



# A HAUNTING TALE

## Two Ohio REALTORS® Killed While Showing Empty Homes

The article by the Daily Mail Reporter reads as follows:

article link here

The recent headline is

disturbing and

concerning to all of our

members, “Is a serial

killer targeting real

estate agents in Ohio?

Police launch hunt

after two realtors are

killed while showing

empty homes”.

*Police fear they may be hunting a serial killer after two real estate agents were murdered while showing empty homes for sale.*

*The murder victims were killed within days of each other this week and a third realtor was threatened and robbed of her purse after meeting a would-be client at a rental apartment.*

*The attacks all happened in the same area of northeast Ohio and now police have warned local realtors to postpone open houses and not to go alone when showing vacant properties.*

*Vivian Martin, 67, was found on Monday strangled in the kitchen of a burning home that had been vacant and on the market. Police said the fire was started by arson.*

*The next day, the body of 51-year-old Andrew VonStein was found shot once, also in vacant ranch-style home up for sale about 40 miles west of Youngstown in a lakefront community near Kent State University.*

*‘A lot of agents are really scared and upset,’ said Suzanne Brown, an office coordinator at RE/MAX Valley Real Estate in Youngstown, where all 24 agents in her office have cancelled open houses scheduled for this weekend.*

*She said the office has stopped taking on new clients until police are confident that all suspects are in custody. Ms Brown is reminding agents to take standard precautions when showing homes, such as following the prospective buyer into the property and not bending down or turning your back to the clients.*

*Agents are also being encouraged to meet new clients at the office, get identification and verify that they are pre-approved for loans, all to help ensure that the potential buyers are serious and credible.*

*One of the victims, Mr VonStein, a prominent real estate agent who had worked in the Kent area for 32 years, was reported missing by his family when he failed to come home from work Monday night.*

*Police tracked the agent, of nearby Ravenna, using a device in his car parked outside the tidy ranch home, which sits on half an acre of tree-shaded land with a swimming pool. Property records show the home, which sits across the street from a lake, is worth about \$235,000.*

*The agent who was robbed was showing a vacant apartment building in Boardman Township, outside Youngstown. She was told she’d be killed if she called police, said Boardman police Capt. Donald Hawkins. Her name was not released.*



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As you can see, your profession is risky due to the large numbers of strangers that you meet at the office, in vehicles or at properties while conducting your real estate business. As we have discussed in the past, the following safety tips may reduce your vulnerability for criminal acts and increase your safety awareness.

- Remember that your attire and behavior should always reflect professionalism and confidence as a means of preventing many dangerous situations. Avoid expensive and flashy jewelry as it could potentially mean to an offender a way to buy drugs. Wear shoes you can run in and fight-off an attacker if the situation arises. It is not unusual for individuals to have more power than they thought they did when confronted by an attacker. Screamers, biters, fighters and kickers are often successful in fleeing from an attack or robbery.
- You should never meet an unfamiliar or unqualified prospective client alone at any time. A pre-qualified prospect that meets with you at your office is less likely to assault you. If you have any suspicions about a potential client, then have another agent accompany you to any showing. As a matter of company policy, it makes good sense to check identification and record license plate numbers.
- Always take your own car and have a prospective buyer follow you to any showings. You do not have to play the role of chauffeur. Do not fall for the excuse that "I am from out of town". When you leave your car, make sure that you lock it even if you do not intend to be at the property very long. You should have pepper spray on your key ring and in your car at all times as well as your cell phone with you and programmed for 911 on speed dial. Previously establish a "code" word or phrase (i.e. red property disclosure form) with your office that signals to them when you are in danger. Make sure your office knows where you will be, who is with you and when you will return. It is always prudent to tell your office in front of the prospect that will be following you to a property.
- When showing a property to a prospective buyer, always let the prospect walk in front of you. You want to avoid at all costs being pushed from behind and/or a door locking behind you. Avoid going into any areas with a stranger/prospect that are confining in nature such as an attic, loft, basement or any detached structure. You can also inform a neighbor in advance that you will be showing the house next to theirs and ask them to report anything unusual. Never become so occupied with the property and its amenities that you forget what the prospect is doing at all times.
- Most important, REALTORS® have very good instincts, and you should trust them! For instance, if you have unsettling feelings (like the above scenario) even about a well-dressed person driving an expensive car, then cancel the showing if necessary. Also, asking a lot of questions in the beginning of a client relationship can be extremely informative. You always have the option of having a colleague accompany you, especially during night-time hours. Criminals prefer to operate under isolated circumstances and in darkness. However, if you are still suspicious, then it is always better to walk away.

In short, the best way to protect you from becoming a crime victim is to follow basic safety precautions in all aspects of your real estate business. Hopefully, all offices will be proactive and will notify other offices as well as law enforcement officials of any dangerous situation that poses a threat to other brokers and agents. Last, make this year the time that your real estate firm has regular safety discussions and safety office policies in place.

**In addition to the above safety tips, NAR has promoted a field guide to REALTOR® safety and discussed the six most dangerous situations for our members. □**

NAR guide to REALTOR® safety link