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Protecting Home and Hearth

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"Safety is knowing your neighbors," says Jeffrey Jennings, Orinda's Chief of Police. "You are your own best defense."

That concept is never more uppermost in the minds of Jennings and his officers than during the holidays when many area residents leave home for treasured times with loved ones.

It's important, says Jennings, to give neighbors a heads' up when you are leaving town. There are far more residents than there are police, and neighbors are capable of noticing suspicious behavior much more quickly because they are the ones most familiar with their area's daily routine - who currently has a housekeeper coming in and on what days, who has contractors performing work or regular pool service, or who or will be expecting UPS or FedEx deliveries.

One great way to get to know neighbors, says Jennings, is to form a Neighborhood Watch, but even if you don't have the time or are not a "joiner," you can still help keep your community safe.

When you know your neighbors, you're in a great position to spot something out of the ordinary for the time and day in your area - a car that has always parked at one house on a Tuesday is now suddenly parking there on a Saturday while the homeowner is away, a worker arriving with someone you've never seen before, an odd experience happens with a delivery or utility visit.

"We're looking for behavior that doesn't fit the norm," Jennings says.

And call the police dispatch number right away if you see something, urges Jeannette Irving, the Chief's assistant. All too often, she says, residents will phone a day or two after witnessing something, delaying out of fear that they will appear "silly" or "nosey." By then, it's usually too late for the police to take action.

If residents do see something odd, Jennings suggests that they try to get license plate numbers when cars are involved - but only if they can do so safely. "Use your cell phone camera and photograph the plate or the person."

Chief Jennings also strongly suggests that Orinda residents make use of two home security programs that are offered free of charge by the Orinda Police Department.

The first - a vacation check program - enables residents to have police drive by and check on their homes while they're away. Just swing by the department's office at the City Hall and fill out a small green index card, and you'll be able to leave the worrying to the police. (Moraga Police also offer a Vacation House Watch program; go to <http://police.moraga.ca.us/links.php>).

Home Security Audits

Orinda, says Jennings with pride, is known as one of the safest cities per capita in the nation. The burglaries committed in the community have, to date, been unarmed and non-confrontational.

But those who have experienced break-ins have still reported a sense of violation - an experience sometimes so traumatic that homeowners have felt compelled to sell their previously peaceful sanctuaries.

"The same reasons why you bought your home are the reasons burglars find it attractive," explains Jennings. Recessed driveways and landscaping that affords privacy makes life easier for those looking to commit crimes of opportunity.

So, the Chief is also encouraging Orindans to participate in the City's free home security audit program. The audits are conducted by an actual Orinda Police Department officer, and take approximately 15 to 30 minutes, depending on the number of questions the resident has and issues that may be uncovered during the review.

For many residents who have already gone through the process, the audits have affirmed that they are already employing sound self defense strategies. Others have received advice on ways to upgrade their security procedures.

The changes recommended are usually simple: ensuring that window locks are in working order and used when residents are out of the home, home address numbers are made clearly visible from the street, shrubbery is cleared away from windows and doors, and making sure valuables or tools are not left out for burglars to steal or use when committing their crimes. Additionally, the installation of solid wood doors to withstand door kicks, an alarm system, and enhanced lighting around doorways and in the back yard will also make homes safer.

Residents may also do their own security checks informally, using the handy checklist that is available on the City's web site: <http://www.ci.orinda.ca.us/>.

"Your home should be a sanctuary where you feel safe," says the Chief.

To make sure your ducks are in a row before heading out of town for the holidays, call the Orinda Police Department to arrange for a security audit: (925) 254-6820. Appointments are scheduled Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to noon and from 1:00 to 5:00 p.m.

Before You Go:

1. Swing by the Orinda Police Department to arrange for vacation checks. Let trusted neighbors know your schedule, and ask them to keep a look out. Also make sure they have your emergency contact information.
2. Arrange for a neighbor, friend, or house sitter to pick up your mail, UPS/Fed Ex deliveries, and newspapers on a daily basis, or ask the Post Office and delivery companies to hold onto your materials until you return. If you'll be gone for more than a week, ask the same person to make sure that your trash and recycling bins are taken to the curb and returned to the house.
3. Make sure that everyone with access to your home knows how to properly operate the alarm system so that no false alarms are triggered.



Jeffrey Jennings, Orinda's Police Chief, wants everyone to have a safe and happy holiday season. Photo courtesy City of Orinda

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