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Neighborhood Watches Encourage 'Eyes, Ears'

Programs typically are not designed for physical force.

Roughly seven years ago Steve Spickelmier helped initiate a neighborhood watch in the Brierwood subdivision area of Jacksonville. Nearby, new housing projects had brought an influx of people. Petty thefts were occurring. Burglaries rose.

In response came a neighborhood association. Then came the neighborhood watch. The watch is one of 643 active ones in Jacksonville today: informal groups whose goal is to monitor what is going on in their neighborhoods and keep law enforcement abreast of out-of-the-norm activity.



Steve Spickelmier at the Craven Road entrance to his Brierwood neighborhood where signs are posted announcing their Neighborhood Watch Program. Steve Spickelmier is chairman of the Brierwood neighborhood association and is active in the local neighborhood watch.



Steve Spickelmier walks through his Brierwood neighborhood in Jacksonville. Active in the neighborhood watch program, he said he doesn't carry a weapon and doesn't go out looking for suspicious behavior.

"We look out for one another and report suspicious activity," Spickelmier, 67, said flatly when describing the effort.

That was the purpose when the National Sheriffs Association launched the watches in the early 1970s as a response to rising crimes.

With the Feb. 26 killing of teenager Trayvon Martin, though, the role of neighborhood watches has been put under the public's microscope.

Martin, 17, was confronted, shot and killed near his father's home in a gated community in Sanford, near Orlando. He was unarmed, walking home from a convenience store at the time. The gunman, authorities said, was George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch captain. Zimmerman, who has not been arrested, said he shot in self-defense.

During a 911 call moments before the shooting, Zimmerman told authorities Martin was "a real suspicious guy."

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Regardless, Zimmerman's actions went against the purpose of neighborhood watches, according to Chris Tutko, director of the neighborhood watch program at the National Sheriffs Association.

"First thing: You do not engage," Tutko said. "Once you see anything, a suspicious activity, you call the number that the police department has given you."

Spickelmier's group operates that way. The Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, he said, tells them "not to do anything" if they come across suspicious activity. Instead, they call the police's non-emergency telephone number and report it.

Firearms rare

Spickelmier, who spent 26 years in the military, does not carry a weapon. He does not go out and look for suspicious behavior. There are no scheduled patrols in the area.

Tutko said it is discouraged, and rare, for a neighborhood watch participant to carry a firearm.

"You do not carry a weapon during neighborhood watch," he said. "If you carry a weapon, you're going to pull it."

Tutko tells trainees that "you do what you can, when you can, as much as you can, but if you cross the line, everybody loses."

Sgt. Chuck Mulligan, who works in community affairs with the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office, said his department encourages neighborhood watches to be "the eyes and ears" for the department.

"If they see anything suspicious or out of the ordinary, call us and we'll check it out," he said, adding that the watches are set up by volunteers. They do not have to register with the Sheriff's Office, but authorities will assist groups in identifying geographical areas that could be lumped together. The Sheriff's Office will also meet periodically with the groups to hear concerns.

The watches benefit law enforcement agencies, Mulligan said, because each neighborhood is different. In other words, what is normal for one community may not be for another.

Mulligan said although his department asks watch groups not to arm themselves, they “cannot take away a person’s Second Amendment right.”

The Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office declined to comment, referring the Times-Union to its website.

Know your neighbors

Authorities encourage participants to not only watch for suspicious activity but to take preventive measures, like keeping doors locked, keeping outside lights on and staying in touch with one another. Tens of thousands of watches have formed across the country through the decades. Some consist of an area of 800-plus homes, like the one Spickelmier is involved in. Others are smaller, like the 31-home watch Pat Steele coordinates in a neighborhood just off Ortega Farms Boulevard in Jacksonville.

“It’s an excellent way to get to know who your neighbors are,” Steele said. “We watch out for one another.”

Spickelmier’s group meets once a month in a church. Steele’s group meets at least twice a year, usually in her driveway.

“The main thing is to let each other know who you are,” Steele said, adding that her group does not patrol. They simply stay in contact with one another, usually via email, notifying one another and law enforcement of anything out of the ordinary.

Donald Foy is president of the Jacksonville MAD DADS group, whose members go into crime-riddled neighborhoods in a door-to-door effort to cure social ills. They go for specific reasons, like asking people who may have information about unsolved crimes to share what they know with law enforcement. They do not carry firearms and are trained to not get directly involved with any criminal activity they may see.

“That’s not my job,” Foy, 64, said. “What I am going to do, I’m going to back up, I’m going to call 911. ... I’m not going to run over there. ... Law enforcement has been trained for that.”

Foy said what Jacksonville and the rest of the nation can learn from the Trayvon Martin shooting is that neighborhood watch programs — which he believes serve a good role — need direct oversight from local law enforcement.

“Any neighborhood captain needs to have to go through some training through the Sheriff’s Office to know the dos and don’ts,” he said. “And to help them to understand that they are not law enforcement.”

Steele said she views the Zimmerman case as an extreme, isolated example of what neighborhood watches are about.

“I hope this doesn’t hurt neighborhood watches,” she said. “It’s what makes us feel safe.”

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