



Current REVIEW

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Keeping Watch

By Michele Molnar

After finding his home ransacked in 2004, Art Hanson tallied the losses. Thieves had broken into a basement window and stolen laptops, cameras, even a piggy bank from the family's home in Harpers Ferry, W. Va.

"As upsetting as that was, what really got under my skin was the fact that it was a persistent problem in my neighborhood," he says.

Responding to a flier Hanson posted, other residents in his Blue Ridge Acres community began calling with reports of similar experiences. He learned a rash of 30 break-ins had occurred in the area within three months.

The existing crime watch group in this bedroom community wasn't tracking the evolving problem, and differing law enforcement jurisdictions hadn't connected the dots either. Hanson, now president of Blue Ridge Acres Civic Association, which maintains 13 miles of private roads, hatched an idea: Why not make real-time connections among members of communities who are rarely home?

That's when Nation of Neighbors was born. A web developer by profession, Hanson created this online crime watch site, which has, in all likelihood, saved at least one life from domestic violence, while making many more routine connections, like tracking solicitors going door-to-door.

It's a new twist on an old solution—neighbors working together to stop, prevent or at least discourage crime. Communities have many more tools at their disposal today to help fight crime. Some of them are new, such as Facebook or Google groups, Twitter updates and text messaging. Others are as low-tech as a notebook, a pen and a



telephone list. Many associations create awareness and rally volunteers by organizing social events, such as National Night Out.

TREAD CAUTIOUSLY

Community interest in a crime watch program is often triggered by a serious incident, such as rape or a series of burglaries, or smaller property crimes like slashed tires or garage break-ins. Anxious residents in search of answers for crime—actual or anticipated—often wind up raising the issue at association board meetings.

How should board members respond? Proactively and carefully, experts advise. Most recommend boards invite police officers to speak to residents to share local statistics, suggest ways to prevent crime and guide residents on how they can help police find "the bad guys."

Making community improvements—such as improving lighting, changing landscaping or upgrading locks—is the board's job. Organizing community watches? Many experts believe that should be the purview of volunteers who are unaffiliated with the association's leaders, for practical and political reasons. Liability concerns

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are one issue, but confusion of roles is another.

"I would not advise board members to inject themselves into the role of telling members how to set up a neighborhood watch. The board cannot be the eyes and ears that the owners or neighbors can be," says Beth A. Grimm, a Pleasant Hill, Calif., attorney who is a member of CAI's College of Community Association Lawyers (CCAL).

Grimm says she has attended many crime watch meetings where the conversations were about suspected drug activity—including methamphetamine labs—and neighborhood crime in general.

"I was there so that I could help the board understand its very limited role—purveyor of information and education," she says. Going beyond that can have significant liability implications, she says.

Indeed, Grimm knows board members who have become over-invested in crime watch activities. In one case, a board member confronted people he did not know in the development, interjecting himself into what he thought was a drug deal. "The police were called, and the board member was arrested for obstructing the officers," she says. The association board asked Grimm whether it had to pay the board member's court and legal costs. After examining the facts, she found it unnecessary for the association to pay.

The liability issue is paramount, agrees Raymond J. Diaz, an attorney from Falls Church, Va., and CCAL member.

"What's the extent of the association's powers under the governing documents? Does it have the power to establish a community watch?" Diaz asks.

If not, he says, associations that want to oversee the activities of a crime watch group first need to amend their governing documents and find out whether their insurance covers them. "They must look to their insurance carrier to provide a statement in writing that the community watch committee members and functions are within the scope of the association's liability policy," he says.

From an insurer's standpoint, community associations are not covered for crime watch activities under either general liability or directors and officers (D&O) liability. If the association officially sanctions the group, the board should notify its insurance carrier beforehand.

"There could be exclusions or ramifications depending upon what the claims are," says Tom Coles, vice president of Ian H. Graham Insurance of Washington, D.C. If the organized watch activity is a stand-alone group that is independent of community association oversight, insurers need not be notified. Coles also advises boards to seek legal advice if they want to create an officially sanctioned crime watch initiative.

USAonWatch, the face of the National Neighborhood Watch program founded by the National Sheriffs' Association, also discourages association boards from running crime watch programs in their communities. Sup-



porting, yes. Overseeing, no. That group believes the missions of the two can co-exist and be mutually supportive, without one being subservient to the other, a spokesman says.

When asked to speak at a community association board meeting, Carmen Caldwell, executive director of Citizens' Crime Watch of Miami-Dade County, says she prefers to be first on the agenda so her message about unifying the community isn't lost as the discussion turns to other more divisive business issues. Unity matters because at least 30 percent of a neighborhood's residents are needed to participate in a phone chain for a crime watch program to work, she says.

Lately, inquiries have been coming in faster than Caldwell can field them. The economic downturn has led to many foreclosures in the area of 2.7 million people helped by her organization. When association assessments aren't being paid, security contracts are often the first items to be cut from the budget. Routine crime continues, while new problems—from squatters to marijuana "grow houses"—are sprouting up, even in upscale neighborhoods.

"I did a crime watch meeting for 20 houses on the water in an exclusive part of Miami that had three mansions in foreclosure. Even there, foreclosures bring the criminal element into a neighborhood to see what they can steal. Neighborhood Watch is that crucial element that gets residents to partner with law enforcement," Caldwell explains.

TRAGIC MISTAKES

Neighbors who bypass police training and coordination with their watch activities can find themselves on the wrong side of the law—or worse. Such was the case in a Salt Lake County, Utah, community last year, when a self-appointed patroller—carrying a gun with a concealed weapons permit—went out with his homeowners association president to be on the lookout. They came across four teenage girls in a car that fit the description

of a car used in a burglary. The men confronted the girls; one went back and told her father they were being “stalked.”

Incensed, the father took his gun and found the patrolling men. In the ensuing confrontation, the “on-patrol” homeowner was shot and paralyzed. Ironically, the girl, her father and the self-appointed patrols all came from the same neighborhood.

While this tragedy contains some self-evident lessons, Lt. Don Hutson, public information officer of the Unified Police Department of Greater Salt Lake, makes this his top recommendation: “Rather than try to create your own Neighborhood Watch or security protocol, always involve your own police department,” he says. Police training about what can and cannot be done is crucial. “People understand the police can’t be everywhere all the time, and they want to take responsibility. But it has to be under very strict parameters and guidelines,” he says.

Generally, police departments welcome the opportunity to work with neighbors to prevent and solve crimes. In one High Point, N.C., neighborhood, residents kept tabs on the comings and goings of some local residents and supplied police with information that led to the arrest of 12 people, ages 16 to 22, on burglary-related charges.

At one point, though, residents took matters into their own hands and posted names of the suspects on signs. “Personally, I wouldn’t really recommend that,” says Officer Robert Burchette, High Point’s community outreach officer. “You could get yourself sued. It’s better to just notify the police.”

When Neighborhood Watch groups work closely with police, they will get clear-cut advice on issues like whether to patrol and whether to make watch activities noticeable by putting a crime watch sign on their car, wearing a safety vest or carrying a clipboard and a flash light. In some cases, this kind of self-identification might be a deterrent. In others, it could make a volunteer a target of the very criminals he or she is out to discourage.

A well-run crime watch program can ensure positive relations with the police department, which is how Cindi Groome, president of Oak Highlands/Deer Valley Homeowners Association, and Don Johnson, who runs the Oak

Highlands/Deer Valley Neighborhood Watch in Cane Ridge, Tenn., describe their connection to the Nashville Metropolitan Police Department. Their strong suit: communication, between the police and the Neighborhood Watch, within the watch and between the watch and the association board.

“We get daily activity reports from the Metro police, and I send an e-mail blast to all members on my list,” Johnson says. With some 450 homes, 187 families have signed up for the Neighborhood Watch, which does not involve patrols. “A mouse scurries across the street, and I get about 12 e-mails,” says Johnson.

The most dramatic event in their neighborhood occurred when shots were fired outside a house with residents known for wild parties. The police responded immediately. The homeowner received warnings from the association board about activities at the home. “Not only has it calmed down, but the resident who owns the house is now part of our Neighborhood Watch,” Johnson says.

WORTH THE EFFORT?

Launching a crime watch initiative requires no upfront investment. Many cities and towns budget for signs that are posted notifying all who enter that a neighborhood is being watched. More important than signs are committed volunteer leaders and neighbors willing to report suspicious or criminal activity to the appropriate authorities.

Association leaders might be wondering: Is it worth it to introduce our residents to a crime watch program? One review of 18 studies found that Neighborhood Watch programs were associated with a 16 percent reduction in crime. That’s considered a “small favorable effect,” according to the analysis published in the *Journal of Experimental Criminology* in 2006.

“If a community wants to do something, they have to *do* it,” says Gail Lorenzen, who coordinates Rancho Palos Verdes Neighborhood Watch. “If you have crime, you can’t go to the sheriff’s department and say, ‘It’s your fault, and you have to fix it.’ You need to go to neighbors and say, ‘Hey, it’s our fault, and we have to fix it.’”

Lorenzen has logged 25,000 hours with the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department and countless more at the helm of a nationally recognized Neighborhood Watch program that has been responsible for nabbing thieves and a rapist and getting the word out about home invasion robberies and drug dealers—even in a community with stunning real estate and views to match.

Lorenzen led the charge to start a community watch group in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and today the Los Angeles suburb, with 15,000 homes and 45,000 residents, is one of the most “watched” around.

Getting people to network with neighbors takes effort. People are isolated, busy and preoccupied. She recommends volunteer leaders work to identify and retain block captains. Holding neighborhood parties so neighbors meet face-to-face is also essential she says.

Keeping up with crime is easier than ever, thanks to computer networks that provide crime statistics. Many larger police departments have crime analysts who can keep neighborhood groups posted on the latest criminal



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activity in their neighborhood and ZIP code.

Websites that track crime are another resource. Linda Zimmerman-Horensavitz, CMCA, community service director for Flower Hill Central Corp. in Gaithersburg, Md., routinely logs onto CrimeReports.com to backup the information she receives from police. "It's really helpful because the police aren't going to notify the association if four cars are broken into in a three-block radius. But if you have 20 cars, they're going to call you," she says. With 1,989 homes—including three condominium buildings, townhouses, duplexes and single-family homes—the website gives her the information she needs to keep residents updated.

Zimmerman-Horensavitz also finds the statistics useful in an unexpected way. "Sometimes there's a perception of more serious crime than there actually is. These stats are great in helping property managers and associations partner with

police to know what's really going on," she says. Other sites that provide this service are CrimeMapping.com and, for specific cities, EveryBlock.com.

Community associations can use their websites to share crime statistics with their residents—either on a public page or in a secure section that is only available to community members.

Nation of Neighbors is a free service that operates along the same lines. Today, this web tool is active with communities in 38 states and adds homeowners associations at the rate of two to three a day. Communities can connect online and compare incidents and crime prevention ideas. The organization counts as its biggest success the rescue of a Jefferson County, W.Va., woman who was beaten and terrorized by the man with whom she lived. He had locked her in a room without a phone to call for help. However, he neglected to take away the computer. She used Nation of

Neighbors to alert the police department, and officers were at the door to rescue her in five minutes, reports Hanson, the site's founder.

"I've looked through the literature, and Neighborhood Watches were heavily studied in the late 1970s and 1980s. Most start after a negative event in the community. Everybody sees an immediate need, gets involved, then disbands when the threat seems to be gone. This is different. It helps keep those connections in place. It's an alert system that's there the next time it's needed," Hanson says.

Michele Molnar is a freelance writer in Silver Spring, Md.

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