

Seattle Police Department Advisory

Reporting Suspicious Activity



What Is Suspicious Behavior?

We can't stress enough the importance of reporting suspicious behavior. Sometimes, people may be reluctant to call 911 about behavior that they feel is suspicious because they don't want to "burden" police with non-emergencies. Let us assure you that calling in activity or behavior that you feel is unusual or out of place is not a burden; it's how we know what's going on. We rely on *you* to tell us.

Sometimes, however, a person may not know what suspicious behavior *looks* like. Well, to identify what is suspicious, you first have to know what's "normal." The way you know what's normal for your neighborhood is to interact with your neighbors and be engaged in your community. By knowing your neighbors and the routine activities, whether on the block you live or the areas where you work and do business, the better able you are to identify those things that seem suspicious. The more you know your neighbors on the block, which vehicles belong, which children live in the area, the better able you are to identify those suspicious people, vehicles, activities and behaviors.

If it's suspicious to you, it's worth talking with your neighbors about it and worth reporting it to 911. Examples include:

- unusual noises, including screaming, sounds of fighting, glass breaking
- people in and/or around buildings or areas and who do not appear to be conducting legitimate business
- unauthorized people in restricted areas
- people who follow immediately behind others into card-access areas or buildings while the door is open
- vehicles driving slowly and aimlessly through neighborhoods, around schools or parking lots and, at night, without their lights on
- people sitting in vehicles for extended periods of time
- people peering into parked vehicles that are not their own
- people who change their behavior when they notice that they have been seen
- people dressed inappropriately for the weather or occasion, (i.e., heavy coat in warm weather; or
- abandoned parcels or other items in unusual locations (i.e. in a lobby or elevator)

Reporting Suspicious Behavior

When calling 911, be prepared to give an accurate description of what is happening and where you are in relation to what is happening. There is a lot of information the call taker will ask of you. Answer to the best of your ability and be patient with him/her. They are gathering information about a situation they may be sending officers in to, and that situation may be dangerous. Don't think that because you don't have all the answers that you can't call. Please call and report. If you don't report, officers can't respond.

When you call 911, focus on what is happening now, even if you are reporting situation where there is a history of activity (neighbors who are constantly fighting with each other, for example). The call taker is trying to determine the nature of the call and what resources need to be sent; he or she doesn't need you to relate the background story.

What The 911 Call Taker Needs To Know

Information the call taker may ask for includes:

- What Is happening?
- Where is it happening and where are you in relation to what's happening?
- What made the person's actions suspicious?
- Did the person say anything? If so, what?

- Were any weapons displayed or was there threat of a weapon?
- What was the person's last known location and direction of travel?

If you are reporting a suspicious vehicle – or a suspicious person *in* a vehicle - please provide as much information about the vehicle you can. Consider the acronym **CYMBOL** – Color, Year, Make, Body style, License.

Answer the call takers' questions to the best of your ability. If you don't know the answers to all the questions the call taker asks, don't worry. Answer the best you can and don't hang up until the call taker tells you it's okay to do so.

Calling 911 From A Cell Phone

When you call 911 from a land line, the 911 call center knows from what address you are calling. In the event that the person calling 911 is unable to speak (say the person is having a medical emergency), the call taker knows the address from where the call is originating and can send emergency responders. Even so, the call taker will ask your exact location.

Knowing your exact location becomes even more important when you call 911 from a cell phone. When calling 911 from a cell phone, you will be routed to the jurisdiction in which you are located. For example: if you have a cell phone that has a Tacoma or even a Portland area code, but you are in Seattle and call 911, you will be routed to Seattle's 911 center. However, Depending on where you *are* in Seattle, you may be connected with Seattle PD, Washington State Patrol (if you are on a freeway), King County or another jurisdiction that borders Seattle. The 911 operator will only see your cell phone number, and your general location based on the cell tower closest to where you are.

Since the 911 center you contact will only know the general area from where you are calling, always tell the 911 call taker exactly where you are so they can transfer you to the correct jurisdiction, if necessary. The 911 call taker needs your specific, physical address or nearest intersection. Don't assume they know; remember that cell phones do not give your exact location.

You Don't Have To Give Your Name When Reporting Suspicious Behavior

Some people are reluctant to call 911 because they are concerned that if they call, the person(s) about whom they called will know who reported them. You need not be concerned about this. When officers make contact with a person about whom you called, it is not typical that they will tell the person, "Mrs. Martin over at 3001 said you were causing trouble over here." While it is preferred that a person provide their name and contact number so that the police can call back to verify information, it is not necessary. The important thing is to report the activity. Further, you can request that your name not be disclosed. You can also request to remain anonymous. And, you can also request officers not contact you in person. If you are concerned that you will be identified as the person who called 911, just relay to the call taker you don't want your name disclosed and you don't want contact.

Better To Report Than Not

Remember that it is always better to report a person or situation and have it turn out not to be a crime or hazard than to not report and find out later that a crime was committed. By the way, you won't get in trouble for reporting something that you feel is suspicious and upon checking it out, we discover that nothing was amiss.

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