



Police chief welcomes presence of Guardian Angels

By DERRILL HOLLY
Associated Press Writer

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WASHINGTON -- A New York-based crime fighting group will try to help beleaguered residents of a District of Columbia neighborhood overcome escalating gang and other crime problems.

Members of the Guardian Angels have opened a small headquarters in the Mount Pleasant section of the city, just a ten minute cab ride north of the White House. They paid a courtesy call Monday to D.C. Metropolitan Police Chief Charles H. Ramsey, who said he looks forward to working with them.

"They're willing to take on the responsibility to help make the streets safer, and that is something that more people in the District of Columbia should take it upon themselves to do," said Ramsey.

The chief has worked with the Guardian Angels when they have come to Washington in years past. He also worked with them as a police officer in Chicago. Ramsey is hoping the volunteers' presence on the streets will reduce vandalism, car thefts, and other crimes typically involving younger offenders.

The Angels will initially target the Columbia Heights, Adams Morgan and Mount Pleasant neighborhoods where street robberies, aggressive panhandling, and gang activity have troubled residents in recent months.

On Oct. 9, a 20 year-old man was killed and a bus driver wounded during a running gun battle involving rival gangs in Mount Pleasant.

Since September, the city's 3,700 police officers have been working under a special crime initiative enabling police commanders to suspend days off and extend shifts to boost manpower. Ramsey has now extended the effort through January.

The Angels built their reputation making citizens' arrests in New York City after the group was founded in 1979. But John Ayala, their Washington area coordinator, said the group's efforts are now concentrated on anti-gang initiatives in schools and community centers.

"The most important thing that we're trying to do is to get the youth involved with the Guardian Angels," said Ayala. He sees the Angels as a positive alternative to gang affiliation.

Ayala, 34, of Waldorf, Md., and other members hope to carry their message into the city's middle and high schools. Their goal is to recruit students over 16 into the group, while launching a special junior program focusing on community service for younger teens.