

A Speech Made By  
**Detroit Chief of Police, Ella M. Bully-Cummings**  
At the 2006 Burglar and Fire Alarm Association of Michigan – Fall Conference  
Detroit Marriott, Detroit, MI  
Thursday, October 05, 2006

---

Good Morning.

There is no question that in today's society there is a great need to protect our property and lives. Home and business security alarm systems are an answer to this concern, but in doing so brings about a whole new question, "how can we take advantage of the protection security alarms offer without overburdening an already overburdened police department?"

As the American public continues to demand more security for themselves, their businesses and their homes by having a professionally installed and monitored electronic security system, the incidence of false alarm calls for service has created an undue burden on local public safety departments.

Faced with shrinking budgets and requests from their constituencies to do more with their already limited resources, many local agencies and governments have responded by enacting alarm ordinances. Typically, an alarm ordinance is designed to encourage alarm users to properly use and maintain the alarm system in order to reduce or eliminate false alarms, which may unduly divert law enforcement from responding to criminal activity and ultimately compromise citizen and/or officer safety.

Therefore, in the spirit of benchmarking and utilizing best practices from around the nation to reduce false alarms in the city of Detroit, the Detroit police department has formed an alarm management committee, which will consist of key stakeholders from the faith-based community, business community, community activists, law enforcement, alarm industry and elected officials. The committee's goals will be to reduce dispatches to false alarms; educate all parties; share information; promote and support effective ordinances; and develop measures to help recover costs to law enforcement.

The security industry alarm coalition has committed to assisting the Detroit police department in this endeavor. This coalition has worked with many other comparable law enforcement agencies and has been successful in helping them experience significant reductions in false alarm calls for service. I'm sure that the coalition attributes some of their success to those agencies adopting and implementing some of the following steps:

- Requiring registration permits for alarm users
- Jointly developing a model alarm ordinance with the alarm industry
- Requiring call verification – which yields a reduction between 35% to 50%
- Accepting cancellations from alarm monitoring stations
- Conducting alarm user awareness training
- Meaningful fines
- Fines + registration fees = cost recovery

Utilizing these best practices will yield long-term reductions in false alarm dispatches.

Although there is no one solution that fits every city, it is critical that the Detroit police department analyze its unique issues and differences and explore the full range of alternatives available.

A key component to achieving long-term reductions in false alarms is the partnership between the citizens of the community, alarm industry and the police department to conserve resources and best serve the community.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Hank Luks, president of the burglar and fire alarm association of Michigan, for pledging his support on behalf of the alarm industry to work in partnership with the police department and for agreeing to be a member of the alarm management committee to assist us in further reducing our false alarm dispatches.

Mr. Luks, has been working with us for the past 4 years to reduce false alarm dispatches and has already implemented key elements of the alarm management model ordinance, such as “enhanced caller verification” or “multiple call verification.”

I thank and applaud the alarm industry for working toward a common goal with police departments to continue to further reduce and manage false alarms.

This is vitally important in a post 9-11 environment where new demands require a delicate balancing of law enforcement resources to ensure hometown and homeland security issues are effectively addressed.

Results from studies initiated by the alarm industry indicate that multiple call verification (two or more calls prior to request for dispatch) significantly reduce dispatches to false alarm calls for service, thereby freeing up law enforcement resources to address homeland security concerns.

A resolution by the International Association of Chiefs of Police encourages all alarm companies to immediately implement multiple call verification procedures to be used by the central station monitoring center prior to law enforcement dispatch on all alarm signals from customer alarms. Additionally, the IACP urges your support of local jurisdictional efforts to adopt procedures and/or ordinances mandating multiple call verification procedures.

In 2002, the Detroit police department and the burglar and fire alarm association of Michigan formed the false alarm reduction committee. The efforts of this committee resulted in the reduction of false alarms in the city of Detroit from approximately 106,000 during the year 2002, to approximately 64,000 by the end of 2005. I am confident that 2006 figures will reveal similar significant decreases. This committee achieved the results primarily by changing a practice – emergency service operators (our 9-1-1 call takers) being allowed to accept cancellations from alarm employees working in the central station monitoring centers. Also, call verification by the alarm industry contributed to substantial reductions in false alarms.

It should be emphasized that these reductions were achieved while the overall number of residential and commercial burglar alarms systems were increasing dramatically in the city. For example, the number of new housing starts, lofts, condominiums, and businesses that are being built in the city of Detroit, which are generally pre-wired for an electronic security system, have increased significantly. As a matter of fact, the city of Detroit reclaimed the title of homebuilding capital of the region in the year 2005. Therefore, the need for a registration process is paramount.

Although no data currently exists to establish the number of burglar alarms that are active in the city of Detroit, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the number of alarms is increasing. A registration process for residential and commercial alarm owners would readily reveal the true number of active alarms in the city. For example, the city of Phoenix requires anyone that has an alarm in their city to pay \$15.00 for an annual alarm permit. Last year they generated over \$800,000 in revenue, which covered the administrative costs, including benefits, salaries, mailings and other types of public service announcements that were incurred in conjunction with their alarm management program. The data from phoenix revealed that only 12% of the people that have alarms, both residential or business, were assessed a fine for false alarm abuses. In other words, phoenix achieved an almost 90% compliance rate! One of the benefits realized are a higher confidence level that calls for service to an alarm run are actual crimes.

The national trend indicates that the number of alarms is steadily increasing. For example, Montgomery county, Maryland had approximately 30,000 active alarms in 1994. By 2003, the number of active alarms had increased to over 63,000, but false alarm dispatches had decreased from approximately 42,000 in 1994, to 20,000 in 2003. This decrease was due to the key components of the model ordinance which was jointly developed by law enforcement and the alarm industry.

I'd like to take pause here and take this opportunity to thank Mr. Glen Mowery, retired deputy chief, of Charlotte-Mecklenburg police department, North Carolina. Mr. Mowery, who is the national law enforcement liaison, of the security industry alarm coalition, has committed his time and efforts to assisting us and the burglar and fire alarm association of Michigan in our goal of developing a Model Alarm Management Ordinance that fits city of Detroit. We are striving to achieve the successes other municipalities have realized upon implementation of a model ordinance – up to 61% reductions in false alarm calls for service dispatches.

Cities such as Spokane, WA, Bridgeport, CT, Phoenix, AZ, and Charlotte, NC, have experienced significant reductions after adopting the model alarm management ordinance tailored to their department. Several jurisdictions have also used creative alternatives to manage the false alarm problem, such as: outsourcing the management of false alarms to a private management company recovering the cost of responding sworn police officers by assessing the end user providing alarm owners a choice between selecting a sworn police officer versus a security officer to respond to an alarm run – with the end user being assessed the cost of a sworn police officer response allowing a third party to determine or confirm that an actual break in or crime has occurred before dispatching a sworn police officer, in other words, verified alarm response

Consequently, because we believe that an alarm system is a citizen's line of defense, we are not considering a "verified alarm response" system in the city of Detroit.

In a national survey of police chiefs, 90% acknowledged that alarms both deter burglary attempts and increase the probability of a burglar being apprehended. Moreover, citizens support public safety (police and fire) first response to alarms. Therefore, the Detroit police department will continue to respond to alarms, however, we are also committed to working diligently to further reduce the number of false alarms and hold chronic alarm abusers accountable for user error. We have found that:

Most end users are **unaware** of the impact on critical police resources – this is why education is a critical component to success.

The vast majority of end users are willing to comply.

20% of the systems are responsible for 80% of the false alarm calls for service, and we acknowledge that some end users just don't care and will just pay fines. That is why meaningful fines are also an essential component to the success of the Model Alarm Ordinance. Without meaningful fines, the ordinance, regardless of how great, will not be adhered to. A well-crafted alarm ordinance can significantly reduce false alarm dispatches. Such an ordinance can help financially support the cost of alarm response, penalize alarm users that abuse police and fire response and encourage the responsible use of alarm systems to protect lives and property.

In addition, consideration must be given to eliminating response to abusers until corrective action is taken – this may well serve as a solution to both reduce the number of false alarm dispatches and curb the false alarm problem (by adding a provision to the ordinance that allows for restricted response after a certain number of false alarms).

As stated earlier, the educational component for the community is critical. The police department in conjunction with the alarm industry must conduct appropriate user awareness training. For example, studies of the false alarm problem report one common fact: alarm users cause a vast majority of false alarms. For example, by forgetting to disarm their code, leaving a door or window open, or forgetting to let the new cleaning company know about the system. These types of user errors can all be prevented. The formation of our alarm management committee will assist us in finding resolution to the excessive number of false alarm calls that we respond to on a daily basis. Reducing false alarm calls will result in increased efficiency, which will allow us to focus more of our efforts on crime fighting and reduction, as well as increasing our response time to calls for service.

Reality has required rapid and creative changes in our society. One of those changes is an increase in the use of security systems to protect our persons and property. As with any situation, change inevitably creates obstacles that need to be addressed and overcome. I am confident that the answer to addressing the problems brought about by the increase in the use of security alarm systems can be found in the partnering of the Detroit police department, the security alarm industry and our community. Together we can make our city safer – we can accomplish the protection of our citizens and property while simultaneously decreasing the burden on our resources in responding to false alarm runs. This partnership will allow us to do what we do best – protect our citizens from real criminal activity.

Thank you!