



# Community Lockbox Program Provides Security In Case of Emergency

Quick access to keys aids emergency personnel

by Pat Remick, March 26, 2010 |  Comments: 2

When Joan Long didn't answer her locked front door just minutes after arranging to be picked up for an outing, her friend suspected something was terribly wrong. She dialed 911.

"I had passed out and could not answer the door," recalls the retired Portsmouth, N.H., clerical worker. "My friend called the ambulance, and they couldn't get in. I couldn't hear them to get up. They broke through the door and frame—smashed the whole thing. I had to get a whole new door," says Long, 69.

That experience and her medical issues were factors in Long's decision to move out of her condominium into senior housing. But a community lockbox program, like those cropping up in cities and towns across the country, might have helped her feel more comfortable living alone in her condominium. The lockbox program allows emergency personnel to quickly enter a house with a homeowner's key kept in secure steel box, much like those that allow real estate agents access to homes that are for sale.

"This is good idea for anyone," says Steven P. Westermann of Kansas City, Mo., president of the International Association of Fire Chiefs. "It gives quick access without destroying property."

Lockbox programs work in different ways in different communities. Some use a single master key to open every lockbox and copies of the master key are kept in secured locations in emergency vehicles. In others areas, emergency responders use a key code to gain access to the lockbox.

In the Denver suburb of Arvada, Colo., the lockboxes—two-and-a-half pounds of heavy steel—are usually hung on an outside gas meter "so responding officers always know where to look for it," says Police Officer James Becker, the program's coordinator. Placing the boxes away from the front door also makes it less obvious that someone inside requires special help, he notes.

Police emphasize that lockboxes are for security, not for the convenience of people who may even have innocent motives for entering the home. That's why the key code to open the box is never given to the homeowner.

"We find that if we give the homeowner the code, pretty soon that person gives the code to the neighbor, or the daughter-in-law. The security is gone," says Becker.

And often the key is gone too, taken by someone who forgot to return it, giving paramedics no option but to break through a window or door.

Lockbox programs go to great lengths to ensure only emergency personnel have access to the lockboxes. “When emergency responders arrive and see our key decal on the door, they know there is a lockbox,” Becker said. “They radio the dispatch unit, and the dispatcher will find the address in the computer. Usually they will then call the rescue personnel back on a cell phone [with the entry code] rather than the police radio—because a lot of people listen on police scanners.”

Even with those precautions, Becker said, he always goes out to the house the following day to reprogram the lockbox and put a new code into the police computer. Approximately 130 lockboxes have been distributed in Arvada, a community of 102,000. “We probably use the lockboxes 10 to 12 times a year for emergencies,” says Becker.

Arvada residents Donald and Carol Littlefield, both in their 70s, say the program gives them peace of mind. “I travel frequently and leave my husband at home,” says Carol Littlefield. “We’ve never had to use the lockbox, but just knowing it’s there gives me comfort. If something goes wrong, I have a tremendous sense of relief.”

Residential lockbox programs are surprisingly easy to start and not too expensive to maintain, if the right people take an interest. To find out if a program exists in their community, residents or family members can contact local emergency services—usually the police, fire or sheriff’s department. Each program has its own qualifications for participation. In the Arvada program, for example, members must be at least 60 years old, or disabled and at least 18.

Typically, lockbox program participants provide emergency contact information, medical information, doctors’ names, burglar alarm codes and pet information. The data may be stored inside the lockbox or in the emergency department’s computer system, so it can be retrieved at a moment’s notice.

Community programs frequently provide lockboxes free to those who qualify. Some request a one-time fee, ranging up to \$150, from those who can afford it. In some communities, grants from hospitals or civic organizations help underwrite the programs.

In many communities, commercial buildings have lockboxes so police and fire departments can gain entry if a security or fire alarm goes off in the middle of the night. Local emergency departments can advise citizens if these programs are available for homes, too. Realtor associations are also involved in some residential lockbox programs. One of the largest is in the Phoenix area, where more than 700 lockboxes have been placed over the past seven years.

In Sedona, Ariz., a program is run by the Sedona Verde Valley Association of Realtors. Ann Ziller, who heads the program, personally installs lockboxes on homes and then makes sure the seven different fire districts in the association’s region are aware of where a lockbox is located. Although real estate agents participate in the organization and installation of the lockboxes, only rescue units—not real estate agents—have keys that fit the boxes.

The association received a grant from the state and from several companies to pay for the boxes. The vast majority of people with lockboxes receive them free.

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