

HOW TO START A NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

Neighborhood watch, block watch, town watch, apartment watch, crime watch — no matter what it's called, this is one of the most effective and least costly answers to crime, the National Crime Prevention Council says.

Townships with and without police departments can help residents get organized by sharing the following tips, provided by the council:

Phase one: Getting started

- Form a small planning committee of neighbors to discuss needs, the level of interest, possible challenges, and the watch concept.
- Invite a local or State Police officer or a representative from a local crime prevention organization to discuss the Neighborhood Watch concept and local crimes.
- Publicize your meeting at least one week in advance with door-to-door fliers and follow up with phone calls the day before.
- Select a meeting place that is accessible to people with disabilities.
- Hold an initial meeting to gauge neighbors' interest, establish the purpose of the program, and begin to identify issues that need to be addressed.
- Stress that a watch group 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.

Phase two: When the watch idea is a go

- Elect a chairperson.
- Ask for volunteers to be block captains, who are responsible for relaying information to their neighbors, keeping up-to-date information on residents, and making special efforts to involve the elderly, working parents, and young people. Block captains also can serve as liaisons between the neighborhood and the police.
- Establish a regular means of communicating with watch members, such as by newsletter, telephone tree, e-mail, fax, texting, etc.
- Prepare a neighborhood map showing names, addresses, and phone numbers of participating households and distribute to members. Block captains should keep this map up to date by contacting newcomers to the neighborhood and occasionally rechecking information with ongoing participants.
- With guidance from a law enforcement agency, train watch members in home security techniques, observation skills, and crime reporting. Residents also should learn about the types of crime that affect the area.
- If you are ready to post Neighborhood Watch signs, check with law enforcement to see if they have eligibility requirements for the number of houses that must participate in the program. Law enforcement may also be able to provide your program with signs. If not, officers can probably tell you where you can order them.
- Have organizers and block captains emphasize that their members are not vigilantes and do not assume the role of the police. The group only asks neighbors to be alert, observant, and caring — and to report sus-

picious activity or crimes immediately to the police.

- Remember that the watch concept is adaptable. There are park watches, apartment watches, window watches, boat watches, school watches, realtor watches, utility watches, and business watches.

Tips for success

- Hold regular meetings to help residents get to know each other and collectively decide strategies and activities.
- Consider linking with an existing organization, such as a citizens association, community development office, homeowners association, or housing authority.
- Go door-to-door to recruit members.
- Involve everyone — young and old, single and married, renter and homeowner.
- Gain support from the police. This is critical to a watch group's credibility.
- Remind members that physical conditions like abandoned cars or overgrown vacant lots contribute to crime. Sponsor cleanups, encourage residents to beautify the area, and ask them to turn on their outdoor lights.
- Celebrate the success of your efforts and recognize volunteers' contributions through such events as awards, annual dinners, and parties. To help meet community needs, neighborhood watches can also sponsor meetings that address broader issues such as drug abuse, gangs, and self-protection tactics.
- Don't forget events like National Night Out or a potluck dinner, which give neighbors a chance to get together.

Editor's note: For additional information about neighborhood watch groups, townships should call the National Crime Prevention Council at (202) 466-6272 or log onto www.npc.org. Another valuable resource is the National Association of Town Watch. Call toll-free (800) NITE-OUT, e-mail info@natw.org, or log onto www.nationaltownwatch.org.

