

Neighborhood Watch

The Neighborhood Watch Program is organized to enable the police and the community to work together to make specific geographical areas more crime resistant to reduce crime. It is a citizen involvement, neighborhood and community-based effort, designed to help citizens and the police or sheriffs' department in preventing primarily residential burglaries. In harmony with the philosophy of Community Policing, Neighborhood Watch encourages strong working relationships between patrol officers and the citizens they serve.

Neighborhood Watch, Crime Watch, Block Watch, Town Watch, -- whatever the title, is one of the most effective and least costly methods to prevent crime and reduce fear. The Watch idea is adaptable. There are Dormitory Watches, 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.

Police and sheriffs' departments across the country are learning that community participation in anti-crime programs is essential. One of the most effective ways to promote citizen interaction with police is the sharing of information. Citizen groups determine specific needs or problems and then share this information with local police. The police then act on this information and report back to the group on their progress. This program also works when the police go to public groups and organizations and make them aware of specific criminal activities, or the needs of the police department.

Why Organize a Neighborhood Against Crime?

Crime and fear of crime threaten a community's well-being. Crime may be right there scaring everyone off the streets, or just looming on the horizon. People become afraid to leave their homes, to use streets and parks or to walk through the neighborhood. Suspicion erupts between the young and old. Businesses gradually leave. Crime in turn feeds on the social isolation it creates. Today's lifestyles -- many homes where both parents work, more single parent families, and greater job mobility -- can contribute to this isolation and weaken communities.

Neighbors can prevent or break this vicious cycle, and in the process, build their community into a safer, friendlier, and more caring place to live. Whatever your neighborhood is like, getting together to fight crime, violence, and drugs can help create communities where children can be children and people once isolated by crime and fear, can enjoy being a part of a thriving neighborhood.

The Neighborhood Watch program's success is hinged on achieving and sustaining an appropriate level of community involvement to a point at which the neighborhood realizes a reduction and/or achieves prevention of residential burglaries and other residential area

crime. Where they have been instituted, neighborhood watch programs have had a measurable effect of substantially reducing the fear of crime, encouraging crime reporting, stimulating members' involvement in crime prevention, inhibiting drug trafficking, and spurring beautification activities. Statistics and criminals alike verify that when neighbors organize, the opportunity for crime is drastically reduced.

What Are the Goals of Neighborhood Watch?

The goals of Neighborhood Crime Watch are:

- To increase community awareness, enhance individuals' power of observation, and encourage mutual assistance and concern among neighbors to reduce crime. The crimes normally targeted are burglary and other property crimes prevalent to neighborhoods. Groups can obtain information and assistance from police and other government agencies that can help to improve living conditions.
- To allow the concerns of the neighborhood to be presented in a unified voice to both the police department and to other governmental agencies. Groups can inform community leaders on programs and actions that the "people" support. When people work together as neighbors, they create a better place to live for all of them, as a genuine neighborhood.
- To develop a neighborhood action program where neighbors help each other by watching each other's homes and reporting suspicious persons in their neighborhoods to the police department. They allow the police to train citizens on how to be pro-active by preventing crime and how to recognize and report criminal activities. Then if something suspicious occurs, you will know how to report it to the police and how to notify you neighbors, alerting them against further intrusion. With a heightened awareness and a "sense of community" achieved, criminals will find it much harder to work unnoticed in your area.
- To train citizens in various personal and physical security strategies and help them in making their home more secure. Most crimes are opportunistic and can be reduced or removed by simple crime prevention techniques. It provides the police a method to give the community information on home and personal security. The three main things a resident can do to reduce the risk of burglary are:
 - ✓ the proper use of good locks
 - ✓ participate in Operation Identification
 - ✓ participate in a Neighborhood Watch organization.
- Not only used as a strong tool to fight crime, but also as a strong social organization. They can also be utilized to engage citizens in other neighborhood projects.
- To promote awareness techniques and reporting crime but not the physical confrontation of criminals. Watch groups are not vigilantes and do not assume the role of the police. Citizens are only asked to be more alert, observant, and caring and to serve as extra eyes

- and ears for law enforcement.
- To constantly expand and change to meet the needs of the community.

Neighborhood Watch Procedure

Concerned residents, a community organization, or a law enforcement agency can initiate the effort to organize a Watch. Community members can be given the following instructions on organizing their Neighborhood Watch group.

How Does One Start a Neighborhood Watch?

Forming a Neighborhood Watch is a challenge. The first step is to find out the initial interest level in your neighborhood. Any attempt at beginning an organized Watch group will not be successful unless a certain level of community interest exists. Concentrate your initial effort by organizing those neighbors with whom you have occasional contact. For example, if your block is mostly single family dwellings, invite neighbors on both sides of the street and adjacent corners. If you live in an apartment or condominium, include everyone in your building and in the adjacent buildings as space permits. It is strongly suggested that you start by speaking with neighbors on your block to obtain a feel for how many people may be interested in attending Neighborhood Watch training. Obtain a neighborhood map and clearly define the boundaries for your watch area. Start small, less than fifty homes, and you can expand as you become more organized. Citizen interest and involvement are crucial to the success of this program.

First, talk to your neighbors and tell them that you are starting a Neighborhood Watch and that you need their participation. Enlist the help of other neighbors to help you. Form a small planning committee to discuss needs, the level of interest, possible challenges, and the Watch idea. Introduce yourselves to other neighbors by going door-to-door. The following tips are suggested to encourage the neighbors to join you:

- Tell your neighbors about any recent crime activity in the area. They may be unaware! Ask the police department for a summary of local crime activity to share with your neighbors.
- Ask which evenings your neighbors are available. Generally, neighborhood meetings are conducted at 7:00 or 7:30 p.m., Mondays through Thursdays.
- Take this opportunity to get acquainted on a first-name basis. This is vital to the success of your Neighborhood Watch! Exchange phone numbers. Tell your neighbors that you will notify them when a meeting is scheduled.
- After a substantial amount of community interest is expressed, it would be time to contact the police or sheriff's department or local crime prevention organization for help in training members in home security, and reporting skills and for information on local

crime patterns. You should indicate approximately how many households your Neighborhood Watch includes.

- Gather the facts about crime in your neighborhood. Check police reports, do victimization surveys, and learn residents' perceptions about crime. Often facts do not support residents' opinions, and accurate information can reduce fear of crime.
- After setting the date, select and secure a location, close to your area, to hold the meeting. Local churches, libraries and schools are usually very cooperative. Be sure to select a meeting place that is accessible to people with disabilities.
- Advertising the meeting is very important! Be creative with handouts and personal or phone contacts. Let everyone know when and where the meeting will be held. Create flyers that announce the date, time, location and topic of your meeting. Neighborhood Watch meeting invitations and the Neighborhood Watch pamphlets may be available from the police or sheriff's department.
- The Coordinator or Block Captain will then fill out and deliver invitations, pamphlets, and a cover letter to each resident in the targeted area. Distribute the fliers, in person, seven to ten days beforehand. Have neighbors help pass out the flyers!
- Two or three days before the meeting, remind your neighbors in person or by phone.
- The first meeting is basically a social event and an information sharing time. The officer, who will be speaking to your group, will tell you about your local law enforcement agency and how Neighborhood Watch can help your community. The primary goal of the first meeting is to gauge the expected participation in the project and to create an understanding for the need for Neighborhood Watch.
- After the first meeting you will need to begin selecting the Neighborhood Watch Coordinator and the Block Captains. You will need either a single individual to fill the Coordinator's position or a team. You will then need one Block Captain for certain number of homes (i.e., every ten homes).
- The Coordinator should call a meeting with the Block Captains to plan which form you will use to register the members and to select a target date to officially start the Neighborhood Watch.
- Block Captains should attempt to register every home in your assigned block. Compile a master list of all members. Prepare a neighborhood map showing names, addresses, and phone numbers of participating households and distribute to members. Block captains will keep this map up to date, contacting newcomers to the neighborhood and occasionally rechecking with ongoing participants.
- Establish a regular means of communicating with Watch members—e.g., newsletter,

telephone tree, e-mail, fax, etc. Get the information out quickly. Share all kinds of news to quash rumors.

- When your group has finished the initial organizing, you need to have a day to officially start the Neighborhood Watch. This will be the Kick Off Day.
 - ✓ We recommend that you pick a weekend or evening when everyone in the group will be invited to a special event such as a block party or a community rally. It never hurts to have food and special events planned.
 - ✓ Try to have the meeting in or near your Watch area. This will draw attention to your group and will encourage others in the area to want to become a part of your program.
 - ✓ You will need to invite a local government representative and your local law enforcement officers who patrol your area. This will give you a chance to meet them and to tell them your problems and to make special requests.
 - ✓ You may also wish to invite the media to cover your events. This is a good way to tell the community about your program and how your neighborhood is fighting back against crime. Work with local media -- newspapers, radio, TV stations -- to publicize events and thank supporters.
 - ✓ Have the big Kick Off event and begin the process of helping to reduce crime in your community.
- At the regularly scheduled meetings address immediate crime problems, focus on home security, and build neighborhood cohesion. Such topics may include:
 - ✓ bias-motivated violence
 - ✓ rape prevention
 - ✓ crime in schools
 - ✓ drug abuse
 - ✓ domestic violence
 - ✓ gangs, etc.
- While holding periodic crime prevention meetings is important, gathering only to discuss “gloom and doom” topics may cause a loss of interest. Gradually move into other areas such as:
 - ✓ educating residents about child protection
 - ✓ child care before and after school
 - ✓ self-protection tactics
 - ✓ recreational activities for young people
 - ✓ victim services

- ✓ isolation of the elderly, etc.
- Explore circumstances in the community that might contribute to crime such as:
 - ✓ abandoned houses
 - ✓ the physical design of buildings
 - ✓ lack of recreation for youth
 - ✓ traffic patterns
 - ✓ few jobs or recreational opportunities for teenagers
 - ✓ lack of affordable housing
 - ✓ drug trafficking, etc.

Organize regular meetings that focus on current issues. Neighborhood Watch groups help build pride and serves as a springboard for efforts that address community concerns such as these. The group works with the police or sheriff for long-range solutions to the identified problems.

- Work with the local government or law enforcement agency to put up Neighborhood Watch signs, usually after at least 50 percent of all households are enrolled.
- The continued interest and involvement of your neighbors are crucial to the success of your Neighborhood Watch. Typically, Neighborhood Watch groups organize to respond to an immediate threat -- a series of rapes, a sharp increase in burglaries, rising fear of street crime. It is an unfortunate fact that when a neighborhood crime crisis goes away, in many situations so does enthusiasm for Neighborhood Watch. To maintain the interest of your group:
 - ✓ Consider linking with an existing organization, such as a civic organization, citizens' association, community development office, tenants' association, housing authority.
 - ✓ Introducing a variety of activities into your Neighborhood Watch provides a welcome change of pace. Don't forget social events that give neighbors a chance to know each other. You and your neighbors can participate in the following social activities:
 - Block Parties: Neighbors arrange to have the street blocked off from vehicle traffic to allow an outdoor party. A "pot luck" meal and games for all ages set the stage for a party. Consider inviting the police or sheriff and fire department to present a display or demonstration.
 - Picnic: A summer picnic is a sure crowd pleaser. When the weather is moderate, an outdoor or backyard picnic is a fun way to get together with your neighbors. Consider inviting a guest speaker to this event as well.
 - Neighborhood Potluck Dinner: A pleasant change of pace takes place when a neighbor holds a gathering where residents bring their favorite foods and

beverage items for sampling.

- Sporting events: a volleyball or softball game to get everyone together may work.
- Progressive Dinner: A great way to mingle with neighbors is to plan a dinner where neighbors prepare foods from a planned menu. Each menu item from salad to desert is served for guests to serve themselves.
- Pool Party: Residents with pools become most popular if they invite neighbors over for a swim especially during the summer heat.
- House Warming: Introduce yourself to new neighbors and invite them to your next gathering. They may volunteer to hold a meeting in their new home.

Arranging these types of activities fosters a sense of cohesiveness among your neighbors. New neighbors will feel welcomed and everyone will get to know each other.

- ✓ Consider starting a program where locations are identified as “safe houses” for kids to go to when they are in trouble. One example of this is a McGruff House. A McGruff House is a reliable source of help for children in an emergency or frightening situations. Volunteers must meet specific standards, including a law enforcement record check. Programs are established locally as a partnership among law enforcement, schools, and community organizations.
- ✓ Initiate a gang prevention task force to assess those problems and develop prevention strategies or solutions.
- ✓ Sponsor cleanups of the neighborhood where residents are encouraged to beautify the area.
- ✓ Participate in events like National Night Out that gives neighbors a chance to get together for a common cause.
- ✓ Celebrate the success of the effort and recognize volunteers’ contributions through such events as awards, annual dinners, and parties.
- ✓ Create pride in the organization by producing such items as pins, T-shirts, hats, or coffee mugs with the group’s name.

Organization of a Neighborhood Watch Group

- The Neighborhood Watch Coordinator’s responsibilities may include:
 - ✓ Act as liaison to the local law enforcement agency. The Coordinator passes non

emergency information from the group directly to the Crime Prevention Office. The Coordinator also receives information from the Crime Prevention Office and passes it to the Block Captains.

- ✓ Coordinates the activities of Block Captains and Block Watchers participating in the program.
- ✓ Organizing the date, time, and location for group meetings and for information sharing meetings with the Block Captains.
- ✓ Review tips and information on suspected criminal activities within the group area and looks for patterns or for potential suspects. This information is received from Block Captains who create written documentation of suspicious activities.
- The Block Captain is the primary link in the group's chain of command. There should be a defined limit to the number of homes (i.e., ten) assigned per Block Captain. The duties include a wide range of simple tasks. The Block Captain's responsibilities may include:
 - ✓ Meet each resident in your assigned area and offer to register them in the group.
 - ✓ Holding regular meetings with the area members. The Block Captains explain the program both to those neighbors at the meeting and to those who did not attend the meeting, discussing the requirements of the program including the need for each resident to commit to reporting crime.
 - ✓ Cooperates and helps the Coordinator.
 - ✓ Maintain an emergency phone list of all your assigned residents. Maintains records of these participating residents.
 - ✓ Be available to pass on information about criminal activities in your area. (Note: A Block Captain may be called late at night if one of their residents spots suspicious activities.)
 - ✓ Lending out Operation Identification engravers.
 - ✓ Forward information to the group's Coordinator and activate the phone tree if you receive information on a suspect in your area. (The "phone tree" involves calling members and informing them if an active incident is going on in the area).
 - ✓ The Block Captain also coordinates assistance programs if there are any special needs in their area and may set up social events for their members to become involved in.
 - ✓ Distributes the Neighborhood Watch pamphlets and other crime prevention literature.

- The Neighborhood Watch members are the most important part of any group. Being a Watch member is not a hard or time-consuming job. It mostly involves becoming aware of activities in your area and taking time to report them.
- ✓ Attend a presentation on Neighborhood Watch by either the Crime Prevention Officer or a trained Block Captain, thus promising to report crime.
- ✓ Cooperate and assist the Block Captain.
- ✓ Volunteer with your area Neighborhood Watch.
- ✓ Review the Neighborhood Watch pamphlets and crime prevention literature.
- ✓ Take simple crime prevention measures to avoid unnecessary crimes. Target harden your home and car by using these proven simple techniques.
- ✓ Participate in Operation Identification.
- ✓ The local police or sheriff asks you and your neighbors to get together and to get to know each other. As you become more familiar with your neighbors, their cars, etc., you become more observant about what is “normal” for your neighborhood. Then, if you see someone that is out of place, or a car that is suspicious, call the police or sheriff and allow them to check it out. Neighborhood Watch is not about you taking police action, that is the job of law enforcement. It is about being a good neighbor.
- ✓ Watch your neighbor’s homes and report suspicious persons in your neighborhoods to your local law enforcement agency. Report the non emergency activities to your Block Captain by phone or on a 3x5 card. These may include:
 - abandoned cars
 - graffiti
 - overgrown vacant lots, etc.
- ✓ Emergencies or a crime in progress should be reported to the police or sheriff emergency line (usually 911) and then to the Block Captain. Many people don’t want to bother the police because they are afraid that it may not be a real emergency or that they may be embarrassed if their suspicions turn out to be unfounded. The police would much rather be called out to investigate than to be called after a crime has been committed. These may include:
 - someone screaming or shouting for help.
 - someone in need of medical attention.
 - a person running, especially if carrying something of value.
 - anyone being forced into a vehicle.
 - a person exhibiting unusual mental or physical symptoms.

- persons making a quick change of vehicles.
 - burglaries, robberies, thefts, auto break-ins, etc. in progress.
 - someone looking into windows of homes or parked cars.
 - apparent drug trafficking.
 - unusual noises.
 - apparent businesses transactions conducted from a vehicle.
 - property being taken out of closed businesses or houses where no one is at home.
 - open or broken doors or windows to a home or business.
 - cars, vans, or trucks moving slowly and without lights with no apparent destination, or repeating the same action.
 - a stranger sitting in a car or stopping to talk to a child, etc.
- ✓ When contacting your local law enforcement agency:
- provide them your name, address and telephone number.
 - briefly describe the event -- what happened, when, where, and who was involved.
 - tell them as soon as possible if medical assistance is needed.
 - describe the suspect: sex, race, age, height, weight, hair color, clothing, distinctive characteristics such as beard, mustache, scars, or accent.
 - tell them if weapons were involved.
 - tell the suspect's last known direction of travel.
 - describe the vehicle if one was involved: color, make, model, year, license plate, and special features such as stickers, dents, or decals.
- ✓ Be willing to serve as an acting Block Captain in the absence of your area Block Captain or to help the Block Captain with projects in your block.
- ✓ Attend monthly or quarterly meetings of the group.

Neighborhood Watch Makes a Difference!

