

# FORMAL INTERPRETATION 98-2

## SILENCING OF VISUAL ALARM NOTIFICATION APPLIANCES

By: Jerry W. Jones  
Deputy Assistant Secretary/Chief Architect

Approved  
By: V. J. Bella  
State Fire Marshal

**Question:** Are visual notification appliances allowed to be silenced by the same as audible notification appliances?

**Background:** This office previously rendered an opinion at a recent Fire Alarm Association meeting that, while the audible notification appliances under certain specific conditions could be silenced, the visual notification appliances would have to continue to operate and would not be allowed to be silenced at the same time.

This office has conducted further research into this matter and has determined that the previous interpretation rendered by this office is incorrect. NFPA 72, in fact, will conditionally allow the silencing of notification appliances, including visual notification appliances.

### Historical Background:

NFPA 72A (1964 ed.) Had no requirements that allow for alarm silencing  
(1967 ed.)  
(1972 ed.)  
(1975 ed.)

**Note:** This would apply to all systems installed prior to September 1, 1981.

NFPA 72A (1979 ed.) 72:2-5.6  
(1985 ed.)  
1. Switch to silence alarm shall be key operated or shall be locked in a cabinet.  
2. The switch shall transfer the alarm to a lamp or other visual indicator (control panel).  
3. Subsequent alarms in other zones will operate the alarm signal sounding devices.  
4. If the switch is left in the "silence" position, a trouble signal shall be indicated in the control panel until the switch is restored to normal.

**Note:** This would apply to all systems installed between September 1, 1981 and February 19, 1989

NFPA 72A (1987 ed.) 72:2-8.6  
1. The requirements are the same from the 1985 edition except the requirement for "the switch to transfer the alarm to a lamp or other visual indicator" was changed to "...a switch shall be permitted only if Visual Zone Alarm Indication or equivalent has been provided as specified in 2-11".  
2. 72:2-11 requires that if an initiating device is (i.e. manual pull station, water flow switch, system detector, etc.) There shall be a visual indication by annunciation (i.e., remote or control panel). Printout (i.e., facility) or any other means subject to the A.H.J. This visual indication shall not be by the operation of an audible alarm switch.

**Note:** This would apply to all systems installed between February 19, 1989 and May 31, 1992.

NFPA 72A (1990 ed.)  
(1993 ed.)

1. The requirements are the same from the 1987 edition except that the following statement was added to the code; “where automatic alarm is permitted by the Authority Having Jurisdiction, the alarm shall not be silenced in less than 5 minutes unless otherwise permitted the Authority Having Jurisdiction.

**Note:** This applies to all existing systems installed after May 31, 1992 to present.

**The Bottom Line:**

This office shall allow existing fire alarm systems and new fire alarm systems to manually silence the general evacuation signal (both audible and visual) provided the system complies with all of the requirements of 72:2-8.6. This interpretation supersedes all previous office policies regarding this issue. According to the Technical Staff of NFPA 72, the intent of this requirement is to allow the fire alarm signal to be silenced by authorized personnel (i.e. building owner, trained staff, emergency response team, etc.) to allow emergency staff to verbally communicate to each other. Many in the Fire Marshal’s staff have argued that by permitting the alarm to be “silenced” allows certain building occupancies to get around the requirements than prevent “presignal” or “positive alarm sequence”. Please be advised that this feature does not allow this, because the evacuation signal has already been activated. Please be advised if the fire alarm signal is silenced automatically, then the notification signal cannot be silenced in less than 5 minutes upon activation of the alarm.