

Angels in Edmonton: Crime-fighting group vows to open local chapter with or without official support

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EDMONTON - The Guardian Angels say they'll organize a chapter in Edmonton with or without the support of the mayor and city police.

About a dozen people are interested in volunteering for a local chapter, which could start training neighbourhood patrollers in two months, says the crime-fighting group's local organizer.

The group is now looking for space to use as a training office and hopes to train the first batch of volunteers over the summer so patrols can begin in August, likely around the 118th Avenue area.

"It all hinges on citizens deciding that enough truly is enough, and they want to have a positive impact on the community," said David Schroder, the group's Edmonton co-ordinator.

The organization's New York City founder, Curtis Sliwa, was in town Saturday to talk about the Guardian Angels' tactics and programs at a public meeting in the Montrose Community Hall near 59th Street and 119th Avenue. About 35 people showed up for the hastily organized presentation.

"The main focus was to have people hear directly from Curtis what the Guardian Angels are about," Schroder said. "Some people attach the label, vigilante. The term vigilante absolutely does not apply. The main rule and the first principle is anti-violence."

David Johnson, who attended the meeting, said he is interested in the group because he believes people have to take responsibility for their own city.

"I was born and raised in this neighbourhood and I've seen too much drugs, crime, gang violence," he said.

Schroder, who has yet to undergo training himself, said volunteers are carefully screened and interviewed, and must submit to a criminal record check.

They must commit to a three-month training program of a couple hours a week in sessions that cover CPR, first aid, fitness and conflict-resolution skills.

Sliwa was in Alberta over the weekend to attend a graduation ceremony in Calgary for seven newly trained Guardian Angels volunteers, and made a last-minute stop in Edmonton.

Calgary Mayor Dave Bronconnier has said he has no problem with volunteer groups offering help to police.

But Edmonton Mayor Stephen Mandel and police Chief Mike Boyd said last year the Guardian Angels are not needed or wanted in Edmonton.

Boyd said the community and police working together is the way to go.

Schroder said he intends to contact both the mayor and police chief in the coming weeks to keep them updated about the plan to establish a presence here.

"If they choose to endorse the Guardian Angels, that would be fantastic, but I respect that they might not choose to do that."

The Guardian Angels differ from other neighbourhood-patrol programs because volunteers will intervene if someone is attacked, Schroder said.

"It is very easy to say, 'No, people shouldn't get involved,' but what if it's you or someone you love being attacked?" said the 47-year-old realtor who felt compelled to join the group after Stefan Conley, 35, was beaten and died on a city bus last year.

"Gang-on-gang violence, that's not something the Guardian Angels would get involved in. That's entirely a police matter."

Interventions are rare, Schroder said. The group's main purpose is to provide a visible presence on the streets and to deter crime. Volunteers also check on street people to make sure they are OK.

A local Guardian Angels chapter would try to work in co-operation with police and existing citizens' groups, said Schroder.

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