

FALSE ALARM REDUCTION REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Intrusion alarms have been extensively used since the 1950's to protect businesses from being victimized by burglars. In recent decades alarm systems have been increasingly used in residences by homeowners to achieve an increased sense of security. Alarm systems are now often routinely installed with higher end residential construction. Over the period of the last fifty years there has been an ambivalent love – hate relationship between police and the topic of intrusion alarms. Burglaries reported while in progress by alarm, or a third party, are one of only two categories of crime in which the on-scene arrest of perpetrators has been regularly linked to rapid police response. Through crime prevention initiatives police departments over the years have encouraged business and homeowners to harden their premises by installing alarm systems. Such systems were encouraged partly to retain businesses as viable entities in high crime areas and also to foster an overall sense of security among residents and businesses.

The high level of false activations associated with intrusion alarm systems has, however, been a vexing problem to police agencies. False alarm rates of ninety seven to ninety nine percent are routinely experienced. At a time of increased demands for police services in general the high level of false dispatches associated with alarm response is increasingly recognized as frustrating and wasteful. It is estimated that Connecticut police agencies currently dispatch officers to about 300,000 alarm calls each year. The continuing growth in private alarm installations and their associated demands on police departments mandate that alarm related dispatches be effectively managed and that strategies be put in place to proactively reduce a needless drain of public police resources.

Background:

On November 27, 2007 Glen Mowrey appeared before the CPCA Board of Directors to discuss a series of initiatives begun by several other State Chief's Associations to manage and reduce the continuing problem of false burglar alarm activations. Mr. Mowrey, a retired Deputy Chief of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department, appeared as a current representative of the Security Industry Alarm Coalition (SIAC). He was accompanied by Chief John Lowry of the Johnson City Police Department. Chief Lowry was the current president of the Tennessee Association of Chief's of Police and a member of that association's Alarm Management Committee.

Mr. Mowrey reported that SIAC had partnered with twelve State Chief Associations to develop statewide approaches to reduce the number of false alarm dispatches and, in turn, the wasteful drain of limited police resources created by such needless responses. The program adopted by the various states usually entailed three common elements. They included:

- 1) A model ordinance recommended for adoption by municipalities across the State which included a registration process and imposed an escalating schedule of fees targeted to that small segment of alarm users who were responsible for patterns of repeated false activations. The model ordinances being put forward by the participating State Associations are streamlined versions of the Model Ordinance originally developed and adopted by the IACP and the National Burglar and Fire Alarm Association in the mid 1990's.
- 2) A requirement for Enhanced Call Verification. This requirement can be enacted by local ordinance but some State Associations have pressed it through state law. It requires that alarm monitoring facilities make a minimum of two phone calls to separate numbers to attempt verification of the validity of the alarm before requesting a police agency to dispatch an officer. Industry research had shown such multiple call verifications can immediately eliminate 30% of the current requests for police service.
- 3) A requirement that all new alarm installations or replacements must utilize alarm panels which meet the current ANSI SIA CP-01 standard. Such control panels include features which reduce the accidental tripping of panic alarms and provide time delays and features which facilitate the alarm users canceling false activations.

Chief Lowry recounted the positive experience his State's Association has had with the Alarm Management Program. He joined Glen Mowrey in urging CPCA to consider adopting a similar approach to reducing false alarm dispatches. In closing, Mr. Mowrey stated the SIAC was purported to offer its time and assistance in helping the Association launch and sustain such an endeavor.

Following this joint presentation, CPCA President Kevin Hale asked the Private Security Committee to review the available alternatives for false alarm reduction and to present a paper and recommendation on that topic to the Board of Directors. This document was prepared in response to that directive.

General Approaches to False Alarm Management

Police departments nationwide employ four distinct strategies in confronting the issue of intrusion alarms. Each of those strategies is briefly discussed below along with the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

- 1) Non-Regulation: There are communities that have no regulation attendant to alarm management. Those police departments respond to all alarm reports received. The departments maintain a reactive posture toward alarms and there are no consequences to alarm users for the use or misuse of their alarm systems.

Some police agencies in jurisdictions with relatively low workloads prefer this reactive posture because alarm calls bolster workload statistics. Some sheriff's departments and police agencies in higher level socio economic communities welcome the alarm calls as a way of demonstrating they are there to deliver service to voters and/or individuals who are paying high level of taxes but otherwise have little interaction with their local law enforcement officers. While a reactive posture toward alarm management may serve department interests in certain circumstances, it can be a hard position to maintain as workload demands and public expectations increase and department resources do not.

- 2) Full Cost Recovery: This unique strategy has been employed only in and around the City of Toronto, Canada. At the time an alarm system is activated, alarm users are required to elect through their alarm monitoring service whether they wish to have a private guard service or the municipal police dispatched to their premises to check out any alarm activation. If the alarm user chooses a police response he is agreeing up front to reimburse the municipality for the associated costs (normally around \$75 per call). The municipality directs all its billings to the alarm monitoring service not the alarm user.

The Toronto area approach is unique. Because billings are to the alarm service the police departments do not have to deal with the broad spectrum of alarm users. Because the alarm user must elect between the response of the police or a private security service at the time they contract for alarm monitoring services all issues of costs are laid out at the beginning of the system's operation and are part of the regular contract process between the customer and the alarm monitoring services.

The Toronto Police Department reports favorably on this approach indicating they have experienced a greater than 60% decrease in false alarms while at the same time they have generated sufficient revenue to underwrite the costs of twenty-four (24) police officers. While acknowledging the approach is effective in curtailing false alarm activations and the unnecessary drain of police resources, the alarm industry has been cooler toward this approach as it squarely places them in the middle as responsible for all revenue collection. While this strategy appears to have many positive features, it is an approach which appears only to be viable where a very specific set of conditions make it workable. Those conditions include: a) a very large metropolitan police agency or a sufficiently large and solidly unified coalition of police agencies to command such a direct attention from the alarm monitoring industry; b) a sufficiently high density of alarm users in respect to land area making a guard service response an economically viable alternative; and c) the legislative authority and administrative structure to require, administer, and enforce this alarm management process. As the "800 lb. Gorilla" in that area of Canada, the City of Toronto was in a unique position to enact this strategic approach.

- 3) Verified Response: Departments employing this approach will not dispatch an officer to any alarm call, other than a duress or holdup alarm, until the alarm has been “verified” as a real incident requiring on-scene police presence. Verification generally must be accomplished by a third party (e.g. the owner, employee, guard service, etc.) checking the premises before the police department will dispatch an officer to an alarm call. Some jurisdictions also accept secondary electronic means such as audio and video monitoring or multiple zone activations to satisfy the verification requirement for sending an officer.

The verified response strategy achieves the greatest results in eliminating false alarm calls from the police dispatch system. Police agencies, which have employed this strategy, report as high as 90% reduction in their alarm related dispatches. While introduced and strongly endorsed by Salt Lake City in 2001, only a small number of jurisdictions (approximately 20, mostly in far western states) have embraced this approach. A few larger cities (i.e. Milwaukee, Dallas and Fremont) adopted verified response.

As much as it can be counted upon to reduce false alarm dispatches, a proposal to adopt a verified response strategy can be expected to generate a political maelstrom. In several police agencies, staff level individuals enamored by the call reduction benefits of verified response have failed to brief their chiefs of the predictable controversy that will greet a proposal to stop the traditional police response to alarm activations. Alarm users, business owners and the security industry will all come out in full force to argue that the police are deserting them or, at least, putting cost saving ahead of concerns for their safety and security. To illustrate the risks of verified response, they are likely to point to the City of Dallas which within one year of instituting verified response reversed that action after a store owner in the process of verifying an alarm activation was attacked by the burglars who were still on scene. In several communities the proposal to initiate verified response never survived legislative review.

IACP’s Private Sector Liaison Committee has reviewed the topic of verified response. Acknowledging the significant false alarm reduction benefits of verified response that Committee has urged caution in embracing this new concept too quickly as there are still many unknowns about its effects. Their reservations regarding verified response revolved around several areas of concern. First was that verified response in many communities’ runs contrary to much of the encouragement police crime prevention efforts have given to alarm installations, particularly in communities characterized by high crime, fear and disorder. Second the Committee had reservations about the state of the guard industry in many states and its capability to provide a quality response to business and residences. There were questions regarding hiring, regulating and training guard personnel. Similarly there were unknowns such as whether guard response in rural and suburban areas is even economically viable. Similarly, there were concerns that private guard responses might be red lined out of high violence areas. Of most critical concern to the IACP Committee was the fact that the long

term effects of police not responding to alarm calls was unknown as to its effects in arrest rates and crime deterrence.

- 4) Abuse Management: This strategy imposes sanctions on that segment of the alarm user population responsible for multiple false alarm activation. The approach starts with the recognition that a small portion of the alarm users (less than 10%) account for the majority of the false alarm activations in every community. Rather than withdraw police response from the vast majority of the alarm user population which uses those system responsibly the focus of this approach is to crackdown and educate the small segment habitually responsible for repeat alarms. The most effective programs of this type involve well organized tracking of alarm incidents and proactive follow up in applying sanctions. Where actively implemented such programs have achieved 40 to 60% reductions in alarm activations. To be effective the strategy does require continual proactive management, but in addition to the substantial saving in officer time by not responding to false alarms these programs generate sufficient revenue to more than pay for the work necessary to properly implement them.

Because this strategy focuses on the small segment of the population abusing or failing to properly manage their alarm systems so as to needlessly consume expensive public police resources, the reasons for the program of sanctions is easily understood and supported by legislative bodies, the security industry, and alarm users in general. The most widely known and tested program of this type is the Model Ordinance developed and tested by the alarm industry in conjunction with the IACP. That dispatch reduction program includes these best practices:

- registration of all alarm systems
- multiple phone calls from the monitoring station to the alarm user to verify the validity of the alarm activation
- graduated fine structure
- suspension of response to the most recalcitrant abusers
- processes for appeal and reinstatement

The alarm reduction programs now being pressed by Chief's Association in other states advocates the use of an updated and streamlined version of the original Model Ordinance.

Several jurisdictions in Connecticut already have ordinances which apply some type of fine or fee schedule to repeated alarm calls. As shown in survey responses from a cross section of the State's police agencies, the degree to which those ordinances are actively enforced varies. Some jurisdictions, such as Glastonbury, have recorded an almost 40% reduction in alarm calls while generating almost \$65,000 annually in revenue from registration fees and response charges. The Police Department utilizes about \$20,000 from those added revenues to fully underwrite the cost of part time staff and mailings to manage the program. Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) has successfully used an aggressive fee structure to

significantly reduce false alarm activations by over 60% in the past decade during a time when alarm installations in that jurisdiction almost tripled. A unique feature of that jurisdiction's program is that all tracking and billing activities are handled by a private firm which remits a portion of the collective revenues back to the City, in addition to reimbursing the City for the salary and benefits of 2.5 full time employees..

Connecticut Practices:

In an effort to determine the state of alarm management within Municipal Police Departments a survey was conducted. A survey instrument was distributed through the Connecticut Police Chief's Association (CPCA) to over 90 police departments in the State. As a result of the survey 34 responses were received. The largest departments responding to the survey were Danbury and Waterbury. Six of the responding departments had no alarm management policy or town ordinance.

A number of statistics were gleaned from the survey. Over 90% of alarms received were determined to be false. The overall percentage of alarms received when compared to all calls for service was 10% or less. The survey indicated that those departments that had actively enforced alarm management programs generated a significant income stream on a regular basis. Some department's revenue was significant due to the graduated fines' system in their Town Ordinance. (The survey responses are attached to this report as Appendix A)

Another significant development concerning alarm management was Public Act 07-246. This bill became effective 10/01/07, and was in part an effort to establish an escalating fine structure for false alarm activities answered by the State Police. The legislation covered only those communities serviced by the State Police for their general policing needs. This bill does not address a number of the provisions inherent in more comprehensive alarm management programs. Attorneys for the Department of Public Safety are continuing to research how to implement its provisions.

Alarm Management Program:

In the past four years twelve State Chief's Associations have established Alarm Management Programs. They include:

Florida	Indiana	Minnesota
Georgia	Alabama	North Carolina
Tennessee	Texas	Mississippi
South Carolina	Virginia	Okalahoma

As reported in Glen Mowrey's report to the Board of Directors in November 2007, there is great similarity in content and approach in each of these State Alarm Management programs. Each of those efforts has involved:

- 1) The formation of an Alarm Management Committee consisting of Chiefs, representatives of the alarm industry who are also associate members of the Chief's Association, and a representative of the Security Industry Alarm Coalition (SIAC). The Committee is responsible to monitor new developments and approaches to alarm reduction, on one hand, and to encourage and support efforts to achieve alarm reductions in interested municipalities or through state legislation.
- 2) A draft alarm ordinance which has been endorsed by resolution of the Association and which is recommended for use whenever departments and municipalities are adopting or revising an alarm management ordinance. The ordinance adopted and espoused in each of the twelve states is very similar. It is focused specifically toward the abuse management strategy outlined above. (A copy of such a draft ordinance is attached as Appendix B)
- 3) A resolution by the Chief's Association that all departments and municipalities are encouraged to support and require Enhanced Call Verification. That process requires that alarm monitoring stations make more than one call to reach users and/or contact persons to check the validity of the alarm before requesting a police response. That added requirement alone has been demonstrated to eliminate as much as thirty percent of the false activation requests. The State Chief's Associations in Tennessee and Florida successfully lobbied to have the requirement for Enhanced Call Verification adopted as state law. (Note: By resolution in 2002, the IACP urged local jurisdictions to adopt requirements mandating multiple call verification. Resolution attached as Appendix C)
- 4) A resolution that all municipalities are encouraged to require the use of alarm control panels which meet ANSI SIA CP-01 Control Panel Standards for all new alarm system installations and panel replacements. Those standards incorporate specific features proven to reduce false activations. While this requirement to meet the ANSI control panel standard has normally been incorporated into individual municipal ordinances, the Texas Chief's Association pressed legislation which now makes that requirement a state law. (Note: By resolution in 2006 the IACP urged all facets of the alarm industry to use this ANSI standard. Resolution attached as Appendix D)

SIAC has provided resources and support to the Alarm Management Committees in the above listed States. They have made Glen Mowrey available as a resource person to the various state committees providing input as to alarm management initiatives nationwide and fostering the exchange of information between each of the participating states' committees. State Alarm Associations, working through the Chief's Committee, have also provided resources to underwrite the cost of associated educational brochures in Georgia and Florida. (A copy of a Georgia flyer is attached as Appendix E)

Summary and Recommendations:

Burglar alarm activations constitute approximately ten percent of the police dispatch workload statewide. The overwhelming majority of those activations are the result of

human or mechanical error resulting in more than 90% and perhaps as high as 99% of the alarm activations being false.

Many residents and businesses rely upon alarms to protect their dwellings and place of business. Those alarms provide an increased sense of security for a segment (about 10-15%) of the populations our departments serve. In some communities police have encouraged the use of alarms as part of target hardening crime prevention efforts. While the alarm users have an expectation of public police response, the level of false activations constitutes an adverse and wasteful drain of public police resources paid for by the broader tax paying community. As alarm installations continue to increase, as police responsibilities increase without a commensurate growth in staffing and as increasing fuel costs argue for the elimination of needless and wasteful police response there is a need for effective management of intrusion alarms.

The alarm industry recognizes the need to reduce the requests for police response to baseless alarm activations and they have demonstrated a willingness to partner with State Police Chief Associations in twelve other states to field effective Alarm Management Programs. The approach built around the framework of the Model Alarm Ordinance developed jointly by the alarm industry and IACP's Private Sector Liaison Committee represents the most politically viable and tested approach to false alarm reduction. A unified approach to alarm management statewide offers a common framework for Chiefs to speak to their local legislative bodies, to educate the media and the general public on this issue, and to establish corrective measures which are focused on those abusers who repeatedly fail to use or maintain their alarm systems properly. A unified approach to alarm management would additionally allow the Association to advocate and support legislative initiatives, such as requirements for enhanced call verification and alarm control panels, which have been proven effective in identifying false activations and reducing the number of needless requests made to police departments by alarm monitoring stations.

Accordingly, the Private Sector Committee recommends the Association formally initiate a State Alarm Management Program. To that end it is recommended that the Association:

- 1) Establish an Alarm Management Committee, as outlined above, to oversee and direct alarm reduction initiatives;
- 2) Adopt by resolution the draft alarm ordinance attached as Appendix B as the statewide model municipalities are encouraged to use when establishing or modifying their alarm management ordinance.
- 3) By resolution encourage all municipalities to incorporate in their ordinances a requirement that alarm monitoring centers calling for police response must utilize multiple call verification.
- 4) By resolution encourage all municipalities to incorporate into their ordinances requirements that alarm installers utilize alarm control panels which meet or

- exceed ANSI SIA-CP-01 standards for all new installations and panel replacements.
- 5) Actively pursue and support State legislation which requires the use of multiple call verification and the ANSI SIA-CP-01 standard.

Implementation of the recommended type alarm ordinance has been found to significantly reduce the level of false alarms in the jurisdictions in which it is proactively enforced. It has been shown also to generate a significant revenue stream from both registrations and response charges. Implementing and managing the ordinance, however, entails significant costs and work for the police department. In advocating for the implementation of an active alarm management program Departments should point to the positive revenue stream as a way to bolster their case for needed staff and operating expenses to be added to their budget.