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Guardian Angels has Easton wing

Chapter forms Monday. Founder Curtis Sliwa praises residents' passion about crime problem.

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By **COLIN MCEVOY**
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EASTON | Curtis Sliwa has visited dozens of northeastern Pennsylvania cities with increasingly violent crime problems, but, he said, few residents have responded to them like those in Easton.

"I've been in a lot of communities where people jump up and applaud, pat you so hard on the back you have to go for a chiropractic adjustment, but when it comes time to actually stand up and be counted and go through the training process, sometimes it's just you and your shadow," said Sliwa, founder of the international volunteer safety organization.

"Here, they stepped forward," he said Monday. "In the midst of a citywide crisis, particularly with the shootings in the West Ward and the growing gang problems, they responded."

After months of training, the city's first Guardian Angels chapter became a reality Monday night when Sliwa graduated its first 14 members during a ceremony at the Easton Area Community Center.

Kelly Souders, chapter administrator and co-founder, said she hopes to set up Angel patrols four times a week, starting next week in the city's West Ward, South Side and Downtown neighborhoods.

"Now it's time to put feet on the street," she said. "It's been a long road, but we've made it."

Souders acknowledged a major challenge will be winning over both residents and local officials who still have doubts about the organization.

"The Guardian Angels are not sanctioned by the city," Easton Mayor Sal Panto Jr. said Monday. "What they're doing, they're doing on their own. There's nothing we can do to stop them, but we do not sanction them as an official body of protection."

Panto said he encourages volunteers to help the city through block watch organizations and remains concerned about the prospect of Guardian Angels attempting to arrest or engage criminals.

"I'm afraid they're going to intervene and get hurt," he said. "I'm only worried about our residents' safety. ... We're not looking for intervention from people not properly trained in physical combat against somebody who might have a weapon."

Sliwa said many of the more than 100 Angels chapters in 12 countries have faced such skeptics before but warned that doing nothing would only make the crime problems worse.

"If you sit, you grow barnacles on your backside, you watch the boob tube, you choose to moan and groan, suck your bottom lip, point fingers, blame the mayor, blame the council, blame the police, (then) you're going to achieve absolutely jack-diddly-squat nothing," he said.

Easton is the 104th Guardian Angels chapter, Sliwa said. A Wilkes-Barre chapter was formalized Sunday, and new chapters are in training in Scranton and Stroudsburg.