

## TVF&R's Response to Automatic Alarms

### Q: How Common are False Automatic Alarms?

TVF&R responds to several thousand false automatic alarms every year. Nearly all of these false alarms come in via automatic alarm systems that are not required to verify that an actual emergency is occurring. **In almost all cases, firefighters find it was burnt food, dust, steam cleaning, or a simple malfunction that falsely activated the alarm.** Nationally, studies show that there were 2.2 million false automatic alarms last year.

The issue is also not unique to the fire service. Police departments face similar problems with automatic burglar alarms, unnecessarily responding to tens of millions of false burglar alarms each year. Police and fire departments across the country are taking steps to reduce the number and impact of these false alarms, and TVF&R is no exception.

### Q: How Has TVF&R Changed its Response to Automatic Alarms?

To address its false alarms issue, TVF&R **adopted Fire Code Ordinance 10-02\***.

- This Ordinance requires alarm stations to attempt verification (in less than 90 seconds) of an automatic alarm at a business *prior* to retransmitting to a 9-1-1 center. **This is the same procedure already used for virtually all residential security and fire alarm systems.** Example: If an alarm goes off in a house, the alarm company attempts to call the house first to see if it is a false alarm (burnt toast, etc.) before calling 9-1-1.
- The Ordinance simply expands the 90-second call verification attempt to business occupancies, where the majority of false alarms occur, and where fires are much less likely. The 90-second verification does not delay horns and strobes being activated at the business site or the evacuation of the building – which is the primary purpose of an alarm system. If the alarm company cannot reach someone at the site or is uncertain or confused about what might be happening, they call 9-1-1.

### Q: TVF&R's Response to its False Alarm Issue is Data-Driven

TVF&R has always been a data-driven organization. With its top priority public safety, TVF&R analyzed a data-set that included 10,000 commercial automatic alarms. It confirmed that only a few incidents were actual emergencies – fires so small they didn't even activate the sprinkler system or were extinguished by employees before our crews arrived. Studies throughout the nation, have had similar findings.

### Q: What if the Automatic Alarm turns out to be a Real Fire?

In spite of now having up to 90-seconds to verify an emergency, the change actually increases the speed and size of our response to an actual fire.

- Currently, because of the identified low risk, automatic alarms receive a single apparatus response.
- Now, if an alarm signal is "verified" as an emergency, the call is changed to a full 'First Alarm' assignment which sends 6-8 units (18-22 firefighters) in Code 3 emergency response (lights & sirens). If the alarm signal cannot be verified, it is dispatched as normal with a single unit, Code 1 response.

**Also, it is important to note that virtually all new commercial alarm systems are in buildings with sprinkler systems.**

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**Q: Is There a Cost-Savings?**

While there is a small savings related to fuel, vehicle maintenance, etc., **the real value is improved reliability and response due to not having crews tied-up on a non-emergency call when an actual fire or medical emergency occurs.**

**There is also the potential for future, cost-savings.** As a department's call volume increases, there is a need to add more firefighters, apparatus, and stations to ensure effective service and adequate response times. Reducing incidents in one area, can help offset growing calls in another.

TVF&R has a long-standing commitment to being good stewards of the finances entrusted to us. We believe this is a safe and effective means of reducing false alarms, while maintaining our response readiness.

**\* Background on Fire Code Ordinance 10-02?**

*Fire Code Ordinance 10-02 is the Ordinance by which TVF&R adopts and amends the Oregon Fire Code. There are only two amendments to the Code, both of which deal with the pervasive problem of false alarms in commercial buildings. One amendment simply eliminates a trade-off allowing less fire-fighting water supply in a new building if an alarm system is provided. The other is the "Call Verification" requirement that alarm monitoring companies take 90-seconds to call the premises in an effort to verify if a fire alarm signal is real emergency before reporting it to the 911 center.*