



BJA Bureau of Justice Assistance Fact Sheet

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The Watch Your Car Program



Watch Your Car™

What Is the Watch Your Car Program?

The National Motor Vehicle Theft Prevention Act of 1994 (MVTPA) authorizes the U.S. Attorney General

to develop, in cooperation with the states, a national voluntary motor vehicle theft prevention program. The Watch Your Car Program is designed as a cooperative initiative among states, local governments, and the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). The program provides decals for motor vehicle owners to voluntarily display on their vehicles to alert police that their vehicle is not normally driven between the hours of 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. Motorists may also choose to display another decal to signify that their vehicle is not normally driven across international land borders or in the proximity of ports of entry.

What Is the Purpose of the Program?

A significant number of auto thefts are committed during the early morning hours when the owners are asleep and unaware that their vehicles have been stolen. In many instances, a stolen car can be driven to a “chop shop” or across state lines before the owner awakens to discover the theft. If a vehicle has not been stolen for resale or disassembly for the procurement of its parts, then it may be used in the commission of another crime. In any event, the thief wants to avoid being noticed and may forgo stealing vehicles that could draw the attention of law enforcement officers. The purpose of the Watch Your Car Program is to focus the attention of law enforcement personnel on vehicles that are not routinely operated during the early morning hours or near international land borders or ports. The program

enables proactive investigation of auto theft before a stolen vehicle report is filed.

In addition to the customary Department of Motor Vehicles database, participating states maintain a computerized database of vehicles enrolled in Watch Your Car-type programs. The database is instantly accessible to law enforcement officers at all times and contains the names of the owner and other authorized drivers and the owner’s work and home telephone numbers, along with a cellular and/or pager number when available. This information enables the officer or dispatcher to contact the owner to determine whether the vehicle is being operated with the owner’s authorization.

If a thief has removed the vehicle’s decals and has aroused the suspicion of a police officer on patrol, the officer not only can check whether a stolen vehicle report has been filed but can initiate a check to determine whether the vehicle is enrolled in the Watch Your Car Program. If the computerized database indicates the vehicle is enrolled, the officer should find light-reflective Watch Your Car decals affixed to the vehicle. The absence of such decals should heighten the officer’s suspicion that the vehicle was stolen.

How Does the Program Work?

To take part in the program, motor vehicle owners sign a consent form and obtain program decals authorizing law enforcement officers to stop their motor vehicle if it is being driven under certain specified conditions and take reasonable steps to determine whether the vehicle is being operated with the owner’s consent.

There are two program conditions. Under the first condition, the owner may consent to have the car stopped if it is operated between the hours of 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. Under the second condition, the owner may consent to

have the car stopped if it crosses or comes within 1 mile of a U.S. land border or international port.

Up to three different decals may be used. The decal depicted in figure 1 is applied on the front windshield directly above the inside rearview mirror. It is for vehicles that are normally not operated during the early morning hours.

Figure 1. Front windshield decal



The rear window decal depicted in figure 2 contains no written information but simply serves as a beacon to law enforcement officers that the vehicle is registered in the Watch Your Car Program.

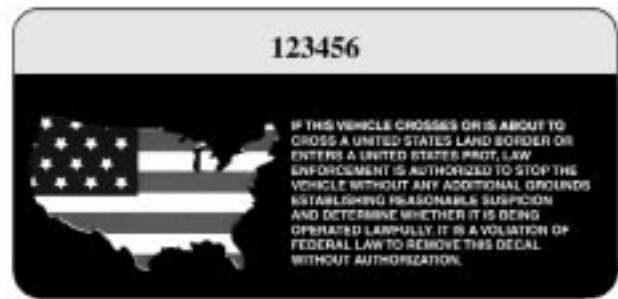
Figure 2. Rear window decal



Motorists can have the decal depicted in figure 3 applied next to the decal for the early morning hours program. This is the international borders/ports decal and is highly visible to border inspectors and law enforcement personnel who monitor traffic at border crossings and ports.

The decals in figures 1 and 2 are affixed to all cars enrolled in the Watch Your Car Program. The decal in figure 3 is optional. Decals are tamper resistant and are made of retro-reflective sheeting to reflect light from

Figure 3. International borders/ports decal



the headlights of oncoming traffic or from vehicles following behind.

The following jurisdictions are currently participating in the Watch Your Car Program: Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Tennessee, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the state of Washington.

How Do States and Local Units of Government Participate in the Watch Your Car Program?

BJA gives states considerable leeway in devising Watch Your Car Programs. One goal of the program is to attain national uniformity so that law enforcement officers anywhere in the United States, the Commonwealths, and the Territories will be able to instantly recognize the decals. The Watch Your Car Program facilitates both intrastate and interstate interception of stolen vehicles driven across county or state lines. States are also encouraged to devise innovative new approaches to deterring motor vehicle theft.

The most successful Watch Your Car-type programs are administered at the state level. A component within departments of public safety or state automobile theft prevention authorities is usually given administrative responsibility for the program. Fees are kept low to encourage program participation. Many states charge a small fee simply to reimburse the costs of producing the decals and general administration. In some instances, major automobile insurance companies have contributed funds to defray the expense of purchasing decals. Some insurance companies have provided discounts on policies to encourage people to register their vehicles.

Law enforcement agencies must be committed to the program. Police must be trained to recognize the decals, and police departments must be willing to issue guidelines instructing officers on how to conduct checks.

Some jurisdictions have paid overtime to their officers to conduct weekend registration campaigns in parking lots of shopping malls and other areas where people congregate. Other jurisdictions have enlisted volunteers to work in their campaigns.

A state may apply on behalf of itself and its units of local government. If there is a lack of interest in conducting a statewide program, individual units of local government may apply directly. The designated point of contact should submit an application that contains the following:

- **Name of the Point of Contact:** A person in either the state or local government must be designated as the primary point of contact for administration of the program. That person will be responsible for devising a program plan that coordinates efforts among the department of motor vehicles, law enforcement agencies, public and private organizations involved in car theft prevention programs, the media, and the private sector.
- **Program Description:** A description of the Watch Your Car Program that the state or local government would like to implement must be submitted. The description should include the proposed program's size and scope; outreach efforts for educating the public; training programs for informing law enforcement agencies of the theft prevention program; a description of the database the jurisdiction will maintain; and efforts to be undertaken to enlist both public and private organizations such as the American Automobile Association, auto insurance companies, major retail businesses, and employers willing to host registration events and encourage employee participation. One successful incentive to encourage people to apply is giving discounts on automobile insurance policies.

- **Assessment:** An assessment of the auto theft problem in the jurisdiction and a description of efforts that have been undertaken to address it must be attached. For instance, the assessment can include information about the state's automobile theft prevention authority and the type of initiatives it supports to combat auto theft. Grantee organizations also need to describe how the Watch Your Car Program can work in concert with other antitheft initiatives and how they will conduct internal evaluations of the program to determine the impact the Watch Your Car Program has had on reducing motor vehicle theft.

Are Federal Funds Available for the Watch Your Car Program?

Funds have been appropriated for the program for fiscal year 2000, and BJA will soon issue a program solicitation to the states. A Request for Proposal (RFP) will be published in the *Federal Register*. After the RFP has been published, it will be posted at the following Web site: www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/html/wyc.htm. Eligibility for funding is limited to state agencies with the lead responsibility for combating motor vehicle theft.

For Further Information

Application kits on the Watch Your Car Program may be obtained by calling the BJA Clearinghouse at 1-800-688-4252 between 8:30 a.m. and 7 p.m. eastern time, Monday through Friday. For additional information on the Watch Your Car Program, contact the U.S. Department of Justice Response Center at 1-800-421-6770 or 202-307-1480.

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