

Frequently Asked Questions

The questions below originated from calls and emails to the City, with responses provided by Sandy Springs Police.

Will implementing True Verification delay police response?

- Currently, calls from alarm companies are placed as a low priority response because of their consistent false alarm rate (99% false). Under True Verification, calls will be prioritized since there will be evidence of a possible crime.
- Please be aware that there is no need for verification on an alarm **when you are at home**. Police and Fire personnel will ALWAYS respond to your alarm if you press the panic button, enter the duress code, have a fire alarm, or dial 911 from your home. The verification requirement is only in effect when the home is unoccupied.

My alarm company said the police are no longer responding under True Verification. Is this true?

- In talking with residents, we've heard about notices from alarm companies to contact their provider immediately to '*ensure the police will continue responding to your alarm system,*' and that after the ordinance goes into effect, the police department '*will no longer respond to your alarm system unless you have 'enhanced technology' installed.* **This is not true.**
- **Sandy Springs Police will always respond to panic, duress, hold-up, medical, and fire alarms as well as 911 calls from a location.** The verification requirement is when the building is unoccupied and can be accomplished by audio, video or in-person verification. There are varieties of systems that range in cost. You may also choose a self-monitored system where you maintain your traditional alarm system and pair it with a self-installed/self-monitored video system. These systems are substantially less expensive and can be monitored directly by you or a family member.

I am concerned that the new alarm ordinance renders a common home alarm system useless.

- Alarm systems have the main benefit of deterring criminal activity at an alarmed location. Many studies have revealed that as many as 65% of burglars will avoid a home that has a sign or other indication that an alarm is present – even when no system is actually in use. For those other burglars who are not deterred by the indication there is an alarm, when they do enter an alarmed site – which is rare – they stay inside between 1 and 5 minutes and are always long gone before police arrive. Because of the overwhelming number of false alarms (nationwide, not just in Sandy Springs), police response to burglar alarm activations is low priority. When an alarm is verified – that is when there is evidence the alarm is an indication of bona fide criminal activity and not one of the up to 10,000 alarm calls we receive each year where 99.5% are false – the police response is prioritized as a crime in progress. By having a verification standard to ensure police officers are responding to actual police matters, officers will be able to spend their time enforcing the law more effectively. Verification standards such as these have been employed very successfully in many cities across the US and Canada.

The cost of false alarms should not dictate that police stop responding to alarms, even when there is no proof of a crime.

- The true cost of false alarms is in the loss of enforcement, investigation, and patrol time an officer has during a shift to actually enforce the law and apprehend criminals. When an officer is taken away from a patrol area where there is known criminal activity, or has to rush and investigation, or neglect patrol duties in other ways just to answer a false alarm call, no practical law enforcement or community safety functions can be performed. From the time of dispatch to the time and officer becomes available for further proactive policing measures can be as much as an hour or more. If an officer gets 2 or 3 false alarm calls in a shift, that can be as much as 3 wasted hours of legitimate law enforcement activity.
- Additionally, if a citizen is in dire circumstances, by which an alarm has been activated due to a home invasion (you are at home at the time of the intrusion) and not a burglary, no verification measures are required. Police and Fire Departments will always respond to panic alarms, duress alarms, fire alarms, medical alarms, and 911 calls with no need for additional verification.

Doesn't taking a publicized position that verification is required for response lead to more - or more brazen - break ins?

- This question has been addressed many times in locales where verified response ordinances are in effect. In a site visit to Salt Lake City where a verified response ordinance has been in effect since 2002, we asked these very questions of the officials and were shown statistics that demonstrate the requirement had no effect on break-ins, and there was no evidence of more brazen break-ins or home invasions. In fact, it was just the opposite – burglary rates in Salt Lake City have been steadily declining. Research into such questions in other cities has indicated the same.

What happens if late at night, my alarm goes off, the dog is barking, and I'm tiptoeing through my house to investigate what is going on. How am I expected to chat with someone or snap a picture in order to get help?

- If something like this ever occurs, there is no requirement for you to snap a photo or chat with an alarm company. In fact, we encourage you to not depend on your alarm company to summon police when you can do so yourself. Alarm company response is slow and ineffective. A 911 call, on the other hand, will generate a response in this circumstance that rises to the level of a crime in progress with officers coming as fast as safely possible and with several back-up officers. (As a side note, some studies have shown that a barking dog is a greater deterrent to burglars and home invaders than an alarm system, so by having a dog that barks you actually have an additional layer of deterrent.)
- Additionally, you are encouraged to register with the Smart911 system at smart911.com or at sandyspringsga.gov/alerts. It is a free service that can give a 911 operator additional information about your home that may be valuable to responding officers. Information such as what type of vehicles should be at the home, if there are people with medical conditions, pets, etc. And if you dial 911 from your cell phone instead of a land-line your address will be immediately evident to the dispatcher.

Do outside cameras satisfy true verification? I don't want the intrusion of cameras where I have motion detectors. I can turn cameras off when I am home, but then I am not protected.

- The ordinance does not require cameras to be installed specifically inside, outside or located in a specific location. The requirement is the verification of evidence of criminal activity. Cameras are one method of verification.
- Depending on the features of the property and the desires/needs of the property owner, cameras, if chosen as a verification method, may be placed wherever they will allow someone to monitor activity in and around the property. Many cameras are motion activated, so they can replace traditional motion sensors. A system that pairs cameras (with or without motion detection) and perimeter sensors are also a good combination. Choose what works best for you and your situation.

How does audio verification work?

- When a motion detector or door alarm picks up motion in the house, the monitoring company can ask the homeowner through an audio system if everyone is ok. If the monitoring company does not get the desired response but hears noises such as breaking glass, footsteps, whispering, thumping/rummaging around, etc., that is considered a verified alarm. Dead silence does not fit the definition of verified because it would not be possible for a burglar to be completely silent.

The mailer I received says fire alarms have to be True Verified - is that correct?

- The fire department will always respond to **residential** fire alarms. General Commercial Fire Alarms or Unknown alarms with NO keypad pull station, water sprinkler activation, water flow, CO/Industrial alarms will require true verification.

Won't the added requirements hinder my alarm company, jeopardizing my safety?

- An activated intrusion (burglar) alarm is not an indication of a burglary, since more than 99% of these activations are false – a nationwide statistic. Burglary rates are impacted more by the lack of time officers have to engage in proactive police work than an alarm response program. By adding audio, visual, or in-person verification, you and your alarm company will be better able to determine

if the alarm activation was the result of a potential break-in or simply the cat walking across a windowsill.

- Importantly, the technology for audio and video verification is available today, even for the individual homeowner to secure and place on his own. In fact, **many alarm companies already offer these services.**

The goal of true verification is to reduce the number of false alarm calls made to the 9-1-1 center. If public safety spends less time responding to false alarm calls, they will be able to focus on responding to actual crimes, patrolling neighborhoods, and working within the community – enhancing the community’s safety.

To have complete coverage means multiple cameras, which means a large added expense.

- Each location is different and will have different needs. There are many options to accomplish the goal of reducing false alarms. Many alarm companies are quite adept at designing effective systems without creating unnecessarily high expense. You also have the option to use a self-monitored video system, such as Ring or Nest. You are encouraged to work with your alarm provider to find a solution that will work for your situation.

Has the current ordinance been in place long enough to make the True Verification decision a necessity?

- The City of Sandy Springs adopted an Alarm Ordinance in late 2012, with the Ordinance going into effect in 2013. The expectation was that the Ordinance would reduce the very large number of false alarms necessitating a response from Sandy Springs Police and Sandy Springs Fire. In the first year, there was a decrease of approximately 17%; however, that rate of decrease slowed substantially in the following years and leveled off - no further substantial decreases. The call volume remains quite high - about 18% of ALL calls to the emergency 911 center are false alarms. Additionally, the false alarm rate is currently consistent at 99.5% false. The issue of false alarms is not limited to Sandy Springs. It is a nationwide problem that the alarm industry does not dispute.

If criminals know that police are not coming without confirmation, won't it attract more criminals to our area?

- Studies show that the mere presence of an alarm system - usually indicated by some type of signage - is an effective deterrent. Also, the criminal does not know if someone has heard the alarm siren and called the police, or if a private guard responder service is being used. Typically, burglars stay inside a home for 2-5 minutes, then flee. Under our current system, the average time to handle a call from a monitoring company is 4 – 8 minutes, and because 99+ percent of calls from monitoring companies are false alarms, they are low priority calls, meaning police may not arrive at an alarm activation site for 20, 30 minutes or more. With True Verification, the crime in progress is verified with those calls receiving top priority.

The City Council has changed the policy since the Ordinance was first adopted. What is not working?

- The original 2012 Ordinance followed recommendations from the alarm industry, with the City assessing fines to alarm users for false alarms. In 2017, the Ordinance was changed to no longer fine alarm users for false alarms, but to fine alarm companies (a practice common in some western U.S. cities as well as in most parts of Canada). Because of the historically high false alarm rate, the alarm company has the duty to verify an activation as an indicator of a bona fide crime, rather than just a sensor activation, before requesting public safety response. Additionally, the ordinance put in place fines to the alarm companies for failing to abide by a 2013 State Law requiring that alarm companies must at minimum, attempt to verify an intrusion alarm (panic, duress, hold-up, and fire alarms are exempt) by calling two phone numbers to the alarm owner prior to requesting police dispatch.
- Although we saw a slight reduction in alarm calls immediately after the change, false alarm call volume remains high, and the false alarm rate remains at more than 99%. In response, the alarm ordinance was later further amended to require intrusion alarms to be "verified" by audio, video or private guard response. An unverified alarm is not eligible for police response. Panic, Duress, Hold-up, Medical, and Fire alarms do not have to be verified. This change reflects a model that several cities in the western U.S. have implemented with success. Cities like Las Vegas and Salt Lake City have had verified response

policies in effect for many years. In these markets, there was a drastic reduction in false alarm response - in some cases, as much as 90%, saving taxpayer dollars and allowing public safety to spend more time in areas where crimes are occurring - all without an increase in the burglary rate.

I pay taxes, so shouldn't police always respond to my alarm calls?

- Public Safety will always respond to any individual who calls 9-1-1 to report an emergency. However, having a monitored alarm system is a personal choice and a private contract between the alarm company, a for-profit company, and alarm user for a private service. Less than 20 percent of homes within the city use monitored alarm systems, meaning 84 percent of the city's homeowners are subsidizing a minority number of homeowners with an extra police service that they themselves do not receive. It can be easily construed that the alarm industry, by default, is contracting government services without approval. The **alarm company is not able to promise public safety response** for an intrusion alarm sensor activation.
- In addition, alarm companies experience a 99+ false alarm rate, which diverts public safety personnel from focusing on true crime and public safety initiatives, not a good use of taxpayer dollars.

Won't these changes make my alarm fees go up, possibly preventing me from being able to have an alarm system?

- Technology advances have progressed making it possible for individuals, as well as alarm companies, to add audio and/or video capabilities as part of home and business monitoring services. These tools help alarm users distinguish a sensor break as a faulty sensor or real emergency, and many alarm companies already advertise these capabilities. Property owners have choices related to self-monitoring or using an alarm monitoring service. As evident in other markets which have employed true verification, the marketplace adapts to the needs of the community.

I plan to self monitor my video feed. If I am traveling and see a break in, how do I report it?

- If you are out of the Sandy Springs jurisdiction but need to reach our 911 emergency services, call 404.843.6680. This number will connect you with someone who can dispatch public safety within Sandy Springs.