

Alarm Ordinance Update

City of Marietta Georgia, January 2010

by Chief Dan Flynn

One of the fundamental principles of Community Policing maintains that it is possible for the police to reduce crime by engaging in proactive crime prevention activities. In order to apply this principle, in 2007, the staff of the Marietta Police Department (MPD) sought ways to reduce the time officers were obligated to spend handling calls for police service (CFS) so the officers would have more patrol time to perform proactive enforcement.

An analysis of Marietta's CFS confirmed what veteran officers already knew; approximately 10% of Marietta's total CFS were alarm calls, i.e., calls for officers to respond and investigate activated burglar alarms. More importantly, 99% of all alarm calls were found to be false alarms; and clearly alarm calls are very manpower intensive for the police. Officer-safety protocols require dispatching two officers to all alarm calls and at night or on weekends at businesses, schools and churches, both officers must often wait for a representative to respond from home with keys. Once the representative arrives, the officers must conduct a time-consuming interior search of alarmed structures. Thus a single alarm call takes roughly one hour for two officers.

In order to reduce the number of false alarm calls, at the request of the MPD, in July 2007, the Marietta City Council approved a new alarm ordinance. The new ordinance closely mirrored the Georgia Model Alarm ordinance, which includes alarm registration, enhanced call verification, and progressive fines for all false alarms beginning with the third false alarm each year.

The results of Marietta's new alarm ordinance were almost immediate and very positive. While enforcement of the new ordinance was delayed until January 1, 2008 in order to ensure the community had ample advance notice as well as ample time to register alarms; the community rushed to register. As a result of the publicity created by the new ordinance, in order to avoid false alarms, many alarm users began making a determined effort to learn to use their alarms more carefully and others upgraded or repaired faulty alarms.

Due to the immediate changes in the behavior of alarm users; months before Marietta began issuing citations for excessive false alarms, the overall number of false alarms began a sharp decline. In the five month period between July 2007 and January 2008, Marietta began experiencing an accelerated decrease in total alarm calls.

MARIETTA ALARM CALLS			
<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2009</u>
9287	8667	4994	3254

While there was an early reduction in Marietta alarm calls, (620 less) in 2007 compared with 2006, there was a dramatic decline in 2008. By the end of 2008, there was a decrease of 3,675 from the 2007 level. In 2009, there was yet another decrease of 1,780 alarm calls from the 2008 level. Thus, **there was a 65% decrease in alarm calls from 2006 (the year before the alarm ordinance was enacted) to the end of 2009.**

The most logical conclusion, given that there are only two reasons for false alarms; accidental or faulty; is that the alarm ordinance has caused alarm users to use their alarms more carefully. Perhaps more importantly, alarm companies rose to the occasion and began to work more closely with their customers, alarm users, to be sure alarms were better maintained, thus improving protection and safety for alarm users.

REDUCTION IN TOTAL CALLS FOR POLICE SERVICE

Keeping in mind that before implementation of the Marietta alarm ordinance, alarm calls comprised approximately 10% of total CFS, the staff conducted an additional comparison to determine if the reduction in alarm calls caused a proportionate reduction in total CFS. In 2006, before the alarm ordinance, Marietta Police Department responded to 93,054 CFS. In 2009, with no identifiable reduction in population, the Marietta Police Department responded to 69,229 CFS, representing a **decrease of 26% over the three year period of 2007 to 2009.**

MARIETTA TOTAL CALLS FOR POLICE SERVICE			
<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2009</u>
93054	86507	81448	69229

FALSE ALARM FEES

The goal of the Marietta Alarm Ordinance is to reduce false alarm calls and therefore reduce calls for service so officers could engage in Community Policing activities. Nevertheless, fees for registration of alarms and excessive false alarms were relatively high the first year (2008) and leveled off in the second year (2009) as the community became accustomed to the ordinance. Marietta projects that annually, fees will level off and remain close to the 2009 rate.

MARIETTA CHARGED ALARM FEES/FINES			
<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2009</u>
0	0	\$223,050	\$94,800

REDUCTION IN CRIME

As Marietta alarm calls and total calls for service have continued to drop from 2007 through 2009, Marietta police officers have been trained and instructed to use their additional unobligated patrol time for proactive crime prevention activities. With a new departmental emphasis on the use of field interview cards and photos of individuals engaged in articulated suspicious behaviors, there has been a gradual shift from officers being incident-driven, i.e., primarily responding to calls for service, to being analysis-driven, i.e., conducting proactive crime prevention activities in areas with higher crime trends.

While the causes of crime and crime rates tend to be multi-faceted, crime rates in Marietta have been dropping at the same time false alarms and calls for service have been dropping.

MARIETTA FELONY CRIME*			
<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2009</u>
3083	2830	2696	2508**

* Subject to revision due to change in data sets

** Projected figure subject to revision

CONCLUSION

Based on four years of data; two before the Marietta alarm ordinance and two after, there has been a sustained major reduction false alarm calls (65% reduction) and a corresponding major reduction in total calls for police service in Marietta. As to alarm fees and fines, in the first year it seems that they were higher than they will normally be due to the community adjusting to the new ordinance, i.e., learning to use alarms properly (thus reducing accidental alarms), and repairing or upgrading faulty alarms. Nevertheless, it is fair to project in the second year (2009), fees and fines have settled to a level that will become the annual norm.

As to crime reductions, while it is true that there have been significant reductions parallel to the reductions in false alarm calls and total CFS, it would be inaccurate to assume that there is a direct cause-and-effect relationship because of the number of unrelated variables that effect crime rates. It is, however, fair to conclude that increasing the time officers have to conduct proactive crime prevention activities; and encouraging them to do so as Marietta has done, is a definite contributing factor toward reducing or preventing crime.