



National Crime Prevention Council

Starting 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. Watch groups are a foundation of community crime prevention, they can be a stepping stone to community revitalization.

Phase One: Getting Started -- Meetings, Block Captains, and Maps

- Form a small planning committee of neighbors to discuss needs, the level of interest, possible challenges, and the Watch concept.
- Contact the local police or sheriffs' department, or local crime prevention organization, to discuss Neighborhood Watch and local crime problems. Invite a law enforcement officer to attend your meeting.
- 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 purpose of 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 neighborhood decides to adopt the Watch idea

Elect a chairperson.

- Ask for block captain volunteers who are responsible for relaying information to members on their block, 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 and communicate information about meetings and crime incidents to all residents.

- Establish a regular means of communicating with Watch members—e.g., newsletter, telephone tree, e-mail, fax, etc.
- Prepare a neighborhood map showing names, addresses, and phone numbers of participating households and distribute to members. Block captains keep this map up to date, contacting newcomers to the neighborhood and rechecking occasionally with ongoing participants.
- With guidance from a law enforcement agency, the Watch trains its members in home security techniques, observation skills, and crime reporting. Residents also 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 such eligibility requirements as number of houses that participate in the program. Law enforcement may also be able to provide your program with signs. If not, they can probably tell you where you can order them.
- Organizers and block captains must emphasize that Watch groups are not vigilantes and do not assume the role of the police. They only ask neighbors to be alert, observant, and caring—and to report suspicious activity or crimes immediately to the police.
- The Watch concept is adaptable. There are Park Watches, Apartment Watches, Window Watches, Boat Watches, School Watches, Realtor Watches, Utility Watches, and Business Watches. A Watch can be organized around any geographic unit.

Tips for Success

- Hold regular meetings to help residents get to know each other and to collectively decide upon program strategies and activities.
- Consider linking with an existing organization, such as a citizens' association, community development office, tenants' association, housing authority.
- Canvas door-to-door to recruit members.
- Involve everyone -- young and old, single and married, renter and homeowner.

- Gain support from the police or sheriffs' office. This is critical to a Watch group's credibility. These agencies are the major sources of information on local crime patterns, home security, other crime prevention education, and crime reporting.
- Get the information out quickly. Share all kinds of news -- quash rumors.
- Gather the facts about crime in your neighborhood. Check police reports, do victimization surveys, and learn residents' perceptions about crime. Often residents' opinions are not supported by facts, and accurate information can reduce fear of crime.
- 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 outdoor lights at night.
- It's essential to celebrate the success of the effort and recognize volunteers' contributions through such events as awards, annual dinners, and parties. To help meet community needs, Neighborhood Watches can sponsor meetings that address broader issues such as drug abuse, gangs, self-protection tactics, isolation of the elderly, crime in the schools, and rape prevention.
- Don't forget events like National Night Out or a potluck dinner that gives neighbors a chance to get together. Such items as pins, t-shirts, hats, or coffee mugs with the group's name also enhance identity and pride.