

north shore news

Community policing fills gap

Volunteer programs help to keep neighbourhoods safe

[Rosalind Duane](#) / North Shore News

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Marge Millar's list of volunteer work is impressive, but there is one organization missing from her resume.

"If I was young again you know what I'd volunteer to do? North Shore Rescue," she says. "I like excitement."

A longtime resident of North Vancouver, Millar is a retired nurse who loves to travel and has spent time working in the Middle East. She says she's an outgoing person and that's probably why she enjoys volunteering so much.

"I like being out and about with people," she explains, adding now that she's a widow the volunteer work "fills in a lot of that empty space."

Four hours a week, and in between a plethora of other commitments, Millar can be found looking in car windows at local malls, aiming speed guns at passing cars, or talking to local business owners about fraud.

Millar is a community policing volunteer and participates in programs such as Speed Watch and Lock Out Auto Crime. Speed Watch helps collect data for police about speeding and distracted drivers. As part of the Lock Out Auto Crime program, Millar and other volunteers check cars in mall parking lots for exposed valuables and leave information for those car owners about how to prevent theft from autos.

A friend introduced Millar to the community policing volunteer program about five years ago, and although she has never had any real interest in a career in law enforcement, she jumped at the chance to help out. She says she can't understand why more people don't get involved, especially retirees who are looking for something to do.

"It just broadens your scope, your mind," she says of working with a diverse group of volunteers.

Volunteering with the RCMP is another way of serving the community, she adds, and notes: "I feel at some point in time I'm going to probably need some of this (policing), or (will) feel safer living in the Lower Lonsdale area if there's people out and about trying to make it a safer place to live."

While statistics show that the North Shore is relatively safe, crime still happens and police can't be everywhere all the time. That's where community policing helps to fill the gap.

"It just goes hand in hand because it's the eyes and ears, it's the feet that we don't have," explains Cpl. Richard De Jong, media relations officer with the North Vancouver RCMP. "If you look at community policing it's really a way of policing rather than a part of policing." He says it reinforces what police already do.

Community policing has been on the North Shore in various forms for some time.

"I think historically it was never labelled as community policing," says De Jong. "We've given it a title that acknowledges the work that has been happening for years."

That work included the contact with the community that police on foot patrol used to make naturally just walking down the street talking to people. De Jong says foot patrols are community policing at its grassroots. Even farther back in history, RCMP connected with the community to access local knowledge about the area and its people.

"It's not something that we do externally, it's who we are," says De Jong. "It truly is the community enhancing and supporting police."

Community policing in its more structured form has been in North Vancouver for 20 years. The current RCMP programs are active in both the City and the District of North Vancouver and are supported by both municipalities. (West Vancouver does not have an RCMP detachment, so is not involved in these particular programs.) "Community policing has so many different faces," says De Jong. "It really does augment and support policing, grassroots policing, without a doubt."

Volunteer programs now include Speed Watch, Intersection Watch, Lock Out Auto Crime, and Citizens Crime Watch, among others.

One of the newest programs, called Business Link, is a service provided to all businesses in the city or the district that sign up for it. Member businesses receive regular information about issues of crime or security in their area.

"Basically it provides a real good two-way flow of information from the RCMP and then we take any concerns they have back to the RCMP, which are addressed," explains Doug Gavin, who has been a community policing volunteer for six years and is the co-ordinator of the Business Link program. The program currently has about 300 member businesses in both the city and the district. Gavin recounts an example of when the Business Link network helped

quickly spread information to its members: About a year ago, a prankster was calling restaurants in the area and telling staff they needed to test their fire suppression systems. Improperly testing a fire suppression system could have resulted in flooding and extensive damage to the restaurants. Business Link volunteers received the information from the RCMP and were able to inform local restaurants before they got the call.

Although community policing volunteers receive comprehensive training so they can work in a variety of community policing programs, they are not trained as police and are not members or employees of the RCMP. They are never armed.

"We don't have any police powers, we're not the police," explains Gavin.

Patrol vans are clearly marked and volunteers do not apprehend criminals or suspects.

For example, when members of the Citizens Crime Watch program are patrolling into the wee hours of the morning, they do not get out of their vehicle. They watch for signs of specific crimes (such as theft from autos) that have been identified as a potential problem in certain areas and report any relevant observations back to police. The vans are out on strategic nights but De Jong won't say exactly when.

"They're out in a timely, organized fashion," he notes, adding they are "extra eyes and ears" for police.

The group has four vans in total, paid for by the City and District of North Vancouver. Although they do not apprehend criminals, Citizens Crime Watch volunteers have in the past helped when they came across injured people. Once they assisted an assault victim they encountered on one of their patrols.

Volunteers represent a variety of ages and backgrounds, and Gavin says although they have had volunteers who went on to careers in law enforcement they are not wanna-be cops. The volunteers are retired seniors, post-secondary students and others who simply want to be involved in their community.

"The diversity of our volunteers is just amazing," says Gavin. "It's a terrific way of putting something back into your community and also have the privilege of working with the RCMP."

When asked what type of skills would be good in a volunteer he responds quickly: "Enthusiasm."

"Enthusiasm and dedication," adds De Jong.

Michael Chen is a North Vancouver resident who became enthusiastic about law enforcement as a possible career after attending an information presentation hosted by the Vancouver Police at the Justice Institute of British Columbia about two years ago. The speaker at the presentation offered a list of the qualities needed to be a good police officer, which included altruism, integrity, accountability, professionalism and respect. The list appealed to Chen.

"I felt those values are what make someone a good person," he explains. "Basically I think the reason it appealed to me was because it was a career that reflected my values."

Not long after that, Chen was reading a story in the North Shore News about an RCMP summer student program and decided to sign up. Although he was 19 at the time and a university student, he was allowed to participate in the program, which was generally designed for high school students. While there, he heard about community policing and knew he wanted to give it a try.

"The reason I got involved was because I felt it was a great way to give back to the community," says Chen. "The work we do, we're pretty much citizens who are concerned about communities, so the reason we go out there every day is because we have the interests of the community in mind."

Chen is now taking law enforcement studies at the Justice Institute and hopes to one day become a police officer. "I think the community really appreciates the work of the RCMP and the work that we volunteers do as well."

He says he feels humbled when people give him and the other volunteers a thumbs-up or a wave of support at a Speed Watch or Intersection

Watch site. And when drivers pull over to tell them how they appreciate the work they are doing Chen says it's clear that many people want to help make their community a better place.

Unfortunately, not too many people are aware of community policing, says Gavin, and the programs are in need of more volunteers.

Among other requirements, community policing volunteers must be 19 years of age or older at the time of their application. They must be Canadian citizens or landed immigrants and they must commit to at least four hours of volunteering a week. That's not a lot of time, notes Millar. "If you can just give us four hours, just for four hours, it makes such a difference."

De Jong agrees that despite the fairly long list of programs already in place, community policing has great potential to grow.

"If we had twice the volunteer staff we could be twice as effective in our community and have twice the impact."

For more information about community policing and how to volunteer, visit the RCMP website or one of the two community policing offices located on Third Street in Lower Lonsdale or on West Queens Road.

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