

Guardian Angels Start Anti-Gang Patrols in NW

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The D.C. chapter of the Guardian Angels has started patrols in Columbia Heights and other Northwest Washington neighborhoods that have been plagued by gang-related shootings in recent months, officials said yesterday.

Group members, who wear distinctive red jackets and berets, also will stand guard 24 hours a day at a shelter for homeless families in the 1400 block of Park Road NW, officials announced at a news conference yesterday. A week ago, the Angels began patrolling the surrounding neighborhoods.

"We are exasperated by the crime," said D.C. Council member Jim Graham (D-Ward 1), who helped arrange the patrols. "And the more that we [do] in the streets, deterring crime before it starts, the better off we'll be."

The announcement was made in front of the Park Road Shelter, where 44 families live. Brenda Richardson, whose organization, Women Like Us, runs the shelter, said two Guardian Angels will stand guard during each of three shifts daily, starting Monday. Richardson declined to say how much the shelter will pay group members. The Guardian Angels will have an office nearby on Irving Street NW.

Curtis Sliwa, who founded the Guardian Angels in New York in 1979, said group members will try to mentor youths in the neighborhoods. "We're going to try to teach the young people how to stay out of the harm's way of the gangs," he said.

Over the years, Guardian Angels have patrolled public housing complexes, Metro trains and various neighborhoods. Members, who are unarmed, have never shied from confrontations with criminals, and officials said they expect the same in Columbia Heights, Mount Pleasant and other areas they plan to patrol.

John "Unique" Ayala, director of the group's D.C. chapter, said members will react quickly when they come across a crime suspect. He said they will "grab a person, detain him, and make what we call a 'citizen's arrest.'" If drugs are found, members will force the suspect to destroy them, he said. The patrol work can be dangerous, Ayala said, noting that he was stabbed with an ice pick while on patrol in Southeast Washington in 1991.

Ayala said patrols will be limited by the size of the D.C. chapter. The group has just 12 to 15 active members, who in recent years have done twice-weekly patrols in Southeast but little in Northwest. Now, with the group trying to expand its mission, Ayala said, it might not have enough members to do everyday patrols and cover the shelter at all times. The Northwest neighborhood might see patrols only every other day, he said.

Guardian Angel officials said they hope to recruit more members in Washington -- perhaps from the Columbia Heights neighborhood -- but conceded that they might have to summon reinforcements from chapters in New York, Philadelphia or Virginia Beach.

A few storefronts away from the shelter, at Don Julio Grocery, shopkeeper Julio Melgar said he had noticed the patrols. He said he was tired of drunks and drug dealing on the block. "I hope they help," said Melgar, "because it's very bad, this place over here."