



El Centro, California

POLICE DEPARTMENT

Neighborhood Watch

STARTING THE PROGRAM

Solving security and other problems in a community can seem daunting. Problems associated with crime, housing, economic opportunities and the environment are complex and interrelated. The best approaches to reducing crime and fear as well as other systematic problems in neighborhoods require organized efforts involving collaborative problem solving. A grassroots neighborhood group has the power, strength and safety of numbers. While a group is more productive than one person, the same is true for organizations that work together as allies. Partnering with law enforcement and joining forces with business and religious leaders, youth-oriented organizations, other civic groups and stakeholders maximizes the neighborhood group's effectiveness. When you have many people and groups with different views, resources and skills working together to solve community problems, goals can be realized. Neighborhood or block watches are driven by the energy and dedication of their members and the hope of improving their quality of life.

Getting Started:

Getting projects, including a neighborhood watch, off the ground takes time. Take one step at a time. Problems don't develop overnight and unfortunately neither do the solutions.

- ▶ **SURVEY** neighborhood residents and business people asking them about their concerns and interests and their willingness to work for their neighborhood. Use the information from the survey to identify a laundry list of issues. Create a detailed list (e.g. name, address, telephone numbers) of those interested in joining a neighborhood or block watch.
- ▶ **SEEK** guidance, assistance and information from existing community & not-for-profit organizations and experienced community activists. Members of those organizations may wish to join your effort. Additionally, their by-laws and mission statements may be good models on which to draw. By networking, coordinating, cooperating, sharing and collaborating, neighborhood residents and business people can achieve their objectives more easily than if they were working in isolation. Further, when alliances among different groups are established, people see that they have more in common than they previously imagined, and that there is more to be gained by partnering on projects.
- ▶ **DEVELOP** strategies with a core group on recruiting and mobilizing a larger group of interested people in order to hold a start-up/planning meeting. Conduct outreach to other stakeholders including religious institutions, hospitals, schools and businesses. If safety is a concern, advertise the start-up meeting only by word of mouth through trusted residents and select a meeting location and time which will not intensify the anxiety.
- ▶ **CONTACT** the police to develop a good working relationship. You might want to invite the police to your start-up meeting. Anti-crime activists achieve good results when they work collaboratively with law enforcement and other justice agencies. Approach the commanding officer of the local police station, the supervising officer of the community policing/public affairs office and/or the patrol officer. Discussions with law enforcement should include an assessment of the problems in your community and the development of a safety patrol. Also address with them membership recruitment, bylaws and training. If resources are required, such as two-way radios or cellular phones and uniforms, ask the police for ideas. Some police departments have access to used cellular phones that are programmed only for contacting emergency services. An ongoing relationship should be fostered!

- ▶ **HOLD THE START-UP MEETING** Formulate a mission statement and establish priorities or goals for the organization.
- ▶ **CONDUCT** outreach to the business community including the Kiwanis, Rotary and the Chamber of Commerce. Additionally, contact banks, local businesses including the cable or a cellular telephone company or the local newspaper and ask for support in terms of volunteers and materials. These stakeholders may be willing to provide materials for a patrol including cell phones and radios, jackets or t-shirts, office supplies and printing. Work to maintain relationships with these stakeholders as they can be sources of continuing support.
- ▶ **INITIATE** training in crime prevention techniques. Identify drug-dealing and other suspicious situations and find out how to report information to the police, how to make accurate descriptions of persons who appear to be involved in criminal activities, where and whom to call in an emergency, how to use radios and self defense tactics. Train volunteers on resource referrals. Some law enforcement agencies operate mini-academies for community crime-prevention groups to train volunteers in the above-mentioned topics and provide an overview of the law.
- ▶ **DEVELOP** policies and procedures to encourage people to join the neighborhood watch/patrol. New recruits should be trained in the principles or mission of the organization and the way the patrol operates. Encourage new members to actively pursue their interests and serve on any committees.
- ▶ **PLAN** a regular patrol schedule including days and hours of operation based on the availability of volunteers. Notify police of the schedule and ensure that contact is maintained with them and with a "home base."
- ▶ **IDENTIFY** additional activities that the neighborhood watch may take on including community clean-ups, block parties, community gardens, street lighting, code enforcement, and youth recreation.

Start-up Meeting:

The key to having a successful first meeting is to involve everyone. It is important that the leader or facilitator motivate and encourage those in attendance to become active participants and express their views to help residents overcome that sense of powerlessness. The organizer must be able to recognize and appreciate different viewpoints. To ensure a successful meeting, below are some suggestions to follow:

- ▶ Give your neighbors an opportunity to socialize before the meeting begins.
- ▶ Prepare an agenda, which should represent a collaborative effort of a core group of dedicated residents.
- ▶ Establish guidelines to encourage honesty, confidentiality and responsibility to the group.
- ▶ Have those in attendance introduce themselves. Prepare and distribute to the group an attendance sheet with each participant's address and phone number.
- ▶ Early in the meeting, allow everyone to talk about themselves, their values, experiences, their stake in the community and their ideas. Identify basic safety issues in and around your neighborhood. Brainstorm about their underlying causes.
- ▶ Establish priorities and goals and formulate a mission statement for the watch. While there will be diversity of opinions, build on the ideas that are agreed upon.
- ▶ Develop an action or strategic plan identifying specific community changes. The plan should be precise, specifying who will perform each task and the timetable. The planning process should be inclusive, involving people who have influence in the community (e.g. elected officials, clergy) as well as others.
- ▶ Identify key people and resources to help you solve problems and lend support (e.g. police, District Attorney, local elected officials, clergy, youth & business leaders).
- ▶ Elect a coordinator, secretary to maintain records of meetings and important events, and a treasurer to collect, record and disburse funds. The group can collect membership dues, donations from elected officials, businesses and foundations. Establish committees, if possible, which will involve other residents. These units can invite guest speakers, distribute flyers and brochures and work on other events and projects. If a patrol is established, choose a patrol coordinator who will interface with law enforcement and match surveillance activities

- ▶ and hours with volunteers' schedules.
- ▶ Provide refreshments which will present another opportunity for socialization

Follow-up:

Congratulations! Now that you have formed the neighborhood watch/block watch and gained the initial enthusiasm, it will require effort to sustain the initiative. Expect that as you build your group, there will be setbacks and disagreements. That is part of the process, and you should not be discouraged. Remember it is the health and welfare of our children, families and neighbors that encourage us to take on these challenges that can feel overwhelming at times. Try to minimize the divisions and problems and focus on what has been accomplished. Then proceed to the next goal. Soon after forming a neighborhood watch, consider the following:

- ▶ Distribute an organizational list of members with addresses and phone numbers, block maps and telephone tree assignments. If a patrol was established, finalize a tour schedule and distribute to volunteers.
- ▶ Work toward developing an insignia. Sponsor a contest for the neighborhood youth to design an insignia. Using that symbol, produce window decals and neighborhood signs. These signs will advertise the fact that your community is vigilant. Convicted burglars report avoiding neighborhoods that have watch signs.
- ▶ You should consider contacting local businesses, print shops, banks and newspapers in an effort to secure design, production and financial assistance in creating and distributing these materials. Aluminum signs are preferable. Don't forget to contact the public works or highway department as well as the police to secure permission to affix the signs on street lights and other poles. Assistance from a local official may also expedite this project. When the signs are ready, arrange a community/block party to celebrate neighborhood pride and unity. Don't forget to invite the media to mark the occasion.

It is important to try to attract new members. Harness the talents and energies of watch volunteers to recruit new blood. Engage those families in your neighborhood who are not participants in order to maintain a solid organizational foundation. New residents in your neighborhood should be welcomed. The best way to recruit participants is through one-on-one contact and visits.

Although frequent meetings require some energy, they present an opportunity for your neighbors to socialize and become better acquainted.

In addition to reviewing quality of life issues and tracking neighborhood conditions, the meetings could be educational. There are many resources on which your watch group can draw to help you develop meeting topics. Federal, state and local law enforcement and judicial agencies feature public affairs offices. In addition, municipal or county agencies including consumer affairs and public works departments as well as hospitals and public utilities can provide information/speakers for a meeting. Consider these meeting topics:

- ▶ Personal safety
- ▶ Self defense & observation skills
- ▶ Child security
- ▶ Home security & surveys
- ▶ Property identification
- ▶ First aid
- ▶ Fire safety and prevention
- ▶ Victim rights and services
- ▶ Court monitoring
- ▶ Consumer frauds & scams
- ▶ Traffic safety & drunk driving
- ▶ Internet access & security
- ▶ Safety strategies for seniors

- ▶ Graffiti and vandalism prevention
- ▶ Home & garden beautification
- ▶ Renters' rights
- ▶ Eliminating drug dealing and gangs
- ▶ Conflict resolution/mediation
- ▶ Schools/gangs/truancy

Conduct an informal survey among your members to decide what topics are of interest. Establish priorities for which subjects will be featured at meetings. This should be a collaborative effort. Create a committee to develop the theme of each meeting and arrange for speakers and/or videotapes.

After setting a meeting date, create an agenda (See Sample Forms) and draft a notice for distribution. The secretary should prepare the minutes from the prior meeting to be distributed with the agenda for the next meeting.

Use a telephone tree to remind participants of the meeting two days before the event.

Keep a record documenting changes brought about by the watch and any feedback. Maintaining this history can be an invaluable guide for the group. Reviewing regularly the watch group's achievements, can spur the group onto even greater heights.

Meeting Agenda:

Meetings should be regularly scheduled. A typical meeting agenda should include the following:

- ▶ Information sharing/gathering -- discuss neighborhood strengths, weaknesses and problems. Identify any suspicious activity in the community. Review procedures on what to do if volunteers or residents see, hear or smell anything suspicious.
- ▶ Patrol report and reports from other committees including finance.
- ▶ Featured topic -- one meeting can feature home security: property identification and engraving, installing outside lighting, security devices, use of automatic timers, hedge pruning and window decals. The watch can also host a crime prevention officer who can arrange for home protection surveys which involve conducting an inventory of property and the engraving of valuables. Discuss the idea of video-taping the interior of each home or apartment to document contents for insurance purposes. (The video-tape should be stored in a safe place outside your home.)
- ▶ Discussion of other issues, future meetings and events (e.g. sanitation--trash removal & code enforcement).
- ▶ Assignments -- based on the above, delegate tasks to volunteers.
- ▶ Closing -- time & place of next meeting.
- ▶ Adjournment & refreshments -- seek donations for refreshments from local businesses

Reward, Recognize, Record & Celebrate Success:

It is important to reward and recognize the value and importance of other people's efforts. These acknowledgments range from simple and generous thank you notes to pins, pens, and certificates. In a follow-up or subsequent meeting, the neighborhood watch group may want to celebrate accomplishments. Such a celebration may include festivities, food and a meaningful reminder of how people have furthered the organization's mission. Key law enforcement representatives, public officials and local business leaders should be invited and recognized for their support. Outstanding youth in the community can also be acknowledged. The media should be notified of these special events and awards. As indicated earlier, accomplishments should be documented. This record can be used to secure favorable publicity as well as financial and technical support from colleges, businesses, foundations, government and other funds. Grant makers often request information on achievements for grant applications. With this record in hand, grant makers can also assist community groups in forming partnerships and other alliances to secure funding and additional resources.