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The Need For An Alarm Ordinance
For Everman, Texas

A Policy Research Project
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to address the false alarm problem in Everman, Texas. Upon reviewing statistics of the Everman Police Department, it was determined that over ninety - nine per cent of these calls were false alarms.

This study was conducted to determine other aspects of law enforcement that are affected by the alarm calls, what other cities have done to address the problem, and what the results of their actions have accomplished.

To determine the desired outcome, studies conducted by others were reviewed, as were alarm ordinances currently in use by other Texas towns and cities. Additionally, telephone interviews were conducted with neighboring cities police officials, to determine what they are doing to address the alarm problem.

Upon completing the research, it was determined that it would be feasible to recommend the implementation of a false alarm ordinance for the City of Everman.

INTRODUCTION

During the last three years, the Everman Police Department has experienced an increase in the number of alarm calls. Of these calls, a large portion of them were false alarms, generated as a result of various reasons. The increase of alarm systems now used by home and business owners is an issue that must be addressed by the Everman Police Department.

The purpose of this policy research is to determine if the implementation of an alarm ordinance is feasible for the City of Everman. Upon it's completion, it will be presented to the Mayor and City Council of the City Everman for their consideration and possible action.

Sources that will be used in the policy research project will include communities that have introduced false alarm ordinances, with varying degrees of success. This study will involve four steps. First, it will be necessary to review actual statistics of the Everman Police Department, regarding alarm calls, to determine the degree of increase during the period studied. Secondly, the study will help determine the causes of the alarms being activated, and possible solutions to help remedy the problem. The third phase of the study will be to examine other areas of law enforcement that are affected as a result of these alarms. The final phase will review what other communities have done to address this issue and how successful they have been in reducing false alarm calls.

The intended outcome will be to establish guidelines and procedures for the handling of false alarm calls, and address the unnecessary utilization of manpower and other resources.

Historical, legal or theoretical context

While media reports focus on increases in violent crime, the rate of property crime has risen even more dramatically. One direct result of this upsurge in property crime has been an explosion in the number of monitored alarm systems (Moslow 2).

Studies reveal that the first alarm company was founded in 1859 (Greene 79). These alarms were inadequate and expensive. Alarm equipment, like most other electronic devices has experienced a spectacular drop in cost over the years. Nationally, over the last ten years the number of dwellings that have burglar alarms has grown significantly (Baig 1992). Although the City of Everman has not experienced a dramatic increase in it's burglary rate (Everman Crime Analysis), because of it's proximity to Ft. Worth, the fear of becoming a victim has resulted in a very rapid increase in the number of business and residential users of alarm systems. Exact figures have varied, but there is general agreement that between 90 and 98 percent of all intrusion alarm signals are false (Daughtery 14-15). In the City of Everman, the figure is between 96 and 99 percent (Everman Crime Analysis).

An important end product of this has been a great increase in the number of police responses to false alarms and an ever-growing number of police manhours being consumed by such response (Greene 77). Concern for this manpower is accelerated by the current demand for more efficiency in all levels of government. Additional problems have been recognized in the area of safety. For example, officers attempting to respond as quickly as possible

increase the risk of being involved in a vehicular accident (National Advisory Commission of Criminal Justice Standards and goals 137). There is also the problem of officers becoming complacent in their approach to the alarm location due to their past experience with false alarms indicating there will be no danger (National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals 554).

False alarms represent a disruptive and potentially dangerous drain on police resources. It is a problem that has grown as the public's fear of crime has increased. However, municipalities have an array of regulatory options available to them to address this issue. Some of these include (1) local false alarm ordinances, (2) user permits, which impose a fine for flagrant abusers and faulty installations and (3) some municipalities have taken the next step beyond and now require some form of verification, prior to responding to alarm calls (Moslow 2-4).

By enacting such measures as those listed above (and possibly others), municipalities can, at the very least, curb an upward spiral of false alarm calls. At best, this approach can enhance community safety while freeing more officers to respond to those citizens who truly need their assistance (Moslow 1-5).

Review of Literature or Practice

Upon reviewing and conducting research for this policy project, this author found that this is not a new problem, nor is it a problem that is limited to just a few police departments. Rather, it is a problem that has, and continues to plague every police department, in every state. This author found through his research that many Texas

cities have already enacted alarm ordinances. The departments included in the first study reviewed were the Ft. Worth Police Department, the Dallas Police Department, Corpus Christi Police Department, Beaumont Police Department, Abilene Police Department, Plano Police, Tyler Police, Mesquite Police, Bryan Police, College Station Police, Farmers Branch Police, University Park Police, McKinney Police, Desoto Police, and the Addison Police (Texas Town & City, vol.LXXI - no.1 Texas Municipal League).

Of the fifteen departments included in this study, thirteen of them require the alarm user to obtain a permit and pay a permit fee. The dollar amount of the permit varies. Two of the cities require the alarm business to register with the police department and provide a current list of customers, but no service fee is required. Furthermore, the alarm users are assessed service fees for a specified number of false alarms in a particular time span. The two other cities assess the service fee on the alarm company itself, for false alarms.

This author interviewed, via telephone, Lt. Roland Bazan of the Forest Hill Police Department, Chief Arman Tamakien of the Crowley Police Department, and Captain Doug Peters of the Kennedale Police Department, all neighboring cities near Everman. None of these departments have addressed the issue of false alarms, nor do they intend to.

In an article "San Jose Gets Proposal for Alarm Ordinance" (Alsop 38-41), San Jose police officers became concerned about the number of false alarms to which they were responding. After two studies, they found five related problems which demonstrate the need for an

ordinance:

1. Waste of Police Resources
2. Congestion of Police Telephone System
3. Congestion of Police Radio Channels
4. Accidents caused by emergency response driving
5. Fraud in the sales of alarm systems

It is interesting that no mention is made in this article of a sixth problem caused by false alarms: complacency of police officers. This is probably due to the problem not having yet been recognized, when the article was written, in 1974. Since that time, this has also become a major concern (Texas Municipal League 48).

Alarm ordinances, even with their share of problems, are considered to be effective. After the City of Bryan passed it's alarm ordinance, the number of false alarms dropped by 13 per cent. In Houston, the number declined by 26 per cent, in the first year. Dallas collected \$352,000.00 due to the provisions of their ordinance during nine months in 1983 (Rush 65). In almost every city that has an alarm ordinance, there is some type of fee for the use of an alarm system. As previously stated, these fees vary from town to town. During his studies, this author found that there are administrative problems that come along with the passage of such an ordinance that must be addressed during the planning phase.

- (1) First and foremost a clear definition of a "False Alarm" must be determined.
- (2) The creation of an enforcement branch to collect fees and determine what sanctions will be placed against alarm owners, should they neglect to pay fees imposed.
- (3) They must also determine how many false alarms will be permitted before service is cancelled or a fee is assessed.
- (4) A policy and procedure will have to be created for administrative review, so citizens can question a false alarm.
- (5) Further, this branch will have to have procedures to follow in determining under what conditions service can be restored or a permit reinstated (Kleinknrecht 12).

Some cities that have passed alarm ordinances have found it necessary to refrain from enforcing it, until they could revise it. Any proposed alarm ordinance must be carefully planned and designed. The biggest reason most ordinances have not reduced false alarms is due to the lack of new funds to enforce the ordinance (Watts 78).

Any success in reducing false alarms must start by opening the lines of communication between the alarm industry, alarm users, and the police. Until this is done, the alarm problem will continue.

Discussion of Relevant Issues

Relevant issues to be discussed in the policy research paper will be to determine costs incurred while responding to alarm calls, causes of false alarms, the need for a concentrated effort to improve relations between the alarm industry, alarm users, and police officers. Other issues will include other areas of law enforcement affected by the alarm problem, and the success rates of other cities that have adopted an alarm ordinance.

Because the City of Everman, Texas is a small city with a population of 6,500 residents, to a person from a larger community, the number of alarm calls answered by the Everman Police Department are a drop in the bucket, compared to the ones they respond to. However, alarm calls that are over 99 per cent false, creates an area of major concern for a department that seldom has more than three officers on duty at a time. A study of number of alarm calls by year, answered by the Everman Police Department was done by this author, covering 1995, 1996, and 1997. The results showed an increase of 48 per cent between 1995 and 1996. In 1997 there was only a very slight increase in the number of alarms (Everman Crime Analysis). While the numbers leveled off in 1996 and 1997, the numbers are still a concern.

In trying to determine the causes of alarms activating, a study was conducted to see what types of problems have been encountered, by other agencies seeking to control this problem. In an article titled "False Alarms- Do We Cope or Control(Lovell 24-25) a study showed that less than one per cent of alarms activated were actually burglaries or hold-ups. It further showed that nineteen and seven tenths per cent of alarm calls were caused by a malfunction. For purposes of this study, a malfunction was defined as a problem within the system itself,

a power failure, or telephone line trouble. In this study, forty-six and four tenths percent of the calls were considered errors. An error was considered to be any mistake by the owner which activated alarms. Thirty-five and four tenths percent of the calls were listed as undetermined, meaning the cause of the alarm was unknown.

In another review, by a member of the security alarm industry, some of the other causes of false alarms cited were atmospheric conditions, two-way radio transmissions, trains, drunks, even lovers nestling in the doorway. The author seems critical of the police-saying they expect burglar alarms to be faultless and trouble free from installation (Barker 266 - 268). Whether they like it or not, the alarm industry, the alarm user, and the police department are three partners involved in the use of alarms. Without a working partnership, alarms cannot be an effective crime prevention tool (Watts 77). Suggested guidelines to help the task of improving police - alarm industry liason would include:

1. Identify the need to maximize the use of alarm systems to reduce crime and add credibility to their use.
2. Establish a viable liason between the police and the industry by designating one officer in each department to:
 - a. Become skilled in the workings of alarm systems and terminology.
 - b. Contact every alarm company conducting business in his jurisdiction.
 - c. Identify the level of service provided by each alarm company.
 - d. Start a regular information exchange where problems can be discussed and resolved.
 - e. Develop a cross-training program so that police understand an alarm system and alarm companies will be more sensitive to police needs.
 - f. Develop reasonable local legislation to regulate the alarm industry.
 - g. Establish an alarm ordinance co-ordinators office to act as a liason between alarm companies, and police (Watts 77).

It becomes obvious that there are indeed hostilities between the police and alarm industry. With the increased number of users of

alarms and the demand by the public for more efficiently run government, this would be an excellent opportunity to implement programs as the ones reviewed above to help end this age old problem.

Besides the unnecessary use of manhours, while on false alarm calls, other problems generated include congestion of police radio and telephone systems, vehicular accidents while responding to alarms, complacency of officers, hostility created among police operators and users. On the alarm industry side, they object to what police officers define as a "false alarm". They claim police don't keep an accurate number of alarms, so true numbers of alarms are unclear and that police response to alarm calls is too slow (Greene 36). Once again, the "bad blood" between police and alarm industry becomes obvious.

Most police administrators realize that an increase in a demand for service must be met by a corresponding increase in efficiency in order to offset fiscal constraints plaguing most public agencies today (Kleinknecht 12). In 1997 the Everman Police Department responded to 2,137 calls for service. Of those, 533 were alarm calls and over 99 per - cent of them were false. The cost for handling the false alarm calls, in terms of manpower and equipment was staggering (Everman crime analysis). High false alarm rates have spurred the passage of alarm - control ordinances in Texas cities (Texas Municipal League 4 - 8). It was estimated that Dallas wasted \$1.25 million in 1992 on false alarm calls. Ft. Worth spent \$877,000.00 during the same year. Other cities reported similar costs (Texas Town And City vol LXXI).

Alarm ordinances are considered to be effective. By implementing these ordinances, cities are successfully accomplishing the end result

of reducing costs to tax-payers, and eliminating some of the other related problems. Although this continues to be a problem of concern, with continued pressure on police and the alarm industry, progress can be made.

Conclusion/recommendations

The purpose of this Policy Research Project is to determine if the implementation of an alarm ordinance is feasible for the City of Everman.

Studies show that each year, police officers are called upon to respond to alarm calls and that between 96 and 99 per cent of them are false alarms (Daughtrey 14 - 15).

Besides wasted tax dollars spent from responding to false alarms, other problems related to these responses were identified as congested radio and telephone equipment, vehicular accidents, as a result of emergency driving, unscrupulous alarm operators, complacency of officers due to many false alarms, hostility created between police operators, alarm users, and alarm operators selling police service (Greene 77-78).

Review of studies done by others reveal that implementation of alarm ordinances that have been well planned and researched, as well as properly enforced, have been successful in reducing the number of false alarm calls by police, in many cities.

Also included in the research were recommended ways to improve the relationship between the alarm industry, alarm users, and police departments. It was found that these three components are a partnership and must strive to work together to accomplish a common goal.

In conclusion, the author is convinced that the preperation and presentation of a well planned and researched alarm ordinance, similar to those already adopted by other towns and cities throughout the land, for the City of Everman is feasible. By doing so, the Everman Police will be more able to regulate the number of false alarm calls. By doing this, many tax dollars and manhours will be freed to be used in a more productive manner.

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Alarm Calls by Year

