



Practitioner Perspectives

Onsite Visits, Case Histories, and State and Local Innovations From the Bureau of Justice Assistance

BJA

Nancy E. Gist, Director

National Night Out was established in 1984 with funding from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), U.S. Department of Justice. The program is administered by the National Association of Town Watch, a nationwide organization dedicated to the development, maintenance, and protection of community-based, law enforcement-affiliated crime prevention activities.

National Night Out was developed as a crime prevention program that emphasizes building a partnership between the police and the community. Community involvement in crime prevention is generated through a multitude of local events, such as block parties, cookouts, parades, contests, youth activities, and seminars.

With continued funding from BJA, participation in National Night Out crime prevention activities has increased from 2.5 million people in 400 communities in 1984 to more than 32 million people in 9,530 communities in 1999. Project 365, which helps communities target specific problems over the course of the year, was also developed through BJA funding.

National Night Out's objectives include refining the nationwide crime prevention campaign, documenting successful crime prevention strategies, expanding Project 365, disseminating information about successful community-based strategies, providing technical assistance on crime prevention program development, and developing the National Night Out Web site. With continued support from BJA, National Night Out is making communities across the nation safer places to live.

National Night Out: Building Police and Community Partnerships To Prevent Crime

By *Rebecca Morris*

On a Boston street corner where firebrands and revolutionaries gathered more than two centuries ago, Chris Hayes and his little band of two stood on an August night in 1985, ready to shake things up again.

The occasion was National Night Out (NNO). A young man in Philadelphia named Matt Peskin recently had launched this new crime prevention program as a way for people to begin taking back their neighborhoods by gathering in the streets one summer night each year, turning on their house and porch lights, and celebrating their power to control events in the community. The idea was catching on in cities across the country.



National Night Out block party in the Cedar Grove neighborhood in The Woodlands, Texas (see page 10).

Hayes was an early convert. "I knew that if we all just stood on our own doorsteps, there wouldn't be any crime," he remembered. "I knew that, and I thought, 'I've got to say that.' "

So Hayes, newly appointed as the sole staff member of the Boston Police Department's crime watch unit, took his boss and the head of a neighborhood advocacy group down to Tremont and Park Streets at the edge of the

Boston Public Garden. As hundreds milled around the “T” subway entrance, picnicked in the green, or just hung out, Hayes took out a proclamation and read it to the masses: The good people of Boston were taking back their neighborhoods on this National Night Out.

“Hardly anybody even looked up,” he recollected. Fourteen years later, on August 3, 1999, more than 25,000 people in Boston rallied, held block parties, and celebrated one of the largest and most successful crime prevention programs in the country.

Such growth has occurred nationwide. In 1999, the 16th National Night Out, more than 32 million people in 9,530 communities gathered in parks and streets and front yards, celebrating yearlong partnerships between police and communities that have helped reduce crime. In many cities, between 10 and 15 percent of the population, sometimes more, participated in National Night Out in some way—as organizers or donors, cooks or art contest judges, exhibit builders or block captains, not to mention the people in charge of supplying ice cream sprinkles.

In some locations there were serious reminders of what is at stake. In Chicago, 2 days after a young girl was hit by a stray bullet while purchasing candy from a corner store, more than 3,000 NNO participants marched and

rallied in protest. Speaker after speaker appealed to the crowd: Someone must have seen what happened; people don’t get shot in broad daylight without someone knowing who did it. By nightfall someone came forward, and the police arrested two young men.

In most communities, though, the NNO mood was festive. There were award dinners and parades and huge kickoff events. Mayors issued declarations, and police commissioners praised community efforts. At the heart of National Night Out were gatherings of neighbors, opportunities for residents to meet one another and local beat officers in a friendly environment.

In Lodi, California, two newcomers to Bayberry Street—Johnny and Stacey Moreno—agreed to host a National Night Out block party so they could meet their neighbors. It was the first time this block had celebrated. When the party started, few people knew each other. Two hours later, Johnny Moreno knew Howard, Mark and Susan, Darrell and Cathy, Paul, Bill, and George. He knew which houses were theirs, how long they had been in the neighborhood, and how they liked to spend their time. What’s most important, he knew he could call them for help if he needed someone, say, to check on his house while his family was out of town. All of them met Det. Brian Scott for the first

time—he was the first police officer with whom many had ever had a conversation.

In Vicksburg, Mississippi, Sgt. Douglas Arp continued his tradition of hosting one of the biggest and longest National Night Out parties. NNO in this community lasts for 7 days in August. Festivities have taken place at the top of a billboard and inside an air-conditioned, steam-cleaned trash dumpster—wherever Arp can draw the public’s attention to the event. One year he literally holed up in a hole in the ground, complete with bed, chair, and fan. This year, he sat in a wrecked car, waving to the more than 1,160 passers-by and welcoming more than 560 visitors, most of them bearing food. In a town of just 25,000, Arp’s antics send a message about crime prevention directly to nearly 10 percent of the population and to many more through media coverage from nearby Jackson.

Many of these NNO events and gatherings appear to be deceptively simple. People get together and share food and drink, a few conversations, and a little information about the neighborhood or the town. To an outsider, many of these celebrations are indistinguishable from any other barbecue or street party, except for the National Night Out banners and posters. But it is the year-round effort of building neighborhood organizations and partnerships with police—

This series is dedicated to the exploration of vital issues in criminal justice program development and management. Case studies highlight the work of progressive, innovative people and programs in state and local criminal justice systems. Although a case study may include a detailed description of the operational aspects of a program, it is not a scientific program evaluation. Rather, it is a document designed to explore the interaction of factors such as collaboration, politics, resources, culture, and others that play a part in successful public management.

the work of organizing National Night Out events—that gives this night its special meaning.

“This is not ‘Kiss a Cop Day’ or something like that,” said Peskin, founder of National Night Out and executive director of the National Association of Town Watch (NATW), which runs the program. “It’s a program that really makes a difference. It’s a lot of fun to put together, it reaches deep into neighborhood- and community-building, and it works.”

When Peskin started National Night Out, he hoped simply to develop a higher profile for the community crime watch activities that he knew were helping to deter crime. The program has become a good example of the social capital-building that social scientists have identified as important for reducing crime.

The authors of a 1995 study of Chicago neighborhoods, *Neighborhood Collective Efficacy: Does It Help Reduce Violence?*, published in the journal *Science* and by the National Institute of Justice, found that the largest single predictor of crime levels was “collective efficacy,” which they defined as mutual trust among neighbors combined with willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good. Neighborhoods with high collective efficacy scores had crime rates 40 percent below those in lower scoring neighborhoods.¹

Dr. Wesley Skogan, professor of political science at Northwestern University in Chicago, who has examined these issues in his research, noted that “where people are involved in neighborhood organizations, have

extensive acquaintance networks, and are willing to get involved, there’s a reduction in violent crime.”²

National Night Out was founded in 1984 with \$15,000 from the National Crime Prevention Council’s grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA); since then funding for the event has increased steadily.

Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) has been the primary advocate of NNO funding for many years. “National Night Out represents an imaginative and effective approach to crime prevention,” said spokesperson Charles Robbins. “[Senator Specter] has supported it and expects to support it in the future.”

In a community impact assessment of the program conducted in 1998, nearly 90 percent of law enforcement officers who responded to the survey said NNO in 1997 had enhanced their agencies’ policing programs. Three-quarters of residents said they felt either more or much more comfortable contacting law enforcement officers after National Night Out, and 64 percent said they felt safer in their communities. Perhaps most important for generating partnerships between residents and police, residents reported meeting, on average, five new law enforcement officers during the event. More than half of the respondents said they had met 25 or more fellow residents.



Matt Peskin, founder of National Night Out and executive director of the National Association of Town Watch.

National Night Out evolved in part because a writer was running out of subjects to write about. In 1981, Peskin was responsible for his neighborhood crime watch group’s newsletter. When he contacted other groups for story ideas, he noticed that every group was having a problem sustaining volunteer interest. He suggested they start an association to coordinate their activities and share information.

The National Association of Town Watch was born, and the idea spread to other cities. Soon, Peskin was seeking ways to get even more people involved in crime watch groups. “There was no need to be quite so low profile about it,” he said.

Peskin remembers two images that helped shape the National Night Out idea in his mind. One was the scene from the movie “Network” in which the anchor urges viewers to go to their windows, lean out, and shout, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.” The other was a soft drink ad about a program called Hands Across America. “I loved that idea but I didn’t like the idea that you had to pay to stand in line,”

Peskin recalled. “Also, it wasn’t real clear what they were doing.”

But Peskin knew what NATW needed. “I felt we needed to do something different and powerful and productive, something high profile, with a high impact and broad scale.” Inspired by the two film images, Peskin developed the idea for National Night Out and presented it to his board.

The original concept was very simple: Everyone in a neighborhood would sit on their front porch for an hour with the lights on “to send a clear signal that there [are] more of us than there are of them,” Peskin recalled. He started promoting it in April 1984. The following August, 400 communities with 2.5 million people in 23 states participated in the first National Night Out.

Among the first cities participating were Detroit, Houston, Minneapolis, New York, and Philadelphia. Despite the success, “it wasn’t like it was a real easy sell,” Peskin recalled. Police chiefs were wary of getting involved with the new organization because “if it fell on its face, they would look like idiots.” The large turnout and positive media coverage won them over, and the next year more than 2,100 communities celebrated the event.

Over the years, the national office in Philadelphia and various communities have added special elements to the celebration. Block parties were an innovation in 1986. The following year, with the introduction of the awards program, “the communities really got into it,” competing for top

honors in their city-size category, Peskin said. In 1994, Project 365 was launched to help communities identify specific projects they could address year-round. The projects, which have included cleaning local parks, removing graffiti, and establishing new services, begin on Night Out and conclude 365 days later.

More than 32 million people in 9,530 communities gathered in parks and streets and front yards, celebrating yearlong partnerships between police and communities that have helped reduce crime.

SC Johnson is NNO’s primary corporate sponsor, contributing funds as well as promotional materials such as the banners, posters, door-hangers, and product coupons that block captains use to organize events. The company also organizes local retailers of Johnson products to offer sponsorships, listing them on the promotional materials. “We look for programs that bring meaning from consumer and trade perspectives and programs that give back to the community,” said Marty Killinger, SC Johnson’s manager for promotional resources.

But there are literally thousands of other local and regional businesses that contribute to the events: grocery stores donate food, utilities lower electricity rates on National Night Out, and large employers subsidize employees’ block parties or offer their parking lots for gatherings.

Today, NATW is still lean, with a 5-person office and \$700,000 budget. Each February, the office sends out more than 10,000 organizational packets to groups around the country, telling them how to organize or expand NNO events; how to order banners, posters, and door-hangers listing the names of local sponsors; how to generate media interest in advance of and during National Night Out; and whom to contact. The kits provide camera-ready artwork, sample press releases, a sample National Night Out proclamation, and an array of other material to guide local organizers through the planning process. Participants receive additional mailings in May and July, as well as four newsletters throughout the year.

Each year the national office organizes a huge kickoff event in Philadelphia the night before National Night Out. After the event, staff review contest submissions from thousands of cities and towns, each vying to be ranked as the best among cities of their size. For the contest, communities submit notebooks and videos with accounts of successful crime watch groups and National Night Out events.

In 1997, BJA funded development of a Web site (www.natw.org), at which groups can obtain information about or register for NNO. Eventually users will be able to order equipment and perhaps participate in National Night Out discussion groups through the Web site.

The main action, of course, takes place in cities and towns around the country. The following five cities have been ranked among the best in their size category by NATW for many

years: New Orleans, Louisiana; Minneapolis, Minnesota; The Woodlands (Houston), Texas; Boston, Massachusetts; and Lodi, California. Although there are similarities among communities nationwide that celebrate National Night Out, these cities exemplify the best thinking about how to make the program successful.

New Orleans, Louisiana

The evening of August 3, 1999, was as hot and humid as any summer night can be in New Orleans, an evening when those riding the famed streetcars into the city's Garden District fanned themselves and wished for something cool to drink. It was weather that typically keeps people inside their air-conditioned homes rather than out on the streets.

But this night 18,000 people were celebrating at more than 375 neighborhood events. It was a night when city officials, law enforcement officers, leaders from communities of faith, business leaders, and neighborhood residents paused to reflect on the roles each had played in realizing a 46-percent decrease in violent crime since 1995.

Police Sgt. Greg Elder and his staff coordinate each year's National Night Out, but the event is the culmination of yearlong efforts to involve communities in fighting crime. Throughout the year, Elder's department works closely with neighborhood associations and Neighborhood Watch programs to share local crime statistics, hear residents' perspectives, and develop effective interventions in response to citizens' concerns.

National Night Out focuses attention on the success of these efforts and encourages more citizens to get involved in crime prevention activities. The event has become so institutionalized, Elder said, that "people feel like they're missing out on something if they're not a part of it. There's almost a competition between neighborhoods to see who can be most effective."

New Orleans' events on National Night Out are as diverse as the city's neighborhoods. Some focus on involving children and youth in organizing and participating in the event.

The night is designed to accomplish six goals:

- ◆ Provide an opportunity for neighbors to meet one another.
- ◆ Increase interaction and communication among citizens, police, and city leaders.
- ◆ Build relationships of trust and respect among residents, police, and city leaders.
- ◆ Encourage citizens to become involved in fighting crime.
- ◆ Allow people to recognize and celebrate the successes they have achieved through cooperative efforts.
- ◆ Give residents and police a chance to recommit to working together.

New Orleans' events on National Night Out are as diverse as the

city's neighborhoods. Some focus on involving children and youth in organizing and participating in the event. Diane Sakowski, organizer for the Willowbrook Apartments, says she got involved because she was concerned about children and their well-being. "With innocent kids getting killed on the streets every day from drugs, gangs, and other violent acts, I had no choice but to get involved," she said. "The kids are our future and if we don't invest in them now, we'll pay later on."

Planning for the Willowbrook celebration begins several months before NNO and explicitly involves young people. This year's events included a potluck dinner, a youth talent show, and group singing and dancing. "Experience shows that when youth are involved, they not only show up and get to know each other, they bring their parents with them," Sakowski said. "This gives the adults the opportunity to meet each other and see youth involved in positive activities. It also provides the opportunity to talk with both adults and youth about crime-related issues and to give them information on how to protect themselves and their property."

Other events are organized around music, such as the one held this year in the Lakefront Area on beautiful Lake Pontchartrain, where the Petit Bois, a band of young people aged 8 to 13, provided the entertainment. The band's message to other youth was pick up an instrument, not a gun—make music rather than get into trouble. More than 100 adults were on hand to celebrate as well.

District A City Council Member Suzanne Terrell, who attended this



Block captains for the Gentilly Gardens Neighborhoods Watch Group in New Orleans. Left to right: Martha Johnson, Rebecca Bell, Rachelle Defillo, Carol LaMotte, and Val Lacey.

event, noted that “New Orleans has always been a neighborhood-focused city where people care about each other. National Night Out, however, provides an organized opportunity to publicly say to criminals that citizens living in this neighborhood are not going to put up with criminal activity. If you do something wrong there will be a reaction from the neighborhood residents as well as the police department. This is very effective in preventing crimes.”

And then there is the famed French Quarter, where parties happen 365 days a year. This year’s National Night Out celebration, organized by B.B. St. Roman, was one of the few events in the Quarter at which locals outnumbered tourists. With her beautiful cockatoo, Iko, sitting on her shoulder, St. Roman recalled that when she first moved to the French Quarter she lived behind locked doors because she was afraid to go out into the streets.

“When I saw my 90-year-old neighbor going out onto the street shouting at some kids who were vandalizing property, I knew I had to get involved,” St.

Roman said. “I realized that if she could be involved, so could I. If I wanted to have a nice block to live on, I had to do something. That meant coming out from behind locked doors, getting to know my neighbors, finding out from police what

kind of crime was occurring in my neighborhood, and then taking a role in stopping that crime.” According to St. Roman, their neighborhood efforts have been successful. “The neighborhood is a different place now than it was just 3 years ago,” she said. “Drug trafficking is down substantially as are quality-of-life crimes. We now have reason to celebrate!”

New Orleans may know how to party, but everyone involved in National Night Out—neighborhood residents, city officials, business leaders, and police—agreed on a set of best practices required to give New Orleans, or any city, something to celebrate.

Leadership from the top. All sectors, including the police, business community, and city government, must support the effort, and they must understand and make a commitment to the fundamentals of community policing and citizen involvement in crime reduction. In New Orleans, new Police Superintendent Richard Pennington restructured the department to get more officers working in the neighborhoods and redesigned the officer training

program to emphasize building effective community partnerships. The city’s business leadership endowed a Police Foundation with enough resources to provide supplemental funds for community policing, and elected officials upgraded police salaries and increased the number of police officers. All of these groups actively participate in NNO activities.

Leadership at the grassroots level. In each neighborhood at least one local resident must take responsibility for community organizing. In most cases this involves year-round coordination of neighborhood meetings, monitoring of crime statistics, and engagement of city and police department officials when appropriate.

Each neighborhood has various assets upon which to build, including residents, faith communities, and community-based service organizations. Roles for these partners need to be identified so they can become part of the solution. In New Orleans these roles include providing space for meetings, contributing funds for a National Night Out event, providing photocopying services for community meeting notices, distributing the notices, and providing recognition of community citizens working on crime reduction activities.

Relationships of trust and respect between citizens and police. A conscious effort must be made to provide opportunities for citizens and police to get to know one another. Communication must be two-way—that is, citizens need to hear what concerns police have and police need to hear what citizens have to

say. Recognition that each has something to contribute to making neighborhoods safe is critical to forming the partnerships necessary to be effective in reducing crime.

In New Orleans, police officers are expected to attend any Neighborhood Watch meeting at which they are needed and the police department provides monthly briefings for neighborhood leaders noting crimes committed in their neighborhood during the month. Further, if special circumstances arise and neighborhood leaders need special meetings, the police make themselves available.

A point person in the police department to coordinate NNO efforts citywide. Because National Night Out is part of an overall community policing strategy, Sgt. Elder has not only responsibility for the program but the authority and resources to make it happen.

Effective pre- and postevent publicity. Among the strategies used in New Orleans to secure publicity are a partnership with a local television station to provide publicity before, during, and after the events; contributions from Cox Communications to develop public service announcements; support from local television and radio stations to schedule appearances by police, citizens, and city leaders on local broadcasts; phone interviews as requested by the media; an in-kind contribution advertising the event on the Superdome pylon; advertising space on billboards and in bus shelters contributed by Outdoor Systems; and advertising space on taxicab displays.

Public recognition for jobs well done. Any individual, business, or organization that participates in the coordination or sponsorship of an event should be publicly recognized for contributing. The recognition takes many forms, ranging from thank-you letters from public officials to public recognition ceremonies at which awards are presented.

Linkage of National Night Out to year-round efforts. Neighborhood Watch, neighborhood associations, civic groups, neighborhood town hall meetings, and other gatherings of citizens can provide the opportunity to talk about crime prevention on an ongoing basis.

Officials and residents argued that these critical elements of National Night Out, together with an effective community policing strategy, have been central to reducing crime. “We don’t have to have a policeman on every corner,” said Police Capt. Ernie Demma, commander of the Eighth District in the French Quarter. “But we do have to have citizens working with the police. A 10-percent increase in citizen participation is equivalent to a 50-percent increase in police manpower.”

Minneapolis, Minnesota

“*Zhoo...Way...Noh...Dig*” read the brightly colored poster, one of many



In New Orleans, the Louisiana Superdome's electronic billboard advertises National Night Out events.

adorning the walls of the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center. The phrase, written in Ojibwe in a child's handwriting, means “Taking care of each other,” a crime prevention message for the Center's celebration of National Night Out. In the cafeteria, dozens of women from the Dakota, Lakota, and Ho-chunk Nations sat talking while young children played, filling the space with laughter and joy. Sue Kincade, the Center's human resources coordinator, organized the event in cooperation with other city leaders and spoke of teaching Native-American children “understanding, not violence.”

A few blocks away in Powderhorn Park, State Patrol Air Wing Trooper Bob Ringold gently set his helicopter down on the park's playing field. Dozens of delighted children and their curious parents joined Barb King, NNO organizer for the 3100 block of 14th Avenue South, in this kickoff of what she called the “Avenue of the Stars” block party. More than 400 former and current neighbors, listening to the rock band Rick and the Resisters, would enjoy the summer evening's crime prevention event. Back in the park, families eagerly waited to pose for a picture

alongside city and park police, while Trooper Bob discussed the \$1.7 million aircraft's role in crime prevention.

At the Madison Apartments on the 500 block of East 15th Street, located in Minneapolis' Central neighborhood, Alia Mohamed, wearing traditional Somalian dress, sat in a circle with other Somalian women, quietly encouraging their participation in community organizing. Moments before the yard of the apartment complex had been filled with the smells of East African foods, enjoyed by the neighbors and local community crime prevention police officers. As the event came to a close, children ran freely on the lush lawns, Somalian men huddled together in the setting sun, and teenage boys dressed in Tommy Hilfiger clothes hung out in groups watching the teenage girls. For the Somalis this was the first National Night Out event organized for their large and growing community. This evening's theme, expressed by Abdi Gure, was Take Charge of Your Neighborhood, a new concept to these refugees from a country torn asunder by civil strife.

As National Night Out events unfolded across the city, Minneapolis, which is ranked first among large cities by NATW for organizing crime prevention block clubs, lived up to its reputation. Organizers for the city, including Kincade, King, Gure, and Mohamed, along with many other

activists, told success stories of overcoming the tragedy of a neighborhood murder and victories in combating burglary, drug dealing, prostitution, petty theft, traffic



The Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis comes together on the 2500 block of 16th Avenue South.



Alia Mohamed and Abdi Gure, civilian employees of the Minneapolis Police Department and community crime prevention organizers, preside over the first National Night Out event organized for the growing Somalian community.

problems, nuisance houses, fear, and hopelessness—challenging neighborhood problems that motivated them to step forward and take back their streets, parks, and peace of mind.

It's hard to imagine an undercurrent of crime in a city with such natural beauty, a booming economy, and a history of progressive civic-mindedness. Think of Mary Tyler Moore's portrayal of Mary Richards tossing her hat in the air in downtown Minneapolis, and you sense the promise of this City of Lakes.

In the newly renovated interior court of the Minneapolis City Hall, Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton, the first African-American woman to be elected mayor in a major American city, thanked city employees for their part in the success of National Night Out. This year, she said, more than 850 block parties representing 1,714 blocks registered. (Later, police announced that more than 42,105 citizens, or 11.5 percent of the city's population, had participated, representing 30 percent of its streets.)

About to embark on a whirlwind tour of 10 block parties, the mayor laughed that she would eat her way "across the city," joining residents who were filling streets, parks, and school yards for an evening of food, fun, and, most important, conversation.

This year's theme—Back to Basics—emphasized

strengthening existing block clubs and organizing new ones. Theresa Ruhland, a crime prevention manager for CCP/SAFE, the Minneapolis Police Department's community crime prevention unit, noted that "block clubs in Minneapolis, and in Minnesota in general, grew out of a long history of civic-mindedness and neighborhood organizing." Lucy Gerold, director of the police department's community services bureau, explained that "block associations and the organizing of block leaders date back to the early seventies when a Department of Justice's Law

Enforcement Assistance Administration [LEAA] grant provided the seed money for three pilot projects to develop local block clubs” with a focus on reducing neighborhood burglaries. Today, among many other crime prevention activities, CCP/SAFE coordinates Minneapolis’ National Night Out.

CCP/SAFE’s Unit 24 organizes teams (each consisting of a uniformed officer and a civilian crime prevention specialist) assigned to the city’s 5 precincts. A central crime prevention office houses three crime prevention managers and support staff who coordinate the CCP/SAFE programs. Working in collaboration with other city departments and social service agencies, CCP/SAFE teams address a wide variety of “livability problems,” meeting routinely with block clubs, neighborhood associations, and other community groups to prioritize problems and to involve residents in solutions.

To create and strengthen block clubs, the backbone of community crime prevention efforts, CCP/SAFE works year-round to engage citizens in community organizing. Dozens of volunteers, block leaders, corporate sponsors, and CCP/SAFE personnel meet monthly to plan and organize NNO—sending out information, news releases, announcements, block party suggestions, and street-closing permits. The philosophy of Minneapolis’ National Night Out event is captured in five key messages, reinforced in National Night Out and CCP/SAFE literature and presentations:

- ◆ Cohesive, healthy neighborhoods are key to preventing crime and violence.

- ◆ Active block clubs build community, increase hope, and create harmony.
- ◆ Positive activities displace negative activities; as people spend more time outside, they take back their streets and neighborhoods.
- ◆ National Night Out is an opportunity for all parts of the community, including businesses, corporate sponsors, religious institutions, city agencies, and news media, to come together to promote the shared goal of a safe, healthy community.
- ◆ National Night Out reinforces the partnership of citizens and police to combat crime.

From April through July, CCP/SAFE teams conducted outreach to more than 200 blocks, and 66 new block club meetings were organized. “If a neighborhood does not have a block club, CCP/SAFE team members will go door to door to encourage someone to step forward and assist with organizing the neighborhood,” Ruhland said. Gerold captured the responsibility block leaders assume in neighborhood problem solving by noting “block organizers can’t be anonymous—your life is on the block, you are connected, you are just a door or two away from a problem or a solution.”

When a block club has been organized, CCP/SAFE team members offer leadership training and help organizers set up meetings in their homes, local schools, churches, or precinct station houses. Throughout the year CCP/SAFE teams offer 2 1/2-hour block club leadership trainings. In 1998, more than 200 people attended, of whom 61 organized new block

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clubs and National Night Out street parties. The highly successful block club leadership trainings consist of six elements:

- ◆ An overview of the CCP/SAFE and Minneapolis Police Department organizational structures and functions.
- ◆ An introduction to crime prevention strategies such as making a home safer through physical security (hardware) improvements.
- ◆ A review of crime prevention programs sponsored by the police department, such as the McGruff House (a residence on the block designated as a safe house for children under 12) and Watchforce (a group of citizens who participate in surveillance and reporting of community problems).
- ◆ A discussion of issues such as building community in diverse settings, youth involvement, and networking.
- ◆ Lessons on the basics of organizing a block/apartment club/

network, including the roles and responsibilities of block leaders.

- ◆ Information on how to solve 16 “common problems” such as traffic problems, youth causing neighborhood disturbances, prostitution, loitering, drug houses, abandoned dwellings, and adult and child welfare issues.

A beat-up van sits in a parking lot behind an abandoned building down the street from Linda Kolkind’s home on the 3700 block of 14th Avenue South. On the sides of the van, in neatly spray-painted letters, are the statements “Real Men Don’t Buy Women” and “Pimps Are Wimps.” The parking lot, once a meeting place for johns and prostitutes, serviced a booming sex industry along the busy commercial strip adjacent to Kolkind’s tree-lined street. Kolkind knew all too well Gerold’s observation that “block organizers can’t be anonymous” when she approached pimps, prostitutes, and johns to stop the noise and chaos the open-air sex market created.

Joining with another neighbor (“You can’t do this kind of work alone”), making demands of the local precinct and councilmember (“We must have called a hundred times”), working with the vice squad (“They observed from my living room window”), and collaborating with the CCP/SAFE team, Kolkind went door to door, organizing her neighbors in an effort to develop a strategy of peaceful, legal, in-your-face confrontation that pushed the sex trade out of her neighborhood and off her block.

On National Night Out, Kolkind celebrated by sitting in a lawn chair in the center of her street talking

Police announced that more than 42,105 citizens, or 11.5 percent of Minneapolis’ population, had participated, representing 30 percent of its streets.

with friends. A few houses away, her neatly kept yard, dotted with perennials and enclosed by a picket fence, belied the fact that this now peaceful street was once the scene of dozens of cruising cars with drivers searching for a quick exchange of sex for money. Shortly after moving to the block and into her first home, the self-described ex-hippie, seeing the drug and sex trades, thought she had made a huge mistake and considered moving to a safer part of town. Instead Kolkind decided to take a stand and “stop the insanity” being created by the noise and crime in her neighborhood. Today, ever vigilant, Kolkind’s gutsy organizing skills have reaped a strong block club and several more on adjoining streets.

The Woodlands (Houston), Texas

Driving down the Woodlands Parkway on National Night Out, you never would have known that more than half the residents of The Woodlands were out partying with their neighbors. That’s because virtually all 20,000 homes here are concealed behind walls of pine trees, deep inside a maze of streets and cul-de-sacs.

Like so much else in this planned community 30 miles north of

Houston, the winding streets with names like Rush Haven and Peaceful Canyon Drive are deliberate attempts to make residents feel secure. More than three-fourths of the streets end in cul-de-sacs, making it hard for burglars to find their way around and easy for residents to get to know their neighbors. This neighborhood is not only a hidden haven where every home comes wired for security but also a community where neighbors watch out for neighbors even though the population has doubled in the last decade.

“We know every single person in this neighborhood,” said Vickie Busic as she pushed her infant son down her street in a stroller and chatted with neighbors on National Night Out. “Every single one. There are only two ways in here and two ways out, and if somebody’s not supposed to be here, we know it.”

Busic, a stay-at-home mom, said her husband, a sales manager for a wine company, has twice turned down job offers in the 3 years they’ve lived here so they could stay in The Woodlands. “This is our extended family,” she said. “Someday I’ll be able to let my child play outside and know I’m not the only one keeping an eye on him. That’s why we live here.”

That desire to be part of a community is typical of The Woodlands’ 56,000 residents and one of the main reasons 32,000 of them participated in NNO this year, said Marian Leck, manager of Woodlands Watch, the neighborhood crime watch group that coordinates National Night Out for the area.



John Everett

From left, 15-year-old Catherine Bourne, 12-year-old Caitlyn Hopkins, and 15-year-old Shannon Hopkins check out safety tips for teens at a party for the Cochran's Green neighborhood in The Woodlands.

“People move here because they want to be part of a community, and that makes my job that much easier,” said Leck, a former sheriff’s deputy. “They know that if you create a sense of community, that will lead to a safe community.”

Just how safe? Lt. Ollie Coward, commander of the Montgomery County Sheriff’s Department district that includes The Woodlands, said that although theft is a problem in this fast-growing area, particularly at construction sites, there are relatively few home burglaries and “an astounding lack of violent crime.” In 1997, there were just 0.78 violent crimes for every 1,000 residents, compared with 11.74 in Houston.

But Woodlands residents pay for their security. Woodlands Watch is one of the nation’s few Neighborhood Watch groups with a paid staff, and its \$237,000-a-year budget comes from the annual dues homeowners and business owners pay their community associations. Leck, two other full-time organizers, and three part-time assistants work to promote crime

prevention and public safety year-round—from curb-numbering to registering bicycles to organizing a telephone network through which the sheriff can issue crime watch alerts—culminating in National Night Out. In The Woodlands, the staff’s salaries and these programs cost the owner of a \$164,000 house, the median sale price there, less than \$11 a year.

Although the staff does not answer to a volunteer advisory board or city government in this unincorporated community—but to the boards of the property owners’ associations themselves—at the core of Woodlands Watch are 1,100 volunteers who coordinate Watch events in their neighborhoods. From the ranks of those volunteers came almost all of this year’s 300 NNO coordinators, who signed up to help out after receiving party registration forms inside the *Woodlands Watchword* newsletter sent to all Woodlands Watch volunteers in June. National Night Out could not have achieved the popularity it has in The Woodlands without these volunteers, who hang signs, remind their neighbors about National Night Out when they meet for softball, fill balloons with free helium at the grocery store, and decide which side of their street’s residents should bring the ice cream and which should bring the sprinkles. But much of the evening’s success is attributed to the

full-time staff who handle paperwork, publicity, finances, and, most of all, planning.

“It’s easy to be a volunteer here because it’s so organized,” said Stephanie Teed, a music teacher who has helped coordinate her neighborhood’s party for the past 7 years. “You just call them up and say, ‘I want to have a party,’ and they send you a packet with everything you need to know.”

Woodlands Watch’s planning begins early, before city pools and parks have been reserved. In January or February, the staff schedules a series of pre-events that generate publicity for National Night Out, educate the public on crime prevention, and give residents additional opportunities to interact with sheriff’s and constable’s deputies, FBI agents, 911 dispatchers, firefighters, and emergency medical workers. On the agenda for 1999 were Meet the Police Day at a new sheriff’s station in May; Family Fun Night at the YMCA pool in June; and National Night Out with Sirens and Suspenders for fifth, sixth, and seventh graders at the Woodlands Recreation Center in July. From a float at the Montgomery County Fourth of July Parade, Watch workers also passed out 2,500 fans—“not nearly enough,” Leck said—inviting residents to National Night Out.

These pre-events cost Woodlands Watch approximately \$200, mostly for hot dogs and chips. The group also paid a local company \$2,200 to produce a video about National Night Out in The Woodlands as part of its entry in the nationwide NNO competition. An additional \$4,500 went toward purchasing the fans and other

promotional goodies from NATW: 1,000 balloons, 500 T-shirts, 500 frisbees, 432 pencils, and 36 caps to give away to volunteers, public safety personnel, and contest winners. Through funding from SC Johnson, the national association also provided 4,000 invitations to hang on residents' doors, 400 posters, and 10 banners—plus suggestions for safety games, sample press releases, and tips for organizing the event.

Since its first National Night Out 9 years ago with just 60 volunteers, Woodlands Watch has not had any problems organizing the event. By the time the big night rolled around this year, Woodlands Watch staffers had nothing left to do except drop in at as many of the area's 128 parties as possible before sunset.

Each party also received visits from some of the 57 public safety personnel who participated in National Night Out. School police officers arrived on bikes or with their K-9 partners. Mall security guards on horseback visited senior centers. Firefighters brought their trucks; emergency medical workers, their ambulances; and deputy constables, their patrol cars. Sheriff's deputies passed out collector cards, produced by the Optimists Club and sponsored by local businesses, featuring local deputies instead of baseball players.

To make sure there were enough public safety personnel to attend this



John Everett

Cpl. Matt Blakelock of the Conroe Independent School District's police force talks with children at a park party for the Cochran's Green neighborhood in The Woodlands.

year's parties—1,100 houses had been built since last year's NNO—Woodlands Watch encouraged coordinators to consolidate block parties at neighborhood parks. Where there would have been seven small parties a few years ago, there may have been only one big party this year.

That's the kind of organization that law enforcement agencies appreciate. Constable Tim Holifield said his only contribution to National Night Out in The Woodlands was scheduling enough deputy constables to work that night. By giving them an extra day off before the event, he doesn't have to pay overtime. Likewise, the Sheriff's Department avoids paying overtime by careful scheduling, said Coward. It's a time commitment law enforcement agencies are willing to make in the hope that friendly encounters with a deputy will make children feel that they can turn to the police when they need help and make adults feel like they're part of a crime-fighting partnership with police.

"This is a chance to let people meet us when they're not getting a traffic ticket," Coward said. "This is a

chance to educate citizens on how they can be our eyes and ears."

Boston, Massachusetts

Nearly two dozen police cars, lights pulsating, sirens screaming, poured into the streets of the Dorchester section of Boston in late afternoon on August 3, 1999. People froze on the street, eyes wide with curiosity.

This entrance was impressive, but the police weren't there to perform a drug bust or break up a loud party. They had come instead to make some noise of their own. It was the last day of National Night Out in Boston, a 5-day celebration of the partnership between police and neighborhood crime watch groups. With the city enjoying its lowest crime rate in more than three decades, there was a lot to celebrate.

Dorchester Avenue was blocked off for the celebration. There were clowns, face-painting booths, Vietnamese dragon dancers, African dancing demonstrations, and free ice cream for the kids. Tables were loaded with information about HIV and AIDS prevention, senior services, and a local community health center.

In every corner of the city, parties were jumping. Some were official celebrations with hundreds of participants, visited by a cavalcade that at times included 29 cars and nearly 100 police and top city officials. Others were smaller affairs. Most were funded through donations or discounts offered by area businesses and were organized by community police officers and neighborhood crime watch groups. The money raised for each party was relatively

modest (up to \$1,300), but there were substantial in-kind donations and party organizers made their purchases carefully to stretch their funds.

In East Boston seniors and youth enjoyed bouquets of blue balloons and a seven-piece brass band, while police officer Daniel Simons grilled some of the 1,200 hamburgers and hot dogs that were donated by a local supermarket chain. Simons said that this was a day for residents to see the police as regular people. “Sometimes they feel when they see us in uniform that we’re a little unapproachable. But when they see us like this,” he gestured with a spatula, “they become a little more friendly.”

In Jamaica Plain, Police Community Service Supervisor Larry van Zandt donned a big smile and a tall chef’s hat. “This is our way of showing the community we truly serve them,” he quipped as he stoked two hot grills.

From 10 a.m. until 10 p.m. the city’s top brass, including the mayor and the police commissioner, attended 10

celebrations in every police district in the city, applauding residents for participating in crime watch groups. The day’s celebration began on the Massachusetts Avenue Bridge, which spans the Charles River between Boston and Cambridge, where police and citizens from 21 towns and cities held hands while helicopters buzzed overhead and police and fire department boats sprayed fountains of water below. It was a symbolic act of the partnership between police and residents.

“They’re the eyes and ears of the Boston Police Department,” Superintendent and Chief Robert Faherty said of the citizen crime watchers in the city. “They know things that are going on in their neighborhoods that we’d never know because they’re there all the time. And it’s their information that makes the streets safe.”

Elsa Ogunjobi’s neighborhood is a perfect example. Ogunjobi is a single mother and nurse who must often return home late at night and until

recently had been living right behind a crack house. “It was dangerous and I was afraid something might go wrong and there might be a shoot-out,” she remembered.

Just 2 weeks before National Night Out, police cleaned out the house, and the arrests were in large part the result of work by the crime watch group Ogunjobi helped start 7 years ago. “We just got together as a family,” she recalled of her neighbors. They watched the house and talked on the phone, noted faces and license plates, and worked with community police officer Paul Johnston, who has been in their Dorchester neighborhood for 8 years. “He’s a dear friend to me because he works so hard on my street to keep us safe,” Ogunjobi said. “And he promised that and he stuck to his promise.”

Ogunjobi could barely contain her enthusiasm as she listened to city and police officials address the crowd gathered in Dorchester on National Night Out. Like a one-woman crime watch cheerleader, she



Boston Herald

Representatives from 21 Boston area communities join hands across the Massachusetts Avenue bridge linking Boston and Cambridge to help kick off National Night Out.



Dressing up for National Night Out in the Roslindale neighborhood in Boston.

shouted out her approval. “Yeah!” she whooped, waving her hand in the air, urging the speakers on.

Boston’s crime watch program has built relationships not only between police and residents but also among residents. Those who have been part of a crime watch group say they help weave a strong support web from neighbor to neighbor, overcoming the many barriers that sometimes keep people apart. Ogunjobi’s neighborhood is home to Asian, Caucasian, Latin American, Caribbean, and African-American residents. She describes her street residents as close-knit. “Because we have been through a lot of severe crimes, we have come to be not only neighbors, but family.”

As mentioned earlier, 14 years ago, Hayes started the first crime watch group in Boston on his block in the South End. The summer before he joined the police department, his street was tormented by a series of muggings. Hayes, who was 53, began standing alone on his block at night.

Soon his neighbors joined him and the muggings stopped. Since that humble beginning, 1,022 crime watch groups have emerged in the city. For Hayes, these groups are the key to building strong communities.

“The common ingredient we found across the city is that neighbors don’t know neighbors anymore,” said Hayes. “We have found that there’s a hunger to do that on the streets. That people seem to jump at it.” Hayes described the simple act of neighbors introducing themselves to one another as a kind of magic. Perceived barriers that sometimes keep people apart, such as language, race, religion, and lifestyle, “seem to evaporate very, very quickly.” As people get to know one another, they start to show concern.

As the official cavalcade wound its way across the city, Hayes addressed the crowds at every stop, handing out community service awards to crime watchers in every neighborhood. “It is the police department’s way of

saying thank you to neighborhoods and to those who have gone the extra mile,” explained Tracy Amalfitano, project director of National Night Out in Boston and assistant director of the crime watch unit.

On Dorchester Avenue, Hayes gave Theresa O’Neil an award for starting a crime watch group after she noticed drug dealing and car vandalism in her neighborhood near Carney Hospital. She reached out to her neighbors, to police, to other crime watch groups, and to the hospital administration—all of whom began to work together to solve the problem. “It was a decay that was starting outside her front steps, that went across the street, down through the park into other neighborhoods,” Hayes said as he cited O’Neil’s work. “Think small. If we can stop a little bit of an infection, it’s not going to spread to a serious illness in the neighborhood.”

Mayor Thomas M. Menino called crime watches “one of the most effective tools we have in fighting crime,” and said that National Night Out was an important crime awareness tool—especially today when crime rates are dropping.

For the ninth consecutive year the crime rate has dropped in Boston, with the largest decrease in homicides, which are at their lowest level since 1961. For the past 5 years Boston has outpaced cities nationwide in serious crime reduction, and is now ranked as the 12th safest large city in the country.

“[National Night Out] puts awareness of crime in front of people again,” Menino said. “Because we are going through good times, it’s not time to

get complacent. It's time to redouble our efforts and make sure we don't go back to where we were 10 years ago."

In the early 1990s, before neighborhood policing was firmly established in Boston, the police presence on tiny Nonquit Street in Dorchester was minimal and residents didn't know each other's names. All that changed when one African-American woman, Magnolia Munroe-Gordon, and one white woman, Ruth Clarke, together planted a community garden in a vacant lot.

Munroe-Gordon lived next door to the vacant lot, which in those days was used as a garbage heap by neighbors who hurled everything from old tires to car parts to trash bags over the fence. But what really got to Munroe-Gordon was the ragweed, which grew up to 10 feet tall, blew into her window, and made her and her son sick with allergies. She couldn't get the city to mow it down, so she decided to organize her neighbors to plant a community garden. Clarke threw her support behind Munroe-Gordon and promised to help.

"I finally found someone who shared a dream," said Clarke. As the garden evolved the neighbors got to know each other and began to discuss other problems in the neighborhood.

"There [were] drug dealing [and] loud parties, and there were gang hang-outs," Munroe-Gordon recalled. "It was pretty bad. We were under siege. . . . The loud parties went from 10 p.m. to 3 a.m. We would eventually call the police department, but we'd get very little response." Finally, Clarke wrote a letter to the superintendent of police and soon afterward

officers started to make regular visits to Nonquit Street.

"We started with flowers," recalled Aime Owens, a resident for 13 years. "Then we started with telephone lines to each other when we saw things going on in the street. [Today,] we all know each other. We know whose children [are whose]."

Things have improved so much on Nonquit Street that 2 years ago it was chosen as an official National Night Out site, visited by the cavalcade. This year the neighborhood enjoyed a quieter, more intimate celebration, far from the whirring lights of the police cars and the speechmaking of officials. As the setting sun turned brick buildings a pale orange, neighbors gathered around long tables adorned with colored crepe paper, set under street lamps, to share an abundant homemade meal.

Children biked up and down Nonquit Street; one little boy backed into Officer Edward Hairston's police bike, knocking it over. Hairston just laughed and pinned a plastic "Junior Police" badge on the child's shirt. On National Night Out Hairston didn't have enough of these popular badges to pass around. He said National Night Out "unifies the community" and fosters communication with adults who were involved with the police in the past. "You get together on a one-on-one basis and privately talk about an incident that may have occurred a year or two ago. . . . This is a good way to make things a lot smoother."

From tiny neighborhood picnics to parties for 1,000 people, National Night Out in Boston has grown so

much that as soon as the year's celebration concludes, planning for the next one begins.

The neighborhood crime watch unit plans the largest citywide events. Captains in each police district facilitate the planning of the main celebration in their particular district and choose the site that the police cavalcade visits in their district. On June 1 of every year the crime watch unit sends a letter to every crime watch group in the city, offering technical assistance and asking the groups to return a card detailing their plans. This information is then sent to the captains of each district, who send police officers to every neighborhood celebration.

The celebration kicks off days before the actual National Night Out with an award ceremony for a children's poster contest. The 26 winning artists received U.S. savings bonds for as much as \$200 and art supplies. The entire event, which includes a buffet meal for winners and their families, costs just under \$7,000 and is funded by donations from eight Boston businesses and institutions. This year, organizers of the poster contest were pleased by the lack of violence depicted in the posters.

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From tiny neighborhood picnics to parties for 1,000 people, National Night Out in Boston has grown so much that as soon as the year's celebration concludes, planning for the next one begins.

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Another major Boston event is the Crime Watch Awards ceremony. Ten crime watch groups and one individual, the crime watcher of the year, are feted with food and awards handed out by the mayor and police commissioner. In addition, the city sponsors a mini-cavalcade on July 31 through three neighborhoods and awards are presented to crime-fighting residents.

Among the award winners was the Groom/Humphreys Neighborhood Crime Watch, which has grown dramatically since its founding 7 months before National Night Out. The group, which includes Cape Verdean, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Colombian, and African-American members, has worked closely with the police to address safety issues including inadequate street lighting, abandoned buildings, and intimidation by gangs.

At one point during the awards ceremony, Henry Fernando Bossa, a leader of the group, got everyone on their feet to applaud the police officers in the room. Since his group began meeting, relations with the police have improved considerably, he said, with at least five police officers attending every crime watch meeting. Police quickly respond to the group's requests for help and information, he said, and put their lives on the line. "They do a heroic job."

Lodi, California

Susan Thoms usually is tap dancing her way across a floor on Tuesday nights, but she let her class know she'd have to miss the lesson on August 3 because it was National Night Out and her neighborhood was

having a block party. No problem, they decided: We'll hold class at the party.

So around 8 p.m., nine tap dancers and their leader, Susan Sixkiller, piled out of cars into the street for a special performance in front of nearly three dozen neighbors gathered on Howard Street. It was the sixth year that Howard Street neighbors were celebrating the recovery of their neighborhood.

As the dancers tapped out "Put on Your Dancin' Shoes," Alice Baker recalled the problems that led Howard Street to form a neighborhood watch group in 1994. "We were having trouble with drug dealing" at the house next to block captain Cindy Jorey's, she remembered. "We would see young teenagers riding their bikes with backpacks, they would go in the side door, and

within minutes they would come out and leave," she said. Her husband, Mayland, recalled, "We got pictures of little school children going in and out of there. I'd go out in the morning to get the newspaper, and at 5:30 some guy's sitting on a bicycle across the street looking at me."

So the Bakers, Jorey, and others on the block started taking down license plate numbers, pressuring the dealers and the landlord, and working with

police. "At one point we ran a biker out of our neighborhood," Alice Baker said. They took up a collection to form the watch group and made plans for their first National Night Out celebration. Within a month, the landlord finally evicted the dealers, and another house next door where trouble seemed to be brewing also was vacated.

Ever since, the Howard Street watch group has been one of Lodi's most active, celebrating what Alice Baker calls a "very, very quiet neighborhood."



Jerry Tyson

Members of the Steppin' Out tap dancers entertain the Howard Street block party in Lodi.

Groups like this are at the heart of Neighborhood Watch and National Night Out for Mary Fuhs, the community services officer who organizes these activities in Lodi each year. "I want people to understand they have power within themselves to make positive changes," Fuhs said. Sometimes that may mean something as simple as talking with a neighbor. "All we are doing," she said, "is giving people an opportunity to do something they want to do and are afraid to do in our

society. They just need an excuse and we're giving them an excuse."

Lodi, a city of 58,000, is located in central Joaquin County, the heart of California wine country. A sign at the edge of town welcomes visitors to the "U.S. Capital of Wine Grapes" and it is followed by vineyards and advertisements for wine tastings along the road long before the city comes into full view. But Lodi also has a sturdy manufacturing base, a large number of dairies, and a significant commuter population (about a third of its working population commutes to nearby Stockton and to as far away as Sacramento).

There are only about 350 residential burglaries and 350 car thefts a year in Lodi—numbers that have held steady despite an increasing population—but the city is one of the country's largest methamphetamine suppliers, with dozens, perhaps hundreds, of mostly "Mom and Pop" labs scattered throughout the area. Still, the labs do not appear to have engendered a substantial drug culture. The number of drug-related crimes is small; one city detective said he has made only one arrest in his career for cocaine and has never seen crack.

Lodi has an extraordinary spirit of volunteerism. Despite its small size, the city has 180 active neighborhood watch groups, and this year organized 126 block parties—some of them large enough to accommodate more than one group. There are dozens of stories about their accomplishments—a car burglar thwarted in one neighborhood, a thief identified and arrested in another—but the story Lodians tell most often is about a



Jerry Tyson

Proud winners of the chalk-drawing contest on the 400 block of East Oak Street in Lodi.

12-year-old girl who was kidnaped from her home 5 years ago. More than 400 people turned up at the police station offering to help. They immediately distributed 20,000 fliers, and the girl was recovered within 21 hours.

Then there are the Volunteer Partners. Nearly 100 seniors over age 50 work regular hours with the police department, checking cars and houses while residents are on vacation, delivering evidence to Sacramento, or driving police cars to a garage for maintenance. Two disabled seniors do computer work in the office, and others handle traffic control or staff the found property department. On National Night Out, it was the Partners who delivered pizzas to the winners of a radio call-in contest. The Volunteer Partners program is so popular that younger people often show up at police headquarters

offering to volunteer and have to be told they're not yet old enough.

All of this is the foundation for National Night Out, said police Chief Larry Hansen, who started a community-policing program 5 years ago, a year after taking over the department. "The whole concept of encouraging neighbors to get to know each other again is like taking a step back in time," he said. "Neighbors are being neighbors again."

Each year, Fuhs puts National Night Out together with \$250 from the city, a grant of a few thousand dollars from central California law enforcement agencies, and contributions from local businesses and hundreds of volunteers. She uses McGruff the crime-fighting dog, seat belt dummies, an electric display board to promote electrical safety with children—anything available to get a crime prevention message across.

Banners and posters are hung all over the city, and block captains post word of the upcoming event with door-hangers. This year, Fuhs sent out a planning newsletter early in the summer. "The point of National Night Out," she reminded her circulation of 3,900, "is to spend the evening outside talking with neighbors. . . . Talking, communicating, is what NNO is all about. . . [to] create a sense of ownership and responsibility for the safety and welfare of those who live in the neighborhood."

On National Night Out, 11 police officers, the police chief and commander, the mayor, and several city council members gathered in the police briefing room at 5:30 p.m. to get their orders for the evening. Many officers had volunteered for the duty.



Jerry Tyson

Lodi Police Chief Larry Hansen during his tour of neighborhood watch groups.

Fuhs handed out the gifts they would distribute: candy for the kids, engraving pens so adults could mark their property, and Johnson Wax products and coupons. Each person received an itinerary of parties, and the officers carried “trading cards” with their signed pictures and a little information about them on the back.

This year, for the first time, a group of businesses—the local newspaper, a bank, a real estate agency, and the public library—started things off with a late afternoon National Night Out party in the central business district. Organized by Sandy Smith, a reference librarian, she noted that businesses have security concerns, too, and thus reason to participate. What’s more important, among the business people, “We just personally have these ties now.”

At 7 p.m., Fuhs went on the highway advisory radio channel and hosted a safety call-in contest. Callers from block parties who answered traffic, safety, and crime prevention questions won a free pizza from one of the local pizza chains, delivered by a Volunteer Partner.

Fuhs treasures the stories of commitment to National Night Out: the block captain who had a heart attack but still managed to organize his party; the children who have moved away from Lodi but return on National Night Out for a reunion; and the woman who decided to quit as block captain and introduced her successor at the party. Then there was the time an old boyfriend and girlfriend lived on the same street and didn’t know it until they saw each other at a National Night Out celebration.

Eleven neighborhood watch groups have stories that are longer; they have been meeting for 10 years or more. Flo Celley organized her group on Tahoe Drive and Modock Way for 10 years, winning a plaque posted to the telephone pole outside her house for her achievements. More than 30 people from two blocks attended the night’s events, enjoying an extraordinary potluck dinner. This year was Celley’s swan song, and she was anxious for everyone to get connected with Deborah Cameron, a younger woman who was taking on the job. Cameron has personal experience

with the power of neighborliness; when her home burned down earlier this year, she turned to the people in her block for help. “We’re not nosy, but we’re real concerned about each other,” she said.

For Det. Brian Scott, traveling from party to party and chatting with people was very much business as usual. “I do this anyway,” said Scott, who grew up in Lodi, moved away, and then moved back in 1979. “It lets people know we’re just regular people, too, but with a different job. This makes it easier for them to approach you.”

Across town on the 400 block of East Oak Street, 21 adults, 14 teenagers, and 35 children were eating all types of foods. The block includes Hispanic, East Indian, German, Irish, Japanese, and Chinese residents, and almost everyone brought a dish to share. The children busied themselves with a chalk-drawing contest, while some adults served as judges and others discussed concerns about possible drug dealing in a house on the next block.

Block captain Joanne Mounce has been working for 7 years to clean things up. The house she moved into in 1994 had been the home of a drug dealer. Across the street, another dealer was running a profitable business. Through the neighborhood watch group she helped establish, residents pressured the landlord and he eventually sold the house. Recently, a young family moved in.

“When people move in we visit them and give them neighborhood watch material, and bring them into what we consider a family,” Mounce said.

Police Commander Jerry Adams was one of the block's visitors that night, giving most residents "the only direct contact most people have with city officials," Mounce noted.

"I think this makes a huge difference," said Adams. "The more [we] open lines of communication, the more we can do our job. Neighborhood Watch is one of the truest forms of community policing. . . . You have [to have] successful Neighborhood Watch programs before National Night Out works."

By the end of the evening, with a handful of parties still carrying on,

Fuhs was tired but satisfied. "I love the program," she said. "I believe in it because the people embrace it."

Conclusion

In each of these cities and in thousands of others across the country, National Night Out has become an occasion symbolizing what can happen when citizens take responsibility for the well-being of their neighborhoods instead of looking entirely to outside authorities to enforce public safety. It creates situations for citizens and police to forge partnerships that help protect communities.

But the benefits go well beyond these formal relationships. At a time when modern pressures tend to keep neighbors isolated from one another, National Night Out gives them an opportunity to reconnect, to feel part of a community to which they can contribute and from which they can draw support and assistance. These connections generate a sense of ownership and responsibility within neighborhoods, critical elements in a strong crime prevention program.

Notes

1. Sampson, R.J., S.W. Raudenbush, and F. Earls, "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy." *Science* 277(August 15, 1997): 918-924. NCJ 173119.
2. Personal interview, September 1999.

The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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