VERIFICATION OF FIRE ALARM SYSTEMS: WHO CAN DO IT?

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In the last edition of the CFAA, Stephen Ames noted in President’s message that each province "has specific code requirements and interpretations of National Codes and Standards".

Agreeably, this is generally the case and most jurisdictions articulate their requirements well. However, in respect to acceptance criteria for organizations which are involved in verification procedures of fire alarm systems, there doesn’t seem to be enough clarity and transparency within each jurisdictional authority.

The preface to ULC-S537 Standards For The Verification of Fire Alarm Systems (F.A.S.) states that the standard contemplates that verification will be done by qualified personnel employed by an organization other than the installing contractor and that this organization should be acceptable to the authority enforcing this standard.

So, who is this organization? What qualifies it’s staff to provide a verification procedure? What is the acceptance criteria for these organizations by the regulatory bodies? And if this criteria does, in fact, exist, is it similar in different jurisdictions? To my knowledge there is no such uniformity in interpretation of this acceptance criteria, and even more-such criteria does not appear to be transparent in the majority of jurisdictions. In the absence of any universally accepted criteria local enforcement agencies have to develop their own systems of assessment of potential F.A.S. verifiers for the purpose of acceptance, and then monitor compliance of these verification bodies with the developed acceptance criteria. It is time that the certification and accreditation of verification organizations should be done on a provincial level by an expert group of peers, such as a provincial/territorial chapter of the CFAA.

CFAA could develop accreditation criteria for such qualified individuals to become verification organizations and introduce this criteria to provincial/territorial enforcement agencies for their "blessing". In this case, every individual who is registered with the provincial body of the CFAA, would be accepted by local regulatory agencies ultimately across the country. The CFAA would monitor compliance of these registered verification agencies with all established requirements, foster their professional development and apply necessary disciplinary action when warranted. Such registered "verification organizations" would be able to practice their unique trade throughout the country, thus making verification procedures consistent after each F.A.S. installation, and therefore elevating the effectiveness of fire alarm systems operations.

Unfortunately, this seemingly logical approach has not been adopted in all provincial/territorial jurisdictions. As there is no such provincial certification program in B.C., the acceptance criteria for verification organizations varies in each regulatory jurisdiction. About 9 years ago the Electrical Inspections Branch in the City of Vancouver developed it’s own acceptance criteria for "verification organizations". A list of acceptable verification bodies has been established and this list is updated twice a year. This list (along with a list of acceptable central stations) is posted on the City web site. City Inspection staff accept verification reports only from qualified personnel employed by the verification bodies accepted by the City. In order to be listed in Vancouver as
an acceptable verification organization permitted to verify F.A. systems in conformance with ULC S537 and to submit verification reports, such organization must:

1. Be a fire alarm manufacturer and employ qualified persons whose name(s) will appear on verification reports; (Note: For the purpose of engaging in the FAS verification procedures the City of Vancouver defines a qualified person as a person who possesses a provincial electrical trade certificate.) (a journeyman electrician’s, or a tradesperson’s limited ticket for work with F.A. systems is acceptable), who is able to demonstrate documented completion of the equipment manufacturer’s training program and has at least 3 years of relevant experience.

2. Be a manufacturer’s agent who is authorized by the manufacturer to verify it’s line of F.A. equipment and who employs qualified persons;

3. Be an organization listed by ULC under the ULC testing and maintenance program for F.A. systems and which employs qualified persons; or

4. Be a Professional Engineer, registered in the Province of B.C.

There is no doubt that it would be beneficial for the City to abolish it’s own acceptance program and rely on a provincially accredited body. However, as such provincial accreditation program does not exist, the City of Vancouver has taken a proactive approach on this subject. As the result of this initiative many other local jurisdictions started to informally use the City list.

It is interesting to note that the Applied Science Technologists and Technicians Association of BC has developed a certification program in conjunction with local fire departments for individuals involved in testing and inspection of already installed fire alarm systems. These individuals are Licensed by ASTT to perform testing and maintenance of existing F.A. systems in conformance with ULC-S536. The Vancouver Fire & Rescue Services Department has accepted these certified individuals to test fire alarm systems per ULC-S536 as required by the Vancouver Fire By-law. However, this certification program generated justifiable concerns from the provincial electrical safety authorities, as the ASTT does not necessarily consider testing, inspection and maintenance procedures carried out by these certified individuals, as electrical work, and as such, does not require electrical trade qualification as a prerequisite for certification.

In conclusion I’d like to come back to the comments in President’s message mentioned above, and to point out that CFAA could play an essential role in improving the level of fire safety in Canada by convincing all provincial/territorial regulatory agencies that the comprehensive educational program and certification requirements offered by the CFAA for fire alarm practitioners should be used as a recognized criteria for regulators to accept verification bodies across the country. The CFAA could become a truly indispensable tool in achieving consistency on the national level.