



**THE VANCOUVER POLICE DEPARTMENT**

**False Alarm Reduction Program**

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**To:** Whom it May Concern

4 December, 2003

**From:** Glen Richmond  
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**Subject: False Alarm Reduction Program -  
The Vancouver Police Department – Vancouver, BC - Canada**

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This document has been prepared with a view to provide information to those Police Agencies, Communities and other interested parties who may be considering ways in which they can effectively deal with their false alarm issues. This information illustrates a great North American success story whereby one City was able to significantly reduce the number of police calls for service while off-setting the costs of police response to alarm calls.

**BACKGROUND:**

In 1992, the Vancouver Police attended approximately 40,000 False Alarms with approximately 23,000 “known” alarm systems. With approximately 56,000 systems in Vancouver today, the number of false alarm incidents could have climbed to 80,000 calls for Police Service. In 1993, the Vancouver Police Department implemented an Alarm Permitting System which effectively: maintains public expectation of police service & protection to alarm incidents, reduces police calls for service, and instils alarm user and alarm company accountability.

Approximately 20-25% of false alarms are due to the alarm equipment and related administration. Equipment failure including the age of the equipment/technology in use, the improper application (wrong type and/or positioning) and lack of scheduled maintenance (battery failure) are among the most common occurrences. Since the inception of the False Alarm Reduction Program, the liaison between the alarm industry and the Police Department has been a key element in reducing false alarms. The Permitting System employed by the Vancouver police has fostered greater communication with both the public and the alarm industry while creating a more co-operative environment versus a straight Fining System that may be perceived as more adversarial in nature. This method also insures that the police would have input into the future of alarm response affecting the public, the alarm industry and the police themselves.

The reduction in the incidence of false alarms within the City of Vancouver has been dramatic. From 40,000 in 1992 with 23,000 alarm systems to 15,850 with over 56,000 alarm systems gives Vancouver one of the lowest false alarm factors in North America. The Vancouver Police workload went from spending 18% of their time attending alarm calls in 1992 to a mere 7% in 2002! This has allowed the Police to continue to provide alarm response to the public while freeing up police resources to attend to other police related activities.

**Program Overview**

In an effort to reduce false alarms, the City of Vancouver implemented Security Alarm Bylaw No. 7111 on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1993. Under the Bylaw a permit is mandatory for any premise with an alarm system, whether monitored or local, within the City of Vancouver. It is an alarm user’s responsibility to purchase/renew an alarm permit annually. There are three classifications of Alarm Permits currently priced as follows: Residential - \$15.00, Small Commercial (with premises less than 140 square metres in size) - \$25.00, and Large Commercial with premises greater than 140 square metres in size) - \$50.00.

With approximately 56,000 Alarm Permits on file, **the Program generates approximately \$950,000 per year in Permit Fees.**

A Permit Holder is allowed three false alarms within a 12-month period. A “false alarm” is any alarm incident reported to the Police Department where there is no evidence that an unauthorized entry or unlawful act has been attempted or made and includes, but is not limited to:

- a) The activation of a security alarm system during its testing;
- b) A security alarm system activated by mechanical failure, malfunction, or faulty equipment;
- c) A security alarm system activated by atmospheric conditions, vibrations or power failure;
- d) A security alarm system activated by user error.

On the fourth false alarm, within the 12-month period, the permit is cancelled. The permit holder can appeal the cancellation, in writing, to the Vancouver Police Board or pay a reinstatement fee as follows:

	<u>1<sup>st</sup> Cancellation</u>	<u>2<sup>nd</sup> Cancellation</u>
Residential	\$75.00	\$150.00
Small Commercial (less than 140 sq. metres)	\$125.00	\$250.00
Large Commercial (greater than 140 sq. metres)	\$250.00	\$500.00

**Reinstatement Revenues 2002**

FEES REINSTATE- MENTS	X RESIDENTIAL @\$75	X RESIDENTIAL x2 @\$150 *A	X SMALL COMMERCIAL @\$125	X SMALL COMMERCIAL x2 @\$250*A	X LARGE COMMERCIAL @\$250	X LARGE COMMERCIAL x2 @\$500*A	TOTAL REVENUE
FY 2002	X 268 = \$20,100	X 84 = \$12,600	X 164 = \$20,500	X 98 = \$24,500	X 98 = \$24,500	X 149 = \$74,500	<b>\$176,700</b>

\*A: Upon the second cancellation of an alarm permit the Reinstatement Fee is double and remains so for all subsequent cancellations.

The **total annual revenue collected** by the False Alarm Reduction Program is **approximately 1.1 million dollars annually**. This is not meant to be a “cost recovery” model but it does go a long way towards offsetting the cost of police response to alarm calls while maintaining the public’s expectation of police service within this community.

### **Verified Response**

A new fad that has emerged in the United States referred to as “Verified Response”. This essentially means “no response” by the police unless there is virtually an eye witness to a crime in progress. The rationale appears to be that most jurisdictions are subject to false alarms in the 90 percentile range. Some may argue that the police shouldn’t go to alarm calls because 9 times out of 10 calls, the result is a false activation. On the other hand, approximately one out of 10 alarms occurs as a result of criminal activity. In comparison, police officers who monitor traffic/run radar may watch 50-100 cars pass them by before pulling over a single offender. Does this mean that the police should stop checking for speeders? Of course not! For if the presence of the police on the highways was decreased – speeding and accidents would increase and the public would be at greater risk.

In the case of Verified Response, criminals will become aware that the police will no longer respond to alarm calls and the deterrent of having an alarm system will diminish. This might help explain why in places like Salt Lake City Utah, since bringing in verified response, their burglary rates have increased by 16% in two short years! The cost of investigating burglary/break & enters is considerably higher than the cost related to routine alarm response. Higher burglary/break & enter rates impact both residential and commercial properties as the fear of crime is heightened and legitimate users may relocate elsewhere – reducing the liveability of a given neighbourhood. When businesses, move away, the economic viability of the community may be adversely impacted as both employment opportunity and tax revenues are lost. The notion of not responding to alarm calls as a cost-saving measure is simply false economics.

The overall negative impact on the community is increased further as the fear of crime, coupled with the reduced response by the police, will only serve to raise the dismay of the general public. Not going to alarm calls will not reduce the false alarm problem in your community nor will it not stop the alarms from ringing. Again, the anxiety levels will be raised and public’s expectation and trust that the police will indeed “serve and protect” their community will be lost.

By taking a more proactive and participative approach three things will happen 1) police service levels to the public will be maintained (by implementing an effective false alarm reduction initiative), 2) the police will partner with the two other major stakeholders (the alarm industry and the public) and effectively shape the future of alarm response, and 3) police will see a marked reduction in the numbers of calls for service resulting in a more cost-effective deployment of existing police resources.

## **The “Fine” System**

Some Jurisdictions have opted for a straight “fining system”. This requires “someone” to be responsible for monitoring false alarms then levying fines either personally or by mail. The vast majority of jurisdictions who have implemented this system collect between 15-50% of the fines levied while still incurring administrative costs. Enforcement appears to be sporadic and the overall impact of this approach has, for the most part, been “nominal” at best.

## **The Permitting System**

The permitting system offers the following benefits:

- Effectively tracks all alarm/criminal activity within a given community
- Creates revenue which offsets policing costs
- Enhances police service levels by reducing waste
- Fosters better relations with the public and the alarm industry

The debate over the future of alarm response will undoubtedly continue well into the future. Change is inevitable, and effective problem solving strategies are necessary to effect positive change as the delivery of police service continues to evolve. Hopefully, we have presented some information that may assist both communities and police agencies alike as they grapple with the question of the future of alarm response and how it affects them. This is but one success story where a group of determined individuals acted as effective “change agents” to the benefit of the many. I hope that this account has enlightened you as to some of the positive possibilities on how to effectively deal with the false alarm issues in your community.

Sincerely,

**G.W.J.(Glen) Richmond**

Manager

The False Alarm Reduction Program