Warnings Issued on door-to-door Alarm System Solicitors

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Warnings issued on door-to-door alarm system solicitors

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Security systems are designed to safeguard homeowners, but during the summer months, it's often the security systems themselves that need protection.
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Keith Vick is an installation manager for Knight Security Systems, whose president says anyone approached by a door-to-door alarm solicitor should be skeptical.

State officials say scam artists - usually unlicensed high school and college students - spend their summer vacations going door to door offering new monitoring contracts and alarm installation. In some cases, the homeowner is left paying for two separate alarm systems, or a system that may not work at all.

The Texas Department of Public Safety said it is actively working cases in Dallas, Houston, San Antonio and Austin after reports of young solicitors aggressively marketing alarm services in those communities without a license.

And on Friday, North Richland Hills police issued a warning to residents there after complaints that solicitors were going door to door claiming that the city had endorsed a certain alarm company, something police officials said the city does not do.

"The past two summers we have seen a dramatic influx of student salesmen," sad DPS Private Security Bureau Capt. RenEarl Bowie. "The problem is germane to all major cities."

Chris Russell, president of the Texas Burglar and Fire Alarm Association, said that summer sales programs can pose "a danger to the public," because unlicensed sellers haven't undergone the criminal background check that a license requires.

"Someone who might be a convicted felon might be going door to door, asking where the valuables are kept," Russell said.

Bowie advises homeowners to ask the sales representatives to leave if they become overly aggressive and to ask for a phone number, the absence of which may indicate the seller is unlicensed.

Homeowners can also ask for license credentials up front, Bowie said.

"Ask to see their DPS Private Security Bureau pocket card," Bowie said. "This means they passed the minimum requirements, which includes a criminal background check. That is the biggest peace of mind."

Bowie said it's important to ask for the pocket card because the company itself may have a valid license and yet use unlicensed employees. Other sales representatives may claim to have a license which turns out to be a peddler's license from the city, Bowie said, adding that such a license is not sufficient.

"The challenge for the Department of Public Safety is cracking down on these college kids on a Class A misdemeanor," Russell said.

A Class A misdemeanor is punishable in Texas by up to a $4,000 fine, up to one year in jail or both.

Russell said summer sellers often target houses that already have alarm systems, claiming that the system is due for an upgrade. The installers, who are often waiting nearby, can then use the home's existing wiring to quickly install the new system.

Michael Doumecq, office manager for All Pro Security Services, said that some of the illegal sellers pretend to be a representative from the homeowner's own security company. Often, the scammers get that information right from the homeowner's front yard.

"Usually [yard] signs ward off criminals," Russell said. "In this case it attracts them."

Knight Security Systems Inc.'s president Phil Lake said his company - All Pro - like most reputable alarm companies does not use door-to-door sales representatives. Instead, Lake said, 90 percent of his business is via referrals.

He said anyone approached by a door-to-door alarm solicitor should be skeptical.

"If you're going to let someone into your home, you want to check their references," Lake said. "It's amazing how many people will install security systems without a license. The majority of the public is not aware that a firm needs to be licensed by the state of Texas."

Annette Sperling of Garland learned that valuable lesson the hard way last summer, when she was the victim of a scam. A group gave her a new security system free and a new contract, telling her that they would buy out her old contract.

But it turned out that the new contract didn't cover the full extent of her old one, which would have made her responsible for paying two bills for several months. She was able to get out of the second contract, however, without paying any additional money. But she learned.

"Don't take a new alarm system without calling and finding out your obligations to your old one," Sperling said.

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