

Milwaukee Police Department
Neighborhood Crime Watch Program
Revision Proposal

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Abstract

For over two decades, the Milwaukee Police Department has encouraged citizens to become actively involved in crime prevention/reduction by joining Neighborhood Watch Groups, generally referred to by the department as “Block Watch.” Over the years, there has been no structured, standardized approach to assessing the effectiveness of the block watch endeavor at the district level (or throughout the city), as it relates to the adequacy and effectiveness of:

- Block watch participant knowledge of, and actual application of crime prevention practices.
- Frequency of calls for service from block watch members, contrasted with reported incidents of crime occurrences in established block watch locations.
- District level approaches related to the establishment of and use of block watch groups as a vital, foundational component in a larger strategy of problem oriented policing initiatives.

It is likely that due to a variety of circumstances over time, districts currently have lists of block watch groups that exist largely on paper only, with no measurable criteria to determine actual member participation in crime prevention/reduction practices, or statistical information related to block watch participant calls for service. Furthermore, there are no specified criteria to determine or define what an “effective” block watch is, as it relates to measurable crime prevention/reduction practices.

It should be universally understood and agreed upon, at a base level, that the most important measures of block watch effectiveness should be assessed in three areas.

- 1) Calls for service from block watch participants, contrasted with actual incidents of crime within blocks/areas purporting an established block watch group.
- 2) Measurable implementation of “target hardening” practices related to residential, auto, and personal security (i.e. “CAT Program,” “Operation ID,” or officer conducted Security Survey participation).
- 3) Biennial (or annual) evaluation of program effectiveness via use of descriptive surveys and questionnaires of block watch participants.

Proposal Purpose

The purpose of the proposal is to illicit further inquiry of current practices related to the establishment, maintenance, and assessment of Neighborhood Crime Watch efforts by the Milwaukee Police Department throughout the City of Milwaukee, and as a result, make prudent and necessary revisions to such practices so as to reasonably increase expectations of effective, more frequent citizen participation and engagement in Neighborhood Crime Watch activity and behavioral practices throughout the City of Milwaukee.

Proposal Rationale

Similar to virtually all major metropolitan areas, the City of Milwaukee continues to experience a variety of social and economic challenges that impact its historically unique neighborhoods and their efforts to identify and sustain themselves as safe neighborhoods with a desirable quality of life.

In an effort to assist citizens and their respective neighborhoods to achieve crime prevention and reduction goals, the City of Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Police Department have long been known to promote participation in Neighborhood Crime Watch Programs, specifically through the formation of Block Watch Clubs, which have been shown to be an integral part of reducing crime within communities.

Perhaps due to changes over time in police department leadership, enforcement strategies and initiatives, community demographics, neighborhood geographical changes, social and economic shifts, etc., coupled with a general lack of periodic Neighborhood Crime Watch program assessment and analysis, it has recently been observed that over time, several of the fundamental aspects of Neighborhood Crime Watch have been inadvertently or purposely modified to the point where the overall effectiveness and original intent of the initiative has been compromised.

For example, many districts currently assess the strength of a Block Watch Group based solely upon such criteria as district personnel relationships with Block Watch Captains, and Block Watch Group participant attendance at various community-based meetings or events such as block parties or similar functions. Unfortunately, such ambiguous assessments do not translate into measurable variables or criteria of Block Watch Group effectiveness in crime prevention/reduction efforts, evidenced by virtually no difference in calls for service or reported crime between established Block Watch Group areas, and those areas with no established Block Watch Groups. Furthermore, it is obvious that most people (including purported Block Watch Group members) do not regularly attend community-based meetings of any kind.

Another example relates to the implications of the very name “Neighborhood Crime Watch,” and the corresponding slogans “We immediately report all suspicious activities to our police department,” and “If I don’t call the police my neighbor will,” establish a reasonable expectation that residents will minimally do those things, “watch and call” as necessary. Unfortunately, that fundamental responsibility of Block Watch Club Members; watching for suspicious activity and then calling police; does not appear to be occurring on a scale equivalent to the crime occurring in their neighborhoods, nor the sheer number of established Block Watch Clubs reported within police districts. In other words, we’re experiencing significant, repeated incidents of crime within city blocks where long established Block Watch Clubs exist, but in some cases there are literally no calls for service from citizens/Block Watch Group members on those blocks.

This reality begs an assessment of our overall Neighborhood Crime Watch Programs and efforts, in order to determine why citizens are not engaged in calling police where criminal activity continues to occur. Though there may likely be several contributing factors to the lack of effective engagement of established Block Watch participants calling police, it is prudent to first examine Milwaukee Police Department policies and practices related to Neighborhood Crime Watch, assess such policies and practices, and make reasonable proposals for change, along with necessary adjustments where possible and practical.

Proposal Impetus

The impetus for the proposal to assess and revise the Milwaukee Police Department Neighborhood Crime Watch Program (and related efforts) was the result of preliminary findings from an informal needs-assessment conducted throughout Police District 7 in February 2013 by District 7 police officers assigned to proactive policing assignments. The purpose of the initial assessment was to address immediately identifiable deficiencies of District 7's Neighborhood Crime Watch or "Block Watch" efforts, which ultimately led to a wider inquiry and assessment of similar Neighborhood Crime Watch efforts throughout the city. The goal was to define and/or determine the effectiveness of "Block Watch Clubs" throughout District 7, as it relates to practical application of crime prevention programs and strategies (i.e. Operation ID, C.A.T. Program, Security Survey Requests, etc.), as well as analysis of calls for service contrasted with reported incidents of criminal offenses or city ordinance violations.

Needs Assessment

An initial assessment/overview of Milwaukee's Neighborhood Crime Watch initiative reveals a somewhat blurred understanding or professional agreement of definitions and conceptual differences between "Neighborhood Watch" and "Block Watch." Generally, these terms appear to be used interchangeably, which may lend to reduced understanding of the roles and responsibilities of individuals within these groups and organizations, as well as reduced understanding of how these separate entities may be of distinct benefit to citizens and neighborhoods respectively, based upon the unique characteristics and needs of varying parts of the community.

The needs assessment revealed the following:

- Generally, a minimal ability (of officers or citizens) to differentiate or articulate differences between Neighborhood Watch Associations, Block Watch Clubs, and Business Watch Organizations, their specific purposes and their unique characteristics and functions. This lack of knowledge does not support effective establishment, nurturing, or sustainment of these groups.
- District 7 was experiencing frequent criminal activity in designated "hot spots" where long established "Block Watches" exist, and calls for service from citizens/Block Watch Club Members in those areas were virtually nonexistent.
- District 7 periodically purported maintaining large/specific numbers of "Block Watches," based upon outdated data in the form of outdated Block Watch Captain Rosters that were largely found to be, by definition, a mostly inaccurate depiction of the actual number of current or "active" Block Watch Clubs within the district. (e.g. 252 Block Watches were initially reported, however, only 20 actually met the definition of an established Block Watch Club [having at least 50% or more residential participants within a single block], 34 could best be described as Neighborhood

Watch Groups [sporadic residential participants scattered throughout a neighborhood], 37 claimed to be extinct and/or were unaware of there ever being a Block Watch on their block or a Block Watch Captain residing at their residence., 161 did not answer or respond at all to the phone call or voicemail inquiry.)

- Though a large number of crime prevention educational materials (i.e. pamphlets, etc.) exist for distribution to citizens and groups, few were regularly distributed or used, and some were deemed to be obsolete (e.g. Business Security Survey).
- There appears to be no discussion or mechanism of measuring effectiveness of the MPD or District Neighborhood Crime Watch efforts or initiatives.
- Nearly all MPD District Websites lacked substantive information and are significantly outdated or clearly underused by district personnel and citizens.

Proposal

This Neighborhood Crime Watch Assessment Proposal has three primary components.

Section One

- I. The Milwaukee Police Department shall **regularly (biennially) conduct assessment and cursory analysis of Neighborhood Crime Watch policies, practices, programs, and related aspects and activities** initiated by the Milwaukee Police Department and the Milwaukee City-Wide Block Watch Council, and collaboratively make prudent revisions to associated policies and practices as needed, for the purpose of measuring overall effectiveness of such practices as it relates to achieving measurable outcomes with respect to crime reporting; crime prevention/reduction; and actual implementation of various, proven crime prevention practices.

Proposed biennial assessment areas shall minimally include:

- Current number of “active” Block Watch Clubs (per definition, per district)
- Current number of Neighborhood Watch Associations (per definition, per district)
- Current number of Business Watch Organizations (per definition, per district)
- Cursory analysis of ratio of calls for service vs. reported crime incidents within identified hot spots purporting established Block Watch Clubs.
- Messaging/Community Education efforts regarding: Crime Awareness Updates; When and how to effectively communicate with police; Integration and/or use of technology in Neighborhood Crime Watch activities.

Section Two

- II. Within the City of Milwaukee, eliminate use of ambiguous Neighborhood Crime Watch terminology and instead, **classify the various Neighborhood Crime Watch Groups**, clarifying distinct differences between such groups based upon geographic considerations, population-based parameters, and specified functionality (i.e. “Neighborhood Watch Association,” “Block Watch Club,” and “Business Watch Organization”), and provide thoughtful direction of functionality for said groups. Such classifications will support greater understanding of the unique strengths or characteristics of the various types of groups, as well as helping them to establish reasonable, articulated objectives and effective operational expectations for said groups, thereby supporting the achievement of specific, measurable crime prevention/reduction programs, initiatives, efforts, and outcomes.

Classification Examples:

Neighborhood Crime Watch Groups shall be classified as one of the following:

- A) **Neighborhood Watch Association** – “A citizen-based crime prevention group/initiative that enlists active participation of residents and organizations from within a designated neighborhood, working in cooperation with local law enforcement, to prevent or reduce crime within their specified neighborhood or community.”
- i. There are no minimum participation standards or strict geographical boundaries required for the establishment of a Neighborhood Crime Watch Association.
 - ii. Such groups are uniquely effective in establishing and sustaining grassroots citizen-based organizations and efforts such as “Court Watch,” Enhanced Municipal, County and State Legislative Engagement; and mutually beneficial collaboration with private sector entities.
 - iii. Within a Neighborhood Watch Association, the nature of such relationships among citizens, businesses and legislative representatives is best described as being that of a “social/professional context.”
- B) **Block Watch Club** – “A citizen-based crime prevention group/initiative that enlists active participation of residents living within a specific city block, (sharing a generally east-west side of the street, or a generally north-south side of the street, front structural facing orientation – see addendum), working in cooperation with local law enforcement, to prevent or reduce crime on their residential block.”
- i. An officially established Block Watch Club is designated as such based upon achieving a minimum of 50% of the block residents registering for membership within the specific city block (see addendum).
 - ii. Such groups are uniquely effective in efforts such as implementing personal and residential crime prevention practices, increasing social capital, serving as

extra “eyes and ears” for local law enforcement, and maintaining effective two-way communication with law enforcement.

- iii. Within a Block Watch Club, the nature of such relationships among citizens and local businesses is best described as being that of a “neighborly, friendly, informal, or close/personal context.”

C) **Business Watch Organization** – “A citizen-based crime prevention group/initiative that enlists active participation of private businesses, community-based organizations, and/or nonprofit organizations within the surrounding community, who work in cooperation with each other and area citizens to prevent or reduce crime within the community.”

- i. There are no minimum participation standards, strict geographical boundaries, or organizational classifications required for the establishment of a Business Watch Organization.
- ii. Business Watch Organizations have no official establishment or operational requirements/criteria as it relates to their association with local law enforcement.
- iii. Such groups are uniquely effective in providing logistical or financial support for crime watch initiatives and programs; Assisting with economic development of neighborhoods, and potentially providing various employment or volunteer opportunities for area citizens.
- iv. The nature of such relationships with and among citizens is best described as being that of a “formal, friendly, and professional context.”

Section Three

III. Develop and implement an effective Neighborhood Crime Watch Messaging Campaign,

designed to raise general awareness of obligatory responsibilities of fundamental Neighborhood Crime Watch participation (e.g. Watch and call police), as well as challenge existing Neighborhood Crime Watch participants to consider (or reconsider) their conceptual and operational roles and responsibilities within Neighborhood Crime Watch in their neighborhood, and throughout the City of Milwaukee. Such a campaign should be implemented minimally by use of permanently posted signage (see addendum) using traditional Neighborhood Crime Watch color schemes that identify participating, classified groups as follows:

A) Neighborhood Crime Watch Associations shall use standardized 18" X 24" aluminum signage displaying the traditional Orange/Black/White colors, and displaying the recognized "Boris the Burglar" centered logo, and lettered with "Welcome – (insert neighborhood name) is a Neighborhood Watch Community. We report suspicious activity to our police department." Or, an approved alternative sign (See addendum).

- i.** Such signs shall be specifically designated for use by established Neighborhood Crime Watch Associations, such as "Golden Gate/Mack Acres;" Sherman Park;" "Washington Park;" "Harambee;" "Historic Third Ward;" "Avenues West;" "Story Hill;" and "Riverwest" neighborhoods.
- ii.** Such signs shall be customized with the name of the neighborhood on the sign (See addendum), and strategically posted at locations proposed by the specific Neighborhood Crime Watch Association and approved by the City of Milwaukee Department of Public Works.

B) Block Watch Clubs shall use standardized 12" x 18" aluminum signage displaying the traditional Blue/Black/White colored signs, with the centered "peering eyeball" logo, lettered with "Neighborhood **Block** Watch" at the top, "We report suspicious persons & activity. Call 414-933-4444 (Non-Emergency) or 911 (Emergency) and Milwaukee Police Dept." at the bottom (See addendum).

- i.** Such signs shall be specifically designated for use by formally established and registered Block Watch Clubs (residential city blocks having at least 50% registration of residents on the block).
- ii.** Such signs shall be posted curbside at each right lane near the ends of the specified city block (See addendum), or as otherwise determined by the Department of Public Works.

C) **Business Watch Organizations** shall use standardized 12” x 18” aluminum signage displaying Yellow/Black/White colors, and displaying the recognized “Boris the Burglar” centered logo, and lettered with, ”Warning, Business Alert Program In Force. We immediately report all suspicious activities to our fellow merchants and the police department.” (See addendum).

- i. Such signs shall be specifically designated for use by registered Business Watch Organizations.
- ii. Such signs may be posted on private property, at the discretion of the business owner, in accordance with existing guidelines for posting of signage such as “No Loitering.”

It is important to recognize that the purpose of permanent signage is not to serve solely as a deterrent for would be criminals within an area, but more importantly, the signs serve as **a constant reminder to residents** of their responsibility to **watch and call for police**, as they’ve committed to do by becoming members of the Neighborhood Watch effort.

The decision to post permanent Neighborhood Crime Watch signs shall be at the discretion of each Neighborhood Watch Association, established Block Watch Club, or associated Business Watch Organization, subsequent to final Common Council or appropriate committee approval. Funding for permanent signage shall be the sole responsibility of the requesting Neighborhood Crime Watch Group (see addendum).

Conclusion

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the City of Milwaukee and its police department were frequently recognized as a national leader in regard to fundamental and innovative crime prevention initiatives, and particularly our Neighborhood Crime Watch efforts within an urban environment, along with our “National Night Out” efforts. Since then, enforcement strategies and initiatives over the years have understandably changed and have become more dispersed, and that process may likely have diluted the strength of our once strong, citizen-empowering crime prevention initiatives (i.e. Neighborhood Crime Watch). Consideration of assessing our current crime prevention efforts and making practical modifications to meet the needs of our now 21st Century neighborhoods is an endeavor that is both necessary and long overdue.

With proper assessment, strategic planning, and focused action toward implementation of a renewed effort and investment in Neighborhood Crime Watch, as research shows, it is reasonable to anticipate measurable outcomes in crime reduction and/or crime prevention throughout the City of Milwaukee, as a result of community education, active target hardening, and minimizing opportunities for individuals to commit crimes.