



MEMORANDUM

To: The Honorable President and Members of the Baltimore City Council
c/o Natawna Austin, Executive Secretary

From: Alice Kennedy, Acting Housing Commissioner

Date: April 20, 2021

Re: City Council Bill 21-0050 Burglar Alarms Registration and Regulation - False Alarms

The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has reviewed City Council Bill 21-0050 for the purpose of revising the fees assessed to alarm system users for repeated false alarms; altering the number of false alarms within year that will result in the placement of the premises into a no-response status; requiring that alarm system monitors make certain additional attempts to verify the need for a police response; making certain stylistic changes; and providing for a special effective date.

A false alarm is any alarm signal that elicits a response by officers and for which there is no evidence of activity to justify an officer response. That means that if an officer responds to an alarm signal and, after investigation, finds no evidence that criminal activity either had occurred or was occurring, the officers will designate the alarm signal as a false alarm. A false alarm may be caused by factors such as human error or equipment malfunction.

The Baltimore City Code, requires that alarm system contractors, monitors and users register with the Department of Housing and Community Development's False Alarm Reduction Program within 10 days of activation. A user is not charged any fees for registrations or renewals and the process can be completed online. Alarm users are responsible for keeping personal contact information accurate and the associated monitoring company's information up to date. Alarm Registrations are not transferable from one alarm user to another or from one location to another.

Currently users are assessed a false alarm occurrence fee beginning on the second and subsequent responses. There is one "free" response to false activations in a 365-day period. The user is assessed \$50 for the 2nd or 3rd alarm, \$100 for the 4th alarm and \$150 for the 5th alarm. This legislation would increase the fees assessed to residential alarm system users for repeated false alarms to; \$75 for the 2nd or 3rd alarm, \$150 for the 4th alarm and \$250 for the 5th alarm. The Bill would also remove the subsequent schedule of steadily increasing fees for residential users after the 5th incident. The Bill imposes a similar fee schedule for non-residential users. It is unclear if an increase in the fees imposed will reduce the number of false alarms, calls for police response or generate additional revenue for the City.

Under the current Code the Commissioner of the Department of Housing, or their designee, must send a “warning of no-response status” after the 10th false alarm within any 12-month period. The notice must state that the 10th false alarm has occurred, and if 5 more false alarms occur within the same 12-month period, the user’s alarm system will be placed on no-response status. This legislation would lower the number of false alarms triggering a warning notice by certified mail, from after the 10th false alarm to after the 2nd false alarm, and decrease the number of additional false alarms warranting placement in “no-response status” from 5 additional false alarms, to 2 additional false alarms within the same 12-month period.

It is worth noting that in the past DHCD has not moved any system to a “no-response status” based on discussions with the Police Department. Responding to any property alarm is a decision best made by the Police Department in the interest of health and public safety.

This legislation would add an additional layer of verification of alarm signals by requiring that a second attempt be made to a different number if the first attempt fails to reach an alarm user or an individual at the alarm system site who can determine whether an alarm signal is valid before requesting a police response. This amendment codifies what is already required based on DHCD’s False Alarm Rules and Regulations. DHCD supports additional verification processes and recognizes the intersection with alarm system contractors, monitors and users who must do their part to ensure that contact information is accurate and up to date for needed verification purposes.

DHCD appreciates the opportunity to report to the City Council on 21-0050 and the administration’s efforts to reduce the number of false alarms that officers respond to each year. False Alarm Activations are a major public safety concern. They can be costly and dangerous because they divert officers from crime prevention and delay response to emergencies.

DHCD defers to the Police Department on the passage of City Council Bill 21-0050.

AK/sm

cc: Ms. Themelis, Nina, *Mayor’s Office of Government Relations*