

There Is No Better Asset to America's Safety and Security than the Ordinary Citizen

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Since 9/11, America has adapted to new challenges placed before it. Local first responders and ordinary citizens have stepped into a role that has transformed the way we approach safety and security in this country.

Effective homeland security must begin at home, on the local level of government and community. The post-9/11 period has countless examples of citizens and local first responders who witnessed something out of the ordinary, reported it to the authorities and because of their vigilance, helped to foil a terrorist plot. Take the example of a vigilant store clerk in New Jersey earlier this year, whose watchful eye helped to thwart a potential terror attack on a military installation.

It is hard to always be on guard, and since Americans cherish their privacy, we don't want to appear intrusive. However, when strange things happen that may be of concern, there can be no better value than the caution of a local citizen. The same goes for those who live, work and recreate along the more than 95,000 mile maritime border that makes up America's waterways. It is estimated that there are nearly 70 million boaters alone in the United States who spend their time on more than 290,000 square miles of water.

Citizens' assistance in local efforts to secure America's maritime domain is critical, and must be supported on both local and federal levels. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Coast Guard have established America's Waterway Watch (AWW) program to unite local boating groups and Coast Guard units around the country in a single, national effort to encourage reporting of suspicious activity and increased public awareness of maritime homeland security.

Like the neighborhood watch programs that have successfully brought safety and security to thousands of communities throughout the United States, AWW enables a similar effort to exist on America's waterways. Congress needs to support this effort to promote awareness of maritime homeland security. That is why I have introduced H. Res. 549, which recognizes the importance of increasing maritime domain awareness and supports the goals of AWW.

Many members of Florida's Congressional delegation have already signed on as co-sponsors to this resolution. It is my hope that Congress will put its full weight behind this resolution as an expression of our commitment to the importance of securing America's maritime domain.