

University Safe Walk program usage at all time high

by Derek Paulus - Friday, January 11, 2013

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Students are staying safe after dark thanks to a team of helping hands, or rather, helping feet.

The helping feet are part of what is called the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh's Safe Walk program, which is entering its sixth year of service to the campus. The program provides a pair of trained student Community Service Officers (CSOs) from the University Police Department to accompany students, staff and faculty as they traverse across campus and the surrounding areas.

In 2012, the program saw its highest numbers yet, totaling 568 Safe Walks. This number has risen 137 percent in the last four years, according to University Police.

The Safe Walks service is available to all University members from 7 p.m. to 4 a.m. year-round, within a five block radius of the UW Oshkosh campus. CSOs are trained in defensive tactics and equipped with all the proper equipment, including a police radio, to protect any students who request a Safe Walk from one point to another.

University Police Chief Joseph LeMire said although the University has not experienced an increase in crime, there has been increased awareness. He said safety bulletins, released to all members of the University whenever significant criminal activity is reported, may play a role in the increased request for Safe Walks from students.

LeMire said this was especially the case with Safe Walks between the hours of 1 and 2 a.m., which more than doubled since last year, since the University reported some assaults that took place around that time. Despite these assaults, LeMire said the University is as safe as ever and that the increased awareness has only helped this effort.

"I think we're still a safe and secure campus," he said.

The Safe Walk program is a "no questions asked" service, unless the welfare of the individuals involved is called into question. Students who utilize the program will not be interrogated about they were doing or whether they had been drinking.

Anna Sharpless, a senior criminal justice major who has been a CSO for three years, said the Safe Walk program is for safety purposes only, and a police officer will only be called if there is a clear and present danger.

"Our main focus is to get the person safely from one point to another," she said.

This effort to keep UW Oshkosh safe and secure is not new, however. In 1979, the University created the Walk-A-Friend program, which recruited volunteers to escort students across campus. The establishment

of this service came after student letters written to the University newspaper, the *Advance-Titan*, requested an escort service of this type.

The Walk-A-Friend program later became Knight Owl, before becoming the Safe Walk program in 2008. LeMire said the current program is the most effective, since earlier versions utilized volunteers rather than the properly trained and equipped CSOs used today.

Student CSOs have been an integral part of campus security even prior to their assimilation into the program in 2008. As in the past, they continue to be responsible for patrolling around campus, checking doors and creating an overall uniformed presence on campus. They also assist with security at campus events, such as home football games, Polk Library's all-night study sessions and high profile events like Vice President Joe Biden's visit to the University.

CSOs also play a major role in securing the safety of University residence halls. They ensure the security of common areas and areas surrounding the residence halls, as well as staff residence hall security stations. Director of Residence Life Tom Fojtik said their assistance at these security stations has greatly improved residence hall security.

"We do a much better job of making sure only students and their approved guests are in our buildings thanks to the efforts of our Community Advisers and CSOs," Fojtik said.

UW Oshkosh residence halls have also ensured their security by utilizing electronic access devices and security cameras.

"We have come a long way from the completely unlocked buildings of yesteryear," Fojtik said.

LeMire said UW Oshkosh strives to make University safety and security a collaborative effort, with the University Police and Residence Life being only two components of a broader effort.

"Safety and security on campus cannot be accomplished by just one department," LeMire said. "It needs to be a collaboration of the whole University."

This collaboration is represented each week in a meeting of the Students at Risk Response Team (SARRT). SARRT is comprised of several departments around the University including University Police, Residence Life, the Dean of Students, the Counseling Center, the Office of the Provost and the Student Health Center. Each week the departments meet to discuss students and victims in need of services.

The Safe Walk program and other services provided by CSOs not only benefit the University students who use these services, but also the CSOs who provide them. Sharpless said the experience she gained is "immeasurable" and helped her with her time at Fox Valley Technical College's Law Enforcement Recruit Academy this past summer.

"I can't say enough how grateful I've been for the opportunity to work for such a great department and to have gained the experiences I did," Sharpless said.

Senior criminal justice major Eric Meverden said he enrolled at UW Oshkosh specifically for the CSO program, knowing he wanted to work in law enforcement. In addition to the experience he gained, he said being able to keep students safe has been a fulfilling aspect of his CSO work. He said the parents of University students are especially thankful.

“Parents love it that an option like that is available for their son or daughter and I know they’re really appreciative,” Meverden said.

LeMire said the combined efforts of CSOs, the Safe Walk program and the many University departments involved in campus safety have ensured that students can feel safe at UW Oshkosh.

“You get a sense of security on campus,” LeMire said.

Learn more:

- [UW Oshkosh Police](#)
- [Safe Walk Program](#)