

# Everyday Watch Questions for officers and deputies

written by Evelyn Cahalen, Retired Commander Montgomery County Police Department, for the National Sheriffs' Association

For the past three years, the **National Sheriffs' Association** has been providing nationwide training for the Neighborhood Watch toolkit. As a facilitator for the training program, I have found that both officers and community members have similar questions and concerns regarding their ability to revitalize or establish Neighborhood Watch programs in their communities. Understanding the complexities of working with communities to establish safer environments to live and work is an essential component in providing quality service to residents. While the Neighborhood Watch program is an historically sound program that works to develop strong relationships between law enforcement and our residents, we must be prepared to answer the many questions that arise in the process of developing Neighborhood Watch programs throughout the country.

Here is a compiled list of the top ten frequently asked questions, or FAQs, facilitators have been asked while delivering the Neighborhood Watch toolkit training across the country. The responses have been the results of classroom discussions on how to best handle these issues. We hope that this information will be helpful in assisting agencies in the establishment of Neighborhood Watch programs in their jurisdictions.

---

## **Q: Community members are often afraid to “get involved” for fear of retaliation. Should I be afraid to call the police?**

**A:** While the incidence of retaliation in most cases is relatively low, this is a very “real” fear for many people. Especially in communities with issues of gang violence, community members may be reluctant to call the police to report observed criminal activity or suspicious conduct by individuals known for abhorrent behavior. Therefore, it is imperative that law enforcement agencies provide opportunities for residents to anonymously report these observations. Additionally, all agency employees must be aware of these procedures, and adhere to them in order to ensure the confidentiality of reporting by community members. Furthermore, there must be strict enforcement of laws related to retaliation offenses with strict penalties for violations of these laws.

## **Q: Will I have to testify in court if I am a witness to a crime that I report?**

**A:** Witness testimony in court is a critical component in the prosecution of a crime. Often the testimony of a witness is the deciding factor between the conviction or acquittal of a criminal offender. As part of the Neighborhood Watch training, we recommend that law enforcement officers who work in community service assignments explain the importance of this testimony, and afford residents the opportunity to observe courtroom procedures in order to feel more comfortable in this environment should they be summonsed to court. It is this familiarity that will help to ensure community members are less fearful of the judicial process and more likely to want to participate if called to do so.

## **Q: Once we establish a Neighborhood Watch program, how do we maintain the momentum once the “crisis” has passed?**

**A:** While the “old” Neighborhood Watch program focused primarily on crime in the community as a motivating factor for the development of a crime watch, USA on Watch has expanded the role and function of Neighborhood Watch groups to include an “all-hazards” approach to neighborhood issues. After 9/11 and Katrina, we were all reminded of how important it is for communities to work together to provide information and assistance to public safety agencies in their efforts to return our neighborhoods to a safe and healthy place to live and work. Looking beyond the need to create a “crime” watch program, it is essential that communities be prepared to address any situation that disrupts public order and creates an environment of fear and uncertainty. Therefore, the new Neighborhood Watch program goes beyond the boundaries of crime and assists residents in developing strong community ties that will assist them in any crisis situation.

## **Q: How do I generate support for the program from the executive level of the agency?**

**A:** Without top-down support, it is difficult for anyone in an organization to buy into an initiative regardless of its effectiveness. Therefore, law enforcement executives must be educated to the benefits of creating Neighborhood Watch programs throughout their communities. Strong community relationships and public support are essential to the effective delivery of law enforcement service. Law enforcement executives should embrace initiatives that help to strengthen ties between the community and their agencies as this relationship will inevitably result in more successful outcomes to crime prevention efforts and the protection of residents in times of disaster.



**Q: Community members are told to call the police to report suspicious activity or crimes they have witnessed. What happens when my community officer tells me to call the police, but the call-taker tells me that officers are not dispatched to calls of this nature?**

**A:** This is a frequently asked question, and unfortunately a common problem that directly impacts the community's willingness to be involved in crime prevention efforts. This situation is created by lack of coordination between the officers on the street who are involved in community policing initiatives and call-takers in dispatch centers. It is essential that officers and communications personnel work together, and officers must provide information to call-takers on special enforcement projects that may fall outside of the "normal" scope of dispatched calls for service. Additionally, communications personnel should be invited to participate in community watch meetings and events in order to discuss dispatch criteria and procedures to residents. Better education for all will only serve to enhance these community initiatives.

**Q: Is there any funding available to Neighborhood Watch groups to assist them in initiatives?**

**A:** Yes and No. As a partner of the Citizen Corps program, which is administered by the Department of Homeland Security, there are some funds available to law enforcement agencies and community organizations to promote and expand watch programs. The amount of funding is different for each state and county throughout the United States. Unfortunately, the National Neighborhood Watch program does not have funds to assist local law enforcement or communities with their efforts.

**Q: How do we get residents to want to be involved in Neighborhood Watch?**

**A:** While recruiting residents into any community organization is often a difficult task, it is not an insurmountable one. The Neighborhood Watch toolkit training focuses an entire training block on recruiting and retaining members. While a crime problem may be a good place to start to rally community members, once the issue is resolved the momentum can be maintained by continuous updates provided to the community on news and events. The local law enforcement agency can provide a wealth of information to communities on a myriad of topics to include identity theft, senior citizen crime concerns, and other related issues. Guest speakers are a great resource and can be invited to Neighborhood Watch meetings on a regular basis. It is important that the law enforcement agency reinforces to the community that this is THEIR group, not the police. If they are truly committed to reducing crime issues and developing strong ties in their neighborhoods, the residents must be active in their groups, and local law enforcement must serve as a constant and willing resource.

**Q: Is there special training provided or available to those interested in becoming more active in their communities?**

**A:** Many law enforcement agencies throughout the United States offer Citizen Academies for their residents and business members. Neighborhood Watch groups should contact a representative from the agency to obtain further information on Citizen Academies in their area. Additionally, the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) trains people in neighborhoods, the workplace, and schools in basic disaster response skills, such as fire suppression, urban search and rescue, and medical operations, and helps them take a more active role in emergency preparedness. For more information visit [www.citizencorps.gov/cert/](http://www.citizencorps.gov/cert/)

**Q: What "authority" do community members have who are active in Neighborhood Watch programs?**

**A:** Neighborhood Watch members have no law enforcement authority. However, residents and businesses are the "eyes and ears" of our community. With their assistance, law enforcement can be more effective in addressing crime concerns, and can be better prepared to respond to community needs in times of disaster. Communities and businesses are integral to the development of strong relationships with local law enforcement. Law enforcement must never forget that they cannot be successful in their prevention efforts without the help of those they serve.

**Q: How do we get more information on Neighborhood Watch?**

**A:** To obtain more information on the National Neighborhood Watch program, go to [www.USAonWatch.org](http://www.USAonWatch.org). This website provides information on how to develop a Neighborhood Watch program, how to obtain Neighborhood watch toolkit training, and links to other sites that will assist any law enforcement officer or community member in being better prepared to respond to the needs of their community.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT [WWW.USAONWATCH.ORG](http://WWW.USAONWATCH.ORG)**



This document was prepared by the National Sheriffs' Association, under cooperative agreement number 2005-MU-BX-K077, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.



**BJA** Bureau of Justice Assistance  
Office of Justice Programs ■ U.S. Department of Justice