



# Starting a Community Watch

## A Guide for Neighborhood Leaders



**Kernersville Police Department**

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## **What is a Community Watch?**

Community Watch is one of the most effective and least costly ways to prevent crime and reduce fear. A Community Watch fights the isolation that crime both creates and feeds upon. It forges bonds among area residents, helps reduce burglaries and robberies, and improves relations between police and the communities they serve.

## **The ABC's of Community Watch**

- Any community resident can join - young and old, single and married, renter and home owner.
- A few concerned residents, or a community organization, can spearhead the effort to organize a Watch.
- Members learn how to make their homes more secure, watch out for each other and the neighborhood, and report activities that raise their suspicions to the police.
- You can form a Watch group around any geographical unit: a block, apartment, park, business area, public housing complex, or office.
- Watch groups are not vigilantes. They are the extra eyes and ears for reporting crime and helping neighbors.
- Community Watch helps build pride and serves as a springboard for efforts that address community concerns such as recreation for youth, child care, and affordable housing.

## **Getting Organized**

Forming a Community Watch group might be slow at the beginning. Here are a few tips to help get your group started.

- Talk with the neighbors you know and express your desire to get a community watch started in your neighborhood. Solicit their help in getting this project going.
- Find a place to hold a meeting. Your Community Resource Officer will conduct this meeting to tell all the residents what a Community Watch is and what their responsibilities as members will be.
- Decide on a date and time for your initial meeting.
- Recruit other members, keep up-to-date on new residents and make special efforts to involve the elderly, working parents, and young people.
- Select a coordinator who is responsible for organizing meetings and relaying information to members.
- Keep in contact with your KPD Crime Prevention Unit.
- Schedule regular meeting times for your group. As you get started you may need to meet every month.

## **What makes a Successful Community Watch?**

Typically, Community Watch groups organize to respond to an immediate threat - a sharp increase in burglaries, or auto thefts, rising fear of street crime. Often when the crisis is resolved, membership and the commitment to the Watch start to fade away. After all, why keep looking out for criminals if they've been arrested or gone elsewhere?

This short-sighted attitude ignores key benefits of the contemporary Community Watch - a Watch group empowers people to prevent crime, forges bonds between law enforcement and the communities they serve, and builds a foundation for broader community involvement. Community Watch is far more than a quick fix for an immediate crisis - it can be a moving force for positive changes that tackle root causes of crime.

## **The First Meeting:**

### **Where Do I Have the Meeting?**

Your Community Watch meeting can be held in a public building or area, backyard, den, kitchen, basement, porch, or in your apartment. If you think your group is too large to meet in a home, plan to have the meeting in a meeting room at a church, library, or other suitable location that is free of charge.

### **How Do I Plan the First Meeting?**

1. Hand out a flyer to all the members of the neighborhood. You can also attach a letter explaining the Community Watch program in more depth.
2. Publicize the meeting using email, social media and word-of-mouth.
3. Prepare an agenda with a list of the items that need to be discussed.

### **First Meeting Agenda**

- Thank everyone for coming.
- Reason for calling the meeting.
- Determine if there is enough interest in your area to start a Community Watch.
- Pass around a roster on which everyone will write down their names, addresses, phone numbers and email address.
- Determine date for next meeting, who will bring light refreshments, and whether children may attend.
- Make a list of what topics the participants are interested in hearing about for future meetings.

### **Reasons for Community Watch**

Discuss some concerns you have about your area such as the following:

- Need for neighborhood association and sense of community
- Over-turned garbage cans
- Broken glass
- Prowlers
- Auto/property vandalism
- Garden/Lawn supply theft
- Burglaries

### **Some tips for a successful meeting**

- Seating arrangement - a semi-circle usually works best since it enhances eye contact, and encourages better interaction among members of the group.
- Inexpensive refreshments - KEEP THESE SIMPLE!
- Be sure to have a specific purpose for each meeting and an agenda. Some flexibility is necessary but do not ramble since it is confusing and boring to those attending the meeting.
- Briefly review key points discussed at the last meeting. Prepare materials in advance such as displays or crime prevention devices, handouts and flyers. Be sure displays are clearly visible and labeled for those present.
- No meeting should last longer than 60 minutes and should start on time.

### **Duties of the Group Coordinator**

- Attends regular meetings with law enforcement
- Be the “eyes and ears” of the neighborhood for police
- Distributes information to members
- Recruits new members
- Provides current crime prevention information to members
- Updates email list
- Announces and advertises meetings
- Leads meetings
- Coordinates information with Law Enforcement
- Delegates duties among members

### **Duties of Watch Members**

- Be the “eyes and ears” of the neighborhood for police
- Report unusual activity to the police and group coordinator
- Report suspicious vehicles and people to the police and group coordinator

Members may take a more active role in the watch by:

- passing out informational flyers
- coordinating programs
- becoming a leader

### **Role for Law Enforcement**

- Conduct regular informational meetings
- Guides leaders as they form Watches
- Provides leadership to members
- Supports members as they face challenges and work on goals
- Offers updated crime prevention information and training
- Prepares members to effectively run Watches on their own

Exchange basic information with trusted neighbors: home and work telephone numbers, daily routine of your family, planned vacations or visitors, scheduled deliveries and repairs, and your alarm system.

Report any unusual or suspicious activities to the police department. Don't hesitate to call; there is a direct connection between an increase in calls for service and a reduction in crime! Make note of the descriptions of suspicious persons and vehicles. Write down license plate numbers and directions of travel. Take note of the color of the vehicle, what the suspicious persons were wearing, etc. Give as much specific information as possible.

Keep neighbors informed of houses that will be unoccupied for extended periods of time. Look after neighbors' houses when they are away. Volunteer to collect their mail, newspapers and other deliveries. A stack of several newspapers is a good indication to a burglar that no one is home!

**LET THE POLICE APPREHEND CRIMINALS. NEVER PUT YOURSELF IN DANGER.**

### **Reporting Suspicious or Criminal Activity**

If you detect any suspicious activity in your neighborhood or anywhere, call 911. Do not worry about being embarrassed if your suspicions prove to be unfounded. It is better to think of what could happen if you didn't act.

### **Examples of Suspicious Activity**

#### **Suspicious Persons**

- Door-to-door canvassers in a residential area. This is especially suspicious if, after a few houses have been visited, one or more of the subjects go into the back or side yard. If one remains in the front yard while this occurs, the situation is even more suspicious. They could be "casing the house" for a burglary. There may be a burglary in progress: possibly a soliciting violation or trespass is in progress.
- People waiting in front of a house where the occupants are absent, or loitering in front of a business establishment which is closed. There may be a burglary in progress.
- Someone forcing entrance to or tampering with a residence, business, vehicle, etc. This person is suspicious under almost any circumstance. There may be a burglary in progress.

- Non-resident going into back or side yard of house - possible burglary may be in progress.
- Person running - especially if he or she is carrying something of value. The person may be fleeing the scene of a crime.
- Person carrying property - suspicious depending on the circumstances. For example, if the person is observed at an unusual hour or in an unusual place and if the property is not wrapped as if just purchased, the situation may indicate a crime in progress.
- Exhibiting unusual mental or physical symptoms. The person may be injured, under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or in some kind of need of medical aid.

#### **Suspicious Situations Involving Property**

- Property in homes, private garages, storage areas, etc. This is suspicious when there are large or unusual accumulations of property (such as several TV sets in a garage which are new and not being used). The property may be stolen.
- Property in a vehicle - not suspicious if the property is normally found in vehicles. This property may be stolen if you observe it at unusual hours, particularly TV's or other electronics.
- Property carried by persons on foot - normally not suspicious unless at an unusual hour or in an unusual place. This situation is especially questionable if the person is running and/or the property is not wrapped as if just purchased.
- Property being removed from or being placed in vehicles or buildings. This situation is suspicious if odd hours or places are involved, for example, from closed businesses or residences whose owners are known to be absent.

#### **Other Unusual Situations**

- Continuous "repair" operations at a non-business location. It is possible that stolen property is being stripped, refinished or altered in some other way.
- Broken windows or doors at closed businesses or residences where the owners are absent.
- Unusual noises - gunshots, screaming, sounds of fighting, abnormally barking dogs - anything which suggests foul play or illegal activity.
- Large number of people/vehicles frequently a home.

#### **Suspicious Vehicles**

- Certain moving vehicles - slow-moving vehicles without lights which seem to be following no deliberate path. This is suspicious in any location, but especially in school areas, parks and playgrounds. The occupants of the car may be "casing" for sex offenses, drug pushing or for places to rob.
- Certain parked, occupied vehicles - may contain one or more persons. This situation is especially significant if observed at an unusual hour in a commercial area. The car may indicate a lookout for a burglary in progress.
- Vehicles being loaded with valuables - suspicious if parked in front of a closed business or vacant residence - even if the vehicle is a legitimate-looking commercial vehicle.
- Abandoned vehicle - possibly stolen.
- Vehicle containing weapons - suspicious under most circumstances - may be used for criminal activity.
- Other unusual activities involving vehicles:
- Persons attempting forcibly to enter a vehicle, persons "stripping" a car, especially at night or in parking lots, apparent business transactions in a vehicle, especially if around schools or parks.

### **How to Report a Crime or Suspicious Activity**

Call the police. Dial 911 for emergencies. Identify yourself by your name and address and relay the information. Example: "I am Jane Smith of 1223 Mountain Street, a member of Community Watch.

There is a suspicious person prowling around my neighbor's house at 1225 Mountain Street". Give the exact location of the crime or activity. Remain in contact with the dispatcher until all of the necessary information has been obtained. Do not personally confront the situation. Await the arrival of a police officer.

In an emergency, when reporting an incident to your local Police, you may be asked to repeat the address. This is to ensure that the address is correct and understood. While the dispatcher is asking you questions which may seem indirectly related to the actual incidence of the crime, such as your name and address, a patrol car has already been dispatched to the scene of the emergency. The additional information may be required in order to determine the need for additional response or equipment. All information that may identify the caller, the victim or the witness is kept confidential.

### **Care Enough to Call**

If any of the above situations deemed suspicious are observed, the citizen is advised to call 911 to report:

- What happened
- Where
- When
- If anyone was injured
- License number of the vehicle
- Description of the vehicle
- Description of the persons
- Direction of flight

### **Encourage your community to:**

- Improve the security of their residences
- Identify any potential points of vulnerability
- Correct those security weaknesses

Remember: If a burglar can be denied entry into your home for five minutes, statistics show that he will leave for an easier target.

### **Other Community Programs**

#### **Residential Security Checks**

Take advantage of the Police Department's residential security check program. Let us know if you will be out of town and a patrol officer will make regular checks of your residence as calls for service allow.

#### **Residential Security Survey Program**

Crime prevention begins at home through improved home security. Our Crime Prevention Unit will conduct a home security survey on request. The survey will identify problem areas and will provide guidance for their correction.

**Participate in National Night Out**

"A good-bye party for crime and drugs," National Night Out is an annual event designed to build upon the partnership between the community and law enforcement. National Night Out occurs every August and continues to gain mass, momentum and feeling as it bonds diverse elements of our community. Besides being loads of fun, this event is educational and beneficial to every community that participates. To get involved, contact your Community Resource Officer for more information and to register. The earlier you begin planning, the more successful your event will be.

**Suggested events:**

- Have everyone in the neighborhood display their outdoor lights
- Organize "front porch vigils"
- Block parties
- Cookouts or pot luck meals
- Flashlight walks
- Contests and games