Safety and security are the classic areas where the cliché, “No news is good news,” applies. Ironically, it can take a lot of planning and effort to achieve that desired level of “no news.”

An association’s goal is to keep their protection of people and property as a preventive activity. While there should be plans for first aid, calling in emergency help, and dealing with unwelcome events, deterrence is superior. Associations have to navigate between costs, benefits, probability, and consequences on behalf of the residents, with various levels of fearfulness and fearlessness (considered foolhardiness on occasion) coming into play.

A general consideration of liability may help bring all parties to reasonable ground. “One lawsuit can double your liability insurance costs,” Charlie Ragghianti with A Total Solution, Inc., shares. Even though protection is
the primary goal, considering how an outside party might view the association's actions, or lack thereof, and the corresponding responsibility can provide a jolt for those turning a blind eye toward rough areas. If a problem area could be reasonably predicted and prevented, a prudent association will deal with it, despite the relative likelihood of any emergency event.

Also, Ragghianti reminds associations, “Sometimes money isn’t the most important thing, and I think people forget that. Money is important, but life is a heck of a lot more important. When something happens, you realize you should have taken care of the problem.”

With that perspective, safety and security still cannot be bought outright. Associations should be alert to the situations within their community and applicable regulations in order to prevent crime and mishaps where possible.

One of the biggest single deterrents to crime, according to Ragghianti, is lighting. “It’s a simple fix,” he states. “More than likely, a burglar will think twice if it’s a bright area.” And especially for elderly residents, lighting can enable safer mobility as well.

Another major deterrent to crime is camera surveillance. A prominent, posted announcement of cameras at entrances and other areas will let violators know they will be identified, though Ragghianti admits, “You want to prevent crimes, not see them afterwards.” Current problem security issues include breaking into cars at night and destruction of mailboxes, and lighting and gate cameras can significantly reduce the chance for these ventures to be a success.

Access control is a major component of security for most communities. The major concern is, of course, criminal intent, but unauthorized entry can also mean extra wear and tear and possibly crowding of common areas at the least. “Cameras will tell you what happened. Access control can prevent people from coming in,” Ragghianti states. For associations with card or code access, Ragghianti cautions that accountability is needed. “When you give out a card, make sure there’s a record of exactly who has it. Sometimes they end up with a friend, or a kid, or a friend of a kid. If you can’t get the card back, you need to have a remote method to delete the access. If you can’t get a card back, even if someone moves away, you don’t want it floating around; you want to be able to delete it electronically. Controlled access at the swimming pool also reduces liability for the HOA,” he advises.

Special situations, such as an elevator opening directly into a unit or in a semi-private lobby, can present dilemmas in competing security and safety considerations. Lee Rigby with Vertical Assessment Associates advises, “Due to the perceived security issues, it is sometimes found that unit owners will add a lockable door or gate in front of the elevator entrance to ensure no one can use the elevator to enter their residence unannounced. This situation results in serious safety hazards for other elevator riders, as well as the residents, and violates a number of elevator and life safety codes.”

Fire safety is essential to community safety, as well as being required by law. “The main sources of fires in associations are smoking cigarettes and grease,” Ragghianti reports. “In condominiums, make sure the residents have insurance because they’re liable for the building if they don’t,” he cautions.

The standard for fire equipment inspections is NFPA 72, the National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code. “It covers fire alarms and sprinklers and explains when inspections are required,” Ragghianti explains. “You need to make sure fire equipment is properly inspected by a reliable company. In Florida, companies that inspect sprinklers need to be properly certified. Codes require fire alarm systems to be inspected at least annually.”
“Smoke detection helps, but you need to keep up with the batteries and have battery back-up, both to alert or wake up people before it breaks out and to prevent damage,” Ragghianti notes. “In older buildings, we will find smoke detectors with no battery back-up and the battery is totally dead. They should be replaced twice a year, when the time change occurs in spring and fall.”

“We see so many times that buildings need to be upgraded with sprinkler and alarms. If you have a reputable company that says there are problems, correct them. A lot of the time, people look at the money involved but don’t look at the possibility of what could happen,” Ragghianti observes. “So it just sits there through board meetings. They don’t want to spend any money, so they negotiate with the Fire Marshal that they will upgrade in the next five years. Before you know it, somebody dies.”

“For some older buildings, the alarm device is on the outside, but you can’t hear it inside,” Ragghianti explains. “The new code says you have to be able to clearly hear it in the building. It may cost $1,000 per unit, but is it worth $1,000 to save a life? People look at their pocketbooks, but not the reality that if I can’t hear the alarm and there’s a real fire that’s pretty darn important, and I should get that fixed.”

“Especially when there are 50 people above or below you that may not do the right thing, you want a good system,” Ragghianti emphasizes. “Do inspections, fix any discrepancies right away, and check the button for all smoke detectors.”

For those upgrading security systems, off-site Internet storage provides added protection. “Instead of having a hard drive for camera recording and access control, Cloud computing provides secure storage,” Ragghianti reports.

Security and safety will never be turnkey issues. No one knows ‘what would have happened,’ results are rarely quantifiable, and situations change over time. Wheels always get things rolling, so boards have to regulate a changing mix of cars, bikes, skateboards, golf carts, and other vehicles to protect all concerned. Plants grow, inanimate items deteriorate, and the involvement of people waxes and wanes, so what worked for a time may not still be a healthy situation, but everyone desires a safe and secure home. “Sometimes people confuse wants with needs,” Ragghianti comments in observing some decisions to forego safety items. Safety of residents trumps any extras a community may desire—maintaining systems to avoid losses or tragedies is a fundamental association responsibility to keep in view.

**Sharing Solutions for Common Concerns**

**Gated Community Security Managers Association**

When John Sutphin retired as Police Chief of Kissimmee, Florida, and became Director of Security at Isleworth Country Club, he found that gate access systems were a part of the job he had not encountered before, even in his 30 years in law enforcement. His boss connected him with other security directors, information was shared, and firm friendships were formed. Sutphin recalls, “I said, ‘We should look at expanding our group because I’m sure there are others in the same boat.’”

They responded, “OK, you do it,” and he did. In 2007,
the Gated Community Security Managers Association (GCSMA) was begun to provide a resource and networking system for the benefit of security directors at gated communities. “I told my boss about it, and he thought it was a good idea.” Evidently others found it a good idea also, as Sutphin recalls, “Of the 30 property security directors we contacted, 16 or 17 came to the first meeting!”

The group meets quarterly in Florida but has recently expanded to include eight states and the District of Columbia. The first chapter meeting outside Florida was held in August in Arizona. “It’s funny—the issues are the same no matter where we are,” Sutphin comments. Though many members are also in other general security organizations, gated communities are unique in some respects. “The security is like a concierge service; people pay a lot and have high expectations,” Sutphin explains. Members consult with each other to research technology, operational issues, and administrative policies. “The most prominent way we network is on the Internet,” Sutphin reports. “They send a question, and I put it out for comments. Recently, someone sent a question about manpower on the midnight shift, and within 15 minutes he had five answers. Two days later, there were 12 responses—that’s how involved the members are. We’ve got over 1,000 years of experience within the group.”

Questions that have been addressed online are kept in the library for members’ reference and include a variety of topics:

- Providing additional medical assistance (for example, if a resident falls out of bed)
- Alarm companies
- Background checks
- Bar code readers
- Supervisory training
- Access for civil processors serving subpoenas
- Concealed weapons
- Golf cart policies
- Realtors
- Vendor screening
- Restraining orders
- Traffic enforcement

“When the website was created, we wanted it to not just be user-friendly, but also provide somewhat of a social network,” Sutphin explains. “I’ve really enjoyed it, and we’ve become like family.”

The group’s first expo is currently planned and has outgrown its space before beginning. “We wanted to give vendors an opportunity for exposure,” Sutphin states, “and in two weeks, we had a waiting list of 15 vendors after already filling 15 tables. We’re planning to accommodate a bigger number next year!”

“Our goal is to represent the gated community security industry,” Sutphin says. “In the beginning, it was only security directors, but we’ve created a category of associate members for others who are involved, such as board presidents, general managers, or security personnel who are retired but want to stay involved.”

Whether it’s to gather information, share knowledge, or just enjoy camaraderie with others in the same profession, the GCSMA provides a convenient forum to make those contacts.

For further information, visit [www.securitydirectors.net](http://www.securitydirectors.net) or contact President and Owner John Sutphin at jsutphin1@cfl.rr.com.

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