



Keeping an eye on one another

Neighborhood watch groups make the community a brighter place to live

By Karen Gaspers

Although everyone roots for Batman at the box office and applauds him when he protects Gotham City from criminal masterminds, in the real world vigilantism just doesn't work. Communities cannot wait for a caped crusader to swoop down from the sky to keep their neighborhoods safe.

Instead, with the help of law enforcement, communities can help themselves. And many have done so through neighborhood watch programs.

A neighborhood watch is a "formalized way for a community of residents to be involved [in crime prevention] in a positive way, rather than being vigilantes," said Faye Warren, director of conference and training support services, National Crime Prevention Council, Washington. The network began in California in the 1960s when communities began asking what they could do to support law enforcement efforts and educate themselves, said Warren, who is a founding member of the council.

Photos: Sascha Burland and Kim Seidl

The National Crime Prevention Council, Washington, offers these tips for successfully running a neighborhood watch.

Through watches, “regular Joes” play a major role in keeping their communities safe. According to Matt Peskin, executive director of National Association of Town Watch in Wynnewood, PA, “Ninety-five percent of police arrests are the direct result of citizen phone calls. It’s better than a dog, security system or lights.”

“Ninety-five percent of police arrests are the direct result of citizen phone calls.”

– Matt Peskin, National Association of Town Watch

But the benefits of a watch go beyond foiling crime. It provides a safety net for a community to get out and enjoy their neighborhood – for kids to play and people to walk. “People will live with open doors, rather than lock themselves in,” Warren said. “It makes the community a better place to live.”

In addition, watches build community self-esteem by making residents aware of what they can do as individuals, as well as helping communities solve problems on their own. Warren said communities can tackle issues such as graffiti, trash or a neighbor’s barking dog. “Those are things they can take care of themselves instead of feeling like they need to call the police for every little thing,” she said. That, in turn, frees the police to deal with larger, more serious problems.

With empowerment often comes an improved economy, Warren added. Rental properties and housing values increase because people want to move into a safe community, she said.

Fighting crime

According to NCP, a watch 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. It could be a coalition of apartment renters, condo owners or a block of homes. It also

could be organized around a geographic area, such as a park, business or school.

Watches typically focus on observation and awareness. When a watch member notices suspicious activity, the police are informed so they can investigate. This “eyes-and-ears” mentality is achieved through community building, Warren said. Watches help residents get to know each other and become familiar with the comings and goings of their community. Then, when suspicious activities take place or unfamiliar people are present, residents will more easily recognize the situation.

Peskin said forming these networks is important because while “police enforce the law, people prevent crime.” Criminals know what streets and neighborhoods they can work because they know which ones will call the police and which ones will turn a blind eye, he explained.

Taking it to the streets

Although many watches begin due to area crime, ideally they should be about prevention, Warren said. It is not about waiting until a crime happens, or letting the network die once residents believe they have eliminated crime. It is about teaching residents how to help themselves. “Watches should be proactive,” Warren stressed. “It is about making residents aware of what’s going on in the neighborhood and giving them the right information. Because if you are fearful, that’s when there can be misperceptions of what the crime is in the community, which can make people more fearful.”

That’s why watches emphasize education and common sense. Many hold community meetings to inform residents about various safety topics.

- Hold regular meetings to help residents get to know each other, and to collectively decide upon program strategies and activities.
- Consider linking with existing organizations, such as a citizens’ association, community development office, tenants’ association or housing authority.
- Go door to door to recruit members.
- Involve everyone in the watch – young and elderly, single and married, renter and homeowner.
- Gain support from the police or sheriff’s office. They have information on local crime patterns, home security and crime reporting.
- Get information out quickly to quash rumors.
- Gather the facts about crime in the neighborhood. Check police reports, conduct victimization surveys and learn residents’ perceptions about crime. Often their opinions are not supported by facts, and accurate information can reduce fear of crime.
- Sponsor cleanup projects. Encourage residents to beautify the area, and ask them to turn on outdoor lights at night. Physical conditions, such as abandoned cars and overgrown vacant lots, contribute to crime.
- Celebrate successes and recognize volunteers’ contributions. Hold annual dinners, awards or parties.
- Don’t forget events, such as a potluck dinner, that give neighbors a chance to get together.

Items like pins, T-shirts, hats or coffee mugs with the group’s name also enhance pride and identity.



A National Night Out group in Coppell, TX.



A police officer helps entertain a young student during a National Night Out in Cowley County, KS.

Topics can include drug abuse, gangs, self-protection tactics, isolation of the elderly, crime in the schools, domestic violence, child protection and rape prevention. Other proactive activities range from sponsoring annual cleanup days to remove trash from the neighborhood to hosting Halloween safety parties or having residents post “welcome trick-or-treaters” signs so kids know it’s safe. Warren noted there are generational programs that link senior citizens and kids home alone after school, and there are programs to watch out for children walking to and from school.

One popular event is National Night Out, which annually draws participation from 34 million people in 10,300 communities, Peskin said. People gather in their neighborhoods to hold block parties, cookouts, parades and flashlight walks. Many communities invite the local police or sheriffs’ department to attend. The point is to allow neighbors to get to know each other. “If you don’t know someone, odds are you won’t notice suspicious activity. The more you communicate, the more you care about others and others’ property, and they for you,” Peskin said.

National Night Out is “a good way to kick off a watch program if you don’t have one already, and also a good time to sign up new volunteers while everyone is getting to know each other over a few hot dogs,” he added.

To find out if a watch exists in your neighborhood, Warren suggested calling your local law enforcement agency. Also check with your state governor’s office or the office of the attorney general. “Often they will have information on crime prevention to get you started,” she said. In addition, check the online database of the National Sheriffs’ Association, Alexandria, VA. Approximately 20,000 neighborhood watches are registered on usaonwatch.org, the association’s Website. **FS&H**

For more information

- 📍 National Crime Prevention Council
www.ncpc.org
- 📍 National Night Out
www.nationaltownwatch.org/nno
- 📍 National Sheriffs’ Association
www.usaonwatch.org

How watches can create a safer community

- Encourage schools to teach crime and drug prevention in the classroom.
- Coordinate with parent associations, recreation departments and schools to organize after-school programs for kids.
- Start a “block parent” program to help children cope with emergencies while walking to and from school, or playing in the area. Volunteers must meet specific standards, including a law enforcement check.
- Spearhead a gang or violence prevention task force to assess problems and develop prevention strategies.
- Translate crime and drug prevention materials into other languages needed by non-English speaking residents in the community.
- Recruit a local Boys or Girls Club, or another youth organization, to help the elderly with marking valuables, enhancing home security or going to the store. Senior citizens can help youth with tutoring or recreational programs, cooking lessons or oral history projects.
- Turn a vacant lot into a park, playground or community garden.
- Work with small businesses to repair rundown storefronts, clean up littered streets and create jobs for young people.
- Link with victim services to train watch members in assisting crime victims.
- Recruit utility workers, cab drivers and other people with cell phones or two-way radios to extend the watch network.
- Ask people who seldom leave home to be “window watchers,” looking out for children and unusual activities.
- Encourage businesses to hold lunchtime crime and drug prevention seminars.
- Sponsor a crime and drug prevention fair at a shopping mall or community center.
- Ask banks and other businesses to include crime prevention tips in their statements and bills.
- Work with local media to publicize events.
- Sponsor a seminar for the elderly and others on how to avoid becoming victims of con games and fraud.
- Work with the phone company or local schools to teach children how to use 911 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.
- Tie the watch to efforts promoted by other groups: drug prevention, child protection, anti-vandalism projects, arson prevention, recycling, etc. Share resources and promote each other’s activities.

Source: National Crime Prevention Council

Photo: National Association of Town Watch