



BJA Bureau of Justice Assistance Fact Sheet

Nancy E. Gist, Director

The Watch Your Car Program

What Is the Watch Your Car Program?

Under the Motor Vehicle Theft Prevention Act (MVTPA) of 1994, the U.S. Attorney General has established—through the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and in cooperation with the States—a national voluntary motor vehicle theft prevention program. The national Watch Your Car Program allows owners of motor vehicles to voluntarily display a decal or device, such as a State-issued, customized license plate, on their vehicles to alert police that their vehicles are not normally driven between the hours of 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. Motorists may also choose to display another decal or device to signify that their vehicles are not normally driven in the proximity of international land borders or ports.

What Is the Purpose of the Program?

A significant number of auto thefts are committed during the early morning hours when the owners are asleep and unaware that their vehicles have been stolen. In many instances, a stolen car is driven to a “chop shop” or across State lines before the owner awakens to discover the theft. If a vehicle is not stolen for the purpose of resale or disassembly for the procurement of its parts, it may be used in the commission of another crime. In any event, the thief wants to avoid being noticed and will refrain from stealing vehicles that could draw the attention of law enforcement officials. The purpose of the Watch Your Car Program is to identify vehicles that are not routinely operated during early morning hours or near international land borders or ports so that law enforcement officers can investigate an auto theft before a stolen vehicle report is filed.

In addition to the customary department of motor vehicles database, some States maintain a database of

vehicles enrolled in vehicle theft prevention programs. This information is instantly accessible to law enforcement officers at all times. Consider the following example: A thief removes a vehicle’s decals and, while driving, arouses the suspicion of a police officer on patrol. The officer can access a computerized database to not only check whether a stolen vehicle report has been filed, but also search for a potential stolen vehicle in the State’s Watch Your Car Program database. If the database indicates that the vehicle is enrolled in the program, the officer knows that light-reflective Watch Your Car decals should be affixed to the vehicle. The absence of such decals would heighten the officer’s suspicion that the vehicle had been stolen.

The program compels thieves to remove tamper-resistant window decals while outside the vehicle, thus arousing attention by their suspicious behavior. These impediments, along with other theft prevention devices the owner may use, such as steering wheel locks, raise the deterrence threshold.

How Does the Program Work?

State governments have the option of participating in the program. To register for the program, motor vehicle owners sign a consent form and obtain the program decals. The consent form authorizes law enforcement officers to stop the motor vehicle if it is being driven under certain specified conditions and take reasonable steps to determine whether the vehicle is being operated with the owner’s consent.

There are two program conditions. Under the first condition, the owner may consent to have the car stopped if it is being operated between the hours of 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. (the “night program”). Under the second condition, the owner may consent to have the car stopped if

it comes within 1 mile of a U.S. land border or international port.

Motorists wishing to participate in the night program apply decals to the exterior sides of both the windshield and rear window. For persons desiring the extra protection of having their vehicles checked when operated in the general proximity of an international land border or port, a third decal is applied to the windshield.

Vehicle not normally operated during early morning hours. This decal, shown in figure 1, is applied on the front windshield directly above the inside rearview mirror.

Figure 1



Vehicle registered with Watch Your Car Program. This decal, shown in figure 2, is placed on the outside lower-left corner of the rear window. It contains no

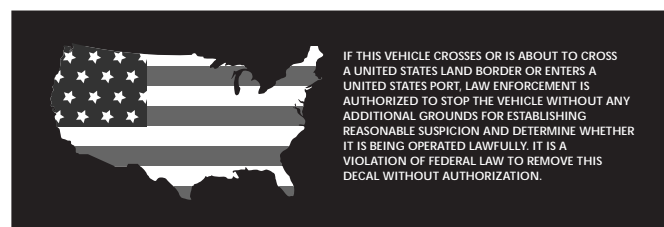
Figure 2



written information but simply serves as a beacon to law enforcement officials that the vehicle is registered with the antitheft program.

Vehicle not normally operated near international borders or ports. Motorists can elect to have the decal shown in figure 3 applied next to the decal for the night program. It is highly visible to border inspectors and law enforcement personnel who watch oncoming traffic at border crossings and ports.

Figure 3



All vehicles enrolled in the Watch Your Car night program use the decals depicted in figures 1 and 2. The decal in figure 3 is optional, to be used in States offering the borders/ports program. Decals are tamper resistant and are made of retroreflective sheeting to reflect light from the headlights of oncoming traffic or from vehicles following behind.

Are There Similar State Auto Theft Prevention Programs?

The most common antitheft program is Combat Auto Theft (CAT), which is presently used both on a state-wide basis and by individual local jurisdictions in California, Louisiana, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania. The State of Illinois has a Beat Auto Theft (BAT) Program, while Texas has a Help End Auto Theft (HEAT) Program. The national Watch Your Car Program has adopted the Texas Automobile Theft Prevention Authority's Watch Your Car icon and, in fact, is modeled after the HEAT Program.

How Does the Watch Your Car Program Build on State Experience?

Recently there has been a proliferation of similar kinds of vehicle theft prevention programs developed by numerous State and local law enforcement agencies nationwide. Programs such as Texas' HEAT and Illinois' BAT function on a statewide basis, which ensures a level of uniformity among participating municipalities and counties. However, a number of other programs

implemented in other States at the local level use different emblems, icons, and symbols. These programs work successfully in the jurisdictions where they were implemented because the local police easily recognize their own jurisdiction's decal. However, if a thief drives a stolen vehicle into another jurisdiction or across State lines, the police in that jurisdiction may not recognize the decal or, if they do recognize it, may lack the authorization to stop the vehicle and check the identity of the driver.

The main advantage of the national Watch Your Car Program is that it uses a decal that will eventually become an instantly recognizable icon by police nationwide. It provides for intrastate and interstate enforcement by allowing police officers to check vehicles with differing county stickers and/or State license plates. Thus, if a thief steals a vehicle, drives to another city or State, and attempts to operate that vehicle between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m., police in that jurisdiction are authorized to stop the vehicle and check the identity of the driver.

Funding Availability

Congress has appropriated funds for BJA to award a limited number of implementation grants to State agencies. Watch Your Car Program grants of up to \$150,000 will be awarded on a competitive basis to States that submit statewide strategies to prevent motor vehicle theft. These strategies shall include effective training of law enforcement personnel, prevention initiatives such as Vehicle Identification Number etching of auto glass, marketing campaigns, and public outreach efforts.

BJA mailed the fiscal year 1998 program announcement and application kit to interested State agencies in late January 1998. Applications must be postmarked or receipted by private carrier by March 31, 1998. All States that have not previously received an award under the program are eligible to apply. To date, BJA has made awards to Arizona, Florida, Maryland, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, and Tennessee.

Eligibility for funding is limited to State agencies only. The program announcement and application kits were mailed to either the State's Motor Vehicle Theft Prevention Authority or, for those States without an authority, the State Administrating Agency (SAA) for the Edward Byrne Memorial Formula and/or the Local Law Enforcement Assistance Block Grant Programs. To locate a State's point of contact for the Watch Your Car Program, call the U.S. Department of Justice Response

Center at 1-800-421-6770. We suggest that local police departments, crime prevention groups, and other interested parties call their respective theft prevention authority or SAA to express interest in the program.

Criteria that States must address in developing statewide strategies include the following:

- ❑ **Problem Statement.** States wishing to apply for funds shall provide an assessment of the auto theft problem in their jurisdiction and efforts undertaken to address it. Applicants should contrast the severity of their auto theft problem with that of other States, discern the patterns and trends of auto theft, and discuss any unique geographic and socioeconomic characteristics of their State that exacerbate the automobile theft situation.
- ❑ **Goals and Objectives.** Applicants must provide goals, objectives, and methods of implementation for the project that are consistent with the program announcement. Objectives should be clear, measurable, attainable, and focused on the methods used to conduct the project. Applicants should also discuss who the beneficiary group or groups are and how they will benefit from the program.
- ❑ **Project Strategy or Design.** Applicants should describe the proposed Watch Your Car Program, including its size and scope, outreach efforts to educate the public, training programs to inform law enforcement agencies throughout the jurisdiction of the program, a description of the centralized computer registry (strongly recommended), and efforts to be undertaken to enlist support from both public and private organizations such as auto insurance companies and major retail businesses.
- ❑ **Implementation Plan.** Applicants should provide an implementation plan that includes a schedule of milestones for significant tasks and should establish deadlines for the completion of each step.
- ❑ **Budget Narrative.** Applicants should provide a specific statement of the proposed use of grant funds, such as the printing, purchase, or distribution of decals; registration and consent forms; public information materials and awareness campaigns; training programs for law enforcement personnel; registration campaigns; equipment; administrative costs; upgrading computer databases; additional personnel; and travel expenses and overtime for Watch Your Car activities.

- **Program Evaluation and Assessment.** Applicants should indicate how the success of project implementation will be assessed and the extent to which the strategy achieved the project's goals and objectives. The evaluation should describe how the collected data will be measured as well as the frequency of measurement.

Sources for Further Information

To request further information on the Watch Your Car Program, call the U.S. Department of Justice Response Center at 1-800-421-6770. For callers from the metropolitan Washington, D.C., area, the number is 202-307-1480.

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