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Law Enforcement Battles False Alarms

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Each year, more than a million new burglary alarm systems are installed in the U.S. by businesses and citizens concerned about crime. In fact, the number of burglar alarms in use in America grew from 17 million to 35 million in just the last eight years, according to Stan Martin, executive director of the Security Industry Alarm Coalition.

Unfortunately, along with alarm systems come false alarms, which strain the time, manpower and budgets of police and sheriff's departments. Faced with numerous, repeat false alarms, cities and counties are fighting back, adopting a variety of strategies to reduce the number of false alarms, and to recover the cost of responding to them.

“Radical” Non-Response Strategy

According to Ron Walters, a director of the SIAC, the most radical of the strategies developed by cities and counties is a non-response policy. Under this approach, police and sheriffs' departments simply assume that burglar alarms are false and will not respond unless a third party confirms that an actual criminal event has taken place. Still other agencies broadcast the call over the police radio and leave it to officers' discretion as to whether they have time to respond – or whether to ignore the alarm. Fortunately, of the approximately 18,000 local law enforcement units in the U.S., he says, only about 28 entities have adopted such policies or variations of it.

Martin, who chairs an alarm committee for the International Chiefs of Police, says that the chiefs feel that non-response policies are “an unfortunate choice.” People purchase alarms for peace of mind and to prevent burglaries, he says, adding, “Mainstream law enforcement considers alarm systems a valuable deterrent, and most will not stop responding.”

Enhanced Call Verification

Instead of ignoring burglar alarms, more jurisdictions across the U.S. are going to Enhanced Call Verification, a policy developed by the alarm industry. Under ECV, when there

is an alarm, the alarm company must make a series of telephone calls (to at least two separate numbers) to the homeowner or representative of a commercial property to verify whether or not there is a reason to contact the police or sheriff's department. ECV can help a jurisdiction reduce false alarms by 30 to 40 percent – or more. For example, Walters says that Boulder, Colorado, which was the first jurisdiction to test the ECV approach along with a cutoff of service for three or more false alarms within a six-month period, was able to cut its false alarms by 62 percent.

Seeing the success of the ECV approach, the legislatures of Texas and Virginia have passed statewide ECV requirements. Yet ECV is not the complete answer. It is helpful, Walters says, “but it can accomplish only so much without ordinances” that require registration of burglar alarms and penalties for repeated false alarms.

Cost-Recovery

Phoenix, Arizona, is among the cities that are requiring such registrations and issuing fines in an attempt to take the burden of responding to false alarms off the general taxpayer. Phoenix, population 1.3 million, charges alarm owners \$75 – the cost of a police response – each time officers are dispatched to a false alarm. Other cities and counties have implemented much steeper penalties based on a sliding scale, with fines increasing if false alarms mount in a given period.

For example, Olympia, Washington, with a population of 46,000 that swells to almost 90,000 during the day when workers flood into the state capitol, has established an alarm registration process costing \$25 per year for residences and \$35 for commercial buildings. While some jurisdictions allow one “free” false alarm per year, in Olympia, an alarm user is charged a service fee of \$60 for each false alarm to which police respond; the third false alarm within in a one-year registration period results in a 90-day suspension of police response.

While some jurisdictions put the income from fines and fees into the general fund, Olympia earmarks the revenue for the budget of the police department. “The up-front registration fees cover the cost to administer the alarm-reduction program,” says Laura Wohl, management analyst for the Olympia Police Department, “while the fees for service get people’s attention.” Indeed they do. In 2002 the City of Olympia was averaging 250 false alarms a month; today they are responding to average of just 61 per month. This significant drop in false alarms is a result of combining ECV, annual registration, no free alarms, service suspension, and effective administration of the program.

Belleview, Nebraska, a city of 44,000, began its current cost-recovery program on a test basis in 2003. Within the first 18 months, Belleview experienced a 50 percent decrease in false alarms and the collection of \$100,000 in fines. Captain Herb Evers of the Belleview Police Department and graduate of the 188th session of the FBI Academy, says that the combination of a \$25 annual registration fee, one free alarm per registration period, and fines of up to \$250 for a third false alarm in a year saved police time, money and equipment use.

The approach “got commercial property owners to pay attention to their alarm systems, instead of just giving the key to a new guy to open the shop. It freed up our police officers to do their other duties,” Evers says. Money generated by the cost-recovery program in Belleview goes to the police department’s budget, with some helping to buy response-related equipment such as lights and sirens, to pay for some vehicle maintenance and to offset the rising cost of gasoline.

In Omaha, Nebraska, population 390,000, registration fees are \$25 and \$35 per year for residences and commercial properties respectively. One free false alarm is followed by fines increasing to \$200 for three or more false alarms in a registration period. “Some people objected that this was pretty steep, but it gets expensive for the city when the cops have to respond time and time and time again because someone is being careless,” says Irene Wolfe, the city’s revenue manager.

Kevin Sherwood, detective lieutenant with the police department of Rahway, New Jersey, and graduate of the 207th class at the FBI Academy, says some citizens were displeased with having to register their alarms and being faced with fines. “But it wasn’t as much [displeasure] as I had anticipated,” he says. “We explain that we want to use our limited police resources as best we can. We want to use them wisely, not waste them responding unnecessarily to false alarms.”

SIAC’s Martin agrees. He believes that 100 percent cost-recovery is both “desirable and achievable.” Without cost-recovery, he says, “all the taxpayers are subsidizing the 20 percent of people who have alarms.”

Cost-recovery is an approach that not only trims the number of false alarms, but also improves officer morale (“Officers hate responding to false alarms,” Wohl says) and helps bolster the revenues of local jurisdictions. But there are drawbacks.

Establishing a good program to reduce false alarms is the first step, but many jurisdictions fail to plan for the second step: enforcement and administration of such a program. Typically, existing staff are required to administer the false alarm reduction program along with their many other responsibilities. Police and sheriffs’ departments may also fail to properly budget for the administration of the program. Many times this leads to false alarm reduction programs not being enforced, or being enforced “when we can get to it.”

To solve the administration burden of a false alarm reduction program, a number of police and sheriffs’ departments are turning to an outside source: third-party administration companies. Olympia, Rahway, Omaha and Belleview are among the communities that have outsourced their cost-recovery program.

Third-Party Administration

Alarm Tracking and Billing Services is a company that specializes in helping communities administer their alarm programs. Zina Zelesnik, vice president of ATB Services, says that it can be very expensive for a jurisdiction to hire additional personnel, and to procure and maintain equipment and software to enforce and administer a false alarm reduction program. Many jurisdictions also lack the expertise in administering a program, educating the public about false alarms, and working with the alarm industry to use proven techniques and best practices to reduce false alarms.

With a third-party company like ATB Services a jurisdiction can “plug right into” a wide range of services, Zelesnik says, from developing a model ordinance to alarm permitting and registration, communicating with alarm companies, tracking and billing for false alarms, providing reports and documentation, processing of fees, supporting the appeals process, educating citizens and businesses about false alarms, and coordinating collections for bad debts.

Typically, the fees for professional third-party administration of a false alarm reduction program are paid from the revenues generated by the program, Zelesnik says, so there is no need for the jurisdiction to hire employees or budget for program expenses.

Wolfe says that working with the third-party company utilized by Omaha has been “an extremely good experience.” The company is very customer-oriented she says, and has “taken the burden of dealing with customers” off of the local government. Sherwood says outsourcing Rahway’s cost-recovery program has been extremely successful. “We hired a company that knew what it was doing and was far more efficient than we could have been,” he says. The company has been very responsive to the community’s needs, he states, tweaking procedures to meet Rahway’s needs as necessary.

“The company is really accommodating,” Sherwood says. “We have no money out of pocket, no hassles, and fewer false alarms. It’s a win-win situation for us – and for the taxpayers.”