

Best Practices

In order to establish an effective false dispatch reduction program there are best practices that should be considered. Experience has shown us that these practices should be looked at as building blocks, not as an all or none package. The more of these that an agency adopts, the greater the cumulative effect and likelihood that reductions will be achieved.

The elements listed below were found to be effective regardless of the jurisdiction size.

1. AGENCY ACCEPTING CANCELLATIONS:

Definition: Responding agency alarm dispatch cancellation is the process in which a dispatch is cancelled or officer recalled when the alarm company providing monitoring verifies with the alarm user or responsible party that a false alarm has occurred and that there is not an existing situation at the alarm site requiring law enforcement agency response.

Observations and Comments for Accepting Cancellations:

It is a waste of law enforcement resources to respond to known false activation's; terminating dispatch reflects a more responsible use of resources to the taxpayer.

- Increases available manpower for response to more urgent calls.
- Decreases likelihood of associated accidents, injury and liability to all parties.
- Cancelled calls should not be included in the overall count of total dispatches, unless officer has already reached the alarm location.
- An ordinance or department policy that accepts cancellations may realize up to a 35% reduction in false dispatches.

The model States experience cites the following examples:

Seattle Washington Police Department accepted 4,069 cancellations, which represented 12.7% of their total alarm dispatches in 1998. Resource savings: assuming .5 hours per response times 4,069 calls equals a savings of 2,035 man hours, or the equivalent of one officer's duty time per year.

Naperville, Illinois experienced a 10% reduction in false dispatch response by accepting cancellations prior to the officer arriving on scene.

2. ENFORCEMENT of ORDINANCE

Definition: An agency's diligent effort to enforce all elements of the false alarm ordinance.

COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS:

Enforcement of the alarm ordinance results in lower dispatch rates.

Uniform enforcement clarifies the rules for the public, the industry, and law enforcement. All segments of the community should be treated equally; residential, commercial, schools, municipal buildings and financial institutions. Many coordinators noted that selective enforcement undermines the entire process – particularly when local politics shield city buildings and schools from enforcement.

It is the consensus of all four Model States Coordinators that strict enforcement results in lower dispatch rates, as observed in 21 of 24 cities with largest reductions in false dispatches.

The Model States experience cites the following examples:

Pinecrest Florida Police Department began enforcing an ordinance that was in effect for the previous nine months and realized a 36% reduction in the first 3 months of enforcement.

Lack of enforcement of ordinance provisions will negatively affect false dispatch reduction, i.e. Olympia Washington experienced a substantial increase in false alarms during the 1998 primary due to a low enforcement priority.

3. REGISTRATION/PERMITS

Definition: *The recording of all essential information necessary to track performance of, and establish responsibility for individual alarm system use as related to the alarm user and alarm installation and monitoring companies.*

COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS:

- Allows for data collection to better manage false dispatches
- Accurate contact information
- Emergency contacts
- Billing and collection information
- Opportunity to familiarize and update alarm users on current ordinance
- Allows for accurate billing information to assist in collection of false dispatch fees
- Legal considerations:
 1. A legal vehicle to restrict response (no permit, no response – except where prohibited by law, i.e. California).
 2. Registration has a signature fixing responsibility.

3. Allows law enforcement to associate alarm dealers with users for problem systems.
4. Allows for the collection of fees to offset administrative costs.

THE NEED FOR AN AUTOMATED PROGRAM TO TRACK REGISTRATION IS ESSENTIAL

The Model States experience showed that:

78% of Law Enforcement agencies that **required** registration experienced a decrease in false dispatches.

66% of Law Enforcement agencies that **did not require** registrations experienced increases in false dispatches.

4. FINES - ESCALATING and MEANINGFUL:

Definition: *The assessment of financial penalties for conduct or failure to take action that is specified or required in the false alarm ordinance. These fines should be on an escalating and meaningful scale.*

COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS:

A reasonable scale could be:

No Fine for dispatch(s) 1, 2 or 3

\$50.00 1st fine

\$100.00 2nd fine

\$200.00 3rd fine

- It was the observation of the Model States Coordinators that a majority of successful programs had 1-3 free false responses in their ordinances
- The initial fine of an alarm user is usually the wake -up call
- Subsequent fines should escalate in line with the severity of the problem
- Fines help to offset Law Enforcement costs
- **Fines can be set too high** - unreasonably high fines may result in collection difficulties. City of Spokane under their previous ordinance experienced this problem.

The Model States experience cites the following example:

In 1998 in the state of Illinois every agency that passed a new and stricter ordinance with a meaningful, escalating, fine scale saw a reduction in false alarms.

5. RESTRICTED RESPONSE:

Definition: *Suspension of agency response to an automatic alarm system activation when the maximum number of false dispatches has been reached or previous fines have gone unpaid as defined by ordinance.*

COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS:

Provides law enforcement the ability to suspend services after an excessive number of false dispatches to reduce resource abuse by chronic offenders.

Restricted response prevents the continued abuse of law enforcement resources by alarm users who fail to pay accumulated fines.

Some alarm users would rather pay the false dispatch fines than take corrective action.

Any restricted response policy should include due process which includes timely notification after each dispatch, warning of impending action, notice of suspension and an appeal process. Proper documentation that includes historical dispatch data, written and verbal communication is essential.

In an effort to provide response to potential life-threatening situations and reduce potential liability, many ordinances or policies require that the department respond to any manually activated alarm signal reported, regardless of the disposition of the alarm permit or the associated response status.

The Model States experience cites the following examples:

70% of the cities with the largest alarm reductions had restricted response as part of their ordinance.

It is a common occurrence, particularly for a commercial customer, to budget for false dispatch fines, as was the case with an Illinois Bank that budgeted \$12,000.00 a year for alarm fines.

6. REQUIRING VERIFICATION:

Definition: *An attempt, by the alarm company, or its representative, to contact the alarm site by telephonic or other electronic means, whether or not actual contact with a person is made before requesting law enforcement dispatch, in an attempt to avoid an unnecessary alarm dispatch request.*

COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS:

Verification should be included as part of any alarm ordinance.

Individual companies that have not previously verified can achieve reductions of up to

70% on their dispatch requests to law enforcement.

The alarm industry estimates that an average of 85% of the alarm dealers have voluntarily complied with verification. However, in an effort to reach total compliance verification should be mandated by an alarm ordinance.

The Model States experience cites the following examples:

Verification was considered so important that the State of Florida made it a statutory requirement.

The city of Seattle included verification in their ordinance in 1992 and also includes a fine of \$250.00 to the dispatching alarm company for non-compliance.

7. NOTIFICATION TO USER OF DISPATCH:

Definition: *The act of law enforcement notifying alarm users of every alarm dispatch.*

COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS:

Most users are willing to take corrective action, but are unaware of the impact of false dispatches on law enforcement.

Timely notification of each alarm dispatch, (even when there is no fee) is helpful in alerting users to the problem and eventual consequences of continued false dispatches.

Notification increases the likelihood of early corrective action.

Notification on all responses also serves as a backup to the efforts that the Alarm

Company is making to reduce false dispatches.

When the notification comes from law enforcement the alarm user is more likely to take corrective action than if it comes from only their alarm company.

Consistent notification of all alarm responses to users should normally result in lowering false dispatches immediately.

The Model States experience cites the following examples:

The city of Arlington Washington reduced alarm dispatches by 19% by visiting each false alarm location and contacting the alarm user.

The most common method of notification includes the mail or a notice left at the premises by the responding officer.

8. ALARM USER AWARENESS CLASS

Pioneered by the Phoenix Police Department, the development and presentation of alarm user awareness training for chronic alarm abusers has proven very effective in reducing false dispatches, especially those caused by user error.

It is designed to educate the alarm user on how false dispatches impact law enforcement, responsibilities of each system user, requirements of the alarm ordinance and ways to prevent false dispatches.

Used as a community-policing tool, joint participation by law enforcement and the alarm industry has resulted in positive feedback from the community.

Most agencies have reported that up to 90% of attendees do not experience additional false dispatch problems.

This training can be optional, or can be mandated by ordinance. Some agencies charge for the training while others allow users to attend once a year for free. In many cases false dispatch fines can be waived by attendance in the class or a credit issued for future use.