

Layers of Protection: Developing Community Association Security

As homeowners volunteer to be a part of their community associations, their range of knowledge on a variety of topics must immediately grow. Those tasked with security for their association are well aware of one very important thing...they want a safe and secure community. But how to go about establishing that can be a challenge. If it is a new community, the association members will draw on past, and hopefully positive, experiences. With an existing community, new members may prefer to stick with whatever the standard was in the past.

But whatever the situation, it is important for homeowners, and more specifically the community association board members, to realize the importance of a comprehensive security program. The old notion that the better the neighborhood, the lesser the security concern, is no longer appropriate. Every community, of every size and location, needs to make security and safety a top priority.

The security options and strategies are many – there are security officers, technology based systems, security minded landscape designs, and specialty lighting just to name a few. So, where do you start?

A quality security company can work with you to determine your true needs – not just what will benefit the security company. And, don't be afraid to head down this path. A security upgrade could be as simple as changing the position of the reception desk for increased visibility – but you won't know until you evaluate. While every community differs in terms of layout, geography, type of homes and size of community, there are some principles that will apply across the board. A comprehensive program incorporates personnel and technology, proactive programs, homeowner involvement and a community-wide commitment.

Many residential communities will benefit from creating layers of protection – both in terms of the personnel and physical security elements. Layers of security can be developed regardless of the size of the community. Some of these layers may already exist (exterior fencing for example) but once they are officially regarded as part of the security program, their maintenance and importance will be given greater priority. For example, if a homeowner sees a damaged fence on remote part of the property, they may not see a need to report it. If it is clearly communicated, however, that the fence is an important layer of security, the homeowner would be much more likely to report the problem.

Exterior Layer

The outermost layer of security can encompass a number of items including exterior fencing, landscape items preventing entry such as large boulders, No Trespassing signs, lighting, gates, intrusion detection sensors and security officers who patrol the perimeter of the community. Crime prevention through environment design can be an important part of the exterior layer of security.

Middle Layer

The middle layer can include a manned gatehouse or reception area, locked main doors, elevator controls, access control systems, delivery/package reception and logs, CCTV, and visitor identification systems. The middle layer of security should also consider non-residential items such as storage closets and maintenance sheds. Not only could theft be a possibility here but these areas could also create shelter for intruders and therefore should be locked and monitored. Utility or electrical closets, server rooms and stations for water, gas and sewage service should also be locked and access controlled. The middle layer of security offers protection closer to the interior of the community – the residences.

Interior Layer

This is the most critical layer. This is the final step between the residents and potential dangers. Residence doors and locks, access controls for primary parking areas, security officer patrols, motion activated lights and emergency procedures all play a role in interior security. This includes anything involving entrance or access to residences.

Through both patrols and specified posts, security officers can be an active part of each of these layers, often tying all of the pieces together.

What to specifically include in each layer varies depending on the individual community and some of these items, such as security officer patrols, lighting and CCTV can overlap – playing an important role in more than one layer within the same community. Most important is the recognition that one security element simply isn't enough. Building layers, both visible and discreet layers, serve to deter, detect and protect. Also, all of the layers are of equal importance. Although the lock on a homeowner's front door may appear to be of the utmost importance, the middle and exterior layers cannot be overlooked.

Also remember that not every security issue is in the form of an intruder or other unwelcome individual. Preventable utility interruptions and floods also fall into the realm of security. Despite large budgets and best efforts there will still be security issues. A natural disaster that leaves the community without power or makes a primary exit road impassible should also be considered as part of the security program. While no security measure can prevent these occurrences, communication, preparedness and evacuation plans need to be in place and the security team can take the lead on those initiatives. If a homeowner experiences any sort of problem, security is often the first call. Being prepared to handle any situation will go a long way with the homeowners who are a part of the community.

In addition to the physical and personnel layers of security, intangible elements also play a role in the overall plan for safety and security. Communication and homeowner involvement is key. Homeowners and community association leaders should work together with their security company to proactively prevent crime. Simple actions can play a large part in creating a safer community. High quality security officers are already aware of the importance of knowing their residents. Homeowners should also get to know the security officers. This helps further the security relationship and open lines of communication. Homeowners should not hesitate to report suspicious or unusual activity to the security staff. Involving homeowners who are not part on the association board through events or newsletters and calls for volunteers will also be fruitful. Security is the responsibility of the entire community.

Relationships with local authorities are yet another layer. The local police and fire departments, along with your security provider, can help you produce security and safety awareness programs for residents. Inviting the police into your community, communicating with them about any security and emergency plans developed, and becoming involved in their safety initiatives extend the layers of security already in place.

Also, don't hesitate to review and assess security plans periodically. What looked good on paper, or what worked for a nearby community, may not work as you expected. Security reviews will give you the opportunity to record any changes that were made once the program was put in place.

The security options for residential communities are many and the ideal security program is one that offers many layers of protection and ultimately, meets your community's unique needs.