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## Topics in Crime Prevention

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# Maintaining Neighborhood Watch Programs

Community Crime Prevention programs have brought safer, more enjoyable communities to millions of Americans. These partnerships of citizens and law enforcement have dispelled the notion that "nothing works" in the war against crime. Neighborhood Watch and similar public-involvement efforts are effective.

One of the most satisfying features of these programs is the diversity of leaders, participants, and supporting organizations. Teenagers, youth, older persons, housewives, executives, and many others band together to combat both crime and community problems. Neighborhood organizations, police departments, churches, local businesses, senior centers, youth groups, schools and others lend their expertise and resources.

Neighborhood Watch members "watch out" and "help out". They reduce opportunities for crimes, and also solve other neighborhood problems to build community safety and stability. However, experienced crime prevention practitioners know that sustaining a strong Neighborhood Watch program needs much more than just enrolling people. Even when the majority of a neighborhood's residents initially join up, their participation level can decline as time passes.

Maintenance of neighborhood watch programs requires establishing a community stake in crime prevention efforts. Crime prevention officers often remind citizens that crime prevention is the citizens' own responsibility. Community members are willing to accept that responsibility if they feel part of program planning, implementation, maintenance, and evaluation, and if they can see positive results.

Community residents have the resources necessary for success of the program. Business people and religious leaders can

provide meeting space, communications, and funding sources. Unions and service clubs can make crime prevention a part of their agendas. Civic leaders can recruit volunteers. Local officials can open doors to resources and equipment. Best of all, citizen involvement ensures that the program addresses citizen concerns.

## Programs Should Focus on Crime And General Neighborhood Problems

Equally important is the role of police officers. Police should be seen as expert sources of help—vital sources of guidance and direction. When police officers and citizens join together to co-produce community safety and satisfaction, programs expand and sustain growth. *Cooperation produces empowered citizens*—they accept responsibility and use their knowledge and resources to improve community life.

## The Problem of Citizen Leadership

Crime prevention practitioners need to reach out to established and potential community leaders before operations begin, to solicit their active involvement. Every community is different; every neighborhood has its own set of resources and priorities. The people who know the neighborhood best are those who live there and lead it—who know the composition of its residents, the problems

they face, and the issues which will motivate the community to action. Maintaining that interest and involvement is the next step.

## The Problem of Maintaining Interest

The next major problem facing Neighborhood Watch programs is sustaining the interest and enthusiasm which got the program going. While the crime issue may have convinced citizens to join, it is usually not enough to maintain interest. For the majority of communities, crime is not an ever-present problem.

Like police officers on patrol, citizens soon realize that opportunities to report crimes or suspicious behavior are not numerous, if they occur at all. A citizen who does not find the opportunities to report crimes or suspicious behavior may begin to doubt the usefulness of involvement in crime prevention.

Volunteer management experts stress that people must feel needed and their roles must be productive, if their interest is to be maintained.

## The Problem of Limited Resources

A third critical problem for program maintenance is managing with limited resources. Even in large jurisdictions, one or two practitioners may be responsible for the entire city's crime prevention programs. A practitioner's day is filled with speaking engagements, telephone calls, analyzing crime statistics, producing newsletters, responding to the press or local officials, and conducting security surveys. Most find the job rewarding; however many lack the time to get it done.

An obvious answer is to increase personnel or funds to supplement the existing resources. But fiscal constraints in many

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jurisdictions preclude this. Practitioners must usually meet their goals with the resources at hand.

### **Widening The Scope of Citizen Participation**

How can these problems be solved? In the successful programs we surveyed, the scope of activities was wider, the range of resources was broader, and the influence of community leaders was greater. Successful programs had done a good job of solving the three problems we have been discussing: citizen leadership, maintaining interest, and obtaining resources.

Widening the scope means opening up the program to other issues and resident leadership, and better managing community resources.

Resident leaders can be found in churches, community-based organizations, and neighborhood groups, business associations, unions, and service clubs. Often, an advisory board can be set up to guide neighborhood watch program operations.

Frequently, crime statistics do not coincide with citizen perceptions and concerns. Crime analysis shows that theft is the major problem. But citizens may feel that disorderly juveniles, litter, abandoned buildings, or a lack of recreational activities for youth are their primary concerns. If neighborhood issues and objectives are given priority, and if citizens have a major role in program planning, it will be easier to obtain and maintain citizen interest.

The third problem—dealing with limited resources—can also be solved by increasing reliance on the community. The community should be the main resource for the needs of the community crime prevention program. The sponsoring office should be a management center or resource bank to serve the entire community.

How can these goals be reached? Several avenues are available: focussing on community issues, organizing and operations, (mobilizing community resources), motivating volunteer leaders, and motivating residents. These suggestions help you to not only maintain but invigorate the crime prevention program in your community.

**Focusing on Community Issues**  
Most people have difficulty understanding how they can prevent "crime," but they know about many improvements to their own neighborhood which can alleviate crime problems. Issues like street lighting, playgrounds, youth activities, and litter should be a major concern of prevention programs. When a neighborhood improves community life, crime rates drop. Some suggestions:

■ *Create an advisory board of community leaders.* Get their suggestions on every aspect of program operations. Members can accept or assign responsibility for program operations. Business leaders can manage financial matters, a Lion's Club vice president can find volunteers, religious leaders can advise their members of program needs and activities. Community input through the board keeps the Neighborhood Watch program sensitive to local issues and concerns.

■ *Conduct a community needs survey.* Ask what members of the community see as problems and concerns. Incorporate these concerns into program plans.

■ *Survey volunteers and block captains.* Determine the areas in which they think the program can be improved. Find out if volunteers feel their work is productive and needed.

■ *Set achievable goals.* Don't tackle the entire crime problem. Concentrate on specific targets: a group of disorderly juveniles, trash in the alleys—plan some activity which can get a quick and effective result.

■ *Work with other local agencies.* Improve responsiveness to neighborhood concerns. Residents need to see results. Get agencies to act promptly on concerns like potholes, better street lighting, playgrounds, and trash collections.

■ *Recruit a mixture of residents.* Everyone wants to feel that they contribute to the community's well-being. Reach out to as many people as possible to find the variety of skills and energy levels that can maintain a successful program.

A Gallup poll found that 8 of 10 people not currently involved in Watch programs would be interested in joining.

■ *Concentrate on youth.* When teens become involved with community programs, they become part of the solution, not the problem. It's a chance for them to demonstrate their responsibility and creativity, as well as serve their community.

■ *Sell the importance of crime prevention.* Convince community groups that crime prevention should be on their agendas. Churches, youth groups, business associations, and social clubs should be convinced to get their members involved. Two examples:

■ *Flint, Michigan*—the neighborhood watch program attacks such community needs as obtaining guard rails to protect residents, and the planting of trees to beautify the neighborhood. Individual newsletters in 64 neighborhoods forge community bonds.

■ *The Philadelphia, Pennsylvania* town watch program empowers watch members to offer immediate help to crime victims and educates them on the enormous value of such help. Victims are actively encouraged to join watch programs. Other members are reenergized by discovering new ways to help; victims, as new members, help expand program activities.

### **Consolidating Operations**

Some communities find it useful to consolidate some operations. A headquarters provides a place materials can be stored, records kept, and community-wide special services developed.

Consolidating operations lets you make better use of scarce resources. Local programs can call on the core group to help with activities which are beyond the resources of the neighborhood.

The central resource center, can be located in a community building, police or fire station, church office, public library or school. Some suggestions for organizing operations include:

■ *Identify types of service needed.*

Relate these to the kinds of volunteer and staff skills required.

■ *Find volunteers with special skills.* A retired banker can solicit funds from businesses. A personnel manager can manage volunteers. A teacher can draw up crime prevention lesson plans. A math professor can help with program evaluations. Form a cadre of specialist volunteers to enrich citizens' and practitioners' efforts in local programs.

■ *Form a volunteer office staff.* The Detroit Police Department uses citizens to staff mini-stations. These mini-stations, located throughout the city, organize neighborhoods and handle community problems. Local businesses often fund special projects. Volunteers inform the police about deserving community members, who are recognized at awards ceremonies. The Pima County, Arizona Sheriff's Department accomplishes virtually every task necessary for a well-run crime prevention program with 200 volunteers.

■ *Solicit funds.* Local foundations or businesses may be willing to provide start-up money. Some police departments join with community groups to create a tax-exempt, non-profit (501(c)(3)) organization to encourage contributions.

■ *Use senior citizens centers.* Senior centers are good sources of experienced people with special skills who are looking for productive work. These skills range from typing and telephone experience to management expertise.

■ *Recruit through community networks.* New volunteers are always needed. Announce through the press, visit senior centers, knock on doors, or ask through churches, unions, service clubs, PTA's, and community groups. The core volunteer staff can help organize recruiting campaigns.

### **Mobilizing Community Resources**

Community businesses and organizations can provide numerous resources for crime prevention programs. Define resource needs, then find areas where community resources can be used. Mobilizing

new resources often refreshes and revitalizes a program, which encourages continued community involvement. Some suggestions:

■ *Adopt resources of other organizations.* Churches and synagogues can provide meeting space, copying machines, and access to new recruits, as well as moral support. Unions and PTA's can provide access to their memberships. Service clubs and business organizations offer fund-raising partnership possibilities.

■ *Solicit business assistance.* Printing companies can provide free services for newsletters, certificates, and other printing needs. A local data processing firm can produce computerized mailing lists. Restaurants might provide refreshments for meetings and ceremonies, or a special dinner for the "volunteer of the month".

■ *Use local media.* Newspapers and broadcasters can provide daily or weekly accounts of how local resources help, as well as advertising your resource needs.

■ *Focus on senior centers and high schools.* These groups can be excellent sources of help and frequently can make equipment or facilities available.

■ *Reward participation.* Businesses and organizations which provide goods or services should be rewarded with certificates of appreciation or other recognition.

### **Motivating Block Captains and Leaders**

Practitioners and civic leaders do not always have time to deal one-on-one with individual households. Many neighborhoods have a highly transient population, or other conditions which require special attention.

Local resident leaders may best be able to handle these situations. Properly screened, trained, and provided with resources, they can be a vital link in maintaining a vigorous program.

The following items are suggested by crime prevention experts as strategies to motivate program volunteers, local leaders, and block captains.

■ *Communicate frequently*—by telephone, in person, or through messages. The Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania police department uses a computerized machine to automatically alert volunteers to local crime prevention news. Many organizations form "telephone trees" by which each volunteer calls three or four others until all are contacted.

■ *Provide public recognition.* Conduct annual or biannual awards ceremonies. Publicize activities in newsletters and the local press. In Flint, Michigan, every neighborhood watch area has a simple single-page newsletter for updates, feedback and posting.

■ *Issue certificates of appreciation.* Send greeting cards on birthdays or during holidays from the mayor or chief of police. Cards can be donated by a local printing company, and addressed with mailing labels provided by a computer firm.

■ *Hold special training events.* The need for training is critical. Trainers can be found in police departments, social service organizations, churches, colleges, business associations, etc. Training events can be short, but they transfer vital information. Use handouts, films, slide shows, and other materials to increase interest and productivity.

■ *Remember, volunteers are doers.* They believe they can make a difference and produce results. Capitalize on these feelings and make sure that volunteers see and hear about positive results.

### **Motivating Residents**

While the motivation of leaders is critical in volunteer management, the average participant is what these programs are all about.

Some communities are harder to organize than others. High crime areas are especially difficult, due in part to fear and suspicion. In these neighborhoods, encourage interested citizens to work through organizations they trust, such as churches or tenant groups. Emphasize the opportunity to confront important community needs, and the importance and effectiveness of crime reporting.

Members of any organization are motivated by factors like achievement, recognition, responsibility, and pride in their work and in the goals of the group. Use motivators in recruiting and sustaining citizen interest. Suggestions:

■ *Organize around the positive.* Emphasize the social and positive aspects of organized neighborhoods. Stress community pride, the safety of children, homes and residents. Emphasize the possibility of increasing community services, and enjoying block parties and socializing with neighbors.

■ *Personalize involvement.* Stress that residents personally can make their neighborhood a more enjoyable and better place to live. Recognize that citizens like to help their neighbors, and enjoy being part of community events.

■ *Emphasize success.* Citizens are sometimes puzzled that organized neighborhoods can be effective against crime and social problems. Be prepared to prove the success of neighborhood watch and community improvement programs in your jurisdiction and in other areas.

■ *Don't emphasize fear.* Fear decreases participation.

■ *Don't make large demands on their time.* Emphasize that activities will be few, specific, brief, and productive. Ask block residents to devote half an hour on Saturday to do a quick clean-up of the block. Make it a group effort, and make it fun.

■ *Develop a sense of local solidarity.* Many groups, like the New York City Housing Authority, provide T-shirts, jackets, arm bands or other items with logos and slogans to develop cohesion and instill pride.

■ *Share your evaluation results.* Track your program activities and tell volunteers the findings. Nothing makes a volunteer (or funding

source) feel better than contributing to a demonstrably successful program.

■ *Work with established neighborhood groups.* Most citizens belong to some kind of organized group. These "joiners" will participate in Neighborhood Watch if their organizations encourage it. Convince these groups that crime prevention should be a part of their agendas.

■ *Stress community issues.* Emphasize neighborhood problems that concern citizens, like playgrounds, litter, street lights.

■ *Keep programs convenient and in the neighborhood.* Don't expect people to travel outside their neighborhood for training or other functions. Survey residents to establish the best times and places for activities.

■ *Stress low costs of fighting crime.* Don't place a financial burden on residents. Maximize "sweat equity" and "do-it-ourselves" approaches. Signing a petition or reporting a crime costs nothing. Donating an hour costs next to nothing.

■ *Teach residents how to report crimes.* Citizens who know how and what to report can provide more useful information to the police. Be encouraging and sensitive to "good" efforts to assist law enforcement.

#### Summary

Revitalizing neighborhood watch programs requires that citizen leaders and practitioners see themselves not as just providers of services, but as managers of community resources. The program, to be sustained and successful, must widen its scope, focus on community issues, use resources efficiently, and support volunteers. There are five guideposts for maintaining and enhancing such a program:

■ *Citizen participation.* Involve

citizens in every aspect of program operations, especially in the planning stages.

■ *Organization management.* Citizen leaders and practitioners must manage and organize the special skills and resources available throughout the community.

■ *Community concerns and interests.* Programs should focus not just on the crime issue, but other neighborhood social problems which affect the quality of community life. Citizens should help define these issues.

■ *Use of existing resources.* The skills and resources of existing community organizations should be marshalled as part of crime prevention operations. Crime prevention can and should become part of other organizations' goals and programs.

■ *Recognition.* Everyone working with the program—volunteers, community organizations, and police and other government—deserves and needs public recognition and thanks for their roles.

Program maintenance is a continuous challenge. It should be built into every aspect of your plans. Your reward? By maintaining a vigorous program you can have a long term effect on crime in your community and upgrade the quality of life for all.

Maintaining a Neighborhood Watch program does take effort. But the rewards—a safer, better community in which to live and work—are well worth it.

#### Further Information

For more information on how the National Crime Prevention Council can help in a variety of ways with community crime prevention programs, write or call:

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