

Verified Response Really Does Work

Law Enforcement endorsing this paper are:

Las Vegas Metro



Salt Lake City, Utah



Arvada, CO



Salem, Oregon



West Valley City, Utah



Broomfield, CO



Lakewood, CO



Westminster, CO



South Salt Lake, Utah



Verified Response Works in Our Cities

Introduction

The police departments of Las Vegas Metro, Nevada; Salt Lake City, Utah; Eugene, Oregon; Salem, Oregon; Arvada, Colorado; Broomfield City and County, Colorado; Lakewood, Colorado; West Valley City, Utah; Westminster, Colorado; Burien, Washington and South Salt Lake City, Utah have joined together to recommend this guide to city leaders and police jurisdictions interested in learning from the experience of cities who have solved their false alarm dilemma.

In 1998, police in our nation responded to approximately 38 million alarm activations, at an estimated annual cost of \$1.5 billion. In the United States alone, “solving the problem of false alarms would by itself relieve 35,000 officers from providing an essentially private service.”¹ It is important to note that a surge of growth since 1998 increased the number of installed systems by at least 50%. The industry did not fix the false alarm problem before the growth; consequently the alarm response workload for the police in many cities has increased significantly.

An alarm signal is NOT an indicator of a criminal activity. A traditional alarm system can only detect motion – not criminal intent. They report human error, system malfunctions and abnormal conditions, most of which have little to do with crime.²

Las Vegas Solved Their Problem

As more and more cities and police departments face limited resources and budget cuts, a logical area of reduction is unproductive calls for service; that being alarm responses, which are consistently 98 – 99% false. Las Vegas solved the problem in 1991 by creating the practice known as “Verified Response” (VR). They continue to practice it today and have experienced 13 years of success.³ Deputy Chief Mike Ault with Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department states that, “First, the alarm company is, by default, contracting government services without our approval. Not only is that rude, but it is illegal.”

VR shifts alarm signal verification to alarm companies by requiring an eyewitness such as a private guard responder or a video camera (CCTV) with interactive audio to verify that a crime has or is occurring before police are dispatched. Some police departments developed slight variations in the plan such as requiring dual zone verification or broadcast and file which leaves response determination to officer discretion; based on officer knowledge, current circumstances and the false alarm history of the premise. Police departments implementing VR continue responding to the human activated alarms, such as hold-up, panic and duress. These types of alarms continue to be 98% - 99% false,

¹ Sampson, Rana (2002). “False Burglar Alarms.” Problem-Oriented Guides for Police Series No. 5. Published by the U.S. Department of Justice and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS).

² Jones, Lee. (2004). “Selective Citizen Privileges.” Report to Mayor and City Councils.

³ McLaughlin, Sandra (2004). “Las Vegas Statement on Alarm Response.” Spokesperson for Las Vegas Metro Police Department.

but generally are only 10% of alarm responses. Moreover, panic and hold-up alarms are generally human-activated as opposed to mechanically activated, and assumes (perhaps falsely) they are legitimate calls for help.

A report published by the U.S. Department of Justice and written by Rana Sampson entitled, "False Burglar Alarms" cited Las Vegas and Salt Lake City as having the "best response" by requiring alarm companies to visually verify alarm legitimacy before calling the police.⁴

The Alarm Industry's History of Attempts at Solving the Alarm Problem

The alarm industry has long been aware of the false alarm issue. Shortly after the start of mass marketing in the early 1960's, the false alarm problem had grown so large that law enforcement felt compelled to deal with it by introducing the first false alarm ordinances in 1972. These ordinances were largely unsuccessful at curbing the problem and with the continued growth of the alarm industry, and under additional pressure from law enforcement, the alarm industry made their first attempt at dealing with the problem in 1984. In a joint effort with the International Association of Chiefs' of Police (IACP) an Alarm Efficiency Task Force was formed. Their recommendation called for user education, state licensing, dealer training, equipment testing and telephone verification to solve the false alarm problem. With no great success from this program and after commission of several false alarm studies, the alarm industry again attempted to deal with this issue in 1992 by creating the False Alarm Coalition Effort (CARE). In 1994, the IACP, FBI and police departments joined together to develop the False Alarm Resolution. In 1995, the alarm industry introduced the Model States Plan and now in 2004 the Security Industry Alarm Coalition (SIAC) was formed. This group has introduced the two-call telephone verification or Enhanced Call Verification (ECV).⁵

Attempts have recently been made by the alarm industry to influence state legislators to require mandatory police response to alarm signal verification. State Senator Jeff Plale (D-South Milwaukee) said he will introduce a measure in January requiring police departments in the state to respond to all burglar alarm calls.⁶ Members of the North Texas Alarm Association appeared before the Texas House of Representatives Law Enforcement Committee in August, 2004 to propose "Mandated Police Alarm Response."

Law Enforcement was told that by following the alarm industry advice, cities would recover their cost of enforcement and reduce the number of police responses to false alarms. All of these alarm industry efforts heavily burden the police with the responsibility for reduction and enforcement of the false alarm problem. To date, none of these programs have had long-term success at either false alarm reduction or cost recovery.

⁴ Sampson, Rana. (2002). "False Burglar Alarms." Problem-Oriented Guides for Police Series No. 5. Published by the U.S. Department of Justice and the COPS Office.

⁵ National Burglar and Fire Alarm Association (2004) "Industry and Association History." NBFAA Website.

⁶ Diedrich, John & Borowski, Greg J. "Alarms Sound Over Policy Change." (Sept. 18, 2004) Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

Dr. Simon Hakim, Professor of Economics at Temple University, who is one of the leading experts in the country and has studied this issue for the past ten years said, “Reducing the government monopoly as alarm response provider would result in more competition, would lower cost to society, improve quality of service, and reduce the government bureaucracy of managing the alarm unit. This solution will entail public provision of the public good aspect of alarm response and private provision of the private good aspect of false alarm response. Response to false alarm activations is a nuisance and a waste of at least ten percent of local police budgets. Police Chiefs have been complaining about the problem of false alarms for many years. A variety of alarm industry and public policy initiative solutions have been tried and shown to have been largely unsuccessful.”⁷

Model States Plan - Large Effort, Little Results

The group of cities endorsing VR would like to go on record as stating that the Model States Plan does **not** work. It is better than doing nothing about the false alarm problem, but it leaves the city and police department holding the responsibility for; tracking alarms, issuing warning letters, billing, collections, false alarm prevention, suspension or no response programs (due to a high number of false alarms) and registering alarm users with permits. Issuing permits has **NOTHING** to do with the false alarm problem. It is merely a means to financially support the bureaucracy created to deal with the problem. The Salem, Oregon Burglar Alarm Task Force (2003) stated: “The information contained in active permits may not be current or may not be available at the time of alarm response dispatch, which relegates the alarm permit to simply an administrative function with little or no real value in responding to alarm calls.”⁸

The Model States Plan leaves a city with the brunt of responsibility for fulfilling a private civil contract that was agreed upon by two private parties (alarm company & alarm owner), with neither the city nor the police department being a participant in that contract. Alarm companies have no control over police priority on alarm response nor the backlog of police calls; and yet alarm representatives have been known to promise an unrealistic and unattainable police response time to their future customers⁹.

As author Anne E. Schwarts states: “Increased fines alone are not the right solution. More fines don’t do much to put that cop on the street where he or she belongs. Sure, customers don’t mind footing the bill for their own false alarms because they feel that’s part of the protections they pay for. But private alarm companies don’t have the right to use our public safety professionals as an added-value service for their businesses. Alarm companies can make their personnel available by setting up patrols while sworn police

⁷ Buck, Andrew; Blackstone, Erwin & Hakim, Simon. (2004). “Evaluation of Alternative Policies to Combat False Emergency Calls.” Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁸ Salem, Oregon Burglar Alarm Task Force. (2003). “Report to Mayor and City Council.”

⁹ Salt Lake City Police Department. (2002). “Verified Response: The False Alarm Solution.” Innovations in American Government Awards Top 100 Programs.

officers, paid for by all the taxpaying public, can engage in the kinds of preventive patrols that have been shown to reduce crime.”¹⁰

Time and time again it has been proven in cities that the first year or two the Model States Plan will result in a 15 – 25% reduction in alarm responses. Then, the results level out as the ordinance enforcement lessens, the number of new alarm systems increase and law enforcement priorities change. On the other hand, cities adopting VR have achieved reduction rates ranging from 69 – 90%, holding year-after-year, and equally as important, without the administrative burden of “managing” the false alarm problem.

Two-Call Verification or Enhanced Call Verification (ECV)

The most recent proposal from the industry has been to make a second telephone call to a location apart from the alarm site. What the industry fails to mention is that after two calls, or 10 calls, when monitoring firms call the police they are still saying that they do NOT have any indication of a burglary or other criminal act, but there is some unknown trouble with the system. It is not a “verification” process, but a filtering process. Bear in mind that national spokespersons from the alarm industry have no control over the individual monitoring company practices. A single attempted telephone call has been the verification standard for more than 10 years and even now, not all monitoring companies practice this concept. A second phone call is unenforceable from a police ordinance standpoint. The alarm industry can adopt this concept without a mandate from Law Enforcement. While enhanced verification is to be encouraged, ECV alone is not an all-encompassing solution to the false alarm problem.

80-20 Claim

Another claim by the alarm industry is that 80% of the false alarms are caused by 20% of the users. Salem, Oregon¹¹; Arlington, Texas¹²; and Seattle, Washington¹³ found this claim to be untrue. Their statistics have shown that 60 – 80% of the alarm activations occurred at premises having one or two false alarms a year. In the past, the national alarm associations had posted on their website the ratio of 1.5 false alarms per premise per year which is a more accurate representation of many alarm systems having a few false alarms.

Crime Rates

Opponents claim that burglaries are on the rise in cities which have adopted VR. Verified Response is designed to reduce police response to excessive false alarms. It was never designed, nor is it intended to deal with property crimes.

¹⁰ Schwarts, Anne E. (2004) “Reason for alarm: False alarms take cops from real crimes.” On Milwaukee.com.

¹¹ Salem Oregon Burglar Alarm Taskforce (2003). “Report to Salem Mayor and City Council.”

¹² White, Jennifer. (2002). “False Alarm Paper to Arlington Mayor and City Council.”

¹³ Garnica, Detective. (2004). “Percentage of alarms on first and second alarm signals.”

Based on the FBI Uniform Crime Report, the first full year (2001) of VR in Salt Lake City realized a minimal 1.8% burglary increase. In 2002, there was a 12% increase in burglaries. For 2003, Salt Lake City burglaries decreased by 6.4%. A long-range view of Salt Lake City burglaries shows that they have **decreased by 32%** from 1991-2003.¹⁴

Burglaries in other VR cities have appeared to be typical of crime statistics, which are generally very cyclical in nature. Opponents of VR tend to exclaim very loudly about any burglary increase is due to police implementation of a VR style ordinance. While the burglary rates in 2003 increased by only 12% in Arvada, Colorado (a VR city), Seattle (not a VR city) experienced a 20% increase in residential burglaries¹⁵. In any study of this issue, notice the failure of alarms to produce any significant number of arrests. Seattle police in 2002 responded to 24,505 alarms, of which 325 were valid alarms, and they arrested 46 suspects. The overwhelming proportion of false alarms meant that the cost per arrested Seattle burglar was \$31,444.¹⁶ Police response to alarm signals has not proven to be an effective crime-fighting tool.

LA Story

Give your taxpayers the right to expect their police officers to respond to real calls for help. Allow officers to be proactive in your city in preventing crime, rather than chasing a ghost signal. As LAPD Chief Bratton said, "The 15% of the patrol resources we now spend chasing false alarms ... that 15% of officer activity could be focused in the parks, in the schoolyards, on the streets -- prioritized, focused patrols in areas where we know we have problems."¹⁷ Chief Bratton was convinced that VR was the correct solution for LA. Due to political pressure on the city council from the alarm industry and the lobbyists they hired, VR was not implemented. Instead, a different alarm ordinance was passed. Now alarm owners are allowed two false alarms in one year and, then, placed on no response. They will be fined \$115 on the first alarm with a 45-minute to 3-hour response. LAPD is burdened with tracking false alarms, no response premises, permits, warning letters, billing and the collection process. A private guard response in LA could provide quicker response. In the rare instance that an actual crime is detected, the combined response between private guard and police would be faster than police response alone, due to the reduced priority given alarm calls by police. Recent news articles state that this program has not been able to be implemented due to the inability of the current computer tracking system and the new computer system is not expected to be online for another 18 months.¹⁸

Scare Tactics

The alarm industry when confronted with VR will send letters to alarm users in your community using emotional scare tactics and inflammatory statements. This has been the

¹⁴ FBI Uniform Crime Report (1981, 2001, 2002, 2003).

¹⁵ Heckman, Candace & Castro, Hector. (2004). "Residential burglaries are up 20% in Seattle." Seattle PI.

¹⁶ Buck, A., Blackstone, E., Hakim, S. (2004) "Evaluation of Alternative Policies to Combat False Emergency Calls." Center for Competitive Government at Temple University, PA.

¹⁷ McGreevy, Patrick. (Jan. 29, 2003). "Chief Wins Key Test on Alarm Plan." Los Angeles Times.

¹⁸ Los Angeles Daily News (April 10, 2004). Editorial.

alarm industry modus operandi throughout the nation. Outlandish statements such as these will attempt to enrage your citizens:

*Your tax dollars are not at work!¹⁹

*Shouldn't we as citizens and taxpayers, have the right of our highly trained police officers responding first to our homes and businesses?¹⁷

*Your city and police department should agree to accept the help offered from the alarm association, a strong, knowledgeable, local group of alarm dealers.¹⁷

*The Model Alarm Ordinance maintains police response, recoups police department costs in responding to alarms, and reduces false alarms through a system of permits and false alarm fee.²⁰

*If you feel that the police department policy is not fair to the citizens and taxpayers of Eugene, please contact your Mayor and your City Council Member. A listing of the elected officials in your city is attached for reference.²¹

*Your alarm company feels that the police department's action is unacceptable and we sincerely believe that your elected city officials should take a further look at this before it becomes accepted policy.²²

*Murder, rape, assault, and arson often accompany burglaries. Women and children are most often the victims.²³

The letters from alarm companies will (as a courtesy) list the mayor and city leaders' phone number and email addresses and the date of the next council meeting. Eugene, Oregon's police department proactively sent educational letters to all alarm users in their city before the inflammatory letters arrived from the alarm industry and also hired a public relations firm. Educating citizens who have only been exposed to a very one-sided view will prove beneficial to all. One thing to keep in mind – a very small, but loud minority, will appear at your city council meeting and a special interest group will have created their hostile feelings. In Salt Lake City, one month after implementation of the VR ordinance, the complaining phone calls abruptly ceased and neither the mayor's office or the city council now receive complaints about the VR ordinance.

VR Works!

Bottom line on this issue is that alarm calls are consistently 98 – 99% false. Eighty percent of your taxpayers are subsidizing less than 20% of the citizens who have alarm systems. An industry is using “free” public safety resources for private security matters.

Albert Einstein once said, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” Continuing the Model States approach and copying other cities failures over the past 30 years will bring the same results – heavy administrative/police burden and light on false alarm reduction.

¹⁹ North Texas Alarm Association (2002). Arlington, Texas

²⁰ Brinks Security (2004). Milwaukee, Wisconsin letter to alarm users.

²¹ ADT Security (2002). Eugene, Oregon letter to alarm users.

²² Brinks Security (2000). Salt Lake City, Utah letter to alarm users.

²³ Deseret Newspaper (2000) Full-page ad paid for by the Utah Alarm Association. Garren Echols.

Verified Response has worked well in our cities we believe it will work well in your city.

Contact any of the cities endorsing this paper for further information or:

Las Vegas Metropolitan
Police Department
Deputy Chief Mike Ault
Professional Standards Division
702-229-3425

Lakewood Police Department
Division Chief John Camper
Support Services Division
303-987-7302

Captain Mark Peck
Salt Lake City Police Department
801-799-3201
Mark.peck@slcgov.com

Eugene Police Department
Public Information Officer Pam Olshanski
541-682-5124

Arvada Police Department
Commander Gary Creager
720-898-6814

Salem Police Department
Sgt. Steve Bellshaw
503-588-6259

Cities who have adopted Verified Response to date are:

Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Eugene, Oregon
Lane County, Oregon
Taylorsville, Utah
Murray, Utah
Westminster, Colorado
Broomfield, Colorado
Burien, Washington

Las Vegas, Nevada
Salem, Oregon
Arvada, Colorado
Henderson, Nevada
Winnipeg, Canada
Breckenridge, Colorado
Lakewood, Colorado
Aurora, Colorado

Salt Lake City, Utah
Bellingham, Washington
West Valley City, Utah
Victoria, British Columbia
Yakima, Washington
Summit County, Colorado
South Salt Lake City, Utah

Contributors to this paper are: Deputy Chief Mike Ault, Las Vegas Metropolitan PD; Division Chief John Camper, Lakewood, Colorado; Sgt. Steve Bellshaw, Salem, Oregon PD; Shanna Werner, Alarm Administrator; Salt Lake City PD; and Lee Jones, Support Services Group.

11/2004 - (Revision from the 9/2004 paper)