

## Bifrost Citizens on Patrol Program (COPP) officially launched; volunteers wanted

By Patricia Barrett

Residents in the municipality of Bifrost-Riverton are stepping up and taking it upon themselves to patrol communities, farms and back roads in a bid to deter crime or spot criminals in action. Led by a local woman, a new Citizens on Patrol Program (COPP) was officially registered this month to help combat rural crime.

Bifrost COPP co-ordinator Bianca Hamblin, who lives in the Riverton area, said she started working on establishing a group last year with other interested volunteers. She was slowed somewhat by COVID-19 and public health restrictions on in-person gatherings, but the group is now up and running, having received official sanction from the RCMP on March 12.

Hamblin said she started investigating how to organize a patrol group after an upsurge of theft and vandalism across the municipality.

"The winter before last there were a lot of people talking about fuel theft happening in the middle of the night. Thieves would drive into farmyards to steal diesel or gas," said Hamblin by phone last week. "There were several incidents. Friends of ours got hit and the thieves tried to steal fuel from our yard but our tanks were empty; we saw the tire tracks in fresh snow."

Property owners lock their fuel tanks and have cameras on their property, but thieves know they're being watched, she said. Nine times out of 10, they're committing crimes using a stolen vehicle. Or they'll cover up licence plates and wear balaclavas to hide their faces so that they can't be identified on camera.

Before fuel thefts, the area saw a lot of cattle rustling. Residents found out that a semitrailer was hiding in the bush somewhere. The thieves would steal cows, take them to the trailer and butcher them, leaving behind the bones. And one farmer had two bulls shot dead in his pasture by

someone driving along a road.

Other residents have suffered break and enters and vandalism. Thieves broke into cottages in the Beaver Creek area one winter, for instance, and cleaned out everything that "wasn't nailed down" and purposely left windows and doors wide open, said Hamblin. Seasonal residents returned in spring to thousands of dollars worth of damages. "We thought enough is enough. We need something out here to make a difference, to curb and deter criminals. We need people on foot and we need people in vehicles paying attention to what's going on in the area. That's the reason why I started the group," she said.

She made a Facebook page for the COPP group and has about 1,300 members. In terms of feet on the ground, Hamblin said they've got 15 people but need more as Bifrost-Riverton is a huge municipality to cover with diverse areas such as farmland, communities, towns and cottage country.

Any resident is welcome to join. Hamblin said she's also hoping seasonal residents with cottages in Bifrost will think about joining for the spring/summer/fall months because "the more eyes out there, the less criminal activity." To become a member of Bifrost COPP, volunteers have to sign a volunteer agreement and clear a criminal record check (as a volunteer there is no fee).

Once accepted, they'll receive training from an RCMP liaison officer on how to stay safe and how to take notes while on patrol. Personal safety is paramount. Before they head out, volunteers call the RCMP's non-emergency number to let them know they'll be on patrol.

"All you do on patrol is observe and/or listen. If a situation gets heated or dangerous, you remove yourself. You're not a vigilante; you don't engage anybody and you don't follow anybody. As soon as

you see suspicious activity, you dial 911 and stay on the line with the operator," said Hamblin.

The Bifrost COPP will be receiving a number of signs from its parent organization to put up at town entrances and other areas to let criminals know the area is patrolled, she said. Volunteers will also receive a high visibility vest and either a vehicle magnet or a sign for their vehicle to identify them as patrols.

"People are free to choose their own areas to patrol. If they want to patrol where they live, they can, or they can patrol areas where crime is happening or where they think crime might happen," said Hamblin. "There are no set hours, either. It's up to them. They can even just go for a drive with no specific area in mind. Sometimes the police will have a hotspot area they want a closer eye on; if a COPP member is in that area, the RCMP may ask them to patrol."

Hamblin said she has had a "huge amount" of RCMP support. The liaison officer told her it "takes a community to make a community safe." She has seen that in action when a member's vehicle was stolen from the side of a road while he was traipsing through the bush, she said. He immediately got on Facebook and the community came together in real-time to track the perpetrator's whereabouts. He was eventually caught by police but totalled the truck in the process.

"It makes you feel really great to have made a difference and helped somebody," she said. "Helping someone in need is what it's all about." To inquire about volunteering, contact Bianca Hamblin through her personal Facebook site, the Bifrost/Riverton/Arborg rural crime watch Facebook site ([www.facebook.com/groups/609968216410016](https://www.facebook.com/groups/609968216410016)) or email her at [hamblinbianca@gmail.com](mailto:hamblinbianca@gmail.com)