extends into calendar year 2016, 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	\$520,705	\$450,989	\$ 0	\$ 69,161
Residential	\$480,025	\$ 395,241	\$ 0	\$84,634
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$1,000,730</b>	<b>\$846,230</b>	<b>\$ 0</b>	<b>\$153,795</b>

*\*Represents fees collected in 2015 and 2016 against false alarm response fees billed in 2015.*

The FARS is in the process of attempting to collect the past due amounts listed above. The FARS has sent the overdue notices to all affected alarm users. The \$153,795 listed above will be referred to the Office of the County Attorney for collection early in 2016 and the affected alarm users will be placed in a non-response status until payment is received.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, the 2015 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 34.1% since 1994, and the total number of responses has declined 61.0% 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 1,719 requests for dispatch that were denied as a result of the violation status of the alarm user or alarm business. This represents only 5.9% of all requests for dispatch and is an increase from 2014 where the number was 4.8%.

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. In 2015 the FARS ability to enforce the major offender project, which reaches out to alarm users experiencing excessive false alarms was stalled due to staffing shortages. The major offender project is instrumental in ensuring that alarm users experiencing excessive false alarms are educated about their alarm system and the impact to police resources. Although the number of alarm users that exceeded the 6 to 31 false alarm count in a calendar year increased for commercial alarm users in 2015, there were no residential alarm users in this category. In 2016 the FARS staff will work diligently to intervene and educate the alarm users that fall into this category quickly and expeditiously to ensure we reduce the number of alarm users in this range.

In 2015 the FARS migrated all of the false alarm billing and tracking to a new system called CryWolf. The FARS is now fully functional on the new system and proud to offer the residents of Montgomery County the ability to pay their response and renewal fees via the internet. Additionally, the residents will now be able to register their locations via the internet as well. The online portal will provide the residents of Montgomery County with a “one-stop-shop” to manage their account environment from the comfort of their homes.