Monitronics Makes False Alarm History Caps 20 Years by Winning PDQ Award

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Verifying security alarms with video cameras is helping law enforcement increase arrests and reduce false alarm dispatches. Learn how law enforcement agencies are defining verified alarm and their different response methodologies.

By Keith Jentoft

What is a verified alarm? It depends who is asked. From the law enforcement perspective, many police chiefs and sheriffs define a “verified alarm” as a crime-in-progress deserving priority response, and this view is becoming increasingly important.

In fact, the cover story in the June issue of FBI National Academy Associate magazine promotes video verified alarms as a force multiplier for fighting crime. The new best practices created by the Partnership for Priority Video Alarm Response (PPVAR) are being embraced by the National Academy, which trains the best and brightest of our nation’s law enforcement (sheriffs and police) who then bring these best practices back to their local jurisdictions.

In contrast, for many in the alarm industry a verified alarm simply prevents a needless dispatch to a false alarm. The term verified alarm generates confusion between these groups because of what they actually seek to verify — a crime or a false alarm. The same term is used in two different ways; sometimes broadly referring to false alarm reduction and sometimes narrowly referring to validating a crime-in-progress.

While aggressive false alarm reduction procedures have been crucial to improving traditional alarm systems and reducing user error, this approach is only defensive. Understanding law enforcement’s view of video verified alarms is crucial to an industry looking to build strong partnerships with police and sheriffs to better serve a common customer/citizen with professionally monitored video alarms that deliver priority police response and more arrests.

PROACTIVE VERIFIED APPROACH WITH A NARROWER DEFINITION

In an era of reduced resources, police chiefs and sheriffs fighting property crime consider video verification as a force multiplier that enhances arrest rates and helps their officers be more effective providing life safety to their community. It is a technology answer that continues to become both more popular and more affordable to mainstream small commercial and residential property owners.

The alarm industry is a valuable partner in deploying and monitoring video alarms to help police catch the bad guys, according to Police Chief Chris Vinson.
of Highland Park, Texas. Vinson chairs the Alarm Committee for the Texas Police Chiefs Association (TPCA) and is an expert working with alarm signals sent to the 911 dispatch center. He is also a key member of the PPVAR’s Video Verification Committee, which recently released its document defining best practices for video verified alarms.

Vinson describes the fundamental difference between the “verify a crime” and “verify a false alarm” approach: “The Texas Police Chiefs Association understands that there are many procedures to reduce unnecessary police dispatches. The TPCA recognizes the value of many false alarm reduction techniques such as waiting for multiple sensors to trip before the central station calls the PSAP [public safety answering point].’’

Vinson believes it is confusing, however, to label such procedures as actual alarm verification. While these procedures may lead to a reduction in false alarms, he says, TPCA does not consider these to be verified alarms and are not the equivalent of a video verified alarm as defined in the PPVAR best practices.

“Video verified alarms are intended to do more than reduce false alarms. Video verification as described in the PPVAR best practices is intended to help identify a probable crime-in-progress and help responding officers make more arrests,” says Vinson.

From this perspective, alarm verification is much more than false alarm reduction. The goal of video verification is to send officers as quickly as possible to probable crimes-in-progress to make an arrest. The industry-law enforcement partnership is promoting technology to catch criminals in the act and minimize property losses and damages; false alarm reduction is almost a byproduct of knowing that a video verified alarm is an actual crime.

**DEPLOYING A CARROT AND STICK METHOD TO RESPONSE**

Even among law enforcement the definition of verified alarm can differ but this is not because the goal is different — police and sheriffs still want to catch the bad guys. The differences are primarily due to the fact that police chiefs want to do what is best to combat crime in their local community, and they can use both a carrot and a stick to improve things.

In an effort to be more efficient, some departments will only respond to alarm calls that have been filtered for false alarms by the central station, thereby limiting response to verified alarms. Police departments using this big stick approach of only responding to verified alarms have typically used a broad definition of verified alarm in an effort to include as many alarm systems as possible.

Detroit, for instance, implemented verified-only response but includes cross-zoning, audio verification and video verification in its definition of verified alarm. Other jurisdictions, like Akron, Ohio, continue a broadcast and file response to all incoming alarms. If officers are not occupied at the time an alarm is broadcast, they are encouraged but not mandated to respond.

Using this discretion, Akron officers have responded to 65% of all alarm calls received. Just the initial notification of this new policy in Akron, in and of itself, produced a 10%-15% reduction in general alarm calls coming in from a central station. Other jurisdictions, including many in Texas and California, have adopted a carrot approach where they continue to respond to all alarm calls, but video verified alarms are given priority 1 response.

These chiefs provide priority response as an incentive to encourage their citizens to upgrade their alarm systems to video verification and enhance their security. This incentive provides a wonderful opportunity for alarm companies to upsell real value, and many are doing so and increasing recurring monthly revenue (RMR).

While the incentive approach uses a much more narrow definition of verified, since it promises a higher level of response with the specific intent to make more arrests, nonverified alarms continue to receive traditional police response. If verified alarm delivers priority 1 response as an incentive, the definition of verified tends to be narrower and focus on crimes.

However, if the term is used as a hard filter to limit police response only to verified alarms, the definition of verified alarm tends to be broader and focus on false alarm reduction instead.

The Texas Police Chiefs are not the only group considering these concepts and definitions. Police Chief David Bejarano of Chula Vista, Calif., recently

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**BEST PRACTICES AIM TO ADVANCE PRIORITY RESPONSE**

In June, the Partnership for Priority Video Alarm Response (PPVAR) released a document that defines video verification from the law enforcement perspective. The best practices describe how central stations can work with their 911 dispatch centers and use video verification to get priority response and more arrests.

A dozen large agencies, including the Texas Police Chiefs Association and the California Police Chiefs Association, worked with leaders in the alarm industry and large central stations to create this important milestone. These PPVAR best practices are available for download and review at ppvar.org.

Video verification is already creating value for the alarm industry by delivering priority response and greater life safety. The support of state police chiefs associations and the National Sheriffs’ Association, together with the efforts of the FBI National Academy, will only make this public/private partnership even more important as video verified alarms become the majority of new alarm system installs over the next couple of years.
implemented a new security alarm ordinance for his city that builds on both false alarm reduction tools to filter nuisance alarms and the incentive of priority response for verified alarms.

The new ordinance mandates that central stations use enhanced call verification (ECV) and imposes fines that escalate to $500 for the third false alarm. In addition, verified response can be mandated for any site that has four false alarms in a one-year period. On the “incentive” side, Bejarano, who serves as first vice president of the California Police Chiefs Association, has elevated verified alarms to a priority 1 response instead of the typical priority 3 for traditional alarm systems.

Verified alarms for Chula Vista mean alarms that video, audio or a person onsite has verified that an actual crime may be occurring or has occurred. More effective policing and a safer community is the goal.

“We did a three-year study from July 2009 to June 2012. During this time we had 8,094 residential alarms and made one arrest, and we had 9,604 commercial alarms and made six arrests,” Bejarano explains. “We spent the equivalent of two full-time officers dedicated to alarm response in that period costing $250,000 per year. That means that we spent $750,000 on seven arrests. We believe this new, innovative approach will help us do better with our limited resources.”

**ENHANCED CALL VERIFICATION AIMS TO REDUCE USER ERROR**

In contrast to more arrests, the false alarm reduction procedures created by the alarm industry tend to focus on canceling a false alarm. False alarm reduction advocates cite user error as causing the lion’s share of all false alarms; something as common as the owner opening the front door and forgetting to disarm the system.

ECV targets user error and is the most successful and widely adopted procedure to verify an alarm is false. Increased arrest rates are oftentimes not even mentioned as a side effect because more arrests are not part of the ECV program. ECV’s goal is to verify user error, not crime. For the alarm industry, this user error-centric approach to verification goes beyond ECV.

A recent white paper published in June by a major alarm manufacturer promotes a cancel/verify button on the keypad as “Electronic Alarm Verification.” The paper presents verification as a feature that offers a one-step cancel button to the user to verify a false alarm. The only possibility of electronically verifying a crime is if: 1) the user happens to be present at the keypad when a burglar breaks into the premises; 2) the user enters the “disarm” code on the keypad; and 3) after disarming the system, the user pushes the verify button to verify a crime-in-progress.

While the verify button will obviously not catch many crooks, the cancel button is a very simple way to reduce false alarms. It must be clearly stated that law enforcement supports false alarm reduction and is actively promoting ordinances that mandate these procedures defensively. From their perspective, false alarm reduction is a good thing but it is not really “verification.”

ECV, crosszoning, permits, fines, two-way voice, cancel buttons and better designed alarm systems have certainly reduced false alarms, but they are not leading to more arrests. As Vinson states, “While these procedures may lead to a reduction in false alarms, we do not consider these to be verified alarms, and certainly they are not the equivalent of a video verified alarm.”

For many in law enforcement verified means that a probable crime-in-progress is being committed, not that someone has verified that the owner made a mistake at the keypad. “We believe it is confusing, however, to label such procedures as actual alarm verification,” Vinson says.

Akron Police Captain Paul Calvaruso concurs: “It sure would have been beneficial to have a definition of a verified alarm that was nationally recognized and accepted by law enforcement when Akron was implementing the new policy.”

At some point, at least in relating with law enforcement, the industry may want to reconsider how it uses the term verified alarm and look for a different word to describe false alarm reduction procedures that focus on verifying false alarms. New terminology could do much to avoid confusion with law enforcement stakeholders who consider video verification something beyond crosszoning and ECV.

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