

# INFORMATION CALENDAR February 25, 2014

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: ( ) Christine Daniel, City Manager

Submitted by: Michael K. Meehan, Chief of Police Subject: False Alarm Reduction Strategies

#### INTRODUCTION

A group of concerned citizens came together over the past two years to look at ways they could support the Berkeley Police Department in its efforts to be more efficient with its resources and find ways to ensure officers' focus was not taken away from their priority on crime reduction by other unrelated issues. As the group considered types of calls assigned to officers, they recognized the drain on police resources caused by responses to false commercial and residential burglar alarms. This was an issue the police department had also been concerned about for some time, and working together, alternatives to the routine response to alarms were explored.

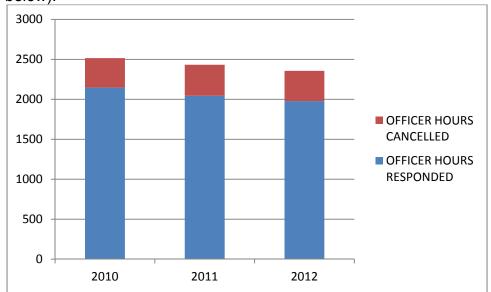
#### **CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS**

The Berkeley Police Department received on average approximately 5,000 audible commercial and residential burglar alarms and silent duress and robbery alarms each year over the last three years. Of these alarms each year some 1,700 were cancelled before officers arrived on scene, while in 3,300 cases officers arrived on scene and investigated the alarm (See chart below). A recent analysis of the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system's 2012 data revealed only 1.5%, or about 53 of the 3,400 alarm calls responded to, proved to be actual "in-progress" burglaries, robberies, or vandalism cases.

Year	AUDIBLE ALARMS	SILENT ALARMS	TOTAL ALARMS	CANCELLED AUDIBLE ALARMS	CANCELLED SILENT ALARMS	TOTAL CANCELLED ALARMS	TOTAL ALARMS RESPONDED
2010	4826	332	5158	1607	74	1681	3477
2011	4765	364	5129	1699	67	1766	3363
2012	4630	342	4972	1662	58	1720	3252

The disparity between the number of actual in-progress crime incidents and total alarm calls dispatched suggests officers' time is inefficiently used, and that review of alarm response strategies could yield significant benefits for the community.

Audible and silent alarms are dispatched as a two-officer assignment. The national average for time spent on an alarm is 20 minutes. A 2013 International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) study found a single false alarm takes 40 total minutes of officer time. Assuming 20 minutes per officer per "total alarms responded", the time spent responding to false alarms is the equivalent of more than one full-time officer (See chart below).\*



\*Note that this assumes two officers per call and will be discussed further below. "Officer Hours Cancelled" assumes officer time is utilized even on cancelled calls; the call is cancelled between the time the call is answered by the communications center and the officer arrives on scene. This category assumes 1/3 of the time for an "Officer Hours Cancelled" call versus "Officer Hours Responded" call.

Current protocols appear to inefficiently use officer resources, encourage complacency, and result in alarms being accorded a lower response priority. The City's alarm ordinance may no longer accomplish its goals, and costs of administration and resulting fines may no longer serve the purpose for which they were created.

Officer safety is compromised when the high number of false alarm reports results in complacency in officers' response to "routine" alarms. Officers may decline a cover officer because alarm calls so often prove false. On the rare occasion where a burglar may actually be on scene, the situation could—in a scenario where a suspect gains the upper hand in a surprise confrontation—have tragic results. Significantly reducing false alarms would help battle complacency, ensure officers' time is productively spent, and increase officer and community safety.

A high rate of false alarms de-prioritizes alarm calls, as compared with other calls for service. Due to the historically high number of false alarms, audible alarm calls have over time been assigned a lower priority in the City's Computer Aided Dispatching system. Currently audible alarm calls default to a Priority 3 call with a 60 minute response target, rather than a Priority 2 call with a 20 minute response goal. Given that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> IACP, "Alarm Management: Determining the Best Approach for Your Community". October 2013.

98.5% percent of alarm calls prove false, it is difficult to justify pulling officers from legitimate Priority 2 calls for service in order to respond to alarms which likely will turn out to be false. Reducing the high number of false alarms could allow the return of an audible alarm call to Priority 2 status.

The City of Berkeley's 1981 Alarm Ordinance is no longer consistent with current best practices. The Ordinance provides for fines for owners where false alarms occur. Homes are placed on a "no response" list pending payment of a fine. There is no registration component and no education component. A registration approach could help offset the costs of administering a program, and help to ensure alarm systems are properly installed, administered, and maintained. Responding officers could have higher quality information about the alarm system they are responding to. An education component could help ensure residents are using their alarm systems properly. Current fine structures could be re-examined. The existing ordinance contains no call verification protocols, which many best practices models use to reduce false alarms.

The City does not have a robust management program tracking and billing false alarms. The lack of a robust program reduces the strongest incentives to properly manage an alarm system.

#### **BACKGROUND**

According to the U.S. Department of Justice in 2011 there were 32 million security alarm systems in the United States, with the industry adding 3 million new systems per vear.<sup>2</sup>

Nationwide there has been community and law enforcement concern over the large number of false residential and commercial burglar alarms and the associated costs to municipalities. Some agencies have gone to the extreme of no longer responding to calls. Others use a "verified response" approach, where officers are only dispatched when there is additional information (aside from the alarm activation) that indicates a crime is in progress. If the only goal is to reduce false alarms, these approaches may appear acceptable.

However, there is value in an informed public's use of a properly functioning alarm system, combined with a police response to legitimate alarm calls. In fact, the BPD Community Services Bureau regularly recommends a good, well-advertised and audible alarm system as part of a comprehensive approach to securing one's property.

A Rutgers University study demonstrated "a burglar alarm, as a target-hardening measure of situational crime prevention, not only protects the home without displacing burglary to nearby house, but in fact also provides these other houses with protection

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, False Burglar Alarms 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. August 2011. Page 8.

from burglars."<sup>3</sup> The Department of Justice indicates that, "Studies from both the United States and the United Kingdom have shown burglar alarms to be among the most effective burglary-deterrence measures.<sup>4</sup>

In October 2013, the IACP published "Alarm Management: Determining the Best Approach for Your Community," a study on the issue of false alarms and associated consequences. The study found that "(T)he proportion of dispatched calls that are due to false alarms remains high, causing complacency among responding officers." However, the IACP study also noted that

"Since 2002 the International Association of Chief of Police (IACP) and the alarm industry have worked together to reduce alarm dispatches through the work of the IACP's Private Sector Liaison Committee (PSLC) and Division of State Associations of Chiefs of Police (SACOP)...Improved technology and better educated consumers, coupled with local ordinances and enhanced verification procedures, have produced a significant decrease in the number of calls for service resulting from false alarms in many communities"

The IACP study indicated that adopting a best practices approach can reduce false alarms by 50-90 percent.

In a well-advertised and attended community meeting on this topic in June of 2012, Berkeley community members clearly indicated there was little community support for a "no response" or "verified response only" approach. It was clear the community, as represented at this meeting, was committed to the need to reduce the number of false alarms, while wanting to ensure that the Berkeley Police Department would continue to respond to alarms, to the benefit of all involved.

#### POSSIBLE FUTURE ACTION

The Department will evaluate approaches which provide for reducing false alarm calls and maintaining a police response to many alarm calls. The Department foresees the issuance of an RFP for a comprehensive alarm management strategy, to include coordination of registration, fees, education, on-line services, fines, and coordination with alarm companies.

### FISCAL IMPACTS OF POSSIBLE FUTURE ACTION

Costs of an alarm management and registration approach are currently unknown, and would be determined through an RFP and negotiation process. Costs may be offset by alarm registration fees. Current inefficient systems and use of staff time would be discontinued.

<sup>3</sup> S. Lee et al, Rutgers University, "The Impact of Home Burglar Alarm Systems on Residential Burglaries", April 2008, pg. V.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, False Burglar Alarms 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. August 2011. Page 10.

## CONTACT PERSON

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