

OAKLAND

Guardian Angels to patrol Grand Lake Unarmed group invited to area after string of robberies

Christopher Heredia, Chronicle Staff Writer
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With crime continuing to plague Oakland neighborhoods, the Guardian Angels have agreed to start patrolling the streets today in what once was regarded as a generally peaceful and safe district near Lake Merritt.

They come at the request of the Grand Lake neighborhood crime prevention council, which met Thursday night to discuss a rash of robberies and burglaries in the area, a stretched-thin police force and how the Angels might step in to help.

"We've never experienced this type of crime before," said Nic Montesclaros, a resident of the neighborhood for two years who said her neighbors are becoming increasingly targeted by gun-wielding robbers, some of whom have invaded homes. Merchants too have been victimized.

Several weeks ago, Montesclaros contacted the Guardian Angels -- a volunteer safety patrol organization that formed in the late 1970s to combat violence on New York subways and has recently worked in San Francisco's Tenderloin and Mission districts -- to see if they would come to Oakland.

Erick Wong, Guardian Angels California regional director, who will be in Oakland today with members from the group's San Diego, San Francisco and Sacramento chapters, said the key role of the unarmed Angels is to provide a reassuring presence in rough neighborhoods and to get residents more involved in safety issues.

The Angels typically bring members from out of town when a new area is selected for patrolling and then train local residents to take over. The San Francisco chapter will work with those Grand Lake residents who wish to go through the organization's three-month training.

Residents have banded together as neighborhood watch groups, and some have agreed to walk the streets in a show of unity in recent weeks. But their efforts to date haven't made a significant dent in the number of robberies.

In related anti-crime effort today, Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums will join with City Council President Ignacio De La Fuente and Police Chief Wayne Tucker to walk with local merchants and residents along International Boulevard in East Oakland.

The walk, which begins at 5:30 p.m. at International Boulevard and 38th Avenue, will be followed by a community meeting in Spanish with English translation at 7 p.m. at Bridges Academy, 1325 53rd Ave.



Police say they are trying to crack down on rising crime in all Oakland neighborhoods and have put special teams in North Oakland and areas around the lake where bands of robbers have moved in to target well-heeled residents who are unaccustomed to dealing with street crime.

"Crime is not only up in Grand Lake; it's a nationwide problem," said police Lt. Ed Tracey, who oversees the Grand Lake area. "Citizens are frustrated. We're frustrated. We have a vested interest in seeing that these neighborhoods become safer for everyone."

Toward that end, the department has assigned robbery-suppression teams to the Grand Lake area as well as West and East Oakland and is focusing on a group of suspects who they believe may be responsible for numerous crimes in the northern part of the city.

Tracey also said the department has been trying to educate residents on avoiding becoming victims of crime, urging them to park in well-lighted areas, keep shrubbery trimmed back, walk in groups, stay alert and not be distracted listening to an iPod or talking on the cell phone, and report suspicious activity.

"We're trying our best with the limited resources we have," Tracey said, adding that he welcomes the Angels -- known for wearing red berets and white t-shirts -- as long as they work with police and do not interfere with investigations.

City Councilwoman Pat Kernighan, who represents the Grand Lake area, said she too welcomes the Angels.

"Oakland is experiencing a really serious problem with robberies, which we haven't been able to stop," she said. "I'm willing to embrace creative solutions."

Montesclaros said, "What I'm hoping is that because this rash of robberies is all very new that we'll nip it in the bud and let the people who are committing these crimes know we're here, we're proactive, we're watching you and we're going to stop this."

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/06/08/BAGS0QBUNE1.DTL>

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