

Neighborhood Watch Organizer's Guide

People Working Together Can Make a Difference!

Crime and fear of crime threaten a community's well-being -people become afraid to use streets and parks, suspicion erupts between young and old, businesses gradually leave. Crime in turn feeds on the isolation it creates. Today's lifestyles -many homes where both parents work, more single-parent families, and greater job mobility -can contribute to community isolation and weaken civic ties.

You and your neighbors can prevent or break this vicious cycle, and in the process, build your community into a safer, friendlier and more caring place to live. Statistics tell the story. Police and sheriffs' departments in cities, small towns, and suburbs throughout the country report substantial decreases in crime and fear because of local crime prevention efforts.

Start with a Neighborhood Watch or block club to address immediate crime problems, focus on home security, and build neighborhood cohesion. Then move into other areas such as educating residents about child protection, drug abuse prevention, victim services, and domestic violence prevention and intervention. Explore circumstances in the community that might contribute to crime-such as the physical design of buildings, traffic patterns, drug trafficking, few jobs or recreational opportunities for teenagers, lack of affordable housing-and look for long range solutions.



The First Building Block - Neighborhood Watch

Neighborhood Watch, Block Watch, Town Watch, Apartment Watch, Crime Watch-no matter what it's called, this is one of the most effective and least costly answers to crime. Watch groups are a foundation of community crime prevention, they can be a stepping stone to community revitalization.

Getting Started-Meetings, Block Captains, and Maps

- Form a small planning committee of neighbors to discuss needs, the level of interest, possible challenges, and the Watch concept.
- Contact the local police or sheriffs department, or local crime prevention organization, to discuss Neighborhood Watch and local crime problems. Invite a law enforcement officer to attend your meeting.
- Publicize your meeting at least one week in advance with door-to-door fliers and follow-up with phone calls the day before.
- Select a meeting place that is accessible to people with disabilities.
- Hold an initial meeting to gauge neighbors' interest: establish purpose of program: and begin to identify issues that need to be addressed. Stress that a Watch group is an association of neighbors who look out for each other's families and property, alert the police to any suspicious activities or crime in progress, and work together to make their community a safer and better place to live.

When the neighborhood decides to adopt the Watch idea it should:

- Elect a chairperson.
- Ask for block captain volunteers who are responsible for relaying information to members on their block, keeping up-to-date information on residents, and making special efforts to involve the elderly, working parents, and young people. Block captains also can serve as liaisons between the neighborhood and the police and communicate information about meetings and crime incidents to all residents.
- Establish a regular means of communicating with Watch members- e.g. newsletter, telephone tree, e-mail, fax, etc.
- Prepare a neighborhood map showing names, addresses, and phone



numbers of participating households and distribute to members. Block captains keep this map up to date, contacting newcomers to the neighborhood and rechecking occasionally with ongoing participants.

With guidance from a law enforcement agency, the Watch trains its members in home security techniques, observation skills, and crime reporting. Residents also learn about the types of crime that affect the area.

If you are ready to post Neighborhood Watch signs, check with law enforcement to see if they have such eligibility requirements as number of houses that participate in the program. Law enforcement may also be able to provide your program with signs. If not, they can probably tell you where you can order them.

Organizers and block captains must emphasize that Watch groups are not vigilantes and do not assume the role of the police. They only ask neighbors to be alert, observant, and caring-and to report suspicious activity or crimes immediately to the police.

The Watch concept is adaptable. There are Park Watches, Apartment Watches, Window Watches, Boat Watches, School Watches, Realtor Watches, Utility Watches, and Business Watches. A Watch can be organized around any geographic unit.

Tips for Success

- Hold regular meetings to help residents get to know each other and to collectively decide upon program strategies and activities.
- Consider linking with an existing organization, such as a citizens' association, community development office, tenants' association, housing authority.
- Canvas door-to-door to recruit members.
- Involve everyone-young and old, single and married, renter and homeowner.
- Gain support from the police or sheriffs' office. This is critical to a Watch group's credibility. These agencies are the major sources of information on local crime patterns, home security, other crime prevention education, and crime reporting.
- Get the information out quickly. Share all kinds of news-quash rumors.
- Gather the facts about crime in your neighborhood. Check police reports, do victimization surveys, and learn residents' perceptions about crime. Often residents' opinions are not supported by facts, and accurate information can reduce fear of crime.
- Physical conditions like abandoned cars or overgrown vacant lots contribute to crime. Sponsor cleanups, encourage residents to beautify the area, and ask them to turn on outdoor lights at night.

It's essential to celebrate the success of the effort and recognize volunteers' contributions through such events as awards, annual dinners, and parties. To help meet community needs, Neighborhood Watches can sponsor meetings that address broader issues such as drug abuse, gangs, self-protection tactics, isolation of the elderly, crime in the schools, and rape prevention.

Don't forget events like National Night Out (sponsored by the National Association of Town Watch the first Tuesday in August) or a potluck dinner that gives neighbors a chance to get together. Such items as pins, t-shirts, hats, or coffee mugs with the group's name also enhance identity and pride.



Other Tools That Support Neighborhood Watch Programs

Citizen Patrols

An effective tool for some Watch programs to use is a citizen patrol. It is up to the community in conjunction with law enforcement to decide whether a patrol is needed. Citizen patrols are volunteers who walk or drive an area on a regular basis to report incidents and problems to the police and provide a visible presence that deters criminal activity. They have no policing powers, carry no weapons, are nonconfrontational, and always coordinate activities with law enforcement. A citizen patrol can cover a neighborhood, an apartment lobby or complex, a business district, or a park; some use bicycles, in-line skates, or cars to cover larger areas. They contact the police dispatcher through two-way radios or cellular phones donated by a local business. Cameras or video equipment

may be used to record suspicious activity. Many patrols are based in a Neighborhood Watch program or work closely with one.

A good resource for your citizen patrol is the Community Policing Consortium (202-833-3305). They will work with your local cellular phone carrier to arrange for phones to be donated to your program.

Make sure your citizen patrol:

- Undergoes training by law enforcement and have their support;
- Works in teams;
- Wears identifying clothing -t-shirts, caps, vests, jackets-or reflective clothing or patches;
- Never carries weapons of any kind — e.g. guns, black jack, mace, baseball bat, or knives;
- Never challenges anyone;
- Always carries a pad and pencil, and a flashlight if it is dark;
- Is courteous and helpful to residents of the area being patrolled: and
- Keeps logs and files reports with the local law enforcement agency.

Remember that citizen patrols can take on extra duties, such as escort services, crowd and traffic control at community events, identifying neighborhood nuisance concerns, monitoring graffiti sites, checking on homebound residents, and reporting abandoned vehicles.

Operation Identification

Marking personal property indelibly with a unique number allows for positive identification if items are lost or stolen. Watch groups can help initiate this process for their communities. Numbers are engraved onto metal objects or marked with indelible markers on other materials. People who mark their property have a greater chance of recovering it.

How To Keep Your Neighborhood Watch Going and Growing

When crime drops or the neighborhood problem is alleviated, Some Watch programs slowly lose momentum. To keep a Neighborhood Watch program vital, blend crime prevention into other community concerns.

Have your Watch group identify the neighborhood's strengths and problems and then brainstorm on what members can do to improve the quality of community life. Here are some ideas to get you started.

- Encourage schools to teach crime and drug prevention in the classroom.
- Cooperate with parent associations, recreation departments, and schools to organize after-school programs for children and teens.
- Start a block parent program to help children cope with emergencies while walking to and from school or playing in the area. These programs can be a reliable source of help for children in emergency or frightening situations. Volunteers must meet specific standards, including a law enforcement records check. Programs are established locally as a partnership among law enforcement, schools, and community organizations.
- Spearhead a Gang or Violence Prevention Task Force to assess these problems and develop prevention strategies or solutions.
- Translate crime and drug prevention materials into Spanish or other languages needed by non-English speakers in your community.
- Get a local Boys Girls Club or other youth organization to help the elderly with marking valuables, enhancing home security, or going to the store. In turn, senior citizens can help youth with such needs as tutoring or recreational programs, oral history projects, or cooking classes.
- Turn a vacant lot into a park, playground, playing field, or community garden.
- Work with small businesses to repair rundown storefronts, clean up littered streets, and create jobs for young people.
- Link up with victim services to train your members in assisting victims of crime.
- Recruit utility workers, cab drivers, and other people with two-way radios or cellular phones to extend your Neighborhood Watch network.
- Ask people who seldom leave their houses to be "Window Watchers," looking out for children and any

unusual activities in the neighborhood.

- Encourage businesses to hold lunch-time crime and drug prevention seminars and special events for employees and their families.
- Sponsor a crime and drug prevention fair at a shopping mall or community center.
- Get banks and other businesses to include crime prevention tips in their statements and bills.
- Work with local media-newspapers, radio, TV stations- to publicize events and thank supporters.
- Sponsor a seminar for the elderly and others on how to avoid becoming victims of con games and fraud.
- Get a local theater group to produce a play teaching children how to protect themselves from violence, drug abuse, or other crime.
- Work with the telephone company or local schools to teach children how to use 9-1-1 or other emergency numbers.
- Establish a "buddy" system for the elderly and people with disabilities, in which someone checks with them daily by phone and summons help if needed.
- Link Neighborhood Watch to efforts promoted by other groups: drug prevention, child protection, anti-vandalism projects, arson prevention, neighborhood cleanup, recycling. Share resources and promote each other's activities. Invite guest speakers to Neighborhood Watch meetings.
- Publicize your program and its successes in local media ranging from civic association newsletters to local radio shows to television.
- Start a community crime prevention newsletter. Block captains or volunteers (including kids and teenagers) can distribute the newsletter, which also helps them keep in touch with residents.
- Work with businesses to develop a Business Watch program. Ask them to help pay for fliers and a newsletter, provide meeting places, and distribute crime prevention information.