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Chief sees time stolen by false burglar alarms

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FREMONT

Police Chief Craig Steckler is fuming. Not at his city's scofflaws, though he hasn't lost his enmity for them.

No, Steckler is irritated at a natural ally in the fight against crime - burglar alarm companies. Last year, he is quick to point out, the firms reported nearly 7,000 alarms to Fremont police dispatchers. After officers arrived, it turned out that all but a couple dozen were false. No burglar, no illegal entry. Nothing.

So, at 12:01 a.m. Monday, Steckler's police force will become the first in the state to cease responding to burglar alarms at homes or businesses unless the alarm company, its customer, a neighbor or another source verifies a burglary is actually taking place.

And even then, it may take his underfunded, understaffed force some time to get there.

"If I seem like I'm on a jihad, I'm not," Steckler said. "What I'm upset about is (alarm companies) will not take responsibility for their systems. ... They sell their systems on the premise that police are going to respond, and they don't have a right to do that."

The alarm industry is unhappy, too. They contend there are effective and less radical courses Fremont could take to reduce false alarms.

But having beaten back "verified response" proposals in Los Angeles, Oakland and elsewhere, the industry seems to have met its match in Steckler. Now, it is hustling to line up private security companies to serve as first responders to burglar alarms.

"The biggest problem with this approach is that you're penalizing everyone for the false alarms of the few," said Michael Salk, of Reed Brothers Security and vice president of the East Bay Alarm Association.

The problem of false alarms is not new, and the industry and law enforcers across the country are quite aware of how it negatively affects police manpower.

In essence, when officers check a burglary alarm, typically a low priority call, they are unavailable for more proactive duties. Steckler said his officers spent 4,900 man-hours last year dealing with false alarms.

A variety of approaches - short of ending police response altogether - have been adopted to combat the problem, from customer training programs and improved equipment to varying levels of fines.

Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton proposed getting verification before answering burglar alarms two years ago. But political and community pressure, along with alarm industry efforts, forced a compromise that requires fines for each false alarm and ends police response after two false signals in a year.

Sacramento police charge residents \$50 after the third false alarm. More than 75 percent of the approximately 31,700 burglar alarms police responded to last year were false.

The Sacramento County Sheriff's Department issues fines of \$75 to \$250 after the second false alarm, but allows refunds if customers attend a class. Sheriff's officials answered about 47,000 alarms last year, and more than 85 percent were false.

Both agencies continue to respond to all alarm calls.

Roseville police last year responded to nearly 4,000 burglar and other alarms, and 99 percent were false. There is no charge for the first three false alarms in a year, but the fourth is \$75, and after that the charge is \$100.

The best result any of those policies, however, is a 40 percent to 50 percent reduction in false alarms. That would still leave a city like Fremont dealing with at least 3,500 false alarms a year, a level Steckler said he is unwilling to accept.

Further, the chief points out, the city's current policy of fining for frequent false alarms has not helped.

Instead, he has ordered his department to respond to alarms only when verified or when tripped by a human being, as in the case of panic, duress or an in-progress robbery.

Almost two dozen U.S. communities have adopted such policies, including Salt Lake City; Milwaukee, Wis.; and Eugene, Ore. Salt Lake City officials reported a steep drop in the number of alarms officers responded to, though most were still false. Burglaries there, according to FBI statistics, have risen only slightly.

In Fremont, the city budget was slashed 22 percent two years ago, and more cuts are possible this year. Mayor Bob Wasserman said the 164-officer police force can no longer afford to chase burglary calls when on many nights only eight officers are patrolling the 100-square-mile city.

"The alarm industry has been coasting on us for 40 years," said Wasserman, Steckler's predecessor as police chief. "They just collect their money and we do all the work. ... It's really about time somebody put the monkey back on their shoulders."

Dave Simon of Brinks Home Security Inc. acknowledged that his industry needs to reduce false alarms. But he noted that police departments have long advocated alarm systems as a crime deterrent, and that such equipment won't be as valuable if officers don't respond when summoned.

"That's what ensures the effectiveness of a deterrent," he said.

Wasserman disagreed, saying it's the presence of alarms that deters burglars, not the fear of arrest.

There has been some public displeasure expressed about the new policy. But it has not risen to a level where City Council members feel inclined to challenge Steckler's decision.

That may change in the coming weeks as more residents and business owners learn that police are ignoring unverified burglar alarms, and that instead, they will have to pay private guards to respond.

ADT Security Inc., for example, has hired a guard firm to check on alarms, while Brinks told customers they can employ their own security service, which will be called when an alarm is tripped.

Smaller alarm companies - there are more than 300 vendors operating in Fremont - are having a tougher time with the financial and liability issues related to private guards, Salk said.

"I've got my fingers crossed, and hopefully I'll get a patrol service intact for my company," said Salk.

Private guards receive far less training than peace officers and under state law can only observe and report possible crimes, cautioned Jon Sargent of ADT and head of the California Alarm Association.

"We're going to have a learning experience," Sargent said. "In the cities that have adopted this ... there has been an increase in burglaries. I would expect the same to be true in Fremont."

But Steckler expressed no fear of a burglary wave. Rather, he said he will be able to direct his \$44 million budget and officers where they are needed more.

"This is a business," Steckler added. "No business in its right mind would invest resources - very scarce, limited resources - in a program that had a 99.7 percent failure rate."