

# Sizing Up Safety

## Expectations, education drive solution

By Daniel Brannigan

**D**espite entrance gates, security patrols and neighborhood watch groups, community associations are not immune to crime. As the slow economy leads to layoffs and tightened personal budgets, desperate people may break the law. Perhaps now may be the best time for an association to review its safety and the steps it can take to help prevent crime.

"I think we'll see an increase in crime with the number of homes that are vacant due to foreclosure," says Melinda Johnson, CMCA, AMS, a senior community manager for Community Development, Inc., based in Golden Valley, Minn. "With banks posting notices of ownership ... , criminals may begin to look for the right opportunity."

Though every community is different, most associations face some type of crime—whether graffiti, the occasional burglary, vandalized cars

### Establish a presence

**James Tripp, manager of Klahanie Association in Issaquah, Wash. and a retired police officer, says that anything a community can do to establish a police presence will help deter criminals that prey on homeowners and decrease police response time. One idea: provide a substation or report-writing facility in your community. The facility also acts as a meeting place for officers during a shift. A facility that has an Internet connection, fax, telephone, TV and coffee, or even a kitchen if available, is a great help. "Any small service you can provide to entice the officers to visit your community will be most appreciated and will be well worth the minimal expense," Tripp says. "Building relationships with the police in your community will serve you well."**

or crimes of opportunity. If newspapers and door hangers are piling up in front of a house, the grass is overgrown and there is no discernible human presence, a criminal may see an opportunity ripe for a burglary.

The steps an association can take to fight crime are many, but there's no definitive solution. A good manager should help a community find the best possible methods to deter crime.

Johnson takes a comprehensive approach. Cameras are in place at the association clubhouse, a service provider replaces exterior light bulbs around the common areas and police take an occasional drive through the community. However, she believes the first and most important step is informing and educating residents.

"Keep homeowners informed of (crime) incidents and what they can do to prevent their families from becoming victims," she says.

Johnson posts the crime report each month in the association clubhouse. She also uses the community's website, e-mail and the monthly newsletter to spread information about new or developing situations.

The contact information of the local crime-prevention specialist is also provided to each of her nine association boards. Occasionally, the specialist will speak to neighborhood watch groups. However, depending on the community, the watch group's effectiveness is limited. "Only certain neighborhoods will take (the neighborhood watch program) and run with it," she says.

Encouraging homeowners to meet their neighbors is another important step. "If residents begin to know their surroundings, such as who is usually



around, who is on vacation and which homes are vacant, they will notice potential safety and crime situations and report with more confidence," Johnson says.

Keep kids, especially teens, busy and provide them with the opportunity to stay out of trouble. If there's nothing better for them to do, some teens will turn to spraying graffiti and skateboarding on private property, explains Johnson.

Reminding homeowners of community rules also can help prevent crime. "Per rules and regulations, many associations require that garage doors are kept closed for aesthetic and property maintenance reasons, but also for safety and security purposes," Johnson says.

One of the first things James Tripp, community manager at Klahanie Association in Issaquah, Wash., does when he is hired to manage an association is assess the security situation. Tripp is a retired police detective and former security expert for the U.S. Department of State and United Nations. "The expectations and concerns are different for every community," he says. "It's important to find out why they do what they do, and what is a reasonable solution."

Tripp, who has managed three large-scale properties in the past 18 years, has found that most communities have a long, revolving chain of security companies, each offering a different level of service. However, for a number of reasons, none are very effective, Tripp believes.

Many states require security guards to have a license >>

and get a background check and severely limit the actions and duties they can provide. "In many states, licensed security guards are only allowed to observe and report," Tripp says. "They can't run in and inject themselves into a situation. What's the benefit to that?"

In addition, Tripp found security guards are not respected by community members. Teens would often throw firecrackers under a security guard's car, shoot bottle rockets and curse and spit at the guards. "Residents loved having the presence of a guard; it made them feel safe, but the guards were never respected," Tripp says.

Tripp explains that even when security guards confronted adult members about rules violations and regulations, the adults ignored, berated and shooed them away.

At Klahanie, Tripp pushed the community from security guards to

off-duty sheriff's deputies, all for the same amount of money. The deputies patrol Klahanie's 30 miles of streets, 20 miles of trails, playgrounds, parks and the shopping center in plain clothes, in uniform, in patrol vehicles or unmarked cars. Klahanie only has one officer on duty at a time.

"Since we made the transition, we've been able to target and alleviate a lot of the small, petty things. Word has gotten out that there are officers on the property," says Tripp.

Klahanie's crime rate has dropped considerably.

Much like Johnson, Tripp also believes in the importance of homeowner education. Before he came aboard, homeowners would often call security during an emergency and ask the security office to call 911. "We had to change the mindset. It was a major challenge to train homeowners how to act in the event of an emer-



gency," he says.

In addition, Klahanie hired a lead sheriff's deputy to conduct safety classes for residents and write newsletter articles. "There has been a ton of positive response from the education. Our residents respect law enforcement," Tripp says. "If the tips and information come directly from a police officer, residents are more inclined to listen."

Building trust and respect between officers and residents can help the community overcome safety issues. While there's no one solution to community safety, gauge what your residents want and tailor a suitable approach. **CM**

*Daniel Brannigan is editor of Community Manager.*

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