

Fail-safe security

HOME SECURITY | Alleviating burglary concerns has never been easier or more economical

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BY ANGIE HICKS Special to the Sun-Times

It's a homeowner's worst nightmare -- pulling into your driveway, seeing your front door wide open and finding your home ransacked. The emotional trauma of having your personal space violated, the painstaking legal and insurance process that follows, and the property loss if anything was stolen, can add tremendous stress to your already hectic life.

Home security should be a year-round concern, but too many families lose focus on locking doors and windows and taking other security measures when good weather, outdoor activities and summer vacations beckon. These lax home security habits are so prevalent and the seasonal spike in home break-ins is so high that June has been named National Burglary Prevention Month.

Property crimes in Chicago have been dropping for the past five years, according to the Chicago Police Department. Yet, 50 percent of Angie's List Chicago members who took a recent poll on burglaries say they are either somewhat or very worried about becoming a victim of a break-in. One-in-three feel that burglary is a problem in their neighborhood.

Alleviating these concerns has never been easier -- or more economical. Innovations in home security technology, coupled with falling costs associated with security monitoring systems, have made home security affordable for most families. Even young people are investing in home security systems, said Tony Stompanato, owner of Alert Protective Services in Chicago, which has been installing and monitoring home security systems in Chicago since 1982.

Stompanato says lower prices for the equipment and installation of security systems make them affordable for homeowners of varying income levels. Price depends on the equipment selected for installation and can range from sensors on the doors and windows to motion detectors to devices that sense when glass has been broken. Additionally, fire and carbon monoxide detectors can be installed to automatically alert the fire department when they are activated -- just think twice before placing a smoke alarm right above the stove.

A telephone line is traditionally required for your home system to communicate with the computer system of the company that monitors your home. Before the advent of cellular communications, radio backup transmitters were installed in case the phone line was cut during a break-in. The reliability and frequencies of these systems wasn't sophisticated enough, according to Stompanato, so cellular backup transmitters were created.

These transmitting devices run about \$175 and in some cases require an additional monthly monitoring fee. Alert Protective Services doesn't charge an additional fee, but other monitor companies may charge up to \$13 per month for cellular monitoring.

"Now, more and more young people are using cellular monitoring exclusively," Stompanato says. As consumers ditch their landline service and use cable television systems for Internet connections, the cellular monitoring has enabled the cell-phone-only crowd to stay safe and still avoid adding the old-fashioned landline phone.

The cellular monitoring transmitter works just like your cell phone. When the alarm system goes off, a signal is sent to the monitoring company via cell towers. The dispatch then has all necessary account information including security codes and emergency contact numbers provided by the homeowner

at the time of installation.

Radio transmitters also have improved technologically and are once again being used as a backup to landline monitoring. The cost of radio is comparable to the cellular, but it uses radio frequencies to transmit the signal rather than cell towers.

"We still like to see someone have a landline and a cellular or radio backup," Stompanato says. "The landline transmission gives the operator more information like identifying which device set the alarm off. Cellular monitoring tells us an alarm is going off, but not which door or window is unsecured."

Another trend Stompanato sees is an increase in security camera and surveillance requests by both businesses and high-end homeowners. Although concealing wiring in a pre-existing residential installation can present a challenge, cameras are an effective way to ensure front door security. These cameras can display images in color, black and white, or night-vision via a small video monitor or directly onto a homeowner's television.

In addition to peace of mind, home security systems can actually help homeowners save on their insurance premiums. Many insurance agencies will offer a discount up to 15 percent on your annual insurance if your home has a monitored security system. That savings could be enough to justify the expense of installing a system on your existing home.

Angie Hicks is the founder of Angie's List, which has more than 500,000 members nationwide, of which 37,000 are Chicagoans. She can be reached at www.angieslist.com.