



*El Centro, California*

POLICE DEPARTMENT

## Neighborhood Watch

### **VICTIM ASSISTANCE**

Crime takes many forms. Assaults, rapes, robberies and homicides are directly violent, but crimes like burglary are often cloaked in violence and cause fear. Violence is not just about attacks by strangers. In about half the rapes in this country, the rapist knew the victim; in more than half the murders, the perpetrator and victim were acquaintances. Domestic violence tears apart millions of families each year and can lead to a cycle of abuse, delinquency and substance abuse. Violence also penetrates schools and workplaces. Crime and violence, wherever it occurs, impacts us.

Crime is not only a violation against the state. It is also committed against a victim and the community. The criminal offense contributes to the weakening of social ties and interferes with community living. Crime and violence can hold victims, families and neighborhoods hostage and breed distrust and intolerance. It can cause physical, financial and emotional problems for the immediate victim and other consequences for the neighborhood. Crime can rob neighborhood residents and business leaders of a sense of security, control and economic investment.

Even if you are safe from harm, crime still has an impact. We spend billions annually caring for gunshot victims, abused children, or victims of fraud. This figure does not include the loss of productivity from promising members of our society. Children, or victims of fraud. This figure does not include the loss of productivity from promising members of our society.

Because community bonds and trust are often broken as a result of crime and violence, it is important to explore how community organizations and neighborhood watch groups can help support victims of crime and become active in the justice system. In that effort, the victim should not be blamed for being in the "wrong place at the wrong time."

### **VICTIM OUTREACH--NEIGHBORS WHO CARE**

By demonstrating concern and support for a crime victim, neighborhood watch groups can help victims and their families overcome feelings of isolation, helplessness, guilt and depression. The group should make it comfortable for the victim to express his/her feelings but not pressuring the individual to discuss the experience.

Victims frequently need practical help to respond to the immediate consequences of the crime. The neighborhood watch can:

- ◆ Assist in tending to the victim until the police/emergency personnel arrive at the scene
- ◆ Offer emergency assistance to victims right after the crime, such as loans or shelter, where appropriate
- ◆ Repair broken locks or windows, fix damaged or vandalized property
- ◆ Provide referrals to neighborhood-based victim assistance programs, a victim advocate in the district attorney's office and/or to law enforcement
- ◆ Develop and share a phone list of local organizations that can provide counseling and guidance to victims
- ◆ Supply appropriate forms for compensation from the NYS Crime Victims' for

- ♦ out-of-pocket expenses
- ♦ Offer transportation, and arrange for babysitting or meals
- ♦ Help the victim recall a description of the perpetrator
- ♦ Accompany victims on appointments to the police, victim services, the district attorney or the court
- ♦ Assist victims in preparing oral and written victim impact statements that document emotional, physical and financial harm as a result of the crime
- ♦ Establish a court watch project to support victims and witnesses
- ♦ Assist in installing lighting and other devices to improve home security
- ♦ Help victims get their property returned promptly
- ♦ Provide crime prevention strategies, information on victims' rights, training and security surveys to help restore a sense of control to victims
- ♦ Engage local businesses, watch members and the media to distribute photos of a missing child to aid in the search and recovery of a missing child
- ♦ Mobilize the community and other civic groups by sponsoring public education activities and events commemorating Domestic Violence Awareness and National Crime Prevention Month in October and National Crime Victims' Rights Week in April
- ♦ Collaborate with advocacy groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), Remove Intoxicated Drivers (RID), and/or Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD) in their prevention efforts and projects
- ♦ Work with schools and law enforcement to establish drug-free, gun-free zones; work with recreation officials to do the same in parks and playgrounds
- ♦ Partner with schools, libraries and museums in the community to incorporate resources on victim rights, victim services and violence prevention into their collections and displays.

## **MEDIA**

Crime victims may be especially vulnerable when faced with media attention. In cases of serious crime, media coverage may frighten or traumatize victims and their families. In contrast to the apprehensions and fear felt by some victims in response to the media scrutiny, others may welcome publicity. They may view publicity about their victimization as an opportunity to seek help for and from the community, tell their story, educate the public about their experience, or advocate for a particular cause. For some victims, press interest relieves stress and anger. Further, depending on the nature of the crime, press interest can help. For example, publicity increases the likelihood of finding victims who have disappeared or who have been kidnaped.

If a victim shuns the press, the neighborhood watch group can play a role in ensuring that the victim's privacy is respected. Victims who choose anonymity should be supported and protected to the extent possible. They may avoid the press because they fear for their physical safety as well as their psychological well-being. The possibility of reprisals as a result of publicity--especially if the victim is being intimidated by perpetrators or those acting on behalf of the offenders or is at risk of repeat victimization. Additionally, the neighborhood watch should be aware of the potential of copycat crimes resulting from publicity about the victim's vulnerability.

When victims have made it clear that they do not want public attention, the watch group can help by: persuading law enforcement to prevent the publication of the victim's name or details that might identify that individual to the larger community;

advocating for the media to omit public information including a rape victim's name or a victim's street address since many press outlets have policies that shield the identity of juvenile and sexual assault victims; and

securing the cooperation of the residents in the area not to talk to any journalists.

A leader of the watch group can also act as a spokesperson to speak on behalf of the victim if the

individual does not want direct contact with the media. The role of the spokesperson is to represent the survivor and family in a positive way, release written statements at the request of the victim and accompany the crime victim to interviews if the person decides to speak to the media.

Watch groups can also help ensure the accuracy of any media accounts. The group can complain about and seek correction of any erroneous information reported about the victim and/or the community. When inaccurate or insensitive accounts are published or when the press ignores prior assurances given to the victim and/or the group, the neighborhood watch group should consider not cooperating with those media outlets in the future, as well as complaining to the editors or assignment directors. In contrast, when specific editors or reporters provide sensitive coverage of the victim, the watch group should acknowledge that effort and express gratitude. This gesture will be remembered and will reinforce the group's relationship with the media.

## **ACTIVISM**

Crisis and tragedy often encourage community concern and unite residents in support of a common goal. When a member of the neighborhood becomes a crime victim, it may serve as a painful reminder that no one is immune to such occurrence. A highly publicized violent crime frequently ignites a desire by community members and businesses to protect themselves, their families and their investments. Additional crime prevention activities are often launched as a consequence of the publicized crime. Community activism can include (1) petition drives, (2) marches and rallies, (3) meetings and speaking engagements by watch group leaders. Unfortunately, due to the tragedy, neighborhood watch groups may receive an influx of volunteers wanting to do their share to make their community safer. Monetary contributions and other support (e.g. printing services, postage, office materials) from local businesses may be offered as well. The key is to sustain and retain this support for the long-term.

The watch group should consider sponsoring a community-wide meeting with law enforcement to discuss crime prevention strategies, opportunities to help the victim and family members and details of the crime thereby dispelling any destructive rumors.

The media often provide an outlet for exposure. A press conference following a local tragedy or crisis can provide a means for distributing important information about what occurred and how the victim and his/her family and community are coping. It is, however, important to consult with the victim or survivor before engaging the media.

After the initial feelings of shock and denial, anger, guilt and powerlessness wane, many victims find that participating in community service especially in crime prevention and awareness programs, contributes to their own healing. Community activism helps them overcome the social isolation caused by victimization often compounded by a lack of support, and even stigmatization from family, friends, neighbors and social institutions. Involvement in programs helps many victims rebuild their low self-esteem and regain a sense of power.

By joining with others to prevent violence, crime victims can have an impact on their community. They transform the meaning of their tragedy by making it the basis for action. Neighborhood watch groups should be supportive of victims who choose to get involved without exploiting them and setting back their recovery. The group should also be aware that some crime victims do not want to become active in community activities.

When victims join community-based programs, they frequently do so with the belief that the injustice they experienced affects all of society. A widespread awareness that crime affects everyone would foster a more supportive atmosphere for victim activism. The group members need to recognize that victim involvement can benefit both their own individual members' well-being and their efforts for community enhancement. The watch group can engage crime victims through community policing/patrol programs, public education initiatives, court monitoring and advocacy and at-risk youth projects.