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SWEEPING SECURITY STANDARDS UP FOR REVIEW

Standard-setting group NFPA is known for fire codes, not security rules

By Andrea Gural

QUINCY, Mass. - The unregulated realm of the security industry could go the way of the regulated, standardized fire market if proposed rules governing the installation and maintenance of security systems are approved by National Fire Protection Association members.

Set for release for public review sometime this month, NFPA 731 Installation of Premises Security Equipment would provide detailed instruction as to the application, installation, performance, testing and maintenance of security equipment and its accessory components. A second document, NFPA 730 Premises Security Code, has been proposed as a guideline for the minimum security needs in different types of occupancies, such as hotels, educational settings, industrial settings and others.

“The uniqueness about the security industry is that it has never been regulated,” said Wayne Moore, director of New England operations for consulting engineering firm Hughes Associates and chairman of NFPA’s Premises Security Technical Committee. Moore oversees a committee membership of about 30 members, which is split between principal members and members from the same organizations who serve as alternates. The cross section of membership is diverse - the committee has representation from not only security industry professionals but also the insurance industry, hotel/lodging, Underwriters Laboratories, public safety officials and members of the real estate industry.

“It won’t take over tomorrow and I’m not even sure how it would be enforced in the field, but our goal is to help alleviate the local backlash against false alarms,” Moore said. “In some areas, if you have a standard to install to, then (local authorities) might be less likely to have that crackdown on false alarms.”

And while few deny that security is an area long overdue for regulation as well as standardization - industry officials said it would likely make

significant inroads in the fight against false alarms if approved and enforced - it's cross-section of interests that give some members of the industry pause.

"NFPA is not made up of one industry, it's made up of the public sector, insurance, real estate, etc.," said Scot Colby, president of the Standards Committee of the National Burglar & Fire Alarm Association and the group's incoming president. "I am concerned that the product that will come out won't be fair to the industry and have the proper guidelines. If it's not acceptable, than I am sure the industry won't pass it." NBFPA is currently working on a set of its own standards in an effort to address the same issues (see related story on page 22.)

And while committee members give nod to concerns about the NFPA's jurisdiction in security, they argue that what is important here is the news itself, not its messenger.

"There is nothing threatening about this code," said John Lombardi, president of CIA Security in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. and a member of the technical committee. "It's a standard to achieve a minimum level of professionalism and any company doing quality work is certainly not going to have a problem with it."

Lombardi, who also represents the Central Station Alarm Association on the committee, said he will not deliver his report on the proposed standards to the leadership and membership of that group until the CSAA's annual meeting in October.

Mark Visbal, associate director of standards and technology for the Security Industry Association and another member of the technical committee, said the committee's direction - both in installation standards and in occupancy guidelines - was not developed lightly.

"It took us well over a year to define the direction we were going to move in, and we got to a point where we needed two directions," Visbal said.

Committee member John Fannin, president and chief executive officer of SafePlace, a provider of safety accreditation for commercial buildings, hotels, health care facilities and other types of buildings, said that the document will not function without references to many other codes and standards that dictate life as a security and fire alarm installer, such as the National Electrical Code and NFPA 72 Fire alarm code.

"It's not a standalone document that is impacted by other things," he said. "It's a correlation of all these documents that is very important."

While a final vote on the standards won't occur until the NFPA's annual meeting in 2005, the standards will pass through NFPA's rigorous public and internal review process, which allows for input on the proposed standards from NFPA members, members of the life safety and the community at large at several different junctures.

NFPA members alone will actually vote on whether to adopt the new standard as part of NFPA's body of 300 codes and standards.