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## NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH IN ESTONIA.



Tiina Ristmäe  
NGO Estonian Neighbourhood Watch

Estonia is a small (with the population of 1,3 million people) Nordic country, located by the Baltic Sea. Since regaining its independence during the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there have been turbulent times, but now we enjoy quite stable and peaceful life.



Safety has always been important subject for Estonians. Although in the last 5-6 years the general crime rate has been falling continuously, it hasn't always been like this.

In 1999 the Estonian Police implemented a reform, which among other changes also reduced dramatically the number of police officers. The people's fear of crime and desire to protect themselves was very high, so they started to search for options on how to deal with the situation. There was a small initiators group consisting of citizens, officials from the local governments, police and Ministry of Justice, who had heard about neighbourhood watch success and decided that it is worth for trying it out in Estonia. Estonian Neighbourhood Watch Association (ENHWA) was founded on 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2000.

The Estonian neighbourhood watch (NHW) model was developed following the UK's example. Over the time and influenced by local conditions the model has changed and achieved the necessary essence which works well in Estonia.

### Estonian neighbourhood watch special features

NHW main principle is **“if you see something special - you react!”** There are several ways how one can react to a suspicious situation, also there are some assumptions, which are important for action.

Main preconditions of the NHW activities are that people know each other and also have the contact data of their neighbours. It gives the possibility to notice suspicious activity and contact the neighbour(s) if necessary. So every NHW district starts with collecting the neighbours contact data (name, address, phone numbers, e-mail, car information), usually it is done in the first meeting, where neighbours also have a possibility to get to know each other. Each participant confirms with his/her signature that they agree to using this data in the NHW activities. Later this data will be updated at least once a year, but usually after a new member joins or when somebody leaves the NHW sector.

The members of NHW district choose a leader, who will represent them in the co-operation agreement, in NHW meetings and will be a contact person for other institutions. One obligation of NHW district leader is also to keep the data of NHW members up to date.

### Neighbourhood watch co-operation agreement

After the contact data of the NHW members is gathered, the next step will be signing the contract. It is co-operation contract between four parties - NHW district, the police, the local government and the ENHWA. The contract is a joint agreement stating that all parties make an effort to create more safety in this area, working in close co-operation. The contract is signed by the highest positions of the parties – NHW district leader (elected by the members of the NHW district), the mayor, the head of the police in current district and the managing director of the ENHWA.





The process of contract signing has great importance to people who start with NHW. They will see that their activity is noticed and recognised at the highest level of authorities and of course it is a good opportunity to discuss the possible solutions to the problems, which the NHW district might have.

### **After the agreement**

After the contract signing the members of NHW district will receive a folder, where we put different kind of advice-leaflets and information booklets about safety, of course there is contact data of their neighbours (the document with important numbers) and some information about our co-operation partners in the field of safety business. All the information will be forwarded to the NHW district members digitally as well.

The neighbourhood watch district receives signs from the ENHWA, those are signs for strangers that people living in this area are observant and will react, if they see anything suspicious.

There is a symbolic fee for joining NHW in Estonia. Every household has to pay 1,00 € membership fee per year.

### **Everyday life in one neighbourhood district**

As mentioned before, the main principle of NHW is that if you see something suspicious, you do react. But how does one know, how to react? How does one know, when one should do something – call the neighbour, police or local government? These are the typical questions from new members of NHW.



To answer those questions and give basic information about safety, a training is organised in every new NHW district. This meeting, where all the members of the NHW sector are invited, is usually held shortly after the agreement signing. ENHWA, the police and local government are sending their representatives to the meeting to share information and answer the questions. If the neighbours weren't familiar with each other earlier, this meeting gives everyone a good opportunity to get to know each other.

Being a neighbourhood watch member should be integrated in one's everyday life. Actually there are not many extra duties or obligations for NHW member. The NHW district leader is a contact person for other co-operation agreement parties and if there are some meetings or roundtables, this person is invited to represent the NHW sector. Once a year the ENHWA organises a general meeting, where all the NHW sector leaders are invited. This is a meeting to develop the Association and to discuss the future activities.



## Neighbourhood watch impact

Neighbourhood watch has been practiced in Estonia already 18 years. The members usually feel and notice the results of their activity but what is the overall impact? Is NHW an effective method in reducing fear of crime and preventing crimes?

Over the years we have had several different methods to measure the impact of NHW. We have had surveys implemented by the Estonian biggest university – University of Tartu. Since we receive funding from the state budget, our activities are measured also by the neutral research enterprise. Police has made statistic and compared different areas and also many students have chosen NHW as their research topic at the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences.

There are controversial research results about the effectiveness of NHW from different countries worldwide: there are studies, which show that this method is effective and then there are studies which prove the opposite. The different sources in Estonia show that NHW:

- Increases the feeling of safety;
- Reduces fear of crime;
- Improves the co-operation with the police;
- Improves the relations between neighbours;
- Increases the knowledge about how to increase safety.



## Difficulties in implementing the neighbourhood watch

The text above can lead to an impression that NHW is the magical key and solution for every problem. But the crime still exists, people become victims and that happens also in NHW sectors. To talk about the difficulties in implementing NHW in Estonia, we should start with Estonians' values, attitudes, history, traditions and nature. We are coming from a society, where everything was organised and people should not or actually were not allowed to intervene into the functioning of society. Now there are already decades of different society organisation in Estonia, but still there are many, who think that somebody else is responsible for arranging the person's life, actions and safety included. They say that we have police, safety companies – they work towards safety, why is there any need for neighbourhood watch?

One problem, that we have noticed, is passiveness and ignorance. It concerns the values – what is important and how one tries to live one's life. We can notice it in everyday life – in traffic, in relations, at work. It is hard to break this attitude and it can also break the positive enthusiasm of others. But here it is possible to draw a parallel with school atmosphere – if in the classroom the majority has positive attitude towards learning, the important values are friendship, helpful and empathic relations, then the whole class has a positive atmosphere. In society as general the same is true, so the solutions in this case would be to create more positive examples to follow.



## The NGO

In many countries police is helping citizens to start with NHW. In Estonia we have a neutral organisation, responsible for developing and implementing NHW. There are several reasons for that, mostly there was a need of an independent organisation, which was not closely related to police system.

The main task of the NGO is of course promoting NHW, but over the years we have grown and developed to an influential organisation, having its role in developing the strategic documents in the field of community policing and other internal security matters. Our activities are partially financed from the state budget.



## Conclusion

They say that Estonians are big individualists, who tend to favour rather being alone than working in a group. Our experience shows that at first it is hard to start, but with a good leadership and common goals it is possible to achieve nice and effective co-operation. We have managed to involve over 12 000 households into NHW, people's interest towards NHW is fluctuating, but it is always present.

The society is in continuous change, so we do have to change accordingly. How to use the advanced technology for facilitating the communication between neighbours and police? How are the new data protection laws influencing our activities? How to get people's attention in the overload of the information? These and other challenges keep us busy and we have to figure out, how to take the best of these changes.

For more information about Estonian neighbourhood watch please contact:

Tiina Ristmäe

NGO Estonian Neighbourhood Watch

Head of the Board

Tiina@naabrivalve.ee

[www.naabrivalve.ee](http://www.naabrivalve.ee)