



How to Be a Good Witness

We, as law enforcement officers, often refer to ourselves as trained observers. We're trained to see details that the average citizen may overlook and more importantly, we are trained to accurately relay this information to others in an organized, concise manner — sometimes under duress. It is not that we have better memories than everybody else; rather, it is due to our training in observational psychology (the study of human physical characteristics and actions) and our daily reliance upon it.

You can learn how to be a good witness.

From a time line perspective, there are three categories of crimes.

- A crime which is about to occur.
- A crime in progress
- A crime which has already occurred.

When you call the police to report a crime, one of the first questions the dispatcher may ask you is, "Is this an emergency?" An emergency is any situation requiring immediate assistance and these are divided into two separate categories:

- Crimes against persons. (These types of crime are considered high priority)
- Crimes against property.

If you are calling 911 in Chatham for one of the two emergencies listed above, the dispatcher will immediately ask you the location of your emergency.

The next question the dispatcher may ask is, "What are you reporting?" You should respond by simply stating what the crime is. For example, "Someone just robbed me," or "I'd like to report a hit and run with injuries," or "A woman is being beaten by a man," or whatever the case may be.

As you are speaking on the phone, the dispatcher is typing the information into a computer and dispatching the call to an officer at the same time. If you start babbling, the dispatcher will abruptly guide you back to the correct line of questioning. Remember, the dispatcher is not intentionally being rude, but they have a job to do.

A series of questions will follow:

- Where exactly did (or is) this crime occurring? (Exact address or landmarks.)
- What exactly happened? Are there any injuries?
- When did it occur? Is it still occurring?
- How long ago? (Time frame: 10 minutes ago, an hour ago, yesterday)
- Who was involved? Suspect? Victim?
- What was the suspect's last direction of travel? (Example: landmarks; name of streets, etc.)
- Were there any weapons involved? Remember, anything can be considered a weapon . . . a fist, gun, knife, car, hammer, bat, etc.

You will be asked a series of questions regarding the suspect.

- Gender — male or female?
- Race — White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, etc.?
- Age — Approximate? Height/Weight?
- Hair color, length and/or facial hair?
- Clothing description? (Including the bad guy's shoes (sometimes a criminal will change their clothes but they will not change their shoes.)

The sooner a crime is reported to the police, the higher the chances of apprehending the suspect. Often times, after a "fresh crime," if other officers happen to be in the area when the call was received, and they have a reasonable suspicion that the person or vehicle they just stopped is connected to the crime, the police will detain the person or people matching the suspect description.

If you are the victim or witness of a crime, the police will advise you that they have someone detained that they would like you to look at. This is known as a "Show Up." You will be advised that the person being detained may or may not be the guilty party. The police may then drive you to the location of the detainee to see if you can make a positive identification. In cases where a suspect is arrested sometime after the crime, perhaps several hours or days later, you may be asked to view a photo lineup.

The Chatham Police Department is here to serve the public 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. No crime is too small to report and any/all questions you may have are worth asking. Remember, keeping your eyes and ears open at all times will make you a better witness. You never know when you are going to have to report or witness a crime.