The evolution of Neighbourhood Watch in Victoria

NEIGHBOURHOOD Watch Victoria has been working to prevent crime and keep communities safe since 1983 and it is now in almost 1300 areas. So how has it evolved over the years?

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THEY may not have capes or superpowers but these crime fighters are on a mission.

Neighbourhood Watch Victoria was started in 1983 by Victoria Police to help prevent crime in the community, and it is not slowing down.

Its 5200-strong membership is on the rise in Melbourne's growth corridors in the southeast and northwest, particularly Wyndham, with everyone from young couples to retirees getting on board.

The not-for-profit organisation began as a pilot program in Kananook — about 50km from Melbourne — and has grown to almost 1300 Victorian Neighbourhood Watch areas today.

Neighbourhood Watch Victoria chief executive officer Bambi Gordon said the crime prevention organisation's aim was to make Victorian citizens feel safer.

"We all have a responsibility; it just can't all fall on police," Ms Gordon said.

"We are not vigilantes. We are not going out there doing their job for them (the police)."

She said police advised the organisation about crime issues, and Neighbourhood Watch then tried to educate the community and create awareness about it.

Then police chief commissioner Christine Nixon, Neighbourhood Watch founder Tom Newman and then Frankston City Council mayor Alistair Wardle celebrate 25 years of Neighbourhood Watch.

Police Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton and Neighbourhood Watch Victoria president Michael Strong install tamper-proof screws into a numberplate. Picture: Nicki Connolly

Neighbourhood Watch Victoria secretary Geoff Kloot said while police could not be everywhere, NHW members could be and were trying to help make their communities safer.

"If we can keep our eyes and ears open, we can report things that don't seem right," he said.

Mr Kloot, who joined in 1985, said young blood was flowing through the organisation with new ideas and modern approaches changing the way it gets the messages out.

He said it was frustrating that residential burglaries, theft from and of motor vehicles were still the main crime issues the community faced decades after the organisation started.

"If we can get people to do some very basic things … it's really common sense stuff," he said.

"You can scratch your head and think 'how the devil can people not do these things?' But they do."

The number of criminal offences dropped 0.6 per cent in the 12 months to September last year — the first time in six years — according to the latest Crime Statistics Agency data.

Geoff Kloot addresses Donvale residents at a Neighbourhood Watch meeting. Picture: Josie Hayden

Yet it hasn't always been smooth sailing for the crime prevention organisation.

When Simon Overland served as police commissioner from 2009 to 2011 he was not as supportive of the organisation and many volunteers left, causing membership numbers to dwindle.

The organisation was told to become an independent organisation in 2013. Since then it has been operating in partnership with the police.

Mr Kloot said having Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton as the patron of the organisation had been instrumental in the organisation's growth and ability to partner with police.

Since last year, the organisation has even begun partnering with developers dividing up land to promote Neighbourhood Watch and allow them to market housing estates as Neighbourhood Watch developments.

"Generally those relationships are around 12 to 18 months per estate," Ms Gordon said.

"Partnerships and corporate sponsorships are as important, if not more important than grants, because we do want to be absolutely (self) sustainable."

There's a fee for the service as Neighbourhood Watch will meet with homebuyers and encourage them to become members to start their own area group.

Ms Gordon said a Facebook page was started before the houses were even built and about 40 people would generally take a lead role in Neighbourhood Watch group.

Mr Kloot with members of Manningham Neighbourhood Watch. Picture: Josie Hayden

Ms Gordon said the future was bright, with a more culturally diverse group of members, and a renewed appetite for Neighbourhood Watch in Victoria.

They were even spreading the message with caravan owners about crime prevention, and helping to host safe plate days to help motorists put in one-way screws into numberplates.

Ms Gordon said they've had to be creative about what makes a neighbourhood as the organisation does not operate as it did in 1983: "We live differently and we have to accommodate that."

"Have a look at us again. We continue to grow, and we are evolving," she said.

TIMELINE

1983

— Organisation starts in Victoria

— Pilot Neighbourhood Watch program in Kananook

— Frankston City Council supports the program and puts up street signs with Neighbourhood Watch Victoria "four heads" green and white logo

1984

— Chief Commissioner Mick Miller and then police minister Race Mathews officially launch state program

1985

— First district meeting with six areas represented

1986

— First state committee meeting

— First edition of the *The Watch* publication with 150,000 copies

1987

— First meeting of police and Neighbourhood Watch state executive liaison committee

— Invitation to state committee to support Crime Stoppers program

— State award program starts

2013

— Told to operate independently of Victoria Police

2017

— Bambi Gordon appointed as chief executive

Neighbourhood Watch encourages residents to join a group to help prevent crime in their local area.

Neighbourhood Watch Victoria launched Project Enable in Dandenong, in the hope of engaging migrants and teaching them about community and personal safety in 2014.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

*Follow the organisation on Facebook

*Subscribe to the mailing list

*Join a group

*Start a Neighbourhood Watch group in your area

*Find out more at nhw.com.au