

# Neighbourhood Watch celebrates one-year anniversary

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EMC News - Fighting crime is a lot easier when you make it a team effort.

That's why, one year ago, residents from the Lepage Ave. area formed the Lepage Neighbourhood Watch, a group of residents from Lepage Manor and the greater Lepage Ave. neighbourhood who are committed to reducing the local crime level.

"When I came on board, some of the community members told me there were a lot of issues in the Lepage Ave. area such as prostitution and drugs, and they weren't issues that came to light all of a sudden," explained Const. Abdul Abdi of the Ottawa Police Service.

Because of this, one of Const. Abdi's first priorities when he took on the role of Parkwood Hills community police officer was to form a Neighbourhood Watch.

"It is very important to get the community engaged because they are the first people who can step up to the plate and make a difference," Const. Abdi said.

"For me, it was very important to establish a rapport with the community. The number one priority from the Ottawa Police Service is to ensure the community feels there is a police presence and that they feel safe because the police are on their side."

The area of primary concern for the neighbourhood were the Ottawa Community Housing buildings located at Lepage Manor (1390 and 1400 Lepage St.), but Const. Abdi suggested that concerns associated with those buildings also have an impact on the Lepage neighbourhood as a whole.

"It was important to make sure the community at large was part of the solution," he said.

"So, the Lepage Neighbourhood Watch initiative became a partnership between Ottawa Community Housing residents and nearby homeowners."

Officially launched on May 23 of last year, the Neighbourhood Watch has been a tremendous success. Members meet weekly with Const. Abdi at 1400 Lepage Ave.

"Everyone works together," Const. Abdi said. "Since the launch, members have met regularly to talk about how they can help to keep the community safe."

It wasn't as easy as it sounds, however, as Const. Abdi admitted there was some skepticism in the beginning as some members of the community questioned whether or not it would be wise to be seen associating with the police.

"I had to let people know that their community is their own and that they have to care," he continued.

"If everyone turned a blind eye, who would they expect to do all the work? The police will come and deal with

problems, but they are the people who live there. Luckily, we had strong leaders emerge who understand the positive impact a Neighbourhood Watch could have. Now, we are celebrating the Neighbourhood Watch's one-year anniversary with the hope that the community feels safer and that the Neighbourhood Watch has actually made a difference."

The official anniversary celebration took place Saturday, May 15 at Raven Park with a barbecue, children's games and much more.

According to Greg Stolarik, Neighbourhood Watch coordinator for the Lepage Ave. neighbourhood, the last year has been a successful one and is worthy of celebrating.

"There has been a change," Mr. Stolarik said.

"We have tried to convey the message of looking out for your neighbours and, if you see something suspicious, reporting it through the right channels. I am lucky because, where I live, I have good neighbours. The neighbourhood is getting better, but we would like to expand our Neighbourhood Watch and get even more neighbours involved."

As for issues taking place at or around Lepage Manor, Mr. Stolarik agreed with Const. Abdi by stating the issues at that location go hand-in-hand with those of the larger community. Such incidents have been fewer and far between, however, according to Jerry Pool, Neighbourhood Watch coordinator at Lepage Manor.

"The Neighbourhood Watch was formed because of all the prostitutes and drugs that had been taking place here," Mr. Pool said.

"I agreed to be the local coordinator because I'm usually up all hours of the night and walk the halls a lot around here. There has been a big difference. The police are not called as often as they used to be and people call me at different times to tell me anything that is going on."

Mr. Pool said about 40% of residents at Lepage Manor are seniors who feel better knowing there is an active Neighbourhood Watch in place.

Const. Abdi went on to note that residents have approached him to express how much safer they feel, but was quick to point out that crime in the Lepage St. neighbourhood has not been entirely eradicated.

"It would be misleading to say there are no more issues because, like any community, there will always be issues," he said.

"There are many ways to make a community safer and a Neighbourhood Watch is only one step. But, in terms of where we were a year ago to where we are now, we do see a significant difference."