

SALT LAKE CITY

POLICE DEPARTMENT

The False Alarm Solution:
Verified Response

Judge's Commentary

The Salt Lake City Police Department's verified response to alarms stands out for several reasons. Most obvious is the impact that verified response has had on reducing the amount of police resources consumed by highly unproductive responses to intrusion alarms. Verified response achieves reduction levels that no other response to the false alarm problem has even come close to achieving, while at the same time showing evidence that it improves the overall community response to the very problem that alarms are intended to address burglary..

Salt Lake City's experience with false alarms prior to adopting the verified response approach was typical of that faced by so many police agencies. Salt Lake City officials justified verified response by detailed documentation of the problem through hard data and professional expertise. They carefully explored and noted the limitations of alternative strategies for reducing the false alarm burden. They methodically built up internal, community, legal, and political support for making the dramatic shift in police policy. Perhaps most importantly, they continue to work closely with the private alarm and security industry to ensure that all aspects of verified response, from legislation to private security training to police operations, remain aligned to advance the community's ultimate interest, the protection of property from burglary.

Summary

The Problem: False alarm calls were draining patrol resources, comprising 12 percent of all dispatched calls. They contributed to a significant backlog of calls for service. The

average police response time to alarm activations was up to 40 minutes, well beyond the time when police could reasonably hope to apprehend an intruder. More than 99 percent of all alarm calls proved false. Responding officers were getting increasingly complacent and they risked injury just driving to alarm calls.

Analysis: Past efforts to reduce the volume of false alarms through permits, warnings, fines, and suspensions had only modest effect. An examination of other approaches tried elsewhere, from cost recovery to alarm industry regulation to outsourcing alarm administration, similarly proved only moderate effectiveness. Police response to alarms was most effective and efficient if the police had verification that an alarm activation was indicative of suspicious activity. Private security guards were ideally suited to make this initial verification.

Alarm owners were receptive to the possibility of having private guards verify alarms once they realized how this option could improve response times and lower their costs. A few other jurisdictions had positive experiences with verified response. A legal opinion established that police were under no legal obligation to respond to all alarm activations. A sufficient number of alarm companies and private guard companies were willing and able to provide initial verification service in a timely fashion.

Response: The police department proposed a verified alarm response ordinance to the city council. A campaign to inform the public, elected officials, and the alarm industry about the purposes and advantages of verified response was undertaken. The city council passed the ordinance and the police department conducted training for private

guards to prepare them for their new responsibilities.

Assessment: The volume of alarm-related police calls for service dropped by 90 percent during the first nine months the verified response ordinance was in effect, compared to the same time frame one year prior. Average private guard response times to alarm activations has been much faster than the previous average police response times. Average police response time to other high priority calls for service dropped from five to three minutes. There has been no increase in the number of reported burglaries and the apprehension rate of burglars caught on site actually increased. Revenues for alarm companies and private guard companies have increased through collection of a modest additional monthly fee from alarm owners. Average costs to alarm owners have reduced due to reduced city alarm fines.

Scanning

The Salt Lake City Police Department (SLCPD) has struggled with the problem of false alarms for the past 20 years. False alarm calls were draining patrol resources and often created a significant backlog of calls. This problem had been apparent since 1980 when the department first began tracking false alarm statistics.

Police administrators were concerned that officers responding to alarm calls were getting increasingly complacent, knowing that 99 percent of alarm calls in Salt Lake City proved false. Complacency put officers checking buildings at risk. Moreover, officers risked injury just driving to alarm calls. Concern was partially based on the awareness that at least four officers in the United States and Canada had been killed in accidents responding to alarm calls in the past two years.

Stakeholders

The Salt Lake City Police Department identified taxpayers without alarm systems, alarm

owners, alarm companies, city government and the police department as stakeholders in this problem. Stakeholders had different interests in the problem:

- Taxpayers without alarm systems were subsidizing the costs for police response to alarms, and those police resources were therefore not available to address other public needs.
- Alarm owners wanted a quick response to their alarm signal and wanted to minimize the costs they incurred from false alarm fines.
- City government tried to balance citizen welfare with consumption of municipal resources.
- The police department was interested in conserving resources by not responding to so many false alarms. They were also interested in ensuring that alarmed properties were adequately protected from burglary.
- Alarm companies were interested in maximizing their profit, which they believed they could do best by having police investigate alarm signals at public expense. Alarm companies' interests were summarized in a recent report on false alarms:

Alarm dealers view police as a gift to their business. They sell a system, charge monthly fees for managing effective response that is provided and paid by the general taxpayers. Dealers consider false activation to be an issue merely between the police and the customers. There is also little (apparent) interest by individual dealers to spend resources in order to solve their own and the communal problem.ⁱ

The Impact of False Alarms on City Resources

False alarms appeared to be a universal problem for police. Studies indicate that 97 to 99 percent of all alarm activations police respond to nationwide are false and they consume about 12 to 30 percent of patrol resources.ⁱ Salt Lake City's false alarm problem did not appear to be unique. A number of important findings emerged from a local examination of the problem, including the following:

- In 1999, the Salt Lake City Police Department responded to 8,213 alarm activations. Only twenty-three cases, or three-tenths of one percent, of these calls justified a police report of any sort. Only a few of these reports were for actual burglaries.
- False alarm calls comprised 12 percent of all dispatched calls.
- Nearly \$500,000 of the police department's budget (1.2%) was attributable to false alarms. The personnel time alone was the equivalent of five full-time officers.ⁱⁱ This figure does not include the amount of time complaint takers and dispatchers spent handling incoming alarm activations and the 2,100 canceled false alarm calls for 1999.
- \$150,000 in alarm fines was collected in 1999, which only partially offset the costs of alarm response, creating a net deficit of about \$350,000. Alarm permits were required, but were free of charge. (The SLCPD did not support charging for alarm permits because it created an unwritten promise that police would respond on alarm activations.)
- Processing alarm permits and false alarm fines and adjudicating appeals created a significant workload for the

police department alarm unit, the city treasurer's office, and the small claims court of appeals.

- All taxpayers, regardless of whether they had alarm systems or not, were subsidizing alarm response for the 12 percent of the city's residences and businesses with alarms.
- The average response time to an alarm activation was 40 minutes. Occasionally, alarm response took as long as two-and-a-half hours. Some aggressive alarm sales representatives were making false and unrealistic promises to their customers about how quickly the police would respond to alarms. Due to the tremendous number of alarm activations and the number of false alarms, the priority for alarm activations was downgraded in 1992 to preserve resources for higher priority calls for service such as domestic violence.
- Locally, alarm owners expressed frustration over false alarms and the consequent fines. They vented their frustration at both the police department and their alarm companies. Sixty percent of the phone calls received by the police department's alarm unit were from frustrated citizens.
- False alarms in Salt Lake City had three main causes: user errors due to insufficient training;^{iv} inadequate verification by alarm company monitoring stations; and improper installation, inferior equipment and application at the alarm site.

Analysis

Part I: Available Alternatives and Current Response

As early as 1980, Salt Lake City officials realized that preventive measures were needed to reduce false alarms. The city adopted a

false alarm ordinance in 1981 that required a permit, established fines for false alarms that exceeded specified limits, and required the alarm owner to disconnect the alarm after excessive false alarms. There were no means to enforce the disconnection provision, however. In 1994, a more stringent alarm ordinance was adopted allowing four "free" false alarms and charging a \$100 fine on the fifth alarm. Alarm owners were charged even for false alarms caused by faulty equipment or faulty alarm installation. This 1994 ordinance resulted in a 16 percent decrease in false alarms in the first year after it was adopted. However, the following year false alarms increased by 13 percent.

These ordinances were only marginally effective, and, considering the rising number of new alarm owners, the permit and fine approaches were like putting a finger in the dam to stop the flooding. These responses helped manage, but did not solve, the false alarm problem.

Alternative Responses to False Alarms

The SLCPD researched other police departments' efforts to manage their false alarm problems, and found everything from smaller jurisdictions doing nothing to larger jurisdictions dedicating up to 12 employees to deal with false alarms. Police officers were being utilized for a variety of tasks, such as inspecting alarm systems and hanging notices on citizens' doors to increase awareness of the problem. Alarm unit staff were billing and tracking false alarms, and sponsoring false alarm awareness courses. Despite intense efforts by many police departments, alarm rates persisted at over 97 percent false and alarm calls constituted from 12 to 30 percent of total dispatched calls for police service.

Salt Lake City examined the following false alarm reduction efforts attempted in other agencies:

Traditional Regulatory Ordinance

Of the reduction efforts examined by SLCPD, the most common was the regulatory ordinance, consisting of processing permits, warning letters, a certain number of "free" false alarm responses, fines, and suspension of police response to alarm systems with excessive false alarms.

Salt Lake City Police Department adopted this approach in 1981. This ordinance attempted to manage the problem, but had no significant long-term impact on reduction. It was very labor intensive for the alarm unit and the treasury department, and required an extensive software program. With four "free" alarms, alarm owners were often negligent about solving the problem until the fifth alarm was imminent. Alarm owners placed on suspension received no response to their alarm from the police department and usually had not selected an alternate provider to do so. Thus, when their alarm signaled, no response was forthcoming. Suspension provisions in this traditional ordinance dealt with the chronic false alarm abuser. However, new alarm owners who were poorly trained and unfamiliar with the use of their alarm system caused the bulk of false alarms. The fines seemed punitive to citizens, complaints were vigorous, and most alarm owners blamed their alarm company for their false alarms.

Cost Recovery

This method requires a permit with an annual renewal fee and is very labor intensive for the alarm unit, generally requiring additional personnel. There are usually no suspension features and police continue to respond to all alarm signals. In order to recover all costs of patrol response under this alarm response approach, the SCLPD would have to significantly increase fees, imposing a financial burden on many alarm owners. Further, the police department would not likely retain the monies from alarm response, as fee revenue would go directly to the municipality's general fund.

Alarm Industry Regulatory

This seldom-used false alarm reduction effort requires the alarm company to collect false alarm fines from their customers and remit the revenue to the city. For example, The City of Toronto, Ontario charges \$73 for every alarm call coming into the communications center. Alarm companies typically resist this approach, even to the point of threatening legal challenges.

Another regulatory strategy has police agencies attempting to restrict the alarm monitoring stations' actions. It requires the alarm monitor to place a telephone call to the alarm site to determine if the alarm signal was in error and whether the person who answered the telephone knew the pass code. Another approach requires the monitoring company to receive signals from two different alarm zones before requesting a police dispatch. Alarm monitoring stations are not necessarily located in the same city as the customers they serve. They may be located hundreds of miles away, deal with thousands of police departments, and answer alarm signals for millions of alarm customers. Each police jurisdiction may require different specifications for alarm response, but that does not mean the monitoring company will comply. It is difficult for a police department in California, for example, to try to dictate an approach to alarm response to a monitoring company in Florida. The Salt Lake City police department were aware of at least one monitoring company that refuses to cancel a request for a police dispatch if the dispatch has aged more than 15 minutes, even if the alarm owner can verify the alarm is in error.

Outsourcing Collection Agency

In this approach, the police department responds to alarm calls, but the administrative tasks of issuing permits, sending out fine notices, and collecting fines is contracted to a private firm. Usually, the private firm returns a small percentage of the fines collected to the municipality. As with other

methods, the SLCPD officers gathered that this method merely manages the problem and does not solve it.

Conclusions from Alternative Response Analysis

The Salt Lake City Police Department's attempt to manage false alarms with ordinances consisting of warnings, fines, and permits had no significant long-term effect and only minimal short-term effect on the overall reduction of alarm activations or the percentage of false alarms. Nearly all alarm activations were false and the current system was yielding slow police response times that were of little value to either the police or alarm owners. The probability of catching burglars in the act after 40 minutes was slim. Even the alarm industry did not believe that police response added much value. Members of the Utah Alarm Association conceded to police that they believed signs and stickers posted on the premise indicating an alarm system provided far greater deterrent value than the value of a police response. The public costs of the current system far exceed the revenues recovered in fines. Continuing to waste police resources was not in the best interest of public safety.

The SLCPD concluded that police response to an alarm signal only made sense if some eyewitness could first verify the validity of the alarm signal. Private security guards were a logical fit for this role. The police department further concluded that the initial verification of alarm activation was a private sector responsibility. Consequently, Salt Lake City began to explore the feasibility of shifting the primary responsibility for verifying alarms signals from the police to the private alarm and security companies. This practice is termed "verified response."

Part II: The Feasibility of Verified Response in Salt Lake City

To explore the feasibility of implementing verified response, the SLCPD alarm unit

began a campaign to increase alarm owners' awareness that they could contract first response to their alarm signal with a private guard company. Most alarm owners were otherwise unaware of this option. The first step was to include a listing of private guard services in the mailing with all new alarm permits issued in 1998 and 1999. The number of false alarms decreased by 7 percent from 1998 to 1999, perhaps partially due to offering alarm owners this private response option. Indeed, many alarm owners commented that they appreciated having the option of paying for the less expensive services of a private guard responder instead of paying false alarm fines to the city. Alarm owners also informed the SCLPD that they didn't want the department's officers wasting time on false alarm calls. Such comments reflected a preference among citizens that the city's officers be made available for response to genuine emergency calls.

The alarm unit concluded that alarm ownership is a private, personal choice, not mandated by law, the city, or the police department. An examination of verified response implementation in agencies in Las Vegas and Henderson, Nevada; Lane County, Oregon; and West Valley City and Taylorsville, Utah, found no legal challenges to these verified response ordinances and policies. According to the Salt Lake City Attorney's Office, "Law enforcement did not have a legal liability to respond to alarms and the alarm contract is a civil contract between two private entities."^v An article on verified response in the Las Vegas Metro Police Department concluded:

The police have no legal responsibility to respond to any given situation unless mandated by local law. Litigation aimed at forcing response compliance is unlikely to succeed because this law is so clearly stated and so well understood by judiciaries.^{vⁱ}

Members of the Salt Lake City Police

Department's alarm unit examined costs associated with verified response and concluded that private alarm companies could feasibly recover the costs of responding to alarms from their customers. When West Valley City (located eight miles to the west of Salt Lake City, population 100,000) adopted their verified response policy in May 2000, alarm companies operating in that community began charging their customers an additional \$5 per month to cover the cost of private guard response.

To gauge availability of private guards responding to alarm activations, the police department sent a survey to all private guard firms listed in the Salt Lake City telephone directory. The survey asked if the firms would be interested in responding to burglar alarms and, if so, what they estimated their average response time would be. Nine companies responded positively, with estimates of average response times ranging from three to 15 minutes. As noted by several researchers, "Already private security guards fulfill most security functions and they number more than three times the total number of federal, state, and local law enforcement personnel."^v

On the basis of the research, the SCLPD concluded that enough private security companies were willing and able to respond to alarm signal activations and that a verified response policy was indeed feasible.

Response

In May 2000, the Salt Lake City Police Department proposed a new ordinance to the city council. The major elements of the proposed verified response alarm ordinance were:

- In all alarm activations, eyewitness verification of suspicious activity is required of alarm company personnel or a private guard prior to police department notification.

- Continued police response to human-activated alarms such as robbery, panic and duress^{vi}ii alarm signals. The first false alarm of these types incurs a \$50 fine, with subsequent fines based on an escalating fine structure.
- Alarm owners participation in a false alarm prevention course in lieu of one false alarm fine per year.
- False alarms that are caused by the alarm company technician charged to the alarm company rather than the alarm owner.

The police department realized that educating citizens, business owners, and the city council on false alarm issues would be crucial to passage of the verified response alarm ordinance. Police encounters with citizens had revealed many misperceptions of the police resources and taxpayer monies involved in false alarm response. The city council members were astonished to learn of the high percentage of false alarm calls.

Salt Lake City police contacted local television stations and newspapers to briefed them on the proposed policy and the rationale behind it. All were willing to cover the story and most reported favorably on the proposed policy.

Upon hearing of the proposed policy, some citizens called the alarm unit to express concern. When alarm unit staff explained that the public would receive faster response to their alarm activation from the private guard service than they could expect from the police, would pay a small fee rather than the \$100 ordinance fines, and, if the alarm was valid, would experience faster police response than they had in the past, a vast majority of the citizens became supportive of the ordinance. In the first month after the news stories broke, SLCPD received more than 100 phone calls, with only two callers remaining opposed to

the proposed policy.

The department approached the local alarm companies again to present the proposed verified response policy. Salt Lake City and several other local police agencies had been meeting with some of the alarm companies and members of the Utah Alarm Association for the past five years, so the industry was familiar with the verified response concept. One of the Utah Alarm Association's early objections to verified response was the cost to alarm companies of responding to and investigating false alarms. This concern was addressed when alarm companies realized they could pay for this added service by charging alarm owners a modest, additional \$5 monthly fee. One alarm company even allowed their customers three "free" responses before charging a fee.

The Salt Lake City Police Department offered a three-hour training course to all state licensed guard companies. Improving cooperation between police and the private guard sector was one of the goals of this training. The training stressed that the private guards' role was only to observe and report at the alarm activation scene, and not to enter or search the building or try to apprehend offenders. Guards were instructed that, if they discovered an open door, they were to contact the police department and not enter the premise. A call from a guard discovering an open door, broken window or any criminal activity would result in a "possible burglary in progress" call—a top priority call. Other subjects covered in the training included safety tactics, initial approach, cover and concealment, crime scene containment, and suspect identification. One of the most popular subjects was the review of Utah state statutes and codes governing the elements of the crimes of burglary and criminal trespass, and laws governing private guards' authority to use force to arrest and defend themselves and others. The Salt Lake City Police

Department attorney reviewed and approved the lesson materials.

A public hearing was scheduled one month after the initial briefing to give the alarm industry sufficient time to participate in the discussions involving the proposed ordinance changes. Police administrators briefed the city council on false alarm issues. The police union president wrote a strong letter of support for the verified response ordinance to the city council.

The ordinance was passed by the city council on a 4-2 vote on September 12, 2000. Some of the comments from city council members were:

The better argument supports taking the resources now being used to address situations which were not of the highest priority and use them to address needs of a higher priority.

No matter what side a person was on, it was an undisputed fact that there is a 99 percent false factor involved in alarm system calls. There is not a program in the City which, if only 1 percent effective, would survive scrutiny for even a moment. If properly implemented, an appropriate method of having security companies show up made a lot of sense. This would free up officers to do what they were supposed to do. The police department was not asking to change the ordinance because they did not want to serve the citizens; they were asking to change it because it was not effective and did not work.

The city council further decreed that the ordinance would take effect three months after it was enacted to allow the alarm companies time to mobilize their private guards and educate the public on the

upcoming changes. The police department provided a list of nine state-licensed and bonded guard companies to those alarm companies that needed to subcontract with guard companies in order to respond to alarm activations. The ordinance took effect December 1, 2000.

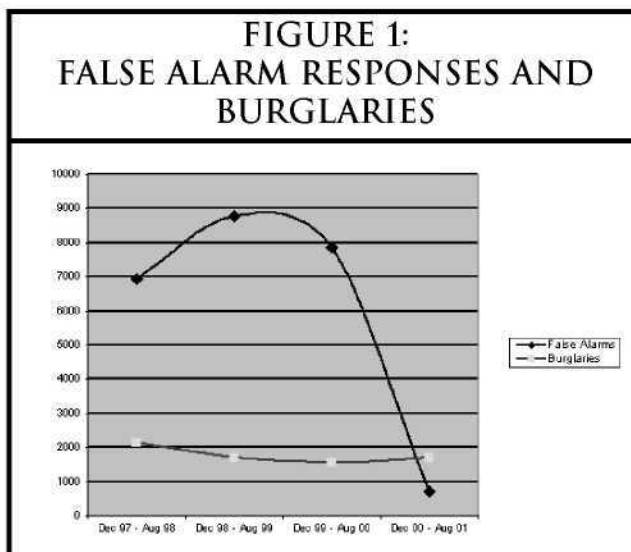
Certified letters were sent to all alarm and monitoring companies to inform them of the changes. In order to reach all citizens of Salt Lake City, an article explaining the drain on police resources caused by false alarms and the new requirements for private guard response was included in two issues of the water bill. This was an efficient way to reach all affected citizens.

Assessment

Benefits to the Police Department

The Salt Lake City Police Department experienced a 90 percent decrease in alarm-related calls for service during the first nine months the verified response ordinance was in effect, from December 1, 2000 to August 1, 2001, compared to the same time frame one year prior (see Figure 1).

This represents 6,338 fewer calls for service, or the equivalent of five full-time police officers (valued at about \$400,000). This time and money is now available for higher priority police services. There are fewer backlogs of calls for service and



responses to high priority calls for service have dropped from five to three minutes. Said Salt Lake City Watch Commander Zane Smith, "In the first three months of enforcement, this alarm ordinance has returned more patrol hours to our department and helped to decrease the backlog of calls better than anything attempted in the past 15 years." There has been a corresponding decrease in the workload of police call takers and dispatchers, the alarm unit, the city treasury department, and the court of appeals. Today, the probability that a crime has in fact occurred when police are called to an alarm activation is much higher.

Initially, alarm company spokespersons said they believed that burglaries in the city would increase when police ceased to become the first responders to the alarm signal. Thus far, this has not proven to be the case in Salt Lake City. The number of burglaries have remained consistent over the past two years, and have decreased by 24 percent from burglaries in 1998. Passage of the ordinance on December 1, 2000 made no significant impact on the number of burglaries (see Figure 1).

Six burglars were arrested by police as a result of private security guards' response to alarms on 720 police responses during the first nine months of the ordinance enactment. By comparison, in 1999, prior to adoption of verified response, only five burglars were arrested on 10,200 police responses to alarm signals.

Benefits to Alarm Owners

The benefits of verified response to alarm owners include a six- to fifteen-minute alarm activation response time from private guard companies, far lower than the 40-minute average the police were able to provide. Further benefits include lower monthly fees than most alarm owners were paying in fines for false alarms and continued police response to human-activated alarms such as

robbery, panic or duress signals.

Benefits to the Alarm Industry

Under verified response, the alarm can now provide their customers with a valued quick response to alarm activations. They can also redirect time and effort into serving their customers rather than trying to appease police. Some alarm companies have actually increased their revenue from the additional monthly fees charged to customers.

Verified response has shifted the management of the false alarm problem from the police to alarm owners and the alarm companies they hire. Economic supply and demand will now govern the delivery and cost of private security responses to alarm activations. If a guard company's performance proves unsatisfactory, the competition will provide another company to take its place. Alarm company representatives indicated that their sales have not been impacted by the shift to private guard response. Citizens are continuing to purchase alarm systems.

Salt Lake City's verified response alarm ordinance is a long-term solution to the false alarm problem, a problem that the department had been struggling with for twenty years. By no longer attempting to manage a private sector problem, the Salt Lake City Police Department believes it has solved its false alarm problem.

End notes

i Erwin Blackstone, Simon Hakim and Uriel Spiegel. "Government Competes and Retreats, Public Gains: Shedding Police Response to Burglar Alarms." January 23, 2001. Center for Competitive Government at Temple University: Philadelphia, Pa.

ii Jennifer Seelig. "Salt Lake City Council Office Audit on Comparable Cities Alarm Policies and Response." 20 July 2000.

iii Each alarm call requires two officers for an average half hour on each alarm call at an average wage of \$60 per hour. This figure includes salary, benefits, and the amortized costs of the police car, computer and equipment.

iv Commercial intrusion alarms accounted for two-and-a-half times the number of residential alarms, mostly due to employees who did not have or remember the alarm code, and to cleaning crews inadvertently setting off the alarm while working. Residential alarms tend to be activated by children and relatives who do not know how to use the alarm system, and by the motion of pets, insects, ceiling fans, and even floating balloons. The National and Burglar Alarm Association calculate that 76 percent of alarm activations are caused by user error.

v Salt Lake City Attorney's Office. Roger R Cutler, City Attorney. Salt Lake City and County Building, Room 505, Salt Lake City, Utah 84111, Tel. (801) 535-7788.

vi "Las Vegas PD Gambles on No Response Policy and Wins." Donna Englander, Security Sales magazine, December 1998.

vii Erwin A. Blackstone, Simon Hakim and Uriel Spiegel. "Response to Alarms: A New Type of Club Good." March 2000. Drs. Blackstone and Hakim are professors of economics and members of the Center for Competitive Government at Temple University in Philadelphia.

viii "Duress" alarm signals occur when a code is entered that indicates the operator is not deactivating the alarm voluntarily.