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Features

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NOV 14 1994

ACQUISITIONS

False Alarms
By John J. Moslow

1 *False alarms present a serious threat to a police department's effectiveness.*

152737

Combating Bank Fraud in Arizona
By Howard D. Sukenic and James G. Blake

8 *Law enforcement agencies in Arizona join forces to protect consumers and financial institutions from fraud.*

152738

Infant Footprints
By Michael E. Stapleton

14 *Using infant footprints to establish personal identity illustrates that effective crime-solving techniques need not be high-tech.*

Civilian Services
By Bruce D. Wilkerson

21 *Increased use of civilian employees can help departments provide better police coverage at a lower cost to taxpayers.*

152739

Controlling Public Protest
By Daniel L. Schofield

25 *First amendment principles should guide departmental decisionmaking in controlling public protest.*

152740

Departments

6 Police Practices
Crime Scene Vehicle

18 Focus on Cooperation
The National Law Enforcement Council

13 Call for Manuscripts on Technology

20 FaxBack

17 Unusual Weapon
Foul Fountain Pen

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152737-

152740

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False Alarms Cause for Alarm

By JOHN J. MOSLOW

152137

Today's police officers respond to approximately 13.7 million emergency alarm calls nationwide each year. Ninety-eight percent of those calls are unnecessary for one reason or another. To some, these numbers may appear relatively benign when compared to other crime sta-

tistics of concern to the public and law enforcement.

In reality, however, false alarms present a serious threat to the effectiveness of police departments and to the safety of the communities they serve. Ironically, this threat stems from the desire of many citizens and businesses to

protect themselves better from crime. While media reports focus on increases in violent crime, the rate of property crime has risen even more dramatically, from 1,726 per 100,000 citizens in 1960 to 4,903 per 100,000 in 1992.¹

One direct result of this upsurge in property crime has been an explosion in the number of monitored alarm systems. It is projected that by the end of 1995, police departments will be responding to a staggering 40 million emergency alarm calls.² Unless communities take action to bring the number of false alarms under control, police officers soon may find themselves devoting much of their time responding to false alarm calls, or in effect, working for private security companies.

The larger threat, however, is to the citizens who have become so fearful of crime. As police resources become strained beyond capacity, the safety of all citizens is unduly

jeopardized by the rising number of false alarms.

LOCAL FALSE ALARM ORDINANCES

To address the problem, many municipalities have taken the initiative and enacted false alarm ordinances. Are these ordinances effective in reducing the number of false alarm calls? Are they cost-effective and worth the effort? Most important, do they ultimately enhance or diminish citizen safety? Because the ordinances reflect a variety of approaches and differ considerably in scope and effectiveness, police executives should be familiar with the range of false alarm ordinances enacted.

Case Study: Amherst, New York

The town of Amherst, located in western New York, implemented an "avoidable alarm ordinance" in 1993. Amherst is one of the most affluent and fastest-growing

communities in the region. The construction of upscale residential subdivisions and a boom in commercial retail development coincided with an increase in demand for police service.

The Amherst Police Department, comprised of 147 sworn officers, responds to an average of 50,000 calls for service annually. Statistics verify that a growing number of these calls result from the triggering of private alarms. Responses to alarm calls increased from 15 percent of the total number of calls for service in 1988 to 18 percent in 1992.

The town organized an alarm ordinance committee to address the issue of false alarms. The "avoidable alarm ordinance" became effective on January 1, 1993. This ordinance specifies no charge for the first five false alarms, a \$25 charge for the sixth and seventh, and a \$50 fine for every false alarm thereafter.

By April 1, 1993, the police department designed and integrated an alarm notification and billing program into its existing computer-aided dispatch and records management systems. The program required a minimal number of clerical staff hours for managing the statistical data and billing. Still, it proved very successful: From April through December 1993, the ordinance generated nearly \$19,000 in fines.

More important, these measures reduced the number of false alarms. During the last 9 months of 1993, the number of false alarms fell by 223 when compared to the same period in 1992. Although the reduction may appear rather modest



Captain Moslow serves as the police alarm coordinator for the Amherst, New York, Police Department.

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(six fewer alarms per week), the ordinance succeeded in curtailing the upward trend of false alarms and effected a decrease in calls, even as the number of new alarm installations continued to grow.

Other Municipalities

The measures adopted by the town of Amherst, while effective, are considerably less stringent than those of other municipalities. The range of ordinance provisions demonstrates how municipalities can design measures to address specific conditions. For example, the Boston, Massachusetts, Police Department responds to approximately 40,000 burglar alarm calls annually, 99.5 percent of which are false. Boston residents now face a \$50 fine for a third false alarm, \$100 for a fourth, and \$200 for all subsequent false alarms.³

The ordinance enacted by the City of Savannah, unlike those in Amherst or Boston, targets only commercial properties. The escalating fee schedule allows for five false alarms prior to triggering a \$90 fine for the sixth. Fines then increase from \$90 to as much as \$750 for the most flagrant violators. However, the ordinance allows business owners to undertake corrective measures within 72 hours of the avoidable alarm, whereby the police department will not assess the fee.⁴

USER PERMITS

False alarm ordinances represent only one way municipalities can address unnecessary alarm calls. To regulate and control flagrant abusers, as well as the types of alarm systems installed throughout the community, many

municipalities require an "alarm user permit." A permit application process allows the municipality's governing agency to ensure that an applicant's alarm system satisfies a set of predetermined requirements and specifications. Such specifications may require that all alarms

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installed within a municipality possess an automatic cutoff feature that disables the audible alarm after a 10-minute period. To reduce the strain on police and emergency resources, a permit procedure also may deny approval of any system with an automatic dialer feature connected directly to the enhanced 911 system.

Permits can be subject to suspension or revocation depending on the number of avoidable or false alarms received from a particular address. Or, the police department may assign a lower priority for discretionary response to such locations. Winnipeg, Ontario, and Nassau County, New York, are among several North American municipalities that currently employ or plan to implement a user permit system.

Winnipeg, Ontario

Before installing new alarm systems, residents and businesses in

Winnipeg must submit alarm permit applications to the police department. The applicants then are assigned a permit number and issued a decal that must be displayed on the premises in a location readily visible to patrols. If the site generates three or more false alarms within a 6-month period, or if the keyholder refuses to attend an alarm call, the police department can suspend the permit for a period of 6 months. The city attributes a more than 28-percent decrease in false alarms to this by-law.⁵

Nassau County, New York

The Nassau County Police Department currently receives more than 100,000 alarm transmissions annually; fewer than one percent indicate actual emergencies. Although the department repeatedly had warned, cited, and even fined alarm owners, the number of violations did not decrease significantly. As a result, Nassau County proposed an "automatic alarm permit system" to target alarm abusers.

The proposed plan would require all alarm users to register with the police department and to pay a prescribed fee for a permit, which could be suspended or revoked contingent on whether false alarms persisted. In addition to enhancing the overall safety of the community, county administrators project that such a program could generate \$1 million the first year and \$400,000 in subsequent years.⁶

ALARM VERIFICATION

Some municipalities have taken the next step beyond an alarm permit system and now require some form of verification prior

to responding to alarm calls. In Canada, two large police departments now require businesses to provide them with additional proof of a possible burglary before they respond to an alarm.

Toronto, Ontario

The Metropolitan Toronto Police Department responded to 131,000 alarms in 1988. False alarms constituted 98 percent of this figure, with an estimated cost to the police of \$130 per call. In response to this drain on police resources, Toronto adopted a policy whereby the police department could suspend response for 1 year to a location generating four unnecessary alarms within a 365-day period. This strategy resulted in an immediate 4-percent reduction during a brief testing period. More significant, however, was a reduction of more than 20 percent when the alarm verification phase was implemented.⁷

Edmonton, Alberta

The Edmonton Police Department no longer responds to "one-hit" alarms. If an alarm is triggered, the police wait for verification that another alarm, such as a motion detector, has been tripped from inside before responding. Officers also look for suspicious activity or signs, such as footprints, near a door or window.

While the Edmonton policy has reduced the number of false alarms, it also has been criticized as too restrictive by the Canadian Alarm and Security Association, which labeled it a "back door approach to create a nonresponse policy." The police commission has agreed to study the policy and the alarm association's concerns.

CONSIDERATIONS

Any proposed alarm legislation must be well thought out and researched. To ensure an effective and equitable approach, administrators

- Will the fee increase with excessive misuse?
- What government agency will collect the fees and what sanctions will be placed against alarm owners should they neglect to remit the fee imposed?
- What policy and procedure will be established for administrative review enabling property owners to challenge a false alarm charge?
- If service is suspended or a permit revoked, under what conditions can service be restored or a permit be reinstated?

Defining an Avoidable Alarm

Perhaps the cornerstone of any legislation is the definition of an avoidable alarm. The Town of Amherst defines this as "...the activation of an alarm system

through mechanical failure, malfunction, improper installation, or the negligence of the owner, user, custodian, or lessee of an alarm system, or of his employees requiring an emergency response, when in fact an emergency does not exist." The definition also includes "intentional activation of an alarm when the activator knows an emergency does not exist."⁸



should come to detailed, comprehensive answers to a series of questions through debate and research:

- What constitutes a false alarm, or put another way, what is the definition of an avoidable alarm as opposed to an unavoidable or excusable one?
- How many false alarms will be permitted before service is suspended or a fee is assessed?

The classification of false alarms should not include alarms activated by violent acts of nature or similar causes beyond the control of the user or owner of the alarm system. Nor should it include circumstances in which the activator reasonably believed that an emergency situation existed.

Community Education and Support

Most false alarms result from user error or negligence. Therefore, it is vital for alarm vendors, the police, and local governing bodies to enhance community awareness and understanding of the false alarm problem. As many municipal governments have found, the local news media can be a highly effective means to communicate with the public and to solicit support. The community must embrace the intended purpose of any alarm statute as a way to promote the safety and general welfare of all residents by reducing the number of unnecessary emergency responses.

To engender the public perception of fair play, any statute should include a provision for issuing warning notices to alarm owners, as well as a grace period prior to the assessment of any penalty fee. Should the public view the alarm statute as "another revenue-making scheme," residents may begin asking, "Why do we pay taxes?"

Not only could the statute prove unpopular but the police also could suffer widespread loss of community support. Because of the reasoned implementation of Amherst's "avoidable alarm ordinance," as well as a proactive public

information effort on the part of the police department, the majority of residents now understand the need for and support the ordinance.

Police Effectiveness

Police executives should not underestimate the many factors that surround this issue. Even in communities that have yet to experience any overt problem directly related to

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the excessive triggering of avoidable alarms, the indirect effects may already have been felt.

Repeated response to false alarms breeds a sense of complacency among officers that can lead to a potentially dangerous situation should an alarm call prove to be legitimate. At the same time, police executives and municipal leaders must also consider the financial ramifications of a civil lawsuit should a tragedy occur due to a delayed police response to another false alarm call.

For police executives faced with streamlining operations, false alarm statutes can reduce the

number of false alarms. These statutes also enhance the safety of officers and citizens alike, improve officer morale, increase the number of police units available for legitimate calls and preventive patrol, and produce revenue at the expense of those who abuse community resources.

CONCLUSION

False alarms represent a disruptive and potentially dangerous drain on police resources. It is a problem that has grown as the public's fear of crime has increased. However, municipalities have an array of regulatory options available to them to address this issue.

By enacting such measures as false alarm ordinances, alarm user permits, and alarm verification regulations, municipalities can, at the very least, curb an upward spiral of false alarm calls. At best, these approaches can enhance community safety while freeing more officers to respond to those citizens who truly need their assistance. ♦

Endnotes

¹ "Violence in America," *U.S. News and World Report*, 17 January 1994, 23-33.

² Lee A. Jones, "The Alarm Industry: Friend or Foe to Police Officers?" *The Police Chief*, August 1991, 24-25.

³ *Corporate Security Digest*, February 1, 1993, 4-5.

⁴ Savannah Department of Police, "Article N. Police Administrative Fees," Section 3. Flagrant violators are classified as those properties generating 51 or more false alarms.

⁵ National Executive Institute Report, "Ideas for Cost Reduction/Increased Productivity in Law Enforcement Operations," Federal Bureau of Investigation, May 1991.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Town of Amherst, Erie County, New York, Local Law 12-1992.