



# Night Watch

It's 10 p.m. – do you know what your courtesy officer is doing?

By **MATTHEW SUMMERS**, Kaplan Management

When colleagues find out that I had a career in law enforcement before entering the multifamily profession, I am inundated with many questions concerning very important police related topics in the multifamily industry – like traffic tickets.

While I am always willing to bring my 17 years of policing experience to bear on these complicated inquiries, in truth it causes me to wonder why there is such a huge disconnect between multifamily owners and managers and the law enforcement community in general. It seems as if we operate in two different spheres of life, only meeting each other at the point of crisis.

And what of the “quasi-law enforcement” roles of courtesy officers in our communities? Do we even know who these folks really are and what they are supposed to be doing for us?

## CASE STUDY

In 2006, a retired military veteran was shot at a South Houston apartment community after chasing two men who had broken into his daughter's apartment. This was a Class A community, gated, well lit, with excellent staff, crime watch meetings, resident screening by a reputable agency, notices to residents of crime issues, and a courtesy officer. Few problems happened in this community before this incident and even less after. The lawsuit, however, settled for \$375,000.

It could have been worse – both for the father that survived the gunshot wound to the abdomen and for the community who could have lost millions. But the crux of the matter in that incident and for this article is, “Do you know what your courtesy officer is supposed to be doing, what he is actually doing, and produce his written patrol logs”? If not, read on.

## A DEFINITION

Courtesy officers are typically commissioned police officers from local municipalities or jurisdictions that are given free rent in exchange for services rendered to the community. The fact that the officers are “commissioned” means, in a nutshell, that they have the governmental authority to arrest; they are full-fledged police officers. They are not employees of the ownership or the management company, but instead are rendering a service in exchange for a rental discount.

**The single most important function of a courtesy officer is high visibility patrol because it serves to deter the criminal element from entering a community and engaging in illegal activity.**

With courtesy officers, the proper benefit of commissioned police with police cars, living on site and deriding services to the community. Many communities host courtesy officers in lieu of contracted security as a more effective and less expensive method of addressing safety issues in a community. Given this, let's start with asking the question, “What are courtesy officers supposed to be doing?”

## HIGH-VISIBILITY PATROL

Properties with courtesy officers provide a greater risk of identification and capture as perceived by criminals. When considering the prudence of engaging in crime on a

then, the presence of courtesy officers influences those decisions. This deterrent effect exists only when criminals know that courtesy officers are present. High-visibility patrol, therefore, is essential to facilitate deterrence. In this regard, courtesy officers should be seen by residents and criminal alike, and make their presence known to as many individuals as possible.

The single most important function of a courtesy officer is high-visibility patrol because it serves to deter the criminal element from entering a community and engaging in illegal activity. Patrol activity, then, should concentrate on the common areas of the community including the vicinity of entrance gates, mailbox areas, laundry facilities, breezeways, parking lots, and other similar areas where courtesy officers will be seen.

In contrast, covert patrol techniques may aid in the apprehension of criminals but provide significantly less deterrence of crime. The overriding effort in our communities is to prevent and deter crime – not capture crooks after our residents have been victimized.



Photo by Lisa F. Young/dreamstime.com

### PHYSICAL SECURITY CHECKS

While engaged in highly visible patrol, regular and sporadic verification of the security of the business office, the maintenance shop, pool gates, motor vehicle and pedestrian gates and other physical structures should take place. Courtesy officers are also tasked with verifying the physical security of the facilities and should be shaking doorknobs as a routine part of their job.

During physical security checks of the grounds and facilities, courtesy officers should also pay particular attention to lighting issues and locking device issues. They should be the primary source for work order requests for light bulb replacements, inoperable photocells and street lamp issues. They should take particular notice of soffit lights, stairwell lights and other lighting issues that present a safety risk to residents and guests as well as functional lighting that helps deter crime. They should notice defective pedestrian gate locks and latches, pool gates that do not swing close and latch properly, laundry facilities with loose knobs and locks, and other similar items.

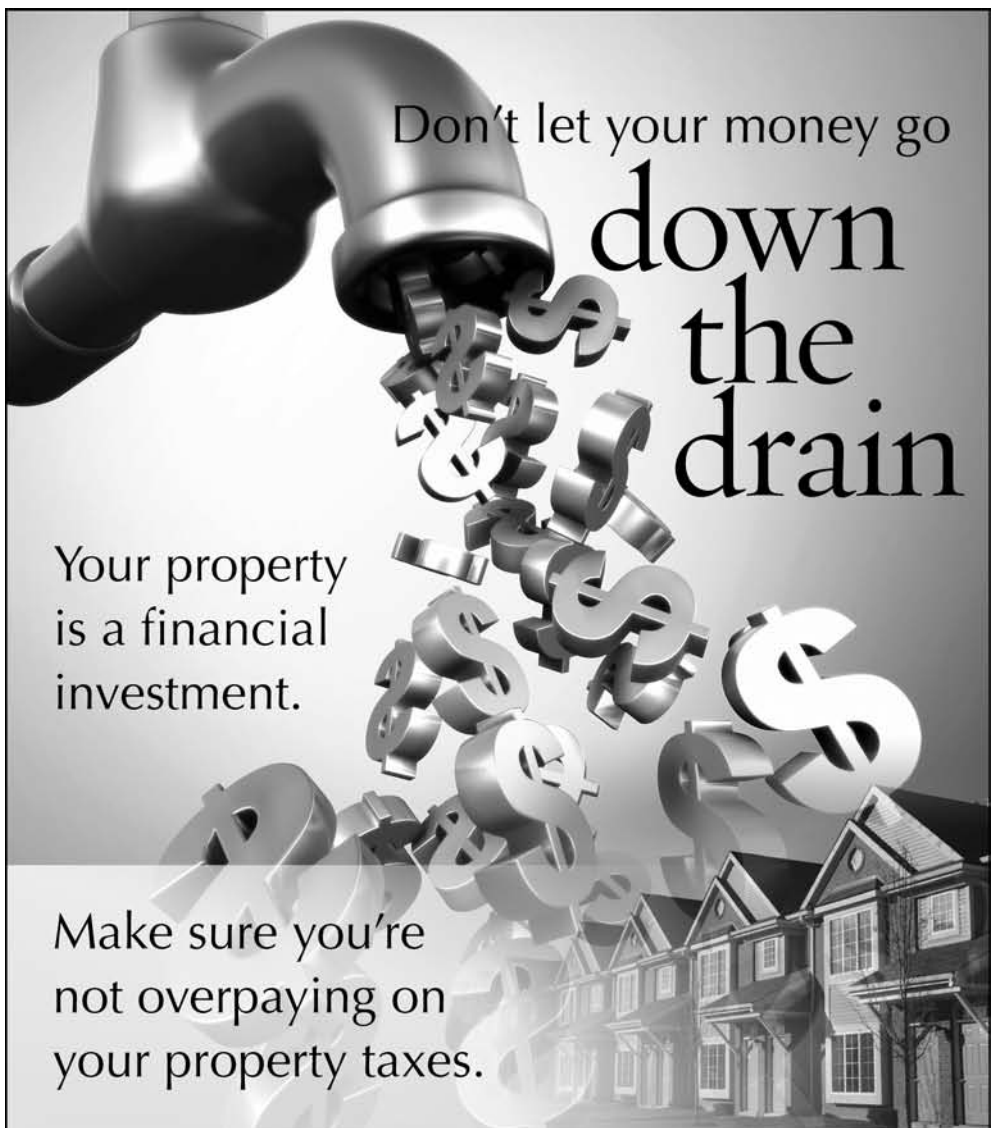
Courtesy officers are tasked with the physical security of the community and need to engage in these tasks, not looking for people to arrest. Courtesy officers should also be tasked with evening lock-up of laundry facilities that are not open 24 hours to residents, shutting down the pool and locking the gates at a reasonable hour and closing and activating motor vehicle gate sensors if the gates are left open during the evening to accommodate homeward bound residents.

### CALLS FOR SERVICE

Most law enforcement agencies have specific protocols on officer involvement in police activity while off duty. Some strictly prohibit it. Others permit it within a limited scope. Those agencies that do not permit officers to become involved in police activity while off duty relegate courtesy officers to "professional witnesses" of sorts. They observe and report to on-duty police officers who handle police patrol activity.

Those agencies that permit off-duty involvement allow courtesy officers to take point on most patrol level activity within the confines of the property.

Management should have a clear understanding of what officers are permitted (or not permitted) to do



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The overriding perspective for courtesy officers is that they are in the community to help the residents, not police them. If this attitude guides their actions, courtesy officers become well liked, are treated with respect by residents and gain useful intelligence about the community that aids management and local law enforcement.

while off duty and engaged in a courtesy officer's role. Management should support agency procedures, not demand that officers defy them.

With regard to resident calls (taken from an answering service, pager or management) for such items as loud music, disturbances or other violations of community regulations, courtesy officers act on behalf of management. After making contact with residents, they should inform them of the appropriate community policy at issue and request compliance. If residents fail to comply, it should be reported to management for appropriate civil action.

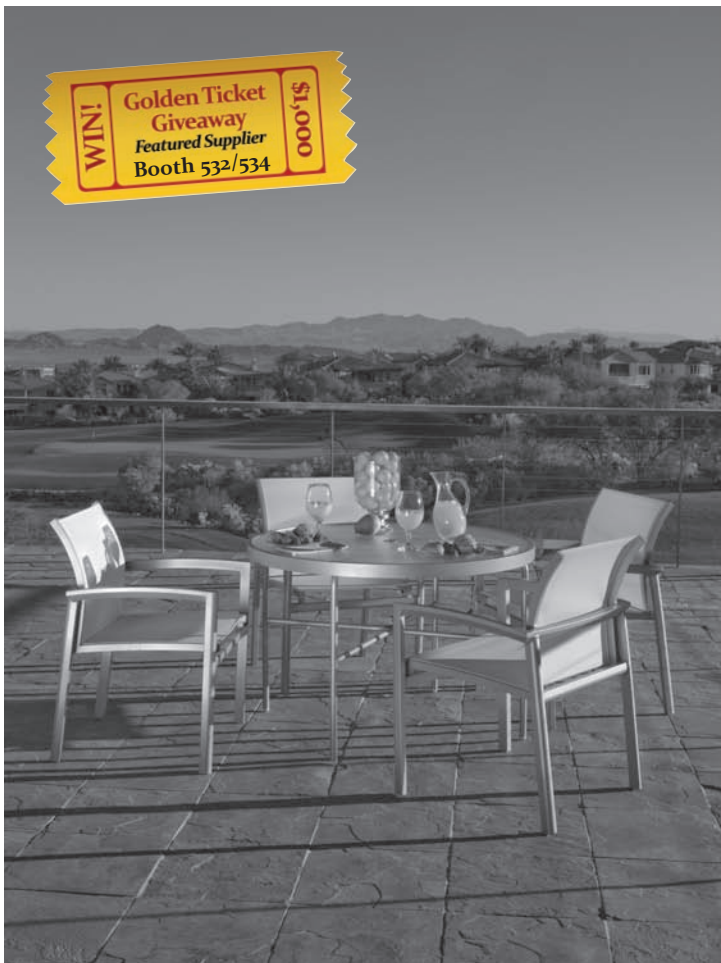
Unless the behavior rises to the level of a crime, courtesy officers should understand that they are not tasked with enforcing community regulations. Those courtesy officers that confuse this will alienate themselves from the residents, prompt complaints to management and make the issue their behavior instead of the community policy violation that was the source of the initial complaint. Vindictive residents are also known to file complaints against offi-

cers with their respective departments with the specific purpose of launching an administrative/ internal affairs investigation.

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**WRITTEN REPORTS**

Most police officers loathe paperwork. Unfortunately, it is a component of good policing and absolutely requisite for courtesy officers. Courtesy officers must maintain written patrol logs that detail exactly what they do, the contacts they make with residents and the facility checks they perform. Written patrol logs should include lighting observations, the status of pedestrian and motor vehicle gates each shift and other information that documents that they are



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both physically present in the community and that they are doing their jobs. These reports are the “eyes and ears” of management in the community. If management does not require courtesy officers to provide this information, daytime staff will remain blind to after-hours activity and have no method to retroactively establish the scope of services being provided to the community.

In short, how do you know that your courtesy officers is doing exactly what he or she is supposed to be doing if you do not require or maintain written reports? Written patrol logs per each officer per each shift is a non-negotiable aspect of hosting a courtesy officers. These reports should be placed in a three-ringed binder and preserved for a minimum of three years.

A community courtesy officer should also be tasked with the acquisition of crime statistics for the community and the surrounding area. These statistics should be placed in the binder on a monthly basis. Routine checks for registered sex offenders should be instituted and the results of these queries should be included in the binder on a monthly basis. Copies of fliers notifying residents of crimes taking place in the community should be included in this binder. Copies of Neighborhood Watch meeting agendas and attendance rosters should be maintained. All crime information relative to the community should be included in this binder and made available to anyone – prospect or resident alike – to inspect and review as they desire.

### CONCLUSION

This article heralds a call to my colleagues to examine the role and function of courtesy officers in your own communities and to begin actively managing them for the benefit of owners, managers and residents alike.

In the 2006 shooting mentioned at the beginning of this article, the victim’s counsel gained some traction over the fact that written reports were missing, that no job description existed of any sort that defined the duties of the courtesy officer and that the courtesy officer was not on duty at the time the shooting transpired (approximately 7:30 p.m.). The off-duty courtesy officer did, however, arrive in the community immediately after the incident, rendered aid and assistance to the situation and provided eyewitness testimony of site conditions and protocols at the time of the incident.

The question that arises, however, is what if the officer were no longer employed with the community? What if he were no longer employed with the same police department and could not be located? What if that eyewitness testimony were no longer available? What documentation would have existed in speak on his behalf?

It is critical that owners and managers have a clear understanding of the duties of the courtesy officer, verify that those duties are being performed and preserve and maintain written documentation of it. This should be a corporate – not a site-level – responsibility given the gravity of legal repercussions for failing to do so. ★

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