



## Curbing Crime

*Being proactive and working with your local police department can go a long way toward helping you protect your facility.*

By Tom Comi

If you are a self storage operator who believes your facility is invincible to crime, you very well could be the most vulnerable target of all.

The truth is every facility in the country is susceptible to crimes ranging from theft to drugs to terrorism. According to the Self Storage Association's latest edition of *Security for the Self Storage Industry* — written by attorney Peter S. Beering — here are just a few major incidents that have transpired over the last 17 years:

- 1993: Members of a terrorist group led by Ramzi Yousef, an Islamic militant known to have mentored Osama Bin Laden, stored and mixed 105 gallons of nitric acid and 60 gallons of sulfuric acid in a New Jersey self storage unit. This explosive mixture was later used to bomb the World Trade Center.
- 1995: Timothy McVeigh is known to have housed supplies in a storage facility for the ammonium nitrate bomb he used to destroy the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

- 2004: British authorities interrupted an Al-Qaeda plot when they raided a self storage facility in which the group had placed 1,300 pounds of explosives in preparation for an attack.
- 2007: Georgia officials arrested a disaffected Army veteran who had placed pipe bombs, grenades, C-4 (military plastic explosives) and a variety of weapons in a Valdosta self storage unit.

While crime at facilities can never be extinguished entirely, it can be greatly diminished through education and proactive planning. The storage industry boasts numerous companies that offer state-of-the-art surveillance cameras, lighting (both indoor and outdoor), alarms systems, password-controlled gating and locks.

But perhaps the most important step owners can take is working closely with crime-fighting professionals who handle emergencies for a living. In *Security for the Self Storage Industry*, Beering wrote:

*See Crime, page 10*

*Self storage operators and their staffs should develop and maintain relationships with all of the public safety officials responsible for their areas, including the police officers that patrol their areas, the fire department, emergency management agency, and the health department. These relationships can be forged by inviting these officials to the facility for a tour, buying lunch, or by visiting the fire station. While such simple gestures seem trivial, they can greatly aid the operator when questions arise, if there are official investigations, or if help is needed.*

### Partnering With Police

Timothy Zehring spent 22 years at the Mesa (Arizona) Police Department and served in various patrol districts, the Criminal Investigations Division, the Crime Prevention Unit and in community relations. While still with the department, he founded in 1992 the Crime Free Association, a non-profit organization that trains police officers and business owners how to prevent crime.

“Crime is not a police problem, it is a community problem,” he explained. “Therefore, it requires a community solution. The police are a part of the community. In fact, they are a vital part of the community, but they cannot do this

alone. They need community partners—responsible business owners and managers—that are willing to help them fight crime.”

The association’s course is free in areas where it is offered by the local police, and a management company can receive free company-wide training if they purchase a policy through a participating insurance company. Zehring said certification requires passing a four-hour class and a subsequent inspection of the respective facility to ensure that the proper precautions taught in the class are implemented correctly.



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*~ Timothy Zehring  
Crime Free Association*

One of the many things that the group offers is the ability to screen potential customers. A facility can work directly with its local police department to do background checks, or use a free web-based national search that has been created with links directly to official websites of courts, jails and prisons and sex-offender registries.

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“Whenever renters apply for a lease, you can’t trust your gut feeling that they will not be engaging in some type of illegal activity,” he said. “One of the best ways to predict a prospective renter’s future behavior is to look at their past. By conducting criminal history background checks and setting screening standards, many problems can be averted.”

Because not every criminal has a past, Zehring came up with a way to give storage operators in appropriate jurisdictions the ability to evict customers who were breaking the law.

“The Crime Free Lease Addendum is a contract between the property management and the renter that provides for the consensual, immediate termination of the lease in the event crimes are committed at the rental property,” he said.

The group’s program was such a success in Mesa that he decided to make it available across the country.

“Once the other cities saw the necessity of joining the Crime Free Programs themselves, the program quickly spread throughout the state of Arizona, to other states in the southwest, and within two years the program was international,” he said. “For sake of consistency and expediency when it came to training other law enforcement agencies throughout the USA and other countries, I formed the International Crime Free Association as a non-profit charitable corporation.”

Adams Self Storage in Wichita Falls, Texas, has been participating in the program for about a year, and according to Adams employee Stephanie Esquibel who took the course, they haven’t had one crime committed at the property in that time

“The police informed us of ways we can better protect and secure our facility, and it has worked great,” said Esquibel. “The police patrols after hours have increased due to our partnership, and we have been able to increase our business by telling people we are crime-free. We also scare away customers [with criminal backgrounds], because they know we are now doing background checks.”

Zehring’s group uses officers across the country to train employees like Stephanie to deal with crimes involving drugs, stolen cars, burglary, theft, prostitution, organized crime and terrorism. And as a former police officer, he said he can’t stress enough the importance of storage operators and managers being proactive toward crime.


“It all begins with prevention,” he said. “And our Crime Free Program has the solutions that are time-tested and endorsed by law enforcement.” ♦

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*To learn more about the International Crime Free Association, go to [crime-free-association.org/mini-storage.htm](http://crime-free-association.org/mini-storage.htm). To purchase Security for the Self Storage Industry, visit [selfstorage.org](http://selfstorage.org).*

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