

Domestic dishonesty on the rise warns Justicia

"My spare cash is missing – it must be the maid!" That's an all too common war cry in households across South Africa.

However, according to Alan Carey, operations director of Justicia Investigations, the sad reality is that crimes committed by domestic workers are on the rise, and employers need to know how to deal with this constructively.

According to Statistics South Africa, more than one million people work as domestic servants in South Africa. As with most crimes in this country, though, there are no available statistics to indicate how serious the situation is.

Cases investigated by Justicia during the first half of 2013 have increased by 70 per cent on the number of cases handled during the first half of last year. In July alone, Justicia investigated 10 incidents in the greater Durban area.

Crimes investigated by Justicia cover a wide range – from stealing money or jewellery to staged break-ins, to more sophisticated crimes such as passing on information taken from

bank statements and financial documents to syndicates.

"Although most theft within homes involves opportunistic, petty theft, criminals do use vulnerable people earning low wages to get information," he warns.

Mr Carey puts the increase in what he formally terms "domestic dishonesty" down to a combination of the pressures of a tight economy – rising food prices and taxi and bus fares – as well as old fashioned greed. Theft of items such as jewellery are often discovered well after they have occurred, making it difficult to recover items.

"A domestic crime is painful and stressful because it has happened so close to home. Small things lead to bigger crimes and, once a trust relationship has been violated, it is gone. Unfortunately, people don't act when they should because they are often afraid that the culprits will come back," he says.

However, he stresses that if correct procedures that protect the rights of both employer and employee are followed, and homeowners are aware of and use the expertise available to them, this seldom happens.

A broad guideline is that employers of domestic workers should take the same approach as they would in the workplace. An expensive professional labour expert is not always needed, but employers should follow standard disciplinary procedures, document a disciplinary hearing and, should the crime be proved, get the perpetrator to sign an admission of guilt before dismissal.

Most importantly of all, he says, employers should do a full evaluation and pre-employment check on new employees, especially those in a position of trust or caring for children or the elderly.

"How well do you know the people that are working for you? Few employers even know the addresses of their own domestic workers. Rather than simply going by a referral from a friend or family member, you need to interview applicants, find out where they have worked before, and then contact those people. Like we do with our own staff, you can even do a pre-employment polygraph."

He says that polygraphs are often seen as a last resort, but are actually an invaluable screening tool. He says tests conducted by Justicia's polygraph division have uncovered applicants with criminal records and identified known and wanted felons. Polygraphs are easy to organise and cost around R600 which is far less than the value of what could be stolen.

Mr Carey adds that using an independent third party helps during sensitive investigations. "When you suspect a person in your own home, you are usually right, 90 per cent of the time. When we listen to a person, we take out the emotion, look at the circumstances and extract the details. We take the problem away from the employer."

He adds that every investigation needs to be handled individually. "There's a different solution for every problem. If a suspect is particularly volatile, we often go the covert camera route.

One of our clients, who had a large CD collection, noticed that this was shrinking. We put a camera in the room and saw the gardener putting the CDs in an empty bucket while acting as if he was cleaning windows."

In another instance, says Mr Carey, a polygraph did the trick after a Durban resident who employed two maids suspected that money was missing. When one told her she had seen her colleague pocketing money from a cash box, she went this route to avoid counter accusations. Ahead of the actual test, the culprit admitted to stealing medicines and money.

Mr Carey says Justicia believes in "a soft approach" with polygraphs, stating that these are for insurance purposes and include the home owner. In one instance, a domestic worker, who passed such a test, had been accused of stealing by an aged employer, disclosed that her aged employer had Alzheimer's and frequently misplaced things. The missing item was soon found.

However, he also advised that home owners should prevent unpleasant situations by locking away valuables and not leaving money lying around.



Alan Carey, operations director of Justicia.