By Glen Mowrey

Increase Efficiencies, Reduce FALSE ALARMS

When alarms just get to be too much

The recession has dried up revenue streams for local governments. This has caused cities and counties to make deep cuts in public safety services, which is often the largest part of their operating budgets. Forced to do more with less, local governments are searching for ways to increase efficiencies in their police, fire, and emergency medical services. In one area—reducing false alarm dispatches—jurisdictions can see immediate results.

The leading call for service of police dispatch is usually alarm calls, and 98 percent of those calls are false. User error causes up to 90 percent of all false alarms. Most false alarms happen when businesses are preparing to open or close. Also, as people leave for or come home from work, they sometimes inadvertently set off their house alarms. In the fast food industry, where there is a high turnover of employees, alarms are routinely set off because new employees do not know how to work the alarm systems.

All of this creates an enormous undue burden on our public safety services. For every alarm call an average of two police officers respond, for an average of 20 minutes per officer. Over the course of a year, this is a tremendous amount of officers' time—time that could be spent being proactive and preventing crime.

Model Ordinance

To reduce the strain placed on law enforcement by false alarms, law enforcement and the alarm industry developed a model alarm ordinance (available at the website www.siacinc.org). The model ordinance includes registration guidelines, a graduated fine structure, new equipment standards, enhanced call verification, suspension of response to chronic abusers, and an appeal process.

The ordinance is recommended for use by local and state agencies in the development and perhaps revision of existing alarm ordinances, and it is a component of an overall alarm management program that includes cost recovery and an educational campaign.

A unique practice is enhanced call verification or multiple call verification. Under this program, the central station operators first call the customer's premises and then, if necessary, call a second customer-provided phone number like a cell phone in order to attempt to verify an alarm before law enforcement is called. This practice has resulted in false alarm dispatch reductions of up to 70 percent.

Law enforcement agencies across the country using the model ordinance and employing its best practices have seen significant reductions in alarm dispatches while realizing substantial revenue streams from their programs.

Marietta, Georgia, reduced alarm calls 65 percent in two years with annual revenues of $223,050 in 2008 and $94,800 in 2009; Johnson City, Tennessee, reduced alarm calls 50.1 percent over a four -year period; and Union City, Tennessee, showed a reduction of 55.4 percent over a four-year period.

During a 14-year period, the police department in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, brought down its percentage of alarm calls, out of total calls for service, from 20.1 percent to 2.4 percent annually, netting 13.5 police officers and an annual revenue in 2009 of $334,470, which includes a reimbursement for 2.5 full-time employees from an outsource company contracted to administer the billing and tracking component.

The alarm factor shows, on average, the number of dispatches per system per year. In 2005, Charlotte-Mecklenburg's was 1.5 alarm calls per year, per system. During 2009, the factor was 0.1958 or fewer than 1 alarm call every five years.

Problem Solving

Local governments can develop their own alarm management programs. The first step is to create a committee of police, alarm industry professionals, and community stakeholders. Reducing false alarms requires a form of community policing because everyone has a role to play.

Next, using the model ordinance, create a city or county alarm ordinance. The ordinance will establish rules, guidelines, and responsibilities for law enforcement and companies that install and monitor alarms. Plus, it will require the disciplined use of alarm systems by alarm users.

Ordinances along with an effective and ongoing community education program will help create efficiencies in public safety services. They help prevent officer complacency when responding to calls and place a greater value on citizens properly using their systems.

"The forging of a partnership between local government and its law enforcement agency can bring tremendous results to local and state governments and their law enforcement agencies by working closely with the alarm industry to reduce requests for alarm dispatches. This is at the core of community policing . . . identifying and solving problems together," relates Bruce Glasscock, executive director of the Plano, Texas, Public Safety Services and Technology Department.

Julie Burch, assistant manager, Charlotte, North Carolina, says, "The key to developing a successful and sustained alarm ordinance and alarm management program is working with stakeholders from the beginning. In Charlotte, our alarm reduction program, which now is in its 14th year, exceeded our expectations not only in reducing alarm dispatches but also in cost recovery. I believe the partnership with the alarm industry has been a key to our success." PM

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