

An Apartment Watch.....Why is it important to Me?

September 11th, 2001 was a day in American History that changed so many of us for the rest of our lives. We now have a compelling need to become more aware of our surroundings, not just because of terrorism, but as it relates to threats from all around. This awareness has in many ways changed the way we live and the way we perceive our world. The following crime statistics previously viewed by just a few and now known by many, affect all of us whether we live in private residences or apartment complexes.

- 80% of us will become victims of violent crime at least once in our lifetime.
- Every two hours a child is murdered in the United States.
- A violent crime is committed every sixteen seconds.
- A residential burglary is committed every nine seconds.

Households where both husband and wife are employed; the mobility and freedom provided by automobiles; the growing popularity of apartment living and other factors are causing many people to become strangers to their neighbors. One of the best ways to accomplish a more secure environment is by *linking up* with our friends and neighbors to create a safer community. This is true for apartment residents and condominium owners as well as for traditional neighborhoods.

An Apartment Watch Program which links resident participation and cooperation makes for a safer living community. Neighbors are asked to be the eyes and ears in helping the police identify and apprehend criminals. An Apartment Watch Program is not designed to substitute for police protection – rather it is an active effort to raise awareness to a higher level.

What are the benefits to my properties and residents?

An outline of positive benefits will encourage everyone. Reporting suspicious persons and activities in your neighborhood to the authorities gives law enforcement agencies probable cause to approach those individuals and ask them their business. Criminals know that otherwise, they can move through your properties unrestricted, committing crime at will.

- An effective Apartment Watch Program provides a layer of protection and intolerance to all types of external, threatening activity.
- By taking part in making neighborhoods safer, parents become roll models to their own children.
- By establishing an Apartment Watch Program, residents create an identity within the neighborhood, which in turn fosters a sense of pride and belonging for the participants.
- Law Enforcement becomes an active partner in protecting your individual apartment community.
- By building bridges of communication instead of walls of isolation, you restore the values of cooperation and participation.
- By working together, you and your residents can take control of the safety of your apartment neighborhoods.

What can I do as an apartment manager to encourage the formation of an Apartment Watch Program?

First, overcome the common objections: “I don’t have enough time to participate”; “people should mind their own business”; “crime isn’t that bad crime in our neighborhood”; or “the threat is over-exaggerated”. These will be key objections from residents. How do you overcome these objections?

Start the process through well constructed resident opinion surveys about crime. Simple questions will form a foundation which when established will drive an action plan to clarify what your tenants think about crime in your neighborhood. From there you can generate positive energy about addressing crime related risk.

Here are some tips to follow when you schedule your first meeting:

- Utilize the community room or an area with enough comfortable space for the size of the group involved.
- Pick a specific time and date.
- Inform your tenants of the event by handing out newsletters containing this pertinent information and call to confirm their attendance. Prepare an agenda for the initial meeting. It will enhance their enthusiasm. Include basic facts you gained from your survey.
- At the meeting, use flip charts, maps, or hand out graphs to emphasize your points.
- Provide pens, paper or notebooks for each resident to participate in this meeting.
- Keep your meeting focused, moving and positive. Remember, you are laying the groundwork for effective solutions to fight crime in your apartment complex and surrounding area. Avoid leading a group gossip or complaint session.
- Maximize effectiveness; keep the meeting less than two (2) hours.
- Allow people to express anger and fear, but do not allow the venting of emotion to dominate the agenda. Ask them to describe an incident that affected them or a loved one.
- Save questions for the end of the meeting since many of the issues may be answered during the course of the meeting.
- Encourage your neighbors to write down questions instead of blurting them out arbitrarily.
- Serve light refreshments.
- Take comprehensive notes. These will be the basis for your discussions with law enforcement.

Initiate a meeting with your local police representative. Invite the expertise and resources of your local police department to your next meeting. And let them explain how an effective program works. Have them define the best way to report information about criminal behavior.

The final overview of any program should be discussed with your resident volunteers. Participation in this Apartment Watch Program is not something that should take a lot of time. It merely requires each person to adopt a more observant and active attitude on a daily basis.

As a result of your Apartment Watch Program meetings, neighbors will get to know each other better, develop a sense of community and gain an understanding of how their participation, through a few basic measures, can effectively assist with protecting and maintaining a safer living community.

- Neighbors should get to know neighbors – name tags at meetings go a long way in developing familiarity. And people familiar with each other look out for each other.
- Maintain a map of the immediate neighborhood with areas of concern noted. Have the police update your crime information regularly.
- Have the police Apartment Watch representative train your residents to be observant and how to watch over a neighbor's area, especially when they are gone or out of town.
- Teach them to write down license plate numbers and descriptions of suspicious-looking vehicles and persons in the neighborhood and report information back through your apartment management or to the police in an emergency.
- Educate children in crime prevention and teach respect and friendship for law enforcement and police officials.¹

An Apartment Watch program = Safety and Security

Secure residency is a formula for successful risk management and full occupancy. Huffmaster can assist SecurPLACE members with their security and loss control needs. With our track record of over 47 years of service in the world of professional security, we can be instrumental in helping you initiate and maintain an apartment watch program at your sites.

¹ Information from Klaas Kids Foundation – P.O. Box 925 Sausalito, California