



Guardian Angels ready to hit the streets

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Alberta's first class of Guardian Angels recruits are expected to start patrolling downtown Calgary this week in their red berets.

Eight Calgary residents graduated on the weekend after three months of training.

Curtis Sliwa, the founder of the New York-based organization, was in Calgary for the first time in a year and led the latest Angels crew downtown on a hunt for drugs, drug paraphernalia and weapons.

"I am back a year later and things have not improved in this downtown corridor. If anything, they have gotten worse," Sliwa said.

"The problem here in Calgary is certainly not as bad as it is in the Sodom and Gomorrah of Canada, the east end of Vancouver where anything goes. You want to shoot up, smoke drugs, have sex, break into shops? No problem. It's just part of the street culture. But it certainly has started to approach that."

Calgary police Chief Jack Beaton said Monday the Guardian Angels never followed through on a promise to collaborate with local police. He said he's concerned about how a U.S.-based organizations will conduct their patrols in Calgary.

"We have to hear what their plans are," he said. "People in Canada have lots of rights, and we're here to protect everybody's rights. That's the homeless, those in poverty, those in substance abuse, those that suffer from mental challenges in our community. They have rights, too."

A Guardian Angels chapter is also being trained in Edmonton.

'Not planning on being confrontational'

Greg Martin, one of the Calgary volunteers, said he and his fellow Guardian Angels are ready to help clean up Calgary's core.

"I feel confident," he said. "We are not planning on being confrontational, so the way that we plan on dealing with this is very verbal. We are trying to be an influence rather than a physical imposition."

He said crime in Calgary is getting out of hand.

"What finally kicked it off for me is seeing the preschool on one side of the fence and the addicts on the other side of the fence," he said. "It just hurt to see that."

The group, founded in New York City in 1979, has received praise for its efforts from former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani and former U.S. president Bill Clinton.

However, their detractors call them a vigilante group whose impact on crime has been minimal.