HOWARD COUNTY
POLICE DEPARTMENT
FALSE ALARM
REDUCTION PROGRAM
MAY 2008

Office of the County Auditor

OFFICE OF THE COUNTY AUDITOR

Haskell N. Arnold, CPA
County Auditor

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The County Council and County Executive
of Howard County, Maryland

Pursuant to Section 212 of the Howard County Charter and Council Resolution 22-1985, we have conducted a review of selected activities of the

POLICE DEPARTMENT
FALSE ALARM
REDUCTION PROGRAM

and our report is submitted herewith. The scope of our examination related specifically to a review of the False Alarm Reduction Program. The body of our report presents our findings and recommendations.

The Chief Administrative Officer, and the Chief of Police have reviewed the contents of this report. We wish to express our gratitude to the Howard County Police Department for the cooperation and assistance extended to us during the course of this engagement.

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SUMMARY

Our office performed a review of the false alarm reduction program that is managed by the Automated Enforcement Division (AED) of the Howard County Police Department. This review included an evaluation of current operating policies and procedures of the program, a review of internal controls, and compliance testing of a sample of false alarm incidents and the collection of false alarm penalties assessed and alarm registration fees. Our review indicated that the internal controls in place are operating as intended and that policies and procedures designed to safeguard assets are being followed effectively. We observed that AED personnel conscientiously followed the prescribed cash receipt procedures set out in Standard Operating Procedure AED-01. This procedure establishes the appropriate segregation of duties to ensure that one employee physically transports cash receipts to the Finance department and a different employee enters cash receipts in a spreadsheet and compares the manual entries to the Cashier's receipts for accuracy and completeness. In addition, we noted that the operations of the unit are consistent with General Order OPS-39, False Alarm Enforcement Procedures, which are based upon Title 17 Subtitle 7 of the Howard County Code regarding false alarms.

INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

The legislation that directed the Howard County Police Department (HCPD) to establish the False Alarm Reduction Program was passed in July 2000. This legislation, which has since been amended to allow the assessment of late fees, requires alarm monitoring businesses and alarm system users (as defined in the Code) to register with HCPD. Alarm users are subject to civil penalties that increase with the number of police responses to false alarms. In addition, a person who maintains or operates an unregistered alarm system is subject to a civil penalty of $200 for each police response to the alarm site, in addition to the penalties imposed under the law for false alarms. HCPD was authorized to enforce false alarm penalties against non-residential alarm users beginning July 1, 2001 and against residential alarm users one year later. Actual enforcement efforts were delayed until April 1, 2004 to provide sufficient time for alarm users to complete the registration process.

Title17 Subtitle 7 of the Howard County Code defines a "false alarm" as an alarm activation:

1) that results in a dispatch request;
2) that is not cancelled prior to the arrival of police personnel at the alarm site, and
3) for which there is no evidence of criminal activity to justify a police response.

In an effort to encourage citizens and businesses to properly use and maintain alarm systems to deter crime, the HCPD web page includes a direct link to information regarding the requirements of the law, the penalties associated with repetitive false alarms, and other facts to assist alarm owners in properly operating and maintaining their alarm system. The HCPD web page also provides access to a false alarm reduction education package that includes details about the alarm process, the causes of false alarms and the associated costs, and what alarm owners can do to prevent false alarms. Individuals who retrieve the education package can qualify for waiver of their initial $50 false alarm penalty, if they complete and return a response sheet indicating that they have read the material included.

The False Alarm Reduction unit utilizes a proprietary software system, known as *Cry Wolf*, which was developed specifically for law enforcement agencies that track alarm calls. The software interfaces with the HCPD computer assisted dispatch (CAD) system and allows the unit to identify

false alarm incidents, track the number of false alarms by location or registration number, and prepare invoices for penalties assessed. The system maintains a database of all registered and unregistered alarm companies and alarm users and an accounts receivable file for penalties billed but not yet paid. The software produces penalty assessment notices that consist of a letter of explanation with date and time of the incident and a remittance portion that denotes the return address of a lockbox contractor. The contractor provides the unit with daily on-line access to a file that contains images of each false alarm payment stub and of the check or money order with which the penalty was paid. This information is useful in resolving a discrepancy or inquiry about the status of a particular citation. In addition, *Cry Wolf* creates a history record for each citation showing the entire life cycle of the citation from its creation to closure. A separate payment history record is maintained for each individual citation.

As part of our audit, we reviewed a sample of false alarm incidents selected from the automated tracking and billing system. We compared each incident to a transcript of the dispatch call in the CAD system and verified that the incident met the criteria for a false alarm. We traced each false alarm through the *Cry Wolf* system noting the accuracy of the current false alarm counts for the location identified and comparing the date of the incident to the date of processing. We noted the invoice number assigned by the system, the amount of the fine, and the date of payment. We compared each payment to the system history records and to payment documentation provided by lockbox contractor. We found that all penalties assessed had been properly accounted for in the billing system. We also selected a sample of dispatch records from the CAD system. We reviewed the text of the dispatch call to determine that the false alarm incident had been appropriately categorized by the *Cry Wolf* system. We noted one dispatch call that met the false alarm criteria, but was not counted as a false alarm by the system. This exception was deemed to be an isolated error on the part of the system operator.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The False Alarm Reduction program has undoubtedly been instrumental in reducing the number of false alarms. Based upon statistics maintained by the AED, the total number of commercial and residential false alarms has decreased approximately 30% since the program's inception. However, at present, new alarm systems registrations exceed 200 per month and current statistics indicate that false alarms are increasing at a disturbing rate.

False alarm statistics compiled for the period January 1, 2007 through December 31, 2007, show that fifty alarm sites accounted for more than 25% of the total number of false alarms. Approximately one-half of the operators of the sites with the greatest number of false alarms are not subject to the registration or penalty provisions of the law. Any "federal, state, county, or municipal government or board of education that owns or operates an alarm site" is exempt under Subtitle 7 Section 17.718. The majority of the "top offending" alarm sites are operated by either the Howard County School system or by an agency of the Howard County government. Efforts to reduce the number of false alarms at these sites have not been effective, primarily because the AED does not have emergency contact information for many of these locations. Both residential and business alarm owners are required by law to provide the names and telephone numbers of persons who Police dispatchers can contact when the report of an alarm activation is received. In many cases, these contacts can investigate and determine that an alarm is false before Police personnel are sent to the alarm site, thereby avoiding an unnecessary and costly response. Therefore, we recommend that:

1. ***The Administrator of the False Alarm Reduction Program develop a registration form that exempt alarm operators can use to provide emergency contact names and telephone numbers. The Chief Administrative Officer of the County and the Chief Operating Officer of the School System direct their respective administrative staffs to coordinate a formal registration campaign for all County operated alarm sites. The AED monitor the registration process for exempt alarm sites to ensure that the appropriate emergency contact information is provided.***

Administration's Response:

The Administration concurs with this recommendation. The Police Department has proposed measures that include:

- The creation of a registration form geared specifically to County facilities and schools.

- The registration form would require the agency to list three representiatives who would respond to the location in the event of an alarm or emergency.

- For accountability purposes, each agency/school would designate one representative to receive the false alarm notices for each false alarm that occurs.

- Each registration form would be accompanied by a breakdown of the alarm history for that specific location for 2007 and what fines would have been for 2007 if the agency/school was a private company and not exempt for the alarm penalties.

- Ensure that each agency/school is up to date with the proper alarm/cancellation codes.

- Once the completed registration form is received by the False Alarm Section the alarm count of that agency/school would be rolled back to zero and to give the agency/school a clean start. This would give the False Alarm Section the best indication of which agency/school is actively working to reduce its false alarms.

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