SUBMISSION
TO
PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

DRUGS & CRIME PREVENTION COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Locally Based Approaches
to
Community Safety and Crime Prevention

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I wish to make submission to the Parliament of Victoria Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee Inquiry into Locally Based Approaches to Community Safety and Crime Prevention.

My submission is based on my experiences as a Neighbourhood Watch volunteer, a Neighbourhood Watch Area Co-ordinator and Newsletter Editor, the Chairperson of Neighbourhood Watch Greater Geelong & Surf Coast Police Service Areas, and as a member of the Board of Management of Neighbourhood Watch Victoria Inc.

My comments relate to the Neighbourhood Watch program as it operates within the Geelong and Surf Coast Police Service Areas within Western Region Division 1.

Please see below my responses to the following:

(a) the breadth of locally based groups and organisations addressing community safety and crime prevention issues within Victoria, particularly with regard to local government and Neighbourhood Watch;

Refer to Submission of Bill Horman APM OAM.

The Neighbourhood Watch program within the City of Greater Geelong and Surf Coast Shire has, in some areas, been operating for 26 years.

While the Colac Otway Shire also falls within the Surf Coast PSA, just two NHW Areas operate within the Shire, being Birregurra and Forrest. These Areas are serviced by the Greater Geelong/Surf Coast NHW Committee.

Five years ago there were thirty nine NHW Areas within the City of Greater Geelong and five within the Surf Coast. Today, we have just eighteen NHW Areas within COGG and just three within Surf Coast Shire.

The main reasons for the decline in the number of operational NHW Areas are:

- Ageing volunteers
- No-one willing to take on committee roles
- An inability to attract younger volunteers to the program
- Since the withdrawal of street by street crime statistics, many Areas found the vague crime information forthcoming was worthless to their Area.
- Police no longer attending meetings
- Lack of community interest in the program
- People’s lives are busier, both parents working, etc.

As we attempt to realign the NHW program to a Police Service Area (PSA) based program, it has been necessary to form a PSA based committee. I have faced considerable disinterest and an unwillingness of representative volunteers to travel to central meeting venues.

Neighbourhood Watch – Safer Communities Greater Geelong is represented on the following committees within the City of Greater Geelong:

- Greater Geelong Safety Committee
- Corio Norlane Crime & Safety Sub Committee
- Barwon Road Safe
(b) the approaches adopted by these groups to promulgating community safety and crime prevention practices, programs or initiatives;

Refer to submission of Neighbourhood Watch Victoria re the Structure of Neighbourhood Watch.

Over the past fifteen months, Neighbourhood Watch Greater Geelong & Surf Coast have shifted their focus from solely providing information on crime prevention in newsletters and at meetings, to that of a reactionary model. Information is provided to NHW on a monthly basis direct from Police Tasking and Co-ordination meetings. This information highlights the current crime trends. From this we develop initiatives to address the current trend. While this information is disseminated via newsletters we have a core group of volunteers who are willing to implement initiatives where the need is in the community.

Some initiatives undertaken by Neighbourhood Watch volunteer in recent months are:

- Unfortunately, theft from cars has been the overwhelming trend. NHW volunteers have been very active in the hardest hit suburbs delivering information to businesses, placing stickers on household garbage bins to remind residents to remove valuables from, and lock their vehicles and distributing other related information to residents. Police management has been appreciative of the assistance, however, there has been little/no support in the form of a police representative to assist the volunteers in the tasks undertaken.

- Theft of vehicle registration plates and petrol thefts have been another trend we have acted upon by operating “Safe Plate” days where one-way security screws are attached to vehicle registration plates.

- To combat increasing truck driver frustration since the introduction of the ban on trucks traveling in the right hand lane of the Princes Freeway between Geelong and Melbourne, Neighbourhood Watch Geelong developed a flyer and distributed it to service centres on major arterial roads in the Greater Geelong region to highlight the issue to drivers using the Freeway.

A Police presence at such events is vital to:

- give credibility to the volunteers working with the program
- show the partnership between the community and police

(c) the extent to which these organisations are effective in engaging with local and state agencies in the development of policy;

There seems to be a lack of respect for NHW and its role in the community by local government and other agencies. It seems that NHW is viewed as a group of old age volunteers who are intent on “spying” on their neighbours.

However, if there was consultation with NHW by local government and other agencies, they would find there is a pool of volunteers very willing to assist in projects/programs within the community.
Many NHW volunteers do not have the skill, the background information nor the interest in developing policy.

We have support of local parliamentarians who sponsor NHW Area Newsletters within most Areas of Greater Geelong.

The City of Greater Geelong provide considerable support to the program by way of greatly subsiding a printer for the purpose of printing Neighbourhood Watch newsletters.

(d) whether institutional or other arrangements support or impede such local groups in engaging in the development of community safety initiatives;

The NHW program has been inhibited in its progress over the past 18 months due to Police management of the NHW Police Co-ordinator. While we realize police numbers are a big issue within both PSAs, it has not been helpful at all to not have at least a part time presence in the role of NHW Police Co-ordinator.

There seems to be a lack of accountability for the NHW Police Co-ordinator with regard to their Neighbourhood Watch duties.

A Police presence at Neighbourhood Watch activities is vital, but is something that has been sadly lacking for the past two years. At events, or when undertaking specific initiatives within the community, police representation is most important to:
- give credibility to the volunteers working with the program
- show the partnership between the community and police

Without Police involvement in the Neighbourhood Watch program, and an acceptance of the program by Victoria Police at large, the Neighbourhood Watch program will not succeed.

There is no liaison with Neighbourhood Watch by local government in the development of community safety initiatives.

As a Neighbourhood Watch representative to the Greater Geelong Safety Committee, I see this involvement as vital to source information on the various strategies being developed and undertaken by various agencies. Often, there are avenues where NHW can compliment or assist a particular strategy.

A recent issue has highlighted the lack of regard for Neighbourhood Watch. - Ongoing community safety concerns had been raised by many residents of Thomson (a suburb of Geelong, predominantly Housing Commission housing). Hooning, burglaries, thefts and anti social behaviour were the main issues expressed. Council initiated a community meeting at which Neighbourhood Watch was represented. (The Neighbourhood Watch program does not exist within this suburb, but does operate in the adjoining suburb.)
It was offered at this community meeting that Neighbourhood Watch could extend and operate within the suburb, to assist with community education and
information, however this offer was ignored. Instead, Council put a $10,000.00 grant towards the problem, yet nothing appears to be happening. And Neighbourhood Watch has had no further communication regarding this issue. Ignored by Council – yet again!

(e) whether there is a cost benefit to the community for current crime prevention strategies;
It is very difficult to evaluate the cost benefit and effectiveness of initiatives undertaken by NHW. The benefits we seek to gain are:

An increased awareness of safety and security measures amongst neighbours to prevent them becoming a victim of crime.

Through the above, we hope that there is a reduction in crime events, therefore, this should relate to a cost saving for police.

In years long gone, some Insurance companies would offer a discount on household insurance policies for home owners residing within a Neighbourhood Watch Area. However, that no longer applies.

(f) whether alternate models for such organisations may improve outcomes;
Information technology must play an important part in any future Neighbourhood Watch may have. It is no longer efficient to deliver information via newsletters to homes. The organization must keep pace at ensure we remain viable.

NHW Greater Geelong has a Facebook page and has gained considerable interest. With the launch of the new Neighbourhood Watch Victoria website, we are now able to post up to date local information on that site.

(g) local community safety and crime prevention arrangements in other jurisdictions, particularly within Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

Please refer to Neighbourhood Watch Victoria submission.