



ARTICLE

Keeping a Watch on Your Neighbourhood

If your neighbourhood deals with vandalism, graffiti, loud parties, street racing or other crime and safety issues, it might be time to set up your own Neighbourhood Watch. After all, when the eyes and ears of the community are on the streets, your neighbourhood becomes a safer, better place for everyone living there.

What is a Neighbourhood Watch?

Neighbourhood Watch is a crime-prevention program that gets people involved in discouraging and preventing crime by watching out for their neighbours and their neighbours' property.

How does it work?

Neighbourhood Watch is simple: by getting to know the neighbours around you, you'll be better able to recognize a person or activity that is suspicious. Neighbourhood Watch programs are done in partnership with the Ottawa Police Service (OPS). The programs are coordinated through your Community Police Centre (CPC), which is the OPS unit that delivers crime prevention programs and serves as a problem solving centre within a neighbourhood. You can find your local CPC on the OPS website.

A Neighbourhood Watch program is NOT about being a busybody or vigilante. It does not involve time-consuming duties and obligations and there are no fees for the service.

Benefits of Neighbourhood Watch

When you get involved in a Neighbourhood Watch program, you can learn:

- how to make your home less inviting as a target for thieves
- how to mark your valuables so that they can be recovered in case of theft
- how to be alert to suspicious activity in your neighbourhood
- how to respond appropriately to potential threats

How to get involved in Neighbourhood Watch

Step 1: Talk to your neighbours

If you think your neighbourhood could use a Neighbourhood Watch program, talk to a few of your neighbours and see if they share your concerns about issues in your neighbourhood. Next, build a team that can promote the Neighbourhood Watch program to your entire neighbourhood and get a sense of people's interest. Don't worry if some people are not interested; full participation is rare.

In general, your Neighbourhood Watch program should have natural community boundaries, such as a street, city block or apartment building, with manageable limits. While every Watch is different, a useful guideline is that no one making phone calls or ringing doorbells should be responsible for more than 10 households.

Step 2: Organize a public meeting

The next step is to arrange a public meeting with the help of your CPC. Here are some tips to help you:

- Invite a police officer to attend the meeting to give a presentation on the Neighbourhood Watch program.
- Promote the meeting through posters, word-of-mouth or emails to your neighbours. The meeting should be well publicized to encourage a good turnout and strong start-up.
- Invite your City Councillor to participate in the meeting to support your program.

Step 3: Start your Watch!

At your first meeting, you should:

- identify the most urgent crime and safety issues in your neighbourhood
- develop a plan to address them
- get everyone's agreement and buy-in to the plan

Once your Neighbourhood Watch is established, you should also begin to attend regular meetings with other local Coordinators and community police officers. There, you will benefit from presentations by crime prevention experts. You'll also get the chance to ask questions and exchange ideas with more experienced Coordinators.

Your local Community Police Centre will supply introductory pamphlets, window stickers and free access to photocopiers for your announcements. You can consult with Neighbourhood Officers who are familiar with local crime issues and incidents. They can also suggest great information sources on public safety and crime prevention topics.

The Ottawa Police Service has an excellent guide, *How to Get a Neighbourhood Watch Going, and Keep It Going*. It offers detailed information on how to start a watch, roles and responsibilities, and how to work with police. Find it on the OPS website at www.ottawapolice.ca.

Step 4: Keep the momentum going

Most Neighbourhood Watches are created to solve a specific crime problem. Sometimes, after the criminal activity has been eliminated, interest can drop. As time passes and Watch members begin to neglect their duties or move elsewhere, the problem may return. That's why it's important to keep the momentum going.

Once a Watch is established, it doesn't take a lot of effort to maintain it. The OPS offers an auto-dialer or e-mail message service that you can use from time to time (e.g. bimonthly or quarterly) to share how many crimes were reported. You can put out a newsletter or regular email to remind members about crime prevention best practices.

This article is drawn from Crime Prevention Ottawa's Neighbourhood Toolkit. To find out more about making your neighbourhood a better place to live, visit the Toolkit at www.crimepreventionottawa.ca/toolkit.