

## **Reducing Unnecessary Response Runs**

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This paper is about a significant policy change that Las Vegas Fire & Rescue made to address concerns on ways we could increase our fire fighters' safety. The LVFR, under Chief David Washington, covers 130 square miles, with a base population of 580,000 plus 35 million annual visitors. For 2004, it responded to 76,000 calls from its 16 stations, with 18 engines, 6 ladders, 19 rescues, plus special units. Total staff is 662, and the budget is \$93.5 million. The Las Vegas Dispatch Center also handles dispatch for the North Las Vegas Department and the Clark County Department.

All of us who have responded to calls know the dangers that may be present when we arrive at the scene. However, there are also the dangers we face getting to the scene. Probably all of us at one time or another have seen or read about the dangers we encounter while responding Code 3. Not only are we, as first responders, put in a dangerous situation as we maneuver through traffic, but so is the public as they make their efforts to get out of our way and often times are involved in accidents of their own.

Several years ago, while looking over the most recent NFPA statistics on firefighter fatalities, we saw that more than 20 fire fighters had been killed while responding to calls. The statistics went on to show that many of those calls that the firefighters were responding to turned out to be false alarms. The type of false alarm is what was troubling – many were fire signals with no verification of a problem other than information given by an alarm monitoring company. I could remember back over the many years as a firefighter and fire captain on the hundreds of fire signal calls I had been on that amounted to nothing more than us arriving, checking around the structure, resetting the alarm panel, and basically doing the work of the alarm company.

We then started to run the numbers. We looked at how many fire signal calls from alarm monitoring companies which we had responded to during the past year. We had responded to over 3,600 of these type of fire signal calls. Next we looked at how many of those calls had other callers call in and report something such as a smell of smoke, flames showing, or any information that would indicate there was an emergency. We eliminated the calls that fell into the category of fire signals with other supportive information of an emergency. What we were looking for was the number of fire signal calls that we responded to that had no other information that either the occupants, the monitoring alarm company, or people just passing by (everyone now has a cell phone) provided. We found that we had responded to more than 3,400 fire signal calls with no other supportive information, and not a single one of those calls involved a fire.

We had put our responding firefighters and the public we serve in danger by responding over 3,400 times, Code 3, to a false alarm. We made the decision that practice was going to stop. We began working on a verified response plan that would only have us respond to fire signals where the caller or the alarm company had someone

on the scene who could see or smell smoke or see fire. If they could not verify the accuracy of the fire signals, we didn't respond. We made a few exceptions, which I will cover later when I show our policy.

The next step was to work with our Fire Prevention Division on what our local codes stated, and that is when we sat down and created our response policy. Once we had written the policy, we believed we would eliminate not only 3,400 calls per year, but would keep our firefighters safer and provide our public with more units in service to respond to their real calls for help. The new policy was then taken to our city attorney's office for their review. We sat down with them and discussed the entire issue at length, and once they received the information they agreed it was something that needed to be done. Once our city attorney's office gave us the OK to proceed, the plan was then presented to our City Manager's Office for their approval. We knew this might be controversial and wanted them to be fully aware of what we wanted to do. We received the support of the City Manager, and then it was time for implementation.

The following was part of a 2002 newsletter sent within our own department:

“One of the main concerns is in the area of medical alarms. Many people in the Valley subscribe to a service in which a company checks on them every few hours. If the party does not reply, the company, which in most cases is out of state, calls 9-1-1 and reports a medical emergency. Many times the people are either shopping or are out of town on vacation and did not report to the monitoring company that they would not be at home. When emergency medical crews arrive on the scene, they are not sure if someone is down inside or if the house is vacant. If they decide to break in the house to check and no one is home, damage is done to the house and the city is responsible for securing the house and repairs. In the case of panic alarms (where a person presses a button to request an emergency response) crews will respond immediately. If the call turns out to be false, the company that sent in the alarm will be fined for the false report.

The same is in the case of fire alarms. Many times smoke alarms will provide a false signal and numerous fire units are sent to investigate. Again, a majority of the alarms are false.

The new procedure will require property owners to have someone check out the premises to see if a fire is actually in progress. Many alarm companies have response teams that will check out the call and notify authorities and the property owner. In the case of automatic fire sprinklers, fire crews will still respond if an alarm is received that automatic fire sprinklers are activated. If the call turns out to be a false alarm, the business owner will be fined by fire officials for reporting a false alarm.

Under the new procedure, someone will have to actually verify that a fire is in progress before crews will respond. In some cases alarm companies reported that they had personnel on scene to verify the alarm, when in fact they didn't. Under the new procedure if the alarm company reports they have personnel on scene, and they are not on scene when firefighters arrive, they will be given a citation and fined for reporting a false alarm.

Recently fire crews have reported that alarm companies dispatched them to burglary and robbery calls before police were notified, endangering firefighters and putting them in a

dangerous situation without knowledge of the actual circumstances of the call. The new procedure will prevent such notifications and fine those who violate it.

The new procedure is expected to save thousands of dollars in unnecessary responses and to keep fire and emergency medical crews available for actual emergencies instead of chasing false alarms.”

## **The Policy**

We next obtained a listing of all the fire alarm contractors who had been issued licenses to operate in Las Vegas, and we sent them a copy of what our new Verified Response Policy to fire signals was to be and the effective date. Below you can see our policy. I have crossed out the local names and numbers).

### **Fire/Water Flow/Halon Systems/Medical Alarms From Alarm Monitoring Companies**

#### **A. Fire Alarms**

1. All Departments: Dispatch appropriate units for the type of alarm called in for the following, regardless of jurisdiction, or how the alarm call is received:

- a. Fire Alarms called in for **ALL** government buildings. Dispatch the closest Engine or Quint.
- b. Fire Alarms called in for **ALL** schools; this includes daycares, pre-schools, private schools, etc. Dispatch the closest Engine or Quint.
- c. Fire Alarms called in for **ALL** hospitals.

**NOTE:** While units are enroute, the Alarm Monitoring company is tasked with calling the identified responsible party for the location; these calls are not the responsibility of the dispatcher, and should not be made.

#### **2. Las Vegas**

Except for government buildings, schools and hospitals, Fire Alarms **WILL NOT** be responded to in the City of Las Vegas jurisdiction by any Fire Department unit, unless the Alarm Monitoring Company confirms someone on scene confirms the presence of smoke and/or fire. In that event, send the appropriate Full Response.

Fire Alarms in xxx jurisdictions will be responded to as follows:

Dispatch the closest Engine or Quint, regardless of the unit's department; this means if the CAD recommends a City of Las Vegas unit, dispatch that unit. In the event additional information is obtained to indicate the presence of smoke and/or fire, complete a Full Response to the call.

**B. Waterflow (Signals) Alarms**

**1. Waterflow Signals without a reset.** Regardless of jurisdiction, dispatch a Full Response.

**2. Waterflow Signals with a reset:**

a. City of Las Vegas: Do not respond.

b. xxx Dispatch an Engine or Quint.

**C. Halon System Activations/Releases/Dumps:**

Regardless of jurisdiction, or how these calls come in, dispatch the appropriate Full Response (Fire in a Building, Fire in a Hotel, etc.) and provide this information in the notes of the call. Halon is a potent fire retardant that, when released, poses a potentially severe respiratory threat to occupants of the effected building.

**D. LVFR ONLY: Fire Alarms Called in From Citizens (Private Residence) or Businesses:**

Fire alarms called into the Communications Center from a residence or business, when the caller confirms there is no flame, smoke, or smell of smoke, respond the nearest Engine or Quint Code 1, per SOP P-13, Public Assistance Response.

**E. Medical Alarms**

**1. Medical (Inactivity) Alarms WILL NOT BE** responded to in the City of Las Vegas jurisdiction by any Fire Department unit, unless the Alarm Monitoring Company confirms someone on scene states that an emergency medical situation exists, at which time an appropriate response will be determined through use of the ProQa Protocol.

**2. Medical (Inactivity) Alarms WILL BE** responded to in the xxx and xxx jurisdiction. Unit assignment will be as recommended by the TriTech System. Unit response will be as an Assist Citizen, Code 1, unless the Alarm Monitoring Company confirms someone on scene states that an emergency medical situation exists, at which time an

appropriate response will be determined through use of the ProQa Protocol.

3. **(ALL DEPARTMENTS)** Medical Alert Alarms will be responded to as they are activated by a person on premise who is declaring a medical emergency. The proper response code will be per information gained from the PR calling in the alarm, or a 32B-Unknown Problem if no specific information is provided.
4. **(ALL DEPARTMENTS)** Panic or Duress Alarms will only be responded to if the Law Enforcement Agency calling in the alarm is on scene, and is requesting medical treatment of a person on the premises.

#### **F. Alarms at City Hall Complex**

1. When the alarm sounds, dispatch the nearest Engine and Truck Company  
Code 3. The Battalion Chief may adjust the response after dispatch.
2. Contact City Hall Maintenance: Office xxx or on 24-hour cellular – xxx
3. Notify the City Marshals via Direct Line or xxx

#### **G. Alarms From Carbon Monoxide Detectors**

1. Dispatch one Engine Company.
2. Call taker will enter the Nature Code as Carbon Monoxide Detect – Comm (for commercial building), or Carbon Monoxide Detect – Resid (for a private residence).

#### **H. Alarms Called in From UMC Hospital: See SOP U-7.**

#### **I. Alarms Called in as Hotel Life Safety: See SOP H-10**

### **Conclusion**

There was strong opposition to this policy change from the National Burglar and Fire Alarm Association, and some threats of lawsuits, which never materialized. Similar policies are in effect in several other large cities.

For 2004, after this policy went into effect, the LVFR reduced its number of call by approximately 3, 700.

***About the Symposium***

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