

Community Watch is here to serve and watch out for the community

By **BILL ELLIOTT**

DIVISION CHIEF
FOR COMMUNITY WATCH

After three months on the job, I realize I have many challenges ahead of me as the division chief of Community Watch. Fortunately, I also realize we have many dedicated employees working to serve our residents.

The majority of our 350 employees are Villages residents who work part-time. I am sure I do not need to tell you how unique our community is when compared to other retirement communities across the county, and for that reason, our Community Watch program is unlike any other.

While our mission is “to provide a safe community for Villages residents by keeping a watchful eye around the clock,” we also focus on the District’s core values of customer service.

Early in my new assignment, I became aware of the fact that many Villages residents were not fully aware of everything we do on a daily basis. I have had the pleasure of speaking to several community groups about the Community Watch operation and how we serve our residents.

At the conclusion of my presentations, many residents have approached me to say, “I didn’t realize that Community Watch did all those things!” Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to describe all the things Community Watch does for you, Villages residents.

First of all, Community Watch is a division of the District Public Safety Department. Community Watch and The Villages Fire Department are the only two District departments that operate 24 hours per day, seven

days per week. We respond to calls for assistance any time, night or day.

In Community Watch, there are four operations that all work together to some degree in order to provide the appropriate service to our residents. The four operations are gate attendants, patrol drivers, gate operations and dispatch.

■ **Gate attendants:** Without a doubt, the gate attendants have the best opportunity to interact with residents and visitors of The Villages. They are the most visible component of the Community Watch operation as they assist in providing safe movement through the gates and customer service (such as directions) when requested.

Currently, there are 76 gate houses throughout the community. Of those gates, 21 are staffed and 11 are staffed 24/7.

Did you know that approximately 133,000 vehicles, including golf carts, pass through our gates every day? The gate attendants have a big job to do as the gate areas are very busy with every mode of transportation: motorcycle, vehicle, bicycle, golf cart and pedestrian.

The primary responsibility of the gate attendant is the safe flow of traffic through the gates. All of our gate attendants are trained in the most efficient techniques used for traffic control at the gates.

A well trained gate attendant, combined with some common sense and courtesy on behalf of both the gate attendant and the residents, will go a long way to ensure a safe and positive experience at the gates.

■ **Patrol drivers:** Our second-most-visible Community Watch employees are our patrol drivers. The primary goals of our patrol drivers are to be crime

deterrents and respond to calls for service.

Additionally, our patrol drivers assist local law enforcement agencies with traffic control at emergency scenes, such as traffic crashes or crime scenes. However, it should be noted that we are not a law enforcement response agency. We are not trained or equipped to handle those kinds of responsibilities.

Did you know Community Watch logs approximately 95,000 miles per month patrolling our community? Our neighborhoods are divided into 12 patrol zones, and each of the 12 zones is patrolled 24/7.

Our goal is to patrol each neighborhood at least twice per day, and we intentionally change the times of these patrols so a pattern is not developed. I hope you occasionally see one of our patrol vehicles going through your neighborhood from time to time. If so, greet them with a wave!

Another major responsibility of the patrol drivers is to assist other District departments such as Community Standards, Recreation, Human Resources, Risk Management, Special Events and Property Management.

Did you know the patrol drivers also are responsible for spotting and reporting repair needs in our community to the appropriate agency? Every morning, we send reports related to repair needs for gate issues, general maintenance and light status updates to the stewards who maintain our community at a high standard.

■ **Gate operations:** Have you ever entered your neighborhood through a gate that was unstaffed? Did you have to

press a button to gain entry? Chances are you were greeted by a voice that said, "Welcome to The Villages" and the gate opened.

That is the responsibility of our Gate Ops personnel. From our Community Watch office,

the Gate Ops group monitors the entry of vehicles and golf carts through our gates using a system of cameras, 24/7.

Our Gate Ops personnel work very closely with law enforcement to help identify possible suspects in their investigations. The video from our cameras also is used by the Risk Management Department to identify the

individuals involved in damaging our gates.

■ **Dispatch:** Our dispatchers receive calls for service and send out patrol drivers to respond. Dispatch can be reached 24/7 at 753-0550. Please understand that our dispatch center is not an emergency dispatch center. For situations involving life safety or medical emergencies,

residents should call 911 immediately.

If an emergency call is received by Community Watch dispatch, the call is transferred to an emergency dispatch center. The Community Watch dispatcher will not hang up until the caller is connected to the 911 center.

In closing, I would like to welcome you to visit us at

our office, 1135 Bonita Blvd. I would be more than happy to give you a guided tour of our facility and further explain our operation to you.

We look forward to seeing you safe and sound next week, here at Our Place.

Bill Elliott is the division chief for Community Watch. He can be reached at 750-8201.