

Neighborhood Watch Gets Residents Prepared

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the need for strengthening and securing communities has become more important than ever. For three decades, Neighborhood Watch groups, in conjunction with local officials and law enforcement agencies, have worked successfully to address crime prevention issues and to restore pride to their neighborhoods. Now they face a new challenge: helping local residents become a critical element in the detection, prevention, and disruption of terrorism.

This new focus is part of a national challenge issued by President Bush and Attorney General John D. Ashcroft to enhance local homeland security efforts. On March 6, 2002, Attorney General Ashcroft announced a plan to double the number of groups participating in the Neighborhood Watch Program and to incorporate terrorism prevention and education into its existing crime prevention mission.

President Bush has called for all Americans to make disaster preparedness a part of their daily lives. Although government agencies assume most of the responsibility for detecting and preventing terrorism, preparedness is the job of individual citizens as well. Disaster can strike quickly. Whether a disaster is due to a natural event, a technological event, or an act of terrorism, the importance of preparedness is the same.

The unique infrastructure of Neighborhood Watch brings together local officials, law enforcement, and residents for the protection of the community, making Neighborhood Watch an excellent program for promoting both citizen awareness and preparedness in the war against terrorism. To strengthen their communities and effectively prevent and respond to the threats of terrorism, crime, or any kind of disaster, residents should know how to start or join a Neighborhood Watch Program; how to create a Community Disaster Preparedness Plan; and how to recognize and report signs of terrorist activity.

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Starting a 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.

Phase One: 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.

Phase Two: When the neighborhood decides to adopt the Watch idea

- 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 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.

Joining a Neighborhood Watch

Neighborhood Watch, Block Watch, Town Watch, Crime Watch -- whatever the name, it's one of the most effective and least costly ways to prevent crime and reduce fear. Neighborhood Watch fights the isolation that crime both creates and feeds upon. It forges bonds among area residents, helps reduce burglaries and robberies, and improves relations between police and the communities they serve.

Visit www.nationaltownwatch.org for more information about town watch and about National Night Out.

The ABCs of Neighborhood Watch

- Any community resident can join -- young and old, single and married, renter and home owner.
- A few concerned residents, a community organization, or a law enforcement agency can spearhead the effort to organize a Watch.
- Members learn how to make their homes more secure, watch out for each other and the neighborhood, and report activities that raise their suspicions to the police or sheriff's office.
- You can form a Watch group around any geographical unit: a block, apartment, park, business area, public housing complex, office, marina. Watch groups are not vigilantes. They are extra eyes and ears for reporting crime and helping neighbors. Neighborhood Watch helps build pride and serves as a springboard for efforts that address community concerns such as recreation for youth, child care, and affordable housing.

Getting Organized

Forming a Neighborhood Watch is a challenge. Here are a few tips to get your group started.

- 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.
- Select a coordinator and block captains who are responsible for organizing meetings and relaying information to members.
- Recruit members, keeping up-to-date on new residents and making special efforts to involve the elderly, working parents, and young people.
- Work with local government or law enforcement to put up Neighborhood Watch signs, usually after at least 50 percent of all households are enrolled.

Neighbors Look For...

- Someone screaming or shouting for help

- Someone looking into windows and parked cars
- Unusual noises
- Property being taken out of closed businesses or houses where no one is at home
- Cars, vans, or trucks moving slowly with no apparent destination, or without lights
- Anyone being forced into a vehicle
- A stranger sitting in a car or stopping to talk to a child
- Abandoned cars
- Report these incidents to the police or sheriff's department.
- Talk with your neighbors about the problem.

How to Report

- Give your name and address.
- Briefly describe the event -- what happened, when, where, and who was involved.
- Describe the suspect: sex, race, age, height, weight, hair color, clothing, distinctive characteristics such as beard, mustache, scars, or accent.
- Describe the vehicle if one was involved: color, make, model, year, license plate, and special features such as stickers, dents, or decals.

Staying Alive!

It's an unfortunate fact that when a neighborhood crime crisis goes away, so does enthusiasm for Neighborhood Watch. Work to keep your Watch group a vital force for community well-being.

- Organize regular meetings that focus on current issues such as drug abuse, bias-motivated violence, crime in schools, child care before and after school, recreational activities for young people, and victim services.
- Organize community patrols to walk around streets or apartment complexes and alert police to crime and suspicious activities and identify problems needing attention. People in cars with cellular phones or CB radios can patrol.
- Adopt a park or school playground. Pick up litter, repair broken equipment, paint over graffiti.
- Work with local building code officials to require dead bolt locks, smoke alarms, and other safety devices in new and existing homes and commercial buildings. Work with parent groups and schools to start a McGruff House or other block parent program (to help children in emergency situations.)
- Publish a newsletter that gives prevention tips and local crime news, recognizes residents of all ages who have made a difference, and highlights community events.

- Don't forget social events that give neighbors a chance to know each other -- a block party, potluck dinner, volleyball or softball game, picnic.

Neighborhood Watch Organizer's Guide

The Neighborhood Watch Organizer's Guide, 1 MB PDF, provides a print-friendly selection of tips for organizing and directing a Neighborhood Watch group. It includes a sample family information form for collecting neighbors' contact information.

Community Disaster Plan

Disaster often strikes with no warning. The best way to prepare for disaster is to create a specific plan of action that can be put in place at a moment's notice. Arrange a meeting of community members through Neighborhood Watch or other civic association and work together to develop a community disaster preparedness plan. Begin with a discussion of the following topics, distribute handouts, and assign volunteers to compile additional information as needed.

Potential terrorist targets. Look at potential terrorist targets in or near your community (e.g., power or chemical plants, airports, high-profile landmarks, bridges, government buildings). Discuss the likelihood and consequences of an attack on any of these targets. Contact your local emergency management office (you can find the number in your phone directory or check your county/state Web site) for more information.

Terrorism prevention. Community members should know what kind of behavior and incidents to look for and how to report suspicious activities. See Handouts.

Community warning system. Community members should know their local warning system. In the event of a disaster, local radio and television stations will provide information on evacuation routes, temporary shelters, and other emergency procedures. Depending on the circumstances, any one of three protective actions (shelter-in-place, prepare-to-evacuate, or evacuate) may be appropriate.

Neighborhood directory. Create a list of home and work phone numbers and e-mail addresses for all community members, noting contact information and plans for children and seniors who may be home alone during emergency situations. Include important phone numbers, such as the local emergency management office and the non-emergency numbers for the police department, fire department, and FBI field office.

Members with special needs. Identify members of the community who may need special assistance during an emergency. These members might include seniors, individuals who are hearing or mobility impaired, and children who are home alone. Develop a plan to assist them during an emergency. See Handouts.

Members with special skills or equipment. Identify members of the community who have special skills (medical, technical) or equipment that they would be willing to share in the event of an emergency. Consider CPR and first aid training for community volunteers. To find CPR and first aid training in your area, contact a local hospital community outreach program or the American Red Cross.

Mail safety. Community members should know how to identify and protect themselves from suspicious mail. See Handouts.

Caring for pets. Community members should know what to do with pets in an emergency. See Handouts.

Property protection. Community members should have working fire extinguishers and know how to shut off their utilities such as gas, electricity, and water in the event of an emergency. House address numbers should be large and well-lighted so emergency personnel can find homes easily. Consider having a representative from a local utility company or fire department speak to your neighborhood watch group about property protection during a disaster. See Handouts.

Evacuation procedures. Develop a neighborhood evacuation plan. Contact the local emergency management office and find out ahead of time what evacuation routes have been designated for your area. Distribute maps to community members. Become familiar with major and alternate routes to leave your area before a disaster. See Handouts.

Local shelters. Provide the location of all county shelters to community members. (Shelters are often located in public school buildings.) Include their pet policies, if possible. Also, identify any community members who would be willing to provide shelter to others in an emergency.

School emergency plans. Find out what your local school district and day care centers plan to do in the event of an emergency. Many school districts stagger school hours so schools can share buses and therefore might not be able to evacuate all the schools at the same time. Make sure children know where to meet parents in the event schools are evacuated or an early release occurs.

Family emergency plans. Encourage community members to develop family preparedness plans that cover emergency contact information for family members, predetermined meeting places, home evacuation

procedures, emergency pet care, safe storage of food and water, and assembling disaster supplies kits. See Handouts.

Reporting Terrorist Activity

If you believe you have information that would help authorities, do not take any action other than to inform your local police department or FBI as soon as possible. Here are some tips for reporting:

- Call 911 for life-threatening emergencies only.
- Call your police non-emergency number to report any behavior or event that seems to be outside the norm or is frightening but does not immediately endanger lives or property.
- Call your local FBI field office. To find your local office, go to www.fbi.gov/contact/fo/info.htm or check inside the front cover of your local phone book. You can also contact the FBI at 1-866-483-5137 or submit a tip on their Web site, www.fbi.gov.

Remain calm and provide the following information:

- your name and address
- a brief description of the event -- what happened, when, where, and who was involved
- description of the suspect: sex, race, age, height, weight, hair color, clothing, distinctive characteristics such as beard, mustache, scars, or accent
- description of the vehicle if one was involved: color, make, model, year, license plate, and special features such as stickers, dents, or decals where you think the suspicious person(s) may have gone.