



UNIVERSITY OF  
FLORIDA

IFAS EXTENSION

# Alarm Systems<sup>1</sup>

Effective alarm systems can serve as a deterrent to intruders, alert us to safety and structural concerns, control automated systems, and keep us informed about our environment. It is now possible to transmit digital, audio and video data over great distances to central monitoring stations.

Many alarm systems are readily available; some can be installed by the homeowner, while others need professional installation. All alarm systems have three basic components: the sensor, the control that causes the alarm to engage once the sensor has been activated, and the alarm itself. Systems can be wired or wireless, or a hybrid of both.

Self-contained alarm systems have the components—alarm, sensor and control—housed as a single unit. In alarm systems with individual components, the sensor, control and alarm are all separate.

## System Types

The False Alarm Reduction Association (FARA), made up of law enforcement professionals from all over the United States and Canada, offers information on a number of alarm systems, including:

- **Burglar Alarm Systems**, which alert the property owner to intruders. The user activates (and deactivates) the system via a control panel or keypad.
- **Fire Alarm Systems**, which—logically enough—alert property owners to fire. They may be activated using smoke or flame detectors, by monitoring the building's sprinkler system, or by manual pull stations.
- **Robbery Alarms**, also known as hold-up, duress, ambush or emergency systems have communications capabilities to alert someone off site when the alarm is activated.

- **Access Control Systems** allow access into a restricted area via identification using coded keys, magnetic cards, or biometric readers (which use palm print, fingerprint, face, voice, or retina recognition). These systems are often used in businesses, hotels and apartment complexes.
- **Closed Circuit Television Systems (CCTV)** display activity on a premise via video monitors. Although used primarily in businesses, they are becoming more popular in homes for viewing visitors at the door or monitoring activity in a baby's room.
- **Home Control and Automation Systems** are commonly used in "smart homes," where virtually all home functions (lighting, heating and cooling, security, fire, etc.) can be linked together and controlled via one central remote or keypad.

**Environmental Conditions Systems**, which are becoming more commonplace, monitor temperature, humidity and/or the presence of water, etc.; depending on design, they can activate alarms, dialers and/or transmitters. These systems are becoming more popular where there is the possibility of damage to valuable equipment or structures.

## Things to consider before leasing or buying a security system

Currently, alarm systems—either leased or purchased—that deal with security are popular. Do some homework before deciding what and where to buy a security system. If you have never had an alarm system before, FARA has a *Consumer Guide to Purchasing a Burglar Alarm* ([www.faraonline.org](http://www.faraonline.org)). This guide provides basic information that will enable you to make an informed choice. It includes a handy chart with a list of questions to ask each potential supplier and space to record the answers.

<sup>1</sup>**DISCLAIMER** – This piece is intended to give the reader only general factual information current at the time of publication. This piece is **not** a substitute for professional advice and should not be used for guidance or decisions related to a specific design or construction project. This piece is not intended to reflect the opinion of any of the entities, agencies or organizations identified in the materials and, if any opinions appear, are those of the individual author and should not be relied upon in any event. Applicable to 2004 Florida Building Code.

Ask your insurance company if you qualify for homeowner's discounts by having a security system installed. Some insurance companies provide discounts for certain kinds of systems.

Check with your local building department before installing an alarm system as some communities require a building permit to be issued prior to commencement of any work. Also contact local law enforcement officials to ask if there are registration requirements for alarm systems, if fines are imposed for false alarms and, if so, how they are assessed.

### Choosing a company

Installation, service, maintenance, monitoring, and repair of all commercially-installed security systems in Florida must be done by a licensed contractor. The state's license law requires security system employees take a minimum of fourteen hours of continuing education every two years, as well as requiring the company to hold \$800,000 liability and property insurance coverage. (Be aware that hiring an unlicensed contractor leaves you with no legal protections should any problems arise with the system.)

How do you know if a company holds the proper license? First, ask the company representative to provide you with his/her company license number. All Florida alarm system licenses begin with the letter "E". You can also check the website of the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation (DBPR) at <https://www.myfloridalicense.com/default.asp?SID>. Click on "Search for a License, Permit, or Registration" to determine if the alarm company you are considering has a license issued by the State of Florida—or call (850) 488-3109.

Secondly, check with the Better Business Bureau or the Florida Attorney General's Office for information on any alarm company with which you are considering doing business.

When dealing with individual companies, ask the company representative if the company's workforce has been certified through the Alarm System Agent law and if all representatives have successfully complied with a criminal background check.

### Comparison shop

Contact several companies and compare their offerings before making a decision. Price shouldn't be the sole determining factor in selecting your system; look at features and monitoring methods as well. Ask if the company has a false alarm reduction plan in effect, and ask how the specific alarm installation will avoid potential false alarms. Ensure a training session is included in the price, so that you and your family or employees can become familiar with the operations of the alarm system.

Be certain you understand all details of the contract. What appears to be a great deal may turn out to be more expensive in the long run through hidden or vague

contract clauses. Always get a *written* quote on the recommended system, its components, and any monitoring that will be performed. And never be pressured into signing a contract right away. Any reputable company will be happy to answer questions and come back for another sales call when you are ready.

If you already own an alarm system, replace old law enforcement direct-connect monitoring equipment with newer, high-security monitoring technology. The new equipment should conform to Security Industry Association (SIA) false-alarm-prevention standards.

Contact the Alarm Association of Florida, Inc. if you have additional questions or want a list of reputable, licensed companies in your area: (800) 899-2099.

### Resources

Alarm Association of Florida, Inc. [www.fla-alarms.org](http://www.fla-alarms.org)

False Alarm Reduction Association [www.faraonline.org](http://www.faraonline.org)

Florida Attorney General: 850-414-3300  
[www.myfloridalegal.com](http://www.myfloridalegal.com)

Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation, Electrical Contractors Licensing Board: 850-487-1395 [www.myflorida.com/dbpr](http://www.myflorida.com/dbpr)

Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation, Office of Unlicensed Activity: 850-487-1395  
[www.myflorida.com/dbpr](http://www.myflorida.com/dbpr)

Florida Department of State, Division of Corporations: 800-755-5111 [www.sunbiz.org](http://www.sunbiz.org)

Florida Department of Financial Services, Division of Workers' Compensation: 850-413-1601  
[www.fldfs.com/WC](http://www.fldfs.com/WC)

Florida Department of Financial Services, Division of Consumer Services: 800-342-2762  
[www.fldfs.com/consumers](http://www.fldfs.com/consumers)

Security Industry Association [www.siaonline.org](http://www.siaonline.org)

Your county or municipal building department (please see the government section of your telephone book—look under "building," "plans," "inspections," or "zoning.")

Local police or sheriff office (see the government section of your telephone book—look under "law enforcement" and check to see if there is a non-emergency number)

### Don't know where to go for an answer to a specific question?

Contact: Building A Safer Florida, Inc. toll-free 1-866-881-3221 or [www.buildingasafeflorida.com](http://www.buildingasafeflorida.com)

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