

Safety Apps vs. Personal Security Systems: It's Time to Understand the Differences

There's been a surge of Safety Apps in the Real Estate space since my mom, REALTOR® Beverly Carter, was murdered in the fall of 2014. Through her legacy, the Beverly Carter Foundation, I've traveled around the country advocating for agent safety, and I've come across many, many products and services that can help. Nothing will protect an agent better than situational awareness and taking basic safety precautions, yet technology can absolutely enhance safety.

The "Safety App" is one powerful technology tool, but it's a relatively new phenomenon. As such, there are broad sets of features and capabilities. Through the years I've seen dozens of offerings, and initially my "test" of effectiveness was solely based around if I felt it could have saved my mother's life. As I've become more aware of the many ways that agents are victimized, I've realized it's time to start talking about some basic standards the real estate industry can get behind.

Don't assume just because it's a Safety App it will meet your needs in an emergent situation. Let's begin by discussing the significant differences between a "Safety App" and a "Personal Security System." You do NOT want to end up with a "Safety App" that may not work under specific situations. "Personal Security Systems" are far more robust and can mean the difference between life and death in the most extreme scenarios.

I want to introduce for discussion a set of standards to help people identify the differences between a "Safety App" and a "Personal Security System." With so many options to choose from, it's easy to focus on one feature – or price – and move along with your choice. However, there are some critical questions that need to be asked before entrusting your personal safety – or the safety of others – to technology.

My goal here is to provide a quick checklist of questions you should consider when choosing technology for your own safety or the safety of others. As more agencies and even boards/MLSs start making these tools available, it's important that they're asking the right questions.

If you answer "No" to any of these, the app you're reviewing is a Safety App, not a Personal Security System. Isn't it time for them to raise the bar?

1. Does it Work if the Phone is Disabled/Destroyed?

First and foremost, 99% of Safety Apps rely on the phone to do all the work. A quick test of any app is to arm it and put it in airplane mode and wait to see if any alerts are sent.

Why is this important? iPhone and Android devices can both be either turned off or put into airplane mode without having a passcode. Of course, a phone can be destroyed easily as well. So it is ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL that the system works under these circumstances.



2. Does it require the User to Interact During an Emergency?

This is an important consideration and often overlooked. Many safety apps require the user to push a button or interact in some way with their phone for help to be alerted.

But in real-world emergencies, people are rarely able to access their phone and interact with an app. An attacker certainly isn't going to wait around. If there is a medical emergency of some kind, the user may not be conscious.

The standard approach is to arm the system and start a countdown timer of some sort. This would be activated prior to an event – whether that's showing property or an open house. If the user does not disarm the system prior to the countdown timer expiring, then alerts are sent (so long as it works even if the phone is destroyed – See #1).

3. Can the System Be Disarmed without a Passcode?

I've seen more "Safety Apps" than I can count which can be simply disarmed without requiring any kind of authentication. Ideally, this is a PIN or password, not a finger print – bad guys have access to your fingers, whether you want them to or not.

4. Can Photos be Stored Remotely AND Securely?

Another important feature is whether photos can be stored remotely. Many "Safety Apps" allow for users to take a photo. Some store them on the phone only, though. This isn't all that helpful in an immediate crisis.

Still others store photos in a public Dropbox folder or some other account. The problem with this model is that if you have a Dropbox account, it can be accessed directly from the phone and the photos deleted by an attacker.

The ideal scenario is a publicly accessible location for photos/videos that is not also editable – by either the user or an attacker. This allows for much greater short-term security, but also provides forensic follow up by investigators at a later date without destroying the chain of evidence.

5. Does it Have Panic Functionality for 911?

Lastly, I've seen many safety apps with a "Panic Button" that doesn't actually call 911. They place a call to a personal contact, but this person may not be able to respond immediately, though. Without the ability to immediately dial 911, you could easily end up with a situation where no first-responders are alerted in a timely fashion.

As a final point, remember that smartphone technology is only one of several layers of safety. Situational awareness and properly vetting clients prior to a first (or subsequent) meeting is critical. Technology can certainly enhance safety; just make sure you understand the capabilities of the system you want to use. Don't assume just because it's a Safety App it will meet your needs in an emergent situation.

