

Free Babysitting Provided in Wells Fargo Vault

Recently, a fourteen-month-old baby spent four long and frightening hours surrounded by safe deposit boxes after she was locked inside a Wells Fargo Bank vault in Conyers, Georgia.

Picture This. . . .

A little girl and her mother arrive at Wells Fargo Bank to visit with her grandmother, a bank employee. While mom and grandmother visited, the toddler wandered unnoticed into the safe deposit vault. As bad luck and poor security procedures would have it, the vault door time clock was set, the door was shut and the toddler was now locked inside. The baby immediately started to cry when the lights went out and was detected by a security camera monitoring the inside of the vault.

Police and fire department personnel arrived quickly. They pumped oxygen into the vault while waiting for a police escorted vault door locksmith. After four tense hours of drilling through solid steel, the toddler was returned unharmed to her frantic parents and grandmother.

History Repeats Itself

A few years earlier, at another Wells Fargo (San Francisco) branch on Christmas Eve, the same “free overnight accommodations” were provided to another unsuspecting consumer. Daniel Goldberg, an 81-year-old attorney spent two nights (more than 40 hours) locked inside the bank’s vault. Fortunately for Wells Fargo, the attorney took it in stride and decided not to sue. Had he chosen to do so, Wells Fargo Bank might now be known as Goldberg National Bank.

Other Nationwide Lock-Ins

Unfortunately, these are not isolated incidents. They are only two of many such vault lock-in horror stories. There have been others nationwide, including a sweet 86-year-old lady from Tacoma, WA, a Georgia bank president, an eighteen-month-old baby boy and several other elderly box renters. One lock-in victim was even a dog belonging to the Chairman of the Board. The dog was in the facility on a Saturday afternoon when he decided to play hide-n-seek with his master. You can easily guess where he decided to hide. Each of these cases could have resulted in serious liability, injury or even death, all of which would mean significant losses for these institutions.

The Solution

The only way to prevent these situations and reduce your potential risk is to have correct access and vault closing procedures that are followed consistently.

Listed below are five procedures that should be adopted and followed daily to protect your financial institution.

1. Vault door day gate must be secure at all times.

Keeping the day gate closed and locked will prevent anyone from wandering into the vault unsupervised. This not only keeps con-men out, it also restricts small children and dogs with a curious nature.

2. Inspect the vault area and viewing rooms under dual control.

The vault interior and viewing rooms should be inspected thoroughly to prevent lock-ins. This should be done at closing time when the vault door time clocks are set. In your vault door opening and closing log book, where the number of hours set on the time clock are recorded, you should have another column (that is initialed under dual control) to indicate that the vault interior and privacy rooms were thoroughly inspected.

3. Turn off the vault lights before locking the door.

After the lights are turned off, wait at least 10 seconds. If during that time you hear a scream, cry or growl coming from inside the vault, consider it your first clue that the door should not be shut and locked at that time.

4. Never leave anyone in your vault alone.

This is the safe deposit "Golden Rule". No one should ever be left alone in your vault. Renters should be escorted to a viewing room outside the vault to conduct their transactions. If viewing rooms are not available, the attendant should stay in the vault with the renter, but far enough away that the renter's box contents are not observed.

5. No viewing rooms inside the vault.

Having viewing rooms located inside your vault increases the chance of forgetting a box renter at closing time. If your viewing rooms are located inside now, they should be routinely checked before and after each transaction and again at closing time to make sure no property, person or pet was left behind.

In Conclusion

Following correct procedures is your only safeguard to assure that none of these unfortunate lock-in situations ever occur at your institution. If your institution is not concerned about or willing to adopt these closing procedures or believes they are too much trouble, it is strongly recommended that you remodel your vault and install restrooms to accommodate your future "overnight guests".