

Safety in selling

Here are a few preventative measures to keep agents safe during showings and open houses. | BY TESS RAINES



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Crime prevention and safety awareness are trending topics among REALTORS® following a few well-publicized incidences involving real estate professionals. In 2015, Janice Tisdale, a real estate agent in

Texas, was held hostage during a showing by a buyer who wanted \$4,000. In what became a national case the year before, real estate agent and wealthy broker Beverly Carter was kidnapped by prospective buyers and lost her life.

It's tough to imagine Naples as an area where REALTORS® would need to think twice about their safety, but it pays to be vigilant and take the proper precautions.

Captain Tim Guerrette of the Collier County Sheriff's Office, who is also a broker for Florida Pro Realty, acknowledges that Neapolitans often take the town's general tranquility for granted. "I think because of the community we live in we have a tendency to feel really safe," he says. "People have a tendency to drop their guard because of that."

But locally, REALTOR® safety has centered around incidences in which agents found themselves the victims of stalking. Prospective buyers will see an image of an attractive real estate agent on signage, or in person at a sales center, and begin tracking them by making frequent return visits. Fortunately, these specific situations did not escalate, but Guerrette adds that victims don't usually notify law enforcement because they believe the situation doesn't warrant police intervention. To help combat this, Guerrette urges agents to use caution with their profile pictures on the internet and to always dress professionally,

in business attire. He also recommends using professional photos, not ones that were taken when the REALTOR® was at the beach with family or in another personal setting.

When it comes to showing houses, there are a number of precautions that REALTORS® can take to ensure their safety. They should first become acquainted with the area if they aren't already. Being familiar with the layout of a rural area, like Golden Gate Estates, for example, or knowing when an area will be less populated—say, a condo building off season—is an advantage. Guerrette adds that having your mobile phone completely charged is "probably the most important thing."

In the event that you're in an area with poor cell service, ask someone to go with you or tell a coworker or family member where you're going and give them the exact address. Guerrette recommends having that person contact you at a designated time if they don't hear from you first. Once you arrive at the address, park your car in a position where you can easily drive away.

For an extra layer of protection, Guerrette recommends gathering as much information on the prospective buyer as possible prior to meeting them. When clients call to schedule an appointment for a showing, Guerrette typically asks for their full name, number and a checklist of who will be coming to the showing. "It's OK to be nosy and know who you're meeting with," he says. Even setting up an initial meeting at a Starbucks to go over properties can help you get a feel for the person.

FOREWARN is a safety app designed exclusively to give REALTORS® background checks on buyers and mitigate potential risks. Inputting basic information into the app, such

as the client's name or phone number, will give the agent a rundown of the buyer's information, including any criminal history, current assets and financial risks. To subscribe to the app, the agent must fill out an online application with their real estate credentials.

It's best to err on the side of caution if you feel apprehensive about a particular person. Ultimately, Guerrette says to listen to your gut. "Go with your sixth sense; that truly is probably the best," he says. "We have a tendency in real estate to please, but slow down and find out who you're dealing with and try to learn about the person you're going to show the house to." He explains that if you're feeling uneasy, it's acceptable to bring another REALTOR® with you or cancel the appointment altogether and reschedule for another time.

Hosting an open house doesn't usually allow agents the advantage of knowing who they'll be dealing with, but it does give them the opportunity to scope out their surroundings. Guerrette tells REALTORS® to familiarize themselves with the home, including where all the doors are and how they unlock. He adds that Florida homes typically have glass sliders with intricate locking mechanisms, so an agent should know how they operate before officially opening the home.

If an agent is sitting in an open house alone, he or she can prop open an emergency window, but Guerrette warns against doing this for any additional doors or windows. "If you open up everything, people can get in every way, as well," he says. "It's good to have a one-point entry with knowledge of how to exit if needed."

Adhering to this advice allows REALTORS® to gain control and gives them the chance to avoid a potentially risky or unsafe situation.