



## IAFC NFPA 72 Proposal Fact Sheet: Focus on Reduction of False Alarms and Support of Effective and Efficient Response

### A Call to Lead

The IAFC is calling on the fire and emergency service to take action now to address the quiet, but pervasive, threat of false alarms in commercial facilities.

Each year, jurisdictions can face thousands of false alarms in commercial facilities, endangering the public and responders by supporting inefficient response protocols that divert or delay needed resources from emergencies.

**A new paradigm is needed, and IAFC is seeking to lead a national-level discussion on the issue surrounding the code.** Today's technology, data collection capabilities and relationship-oriented environment provides an opportunity for the fire and emergency service to create new, safer and more effective models in false alarm reduction and response.

Commercial false alarms are a problem now. The opportunity to evaluate NFPA 72 is now. The time to look beyond our individual interest is now. In short, the time to lead is now.

### Overview

In November, the IAFC submitted 41 distinct proposals to the NFPA code change process to update NFPA 72 with the specific intent to provide solutions to the problems caused by the number of false alarms in commercial facilities that fire departments respond to annually. The IAFC proposals aim to address both the root cause of the issue (reducing false alarms) and the protocols for response to such calls.

The proposals—in total—reflect a comprehensive approach to leverage existing and new technologies, current IAFC policies and NFPA code, and the need for local fire departments to gain efficiencies that are safe for the public and responders.

As with any issue, the code discussion provides a framework for the entire nation and is aimed at moving our industry forward. The IAFC proposal clearly accounts for jurisdictional and regional needs. In fact, local experience plays a key role in informing a comprehensive and professional dialog. Unfortunately, it can also be used to stifle it.

The IAFC realizes that many in the fire and emergency service may not be agreeable to such a progressive approach to the challenges facing local communities and fire departments; however, the goal of the IAFC in making these proposals is to have an open and honest dialogue about moving new ideas forward, rather than waiting another three years—or more—to address problems we have now.

Instead, some are using fear and misinformation to strike down these proposals before the discussion has had an opportunity to begin.

In today's dynamic environment, the fire

service no longer has the luxury to consciously choose to remain behind the curve, and ignore solutions proven to improve response efficiencies in communities that have implemented similar programs.

IAFC is not afraid to take on unpopular positions that support the safety, efficiency and relevancy of today's fire service. Nor are we ashamed to partner with industry associations to ensure solutions are viable and realistic.

While it would be disappointing for the proposals to fail, it is the hope that the fire and emergency service will give these proposals—and the challenges they aim to address—informed and professional consideration. This fact sheet is aimed to provide a synopsis of the IAFC perspective on this issue.

## **The Problem**

False alarms are dangerous. Our public education messaging teaches very young children the dangers of pulling a fire alarm when there isn't a fire. There are few jurisdictions that do not implement fines, penalties or even legal consequences on those that intentionally report a false alarm because of the immediate and long-term dangers it can cause.

Embracing this principle for what some jurisdictions call "malicious" or "intentional" false alarms makes sense, but it is only a part of the issue. Education, or a penalty, are good deterrents to *future* calls and *future* risks, but it does nothing to mitigate the risks of the current situation.

Additionally, this traditional model largely ignores a high volume of calls that are not intentionally generated, and overlooks those aspects that we can best control and that speak directly to our ability to directly make a positive impact on firefighter and public safety: our response.

During the process to develop the proposal, sample departments analyzed their data which commonly reflected less than 10 of 10,000 calls require the intervention of the first alarm assignment to suppress fire.

In a risk benefit analysis, abandoning a response area for such a low statistical probability while medical and other fire responses require resources at a higher percentage actually results in lower reliability and longer response times to statistically higher risk and demand events.

As an industry, we have done well with our public education and deterrent policies in order to reduce false alarms; but, if we want to further mitigate both the root problem and the hazards it creates, we need to look at the whole of the problem; and therefore, we must look internally at our response protocols.

## **Proposal Detail**

The 41 proposals submitted by the IAFC speak to four main solutions that would support the reduction of false alarm calls and increase the effectiveness of response when they do occur. Independently, they offer partial solutions, but taken together or with other code provisions—such as sprinklers—they offer a comprehensive new approach that will benefit both responders and the community they protect.

### **Concept One:** **90-Second Verification Delay**

The IAFC is proposing language that would allow a 90-second delay in notification in order for those monitoring a central station alarm in a commercial environment to determine if the alarm is false. The language also provides an **option** for the AHJ to determine if they cannot accept such a delay. The opt-out language proposed would allow the AHJ to make a determination based on their community's needs, their code and by

location (e.g. they could utilize the delay generally, but exclude high-risk facilities.)

Already this proposal has come under intense scrutiny, but it has been widely mischaracterized as unprecedented and dangerous, which is not true.

This proposal is identical to the 90-second verification delay that currently exists in the code for residential properties. As home fires are a far more hazardous environment (given commercial facilities have redundancies and protections not commonly in the home) and given that home fires account for 92% of fire deaths in structures, it is unclear why those who accept the residential delay do not want to consider the same standard for the commercial environment.

Some communities have already taken action similar to what is in the NFPA change proposal independently and are demonstrating successful implementation. For example, jurisdictions in and around Clark County, Nevada—a county the size of the state of New Jersey and which includes Las Vegas—have implemented protocols to not respond to any automated alarm without other indicators of an emergency. The protocol is more stringent than the IAFC proposal, yet the community has not seen the dire consequences that opponents predict. In fact, the result has been greater efficiency and more targeted response when the threat is real.

Lastly, as referenced above, a commercial alarm does not happen in a vacuum. Commercial facilities, unlike residences, have additional technology to monitor and begin to mitigate potential hazards. Common sense—and the proposed changes to the code—would dictate that the need for verification would be overridden in an instance where there were other indicators, such as multiple detector alarms, significant water flow changes, sprinkler activation, independent/eye-witness reporting of fire, the smell of

smoke, etc.

How the verification process goes hand-in-hand with systems technology is even more evident in regard to the next proposed concept.

#### Concept Two: Recommendation for Point ID Capability

While it does not in-and-of-itself reduce false alarms, Point ID capability is a critical support component to the verification proposal as it gives specific guidance on where to verify, greatly reducing any time delay in notification of a real emergency.

This also supports faster and safer response in an actual emergency regardless if the facility is monitored by a private company or a fire department. Responders will have information on the exact detector that was activated, what hazards may be located in that area, options for entry and egress, etc. before reaching the scene.

The IAFC was initially concerned about added costs of these systems and looked closely at the issue. As the industry changes from analog to digital systems, the price point of these systems has become cost-effective, and even cost neutral in most cases.

#### Concept Three: Adding a 45 Second Minimum to Pressure Change in Retard Chambers

Current code requires that notification must be given if changes in water pressure last longer than a maximum of 90 seconds. The maximum is helpful, but does not address normal occurrences that can produce shorter periods of pressure change.

Often facilities will set the system too low initially or continuously adjust them, defeating the purpose of the device. Adding a minimum of 45 seconds to the current maximum will provide an

appropriate window to provide guidance to fire departments, facility operators, and alarm monitors.

Concept Four:  
Maintenance of the Alarm System by an Approved Professional

The current code requires that the system be maintained, but puts the responsibility for the maintenance on the facility owner, who often does not have the technical knowledge or possibly the motivation to test and maintain the system properly. The current situation creates no accountability.

The IAFC proposal moves existing language requiring affidavits of maintenance from the Remote Station section of chapter 26.5.2 to the Fundamentals section to ensure it applies to all types of facilities. This would ensure that those trained to understand the code and properly maintain the system would do so, and be held responsible for doing so, regardless if the person was internal (e.g. a safety officer of a large manufacturing plant) or delegated to an alarm company or local fire department.

**Fact vs. Fiction**

*Myth: IAFC's proposal will force a 90-second delay in notification in all cases.*

**Fact:** The IAFC proposal would provide an option for the AHJ to choose not to implement the 90-second verification delay. Furthermore, the suggested language would allow an AHJ to tailor the protocols to their community's needs, for example, selecting locations or high-risk facility types where the delay would not be applied (e.g. schools, hospitals, assemblies, senior or care homes, etc.)

*Myth: The 90-second delay for verification is unprecedented.*

**Fact:** The proposal is identical to existing

residential alarm codes.

Additionally, a number of local departments have implemented similar protocols independently. There is no body of evidence to suggest an adverse impact on response.

*Myth: The 90-second delay is inherently dangerous to the public and responders. It will result in loss of response time and possible loss of life.*

**Fact:** If implemented properly and in accordance with local needs and resources, there is no more risk involved than any other response policy. In fact, when implemented properly, the gained efficiencies will enhance both the safety of the public and responders.

Abandoning a response area for such a low statistical probability (that a false alarm is a real emergency) while medical and other fire responses require resources at a higher percentage actually results in lower reliability and longer response times to statistically higher risk and demand events.

In the event that an alarm is an actual emergency, jurisdictions implementing the verification delay are finding that a few seconds delay to verify an emergency actually saves precious minutes later. Consider Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue in Oregon, whose protocol involving the 90-second verification delay has enabled quicker and more appropriate response in the case of a real emergency. Before verification policies were put in place, a single non-emergency unit was dispatched for a single automated alarm. In the event of an actual emergency, the first arriving unit would need to call for additional units. Under the current system, the 90-second verification delay allows for the appropriate resources being dispatched to the scene immediately.

Furthermore, each time a company rolls on a false alarm, it is:

- ♦ Putting lights and sirens on the roads in response mode...where 17.7% of line of duty deaths happened in 2009.
- ♦ Reduces the physiological impact of stress experienced during response that can contribute to heart attack and stroke...a leading killer of responders.
- ♦ Creating an economic and resource impact in equipment usages, fuel rates, etc.

*Myth: The 90-second validation delay flies in the face of our history and mission; it is not what the fire and emergency service does.*

**Fact:** From a technical perspective: The fire department arrives when there is an emergency. Nothing changes with this proposal, because the proposal is meant to weed out when there is not an emergency and ensure resources are available when there is one.

The reasons for making the change are very consistent with our public education messages about the dangers posed by false alarms. The proposal simply brings that into the larger picture that encompasses effective and efficient response (as well as prevention and punishment) by adopting a risk benefit position, aligning response policies, local data, and other widely adopted standards of best practices such as those found in the fire department accreditation process.

From a philosophical perspective: The fire and emergency service can no longer rely on "the way it has always been". The world has changed and if the fire service does not keep up with finding new ways to be safer, more effective and efficient it will be left behind. If we don't ensure that fire service leaders have the tools, resources and capabilities to make the right decisions for our communities, then someone else will step up and do it for us.

Look no further than the fight for residential sprinklers to see what happens

**Comparison Model:  
90 Second's Lost or 10 Minutes  
Gained?**

<b>No Verification Delay</b>		
<b>Action</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Consequence</b>
Alarm reported	--	Immediate employment of single unit, possibly dispatched as a non-emergency
Unit arrives on scene	5 min.	5 minutes since report
Unit verifies on scene, conducts size up	2 min.	Total of 7 minutes since report  Safety hazard
Possible: Begin immediate rescue needs or initial response attempts	5 min.	Total of 12 minutes since report  Safety hazard
Return to unit to report / call for additional units	2 min.	Total of 14 minutes since report  Safety hazard
Possible: Return to response		Safety hazard
Appropriate response units on scene	5-10 min.	Total of 19-24 minutes since initial report

<b>90 Sec. Verification Delay</b>		
<b>Action</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Consequence</b>
Verified emergency reported	90 sec.	Immediate deployment of all appropriate units
Units arrive and begin rescue and response	5 min.	5 minutes since report
Additional units arrive on scene	5 min.	Total of 10 minutes since initial report

when we wait too long to take action we know is right.

We cannot change our line of duty death rates or civilian death rates, and will be powerless against loss of jobs and benefits, and other challenges that face our industry, if we dismiss options for changing for the better just because it is different from what our grandparents did, or because it forces us to take a hard look internally.

*Myth: This is someone's pet project or a one-off issue. It has no real bearing on the larger scope of the fire service. It is not worth the time or effort to pursue.*

**Fact:** The issue of false alarms, like many in the fire service is a deployment issue, deeply integrated into our effectiveness as response agency as well as issues like firefighter safety.

For example, the proposals put forward by the IAFC to address the challenges posed by deployment to false alarms creates an alignment with current accreditation standards which require that a department adopt and manage system improvement to an "Standard of Cover" (SOC). An SOC requires an analysis of community risk and then a cogent plan to align response resources to obviate those risks.

An SOC in part measures unit concentration, unit distribution and unit reliability. If we continue to ignore the statistically obvious high frequency and low risk demands for our services, we will reduce our unit reliability and extend our response times to calls which are of a higher consequence and frequency.

Lastly, accredited agencies must demonstrate a relationship between their deployment model and the community risk as measured against all their risks and demands. Without the changes to NFPA 72, we cannot demonstrate this basic ability and uphold what we consider a model standard.

*Myth: Point ID alarm systems are too expensive.*

**Fact:** Changes in technology have greatly reduced the price-point for these systems, and they are quickly becoming industry norm.

There are few who disagree that a small investment in a more sophisticated system creates a greater return on both public and responder safety. The cost issue is the same misguided and false argument applied by opponents of residential sprinklers.

*Myth: The Central Station Alarm Association created this proposal and convinced the IAFC board to take it up.*

**Fact:** In 2009, the then-IAFC President engaged CSAA to talk about potential solutions to reduce false alarms. In these joint discussions, changes to the code were identified as a major opportunity to reduce false alarms. The NFPA 72 proposals were created by a working group comprised of both IAFC leaders and CSAA representatives.

*Myth: IAFC is "in bed" with CSAA who will gain from this proposal. Local facility owners and departments will be required to pay central station alarm companies more to do less.*

**Fact:** The IAFC knows that partnering with industry to create knowledgeable and realistic solutions benefits the fire and emergency service.

It is not the first time—nor likely the last—that people interpret our ability to build relationships as being "in bed" with industry.

The goal in our relationship with CSAA is not to build solutions that benefit either them or us, but build a better way of working together for the benefit of the fire and emergency service. Language was carefully crafted to ensure that the proposal offered more flexibility for fire

chiefs in determining what is best for their community.

There are no requirements in these proposals that would directly benefit central station alarm providers over the fire service. In fact, the proposals would put additional burden and responsibility on those monitoring and maintaining commercial alarm systems.

*Myth: The IAFC has been secretive and evasive about these proposals. They did not seek input at the state or local level.*

**Fact:** On the contrary, IAFC introduced these proposals into the standard NFPA process with the express goal of having a nationwide, open dialog and discussion on the issue.

In fact, IAFC was notified about those seeking to mount an early opposition by third parties. At no time did anyone express concern directly to the IAFC or reach out to our officers or staff to find out more about the proposal. The IAFC

actually reached out to and had discussions with those demonstrating opposition to better understand their message.

This is a national code process and the IAFC is a national organization focused on solutions to support fire chiefs worldwide. This proposal was drafted in such a way to provide a national framework that allows individual chiefs to tailor a solution that fits their jurisdictional and regional needs and resources.

We hope that those engaging in the code process use their local experience to inform a robust national discussion, rather than prevent it.

*Myth: The IAFC Fire & Life Safety Section does not support this effort.*

**Fact:** The leadership of the Fire & Life Safety Section had the opportunity to contribute to the proposal and supported the submission to NFPA.

### A Call to Action

The IAFC believes that the time to lead this issue forward is now. We encourage fire and emergency service leaders to learn the facts, and debate the issues openly and professionally through the NPFA code change process.