

HOME CHECK FEATURE ARTICLE

Volume 2, Article VIII - 2006



How to start a **NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH**

Many people are skeptical when they hear about neighborhood watches. Many think it involves a lot of effort with minimal impact or effect. However, most police departments will inform you otherwise. A neighborhood watch can help police cut down in crime as you are going to notice suspicious, out of place behavior in your neighborhood before they will. An example that is often used is the scenario of the stranger hanging around your neighbor's car. You look out your window and notice a stranger at your neighbors car and know they do not

[Introduction](#)

Neighborhood Watch:

- [Why start a watch?](#)
 - [What does a watch involve?](#)
 - [How does one start a watch?](#)
 - [More Info on the Web](#)
 - [Suspicious Behavior Examples](#)
-

belong to that car. However, when a cop car drives by the stranger casually looks up and waves hello. The officer cannot tell that person does not belong to that car or neighborhood, he/she may wave back and simply drive ahead. Obviously a call from someone in the neighborhood would inform the police of the stranger's suspicious behavior and they can question them. So how does a neighborhood watch work? How do you set one up? How can you and your neighbors reduce crime and help the police in your area?

Why should our neighborhood start a watch?

Still haven't convinced you? Fair enough, lets look into the benefits of a neighborhood watch a bit more. Unfortunately, most neighborhoods don't consider a neighborhood watch until there is already a problem with thefts, burglaries and/or vandalism. Today, many households have two working parents and kids gone at activities so the home is empty a majority of the day making it a target for thieves. A neighborhood watch helps to place other sets of eyes on your home when you are away. Your neighbors get an idea of who belongs there and will more easily recognize something out of the ordinary. The neighborhood watch will also help build a community partnership. Neighborhoods today are more isolated, people do not know their neighbors so it

More Info on the Web

National Crime Prevention Council

www.ncpc.org

Useful Publications (all in PDF format)

- [*Neighborhood Watch Needs You*](#)
- [*A Checklist for Starting a Neighborhood Watch*](#)
- [*Starting a Neighborhood Watch*](#)
- [*Neighborhood Watch Organizer's Guide*](#)
- [*Taking Back Your Neighborhood*](#)

is more difficult to identify normal behavior for a household. Some neighborhoods have taken this a step further and used the watch to help community in the time of an emergency. Recently in Saucier, MS a neighborhood watch group used their ties to make a list of all those staying behind when Hurricane Katrina came ashore. After the storm, members used this list to make sure everyone was accounted for and also used the list to set up aid for the community including food, water, clothing and other necessities ([Neighborhood Watch Needs You, National Crime Prevention Council](#)). In addition to building a sense of community, a neighborhood watch can also help keep the community informed. A neighborhood watch sets up a phone tree system so you know if someone has had a problem in your area. Without this system you may not hear about vandalism or some other problem until a much later date or not at all. Finally, a neighborhood watch helps the police in your area do a better job. As in the example in our introduction, neighbors are the ones that can inform police of suspicious behavior that would not be obvious to them. Also, neighborhood watches may help police build a case on crimes. For example, in one neighborhood, there was a vandal who was slashing tires. In most cases this would only have been a "slap on the wrist" with little real consequence to the vandal. However, with the neighborhood watch, they were able to document that 80 tires were slashed in the neighborhood during the same crime spree. This made it much easier for the police to build a case for stronger prosecution of the vandal ([Open Letter to Watch Groups in Kent](#)). These are just a few examples of ways a neighborhood watch can help your community.

What does a neighborhood watch involve?

Meetings - The last thing anyone wants is more meetings to attend! With a neighborhood watch there are really only two major meetings that need to be done.

The First Meeting - The first initial meeting

- [Take a Stand: Join a Neighborhood Watch](#)
- [Disaster Preparedness: A Checklist](#)

National Night Out - NATW

www.nationalnightout.org

National Association of Town Watch

www.nationalnightout.org/natw/

National Sheriff's Association

www.sheriffs.org

Volunteers in Police Service

www.policevolunteers.org

National Fire Protection Association

www.nfpa.org

FEMA - Federal Emergency Management Agency

www.fema.gov

Federal Trade Commission (for ID Theft)

www.consumer.gov/idtheft/

Citizen Corps

www.citizencorps.gov

C.E.R.T. - Community Emergency Response Team

www.citizencorps.gov/cert/

Suspicious Behavior Examples

- Door to door "salesperson" going from house to house and looking in windows or backyards. This person may be scouting targets for later.
- Door to door

with your neighbors is to see who is interested in joining. This is a vital meeting in that it is where everyone learns what is involved and expected of participants. Once people find out how little time is involved, many neighbors will express an interest. At this meeting you will want to cover setting up a map, a phone tree, and electing a captain and co-captain(s). You may also want to distribute information on programs like Operation ID or other crime prevention programs that your community may find beneficial (your police department can help you find materials or you may also look to the organizations listed in our [More Info on the Web](#) section).

Yearly Social - After a watch is in place, there should be at least one neighborhood social per year. This may be a BBQ, Community Garage Sale, Neighborhood Picnic, or some other type of family friendly, all-inclusive gathering. At these social events, captains and co-captains may easily give quick highlights and goals for the year. This could be done as a speech or flyers handed out at the event. This would also be a good time to check and see of any changes in information for the watch - such as a change in phone number, etc. After a quick recap of watch business the rest of the social is a community building experience. It is a chance for neighbors to get to know one another and put faces with names. It should be fun - not tedious!

- *National Night Out* - [National Night Out](#) (NNO) is sponsored by the [National Association of Town Watch](#). It is an annual event for neighborhoods to participate in to promote safety and awareness in their community. Taking place on August 1st of every year, the identified goals are: "heighten crime and drug prevention awareness; generate support for, and participation in, local anti crime programs; strengthen neighborhood spirit and police-community partnerships; and send a message to criminals letting them know that neighborhoods are

"salesperson" going erratically around the neighborhood. Instead of going door to door, they are going to every other house, possibly concentrating on houses that look vacant or targeting homes with seniors. Again, may signal scouting for a target.

- Person waiting in front of house or business when no one is home or the business is closed. This may be a possible lookout of others already inside.
- Continuous vehicle "repairs" in a residential area may signal a theft operation.
- Slow moving vehicles without lights at night may be looking for vacant homes.
- Cars coming and going to a residence for short periods of time may signal illegal activity such as drug deals.
- Unusual noises and abnormal dog barking may signal burglary or other crime in progress.

organized and fighting back." Again this is organized around some social activity such as BBQ, block party, or flashlight walks, to name a few. A neighborhood watch can register their event with NNO and receive helpful information about how to set up their event. To find out more visit their site at www.nationalnightout.org/nno/.

Captain & Co-Captain - Captains and co-captains are those who help organize records and keep track of the changes in the neighborhood. Captains are the contact point for people to notify of changes such as phone numbers or new residents. Usually captains will organize a welcome for any new residents welcoming them and informing them about the neighborhood watch to see if they would like to participate. And most importantly, captains are informed of any problems in the area. It is assumed the effected party would have notified the police. However, the captain can also track events and report it to their contact with the police department; as in the example above, it was a captain who brought it to the attention of the police that over 80 tires were slashed in one crime spree. Keep in mind the police don't have a database that would track minor crimes like this, thus a neighborhood watch can help collect this useful information. Captain should be by no means be an exhaustive position! Instead, they are helped by co-captains and can have their duties covered by co-captains when gone. Many neighborhoods will assign more than one co-captain to help share responsibility. One example is to have a captain designated as the main police contact and then multiple co-captains for each block or cul-de-sac for neighbors to report to.

Phone Tree - A phone tree is the easiest and fastest way to help notify the neighborhood of important events. Like other phone trees, each person only calls a few people and then the next group calls the next so no one person is calling everyone. After a crime has happened a phone tree

may be used to help notify the neighborhood a certain type of crime at a specific location occurred. Today, some may opt for an email instead of a phone call. However, make sure to somehow include all that want to be involved. Some residents may not want to use email and still need a mini phone tree.

Newsletter - This is not the quickest way of giving out information but it is effective. Either pamphlets or emailed letters will help give the neighborhood updates of what has been going on the last couple of months. Unless there are major concerns, newsletters may be quarterly or every couple of months. Many times these newsletters can also inform residents of local events or holiday related safety and laws; for example, safety tips and local laws for the use of fireworks on the 4th of July. If working with a police department representative they may already have a newsletter available to which you may tack on neighborhood info before distributing. Newsletters are not required for a watch, but some do find them useful.

Map - The map is a extremely useful tool for the neighborhood watch. A standard map will show the streets involved in the watch, the homes, names of residents, phone numbers, emergency in-state and out-of-state contact numbers and email. This information is always voluntary. However, many residents will find the extra security worth it. Most of us will not know an address of our neighbors, instead we know 'it is three doors down' or 'just around the block'. This map will help get the exact address if the need arises to notify the police and neighbor of a problem. This map may be used in a number of ways. This can be used by a neighbor who sees someone prowling outside a window at night to call the neighbor and the police. If there is smoke from a house, a neighbor can tell the fire department the exact address and notify the resident if they are not at home. Or it might be used with the phone tree to raise the alarm in a

neighborhood. One example of this is a vandal just broke the front window of the house but was scared off and got in a car and drove off down the street. You can call the neighbor down the street and see if they saw which way the car turned or can see the license plate. All this will help police track them down. **This is a good time to note, that a neighborhood watch is used for information gathering - at no point should neighbors be running out in the street as vigilantes to stop crime. Instead they use the phone tree, map and neighborhood connections to track events and relay information to the police!**

Operation ID - Operation ID is a way to encourage citizens to inventory their valuables. Residents mark or engrave valuables with a special number. Usually a driver license is used as this is public information and also identification back to you. If you use your driver license number, then make sure to put your state initials before the number and DL after so the number cannot be changed and will help police identify out of state items. **NEVER** use your social security number! Valuables may be marked with your identification number with invisible marker or engraved. Keep an inventory list of all items marked and store in a secure location such as a lockbox or fire proof (locked!) safe. Once you have inventoried items you may get some decals from the police for your windows and items. If your police department offers these decals it is usually a limited number. You may have to purchase more decals for all your items. Many neighborhood watches purchase an engraver for the neighborhood and then check it out to neighbors. They also then get decals for all participants so the neighborhood is covered and burglars are deterred.

**If you sell an item with your ID, then cross it out with one line and initial it. Also make sure to note it on a bill of sale for the buyer. Keep a copy for your records.

Going the Extra Mile - Make an effort to look out for each other on a daily basis. Help each other better protect their homes and the neighborhood by encouraging neighborhood participation in activities.

- Get all neighbors to turn on porch lights at night.
- Help older neighbors or others who may need help with the safety of their home. For example, help trim high bushes in front of their door/window or change light bulbs in high outdoor lights.
- Have clean up parties to help clear out vacant lots, playgrounds/parks or abandoned cars. Help clean graffiti right away. Work together to beautify the neighborhood, let would be criminals know you care about where you live!
- Recognize captains, co-captains and other participants who go that extra mile to help others!
- Use the neighborhood watch to sponsor safety events. For example, invite fire fighters to a meeting to help better prepare residents against fire.

How do we start a neighborhood watch?

So how do you start a neighborhood watch? First, contact your local police. Not all departments have facilitators to help set up a neighborhood watch, but they will have resources available. Even if they do not have an official representative, ask the department if an officer may be able to stop by the meeting, many times something like this can be arranged in advance. Next, set up a meeting with your neighbors to give out information and see who is interested in participating. This should be a meeting place accessible to all, maybe a school or church in the neighborhood. As mentioned before, this is the vital meeting where you explain to others what is involved and expected for participation. You will find that many neighbors will express an interest,

especially after they find that it does not require a great deal of time or effort. At the first meeting get as much information as possible as it is harder to get the information later. Nominate a captain and co-captain, hand out a form for residents to submit information for the community phone tree and map. Find out if residents are interested in meetings every few months or general meetings about fire safety or if they want to stick with one annual meeting per year. Once the first meeting is over and the information is gathered, the captain and co-captains can compile the phone tree and maps. These will then be given to every participant in the neighborhood. And that was the major bulk of the work. Now it is up to residents to keep information up to date and work with their neighbors on community projects or socials. That's it!

There are many benefits to a neighborhood watch program. Start the dialogue with your neighbors and see if you can start one in your community. It is a great way to build community, cut down on crime and rethink what a "neighborhood" is all about!

| [Home](#) | [Home Check Specialists](#) | [Discussion Boards](#) | [Reference Center](#) | [Realtors](#) |
| [Links](#) | [Legal Links](#) | [About Us](#) | [HouseList](#) |

Please e-mail comments, questions, or suggestions to webmaster@houlist.com.

[*Membership Terms & Conditions*](#)

[*Privacy Policy*](#)

[*Disclaimer*](#)

This site produced by [enlighten technologies™](#).
COPYRIGHT © 2006 enlighten technologies™

