

NorthstarMLS Introduces “Strong Authentication”

November 10, 2008: A couple weeks ago, NorthstarMLS announced plans to implement a security initiative designed to provide optimum protection for valuable MLS and customer data. Our reliance on usernames and passwords as the sole form of user authentication is no longer an option. With the advent of easy-to-use web-based systems, password sharing has become even more widespread. Whether these passwords are used by non-subscribers who fail to pay their fair share, or unauthorized data pirates, the simple truth is that the MLS is no longer a subscribers-only system.

Controlling access to the MLS is now more critical than ever, since it is no longer just listing information at stake. MLS systems now include a host of contact management applications that store personal information about clients and prospects. With transaction management system adoption on the rise, access to the MLS system now provides open access to a whole new world of sensitive property and personal financial information. Subscribers of NorthstarMLS have an *ethical* obligation to protect the personal information of their customers and clients. It is only a matter of time before subscribers may also be *legally* obligated to protect this information.

In order to deal with the inherent weaknesses in our current password-based login authentication system and to provide a greater level of protection for listing, consumer and financial information, NorthstarMLS will implement a security process known as SAFEMLS “*strong authentication.*” In reality, we are all familiar with “*strong authentication*” already. A common example of strong authentication is an ATM or bank card. Such cards are called ‘tokens’ in IT security parlance. Tokens require something you have (your card), and something you know (your PIN). “*Strong authentication*” eliminates password risks by providing multi-factor (more than one level) authentication. Best of all, “*strong authentication*” is not new behavior for us, as we can all relate to the ATM card example. In addition, the MLS electronic lockbox system is another form of “*strong authentication*” as it operates on something you have (your lockbox key) and something you know (your PIN code).

During the week of January 19th, 2009, NorthstarMLS will begin phased implementation of the SAFEMLS Strong Authentication product in partnership with Clarity Security and Secure Computing. Secure, one-time-use passwords for MLS access will be delivered to you via a key-fob token that you will receive in January. It easily attaches to a key chain for quick access. Just press the small gray button to obtain a password!

NorthstarMLS wants to assure each of our subscribers that we are working to protect the valuable data and information in the MLS. More information on the product will be provided to each of our subscribers in the coming weeks and in the following FAQ document.

SAFEMLS Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

How will I log on to NorthstarMLS using the SAFEMLS secure system?

You will enter three pieces of information: Your Agent ID, a four-digit PIN number that you create (as you do for an ATM card), and a one-time single access password generated by your SAFEMLS token. Initially, the SAFEMLS system will be launched in parallel with our current log-in system. This will allow you to fall back on the old system for a period until you get accustomed to the new system.

What is the SAFEMLS token?

Hardware token, or key-fob



Description: The original authenticator, the Clarity Security blue token, is cost-effective, convenient and easy to use. The slim line device measures about 1" X 2" and easily attaches to a key chain for quick access. Just press the small gray button to obtain a password! The numbers on the face are large and easy to read.

Cost: FREE if your MLS account is current at the time tokens are distributed. There will be a one-time charge for new users subscribing after the launch and for replacing lost or damaged tokens.

How much will this cost me?

The ongoing cost of the SAFEMLS system is included in your MLS fees. There is not a separate charge for it. Key-fob tokens will be provided free of charge to all NorthstarMLS subscribers who are active users (and paid up to date on their MLS account) when the system is launched. New subscribers joining after the launch will be charged a one-time fee for the token.

When is this happening?

The SAFEMLS authentication system will be rolled out starting the week of January 19, 2009. Initially, it will run in parallel with the current login system for a period to allow subscribers time to get their tokens, register them online and get used to the new system.

When and how do I get my token?

Tokens will be distributed starting in January. More details on distribution will be coming soon.

How does this affect office staff that use NorthstarMLS?

Every person who accesses NorthstarMLS will be required to do so through a SAFEMLS token, including both licensed and unlicensed office assistants. The Associations are in the process of working with the brokers to identify all the office assistants who will need a token. The system allows an assistant's token to be set up to access multiple agents. So if you support several agents, you will be able to log on with your own token and have access to the accounts of all the agents you support, so you can still easily do their listing maintenance. If an assistant leaves the company, the broker must retrieve the assistant's token which is deactivated and then re-registered for the new assistant. If the outgoing assistant's token cannot be retrieved, a new one must be purchased for the replacement staff.