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Crime has some gearing up for civilian street patrols

By DAN ARSENAULT Crime Reporter

Whether it will be Neighbourhood Watch, Citizens on Patrol or the internationally known Guardian Angels, steps are being taken to get Halifax Regional Police some free help in dealing with street crime.

Some municipal politicians announced plans Tuesday to set up a volunteer program to help police monitor the Halifax Commons, the site of some notorious recent acts of violence.

"It comes down to the neighbourhood mobilizing to help itself, said Coun. Dawn Sloane (Halifax Downtown).

Ms. Sloane, along with Mayor Peter Kelly and Commons-area resident John Gillis, an emergency room physician at Dartmouth General Hospital, announced plans to hold a meeting on Oct. 3 to discuss formation of such a group. They haven't settled on a location or time for the meeting.

"It's going to be a mixture of Neighbourhood Watch and Citizens on Patrol, Ms. Sloane said.

Volunteers would be trained and told to immediately report incidents to police and not to intervene, she said. Other than that, the group's mandate hasn't been determined.

"With the right planning, dedicated training and the will by residents to make their city safer, we can make the Commons Watch a reality in the coming months, Mr. Gillis said in a release.

Mr. Kelly said police are doing a good job, "but the more citizens we have engaged in the war against violence, the stronger the message will be to those few in our community who are committing, or thinking of committing, acts of violence.

Ms. Sloane said a local company, Source Security, has offered to provide free formal training for the volunteers. Source Security is the employer of four young guards who were stabbed outside a dance at the Halifax Forum multi-purpose centre last month.

Const. Jeff Carr said Halifax Regional Police will attend the meeting Ms. Sloane and the

others are organizing next month.

"We're encouraged that citizens are taking an interest in their community, he said.

Ms. Sloane said she is concerned by reports that the Guardian Angels, a group that originated in New York in the late 1970s, may come to Halifax intent on setting up their own citizen patrols.

"They've been asked by an anonymous source with an anonymous website to come here, she said, referring to e-mailed requests the Guardian Angels have received from the anti-Kelly website dumpkelly.com.

"Someone should have the guts to actually put their name on something, she said. "That makes it very difficult to find them credible.

But Ms. Sloane said she's willing to meet with the Guardian Angels, whose founder and leader, Curtis Sliwa, is planning a late October visit to Halifax.

Mr. Sliwa, a one-time McDonald's restaurant manager, started programs to clean up his neighbourhood in the Bronx nearly 30 years ago and the Guardian Angels were born. They now have chapters in 86 cities in nine countries.

In a telephone interview Tuesday, Mr. Sliwa guaranteed the Guardian Angels could reduce crime in Halifax. The first step, he said, is to visit the area and meet with politicians, police officers and citizens.

"In Canada, we've proven ourselves, he said. "In Vancouver, the police department has not only endorsed us but they train us in use of force and citizen arrest procedures.

Mr. Sliwa said one major difference between the Guardian Angels and other citizen patrol groups is that the Angels are willing to get involved physically to make arrests and intervene in crime.

Six Guardian Angels have been shot dead, he said, but none since 1993. He credits that change to improved relations with police, better use of cellphones and other technology, and advances in training.

Mr. Sliwa said the non-profit group relies on donations and does not use government money, except when it is asked to set up inner-city education programs. He said e-mails have sparked his interest in Halifax and he was shocked to read recently about a woman in her 60s who was beaten with metal table legs by teenage girls while she was out for an evening walk on the Commons. Three girls were charged.

Anyone interested in volunteering to wear the Guardian Angels' distinctive red vest and beret would have to submit an application and go through a background check and orientation. Then there's three months of training in basic self-defence and conditioning, laws regarding rights and arrests, first aid and Guardian Angel patrol techniques.

The Guardian Angels are unarmed and have good relations with police in 85 per cent of the cities they work in, Mr. Sliwa said.

They have Canadian chapters in Toronto, Ottawa, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver.

They hit the streets of Calgary in April and have yet to make an arrest, according to chapter leader Steven Saretsky.

The Calgary chapter has 10 members and would like that number to double within a year, but that wish is a "little bit hopeful, he admitted.

The Guardian Angels walk the streets in groups of four or more.

"There's safety in numbers, Mr. Saretsky said. "We can more effectively watch the neighbours we are patrolling.

They've broken up a few fights and called police or paramedics to trouble spots.

Mr. Saretsky called the group's relationship with Calgary police "tentative.

One liaison officer is assigned to communicate with the Angels. They tell the officer when and where they intend to work, but they wouldn't listen if the cop tried telling them how to go about their task.

In Halifax, Const. Carr doesn't want any volunteers, including the Guardian Angels, going too far.

"Under no circumstances do we advocate people becoming actually physically involved in confrontations, he said.

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