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Angels in Lotusland

By CP

VANCOUVER -- The red berets are getting the red carpet treatment in Vancouver.

The Guardian Angels, a U.S.-based organization that fields red beret-clad volunteers to patrol downtown streets in an effort to deter crime, is setting up a chapter in the West Coast city.

Guardian Angels founder Curtis Sliwa said a Friday meeting with local police was the most successful yet in Vancouver.

"The best I hoped (for) was a yellow light. I never thought we'd get a green light," he said.

The group is expected to start patrolling Vancouver streets by fall.

City authorities offered to do background checks on potential volunteers as well as arrange for an instructor from the police department to teach members about citizens' rights and local laws.

Friday's warm reception contrasted with the reaction the Guardian Angels received when they originally opened a chapter in Vancouver in the late '80s, when police refused to communicate with the group on any level.

However, with the Winter Olympics on their way and Vancouver police complaining of being short-staffed, attitudes have changed.

Insp. John McKay, who met with the Angels, said the city's police department is about 500 officers short.

"There ain't enough (police) to clean up the city so we're going to rely on other people," McKay said.

At the meeting with the Angels, McKay told Sliwa that as long as volunteers obey the law, they will be welcome to patrol city streets.

The volunteer group, which started in New York in 1979, has started recruiting volunteers in Calgary and Edmonton and is eyeing Winnipeg.