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Protected by angels

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Rochester, MN (KTTC-DT) --After several drive-by shootings in Rochester last year, the Guardian Angels have landed in southeastern Minnesota. They're out there patrolling the streets, on guard for the criminal element. After the rise in drive-by shootings, drug dealing, and other violent crime, some people are in a mood to fight back.

2008 was the year Rochester's streets exploded with gunfire. The police investigated 21 calls of "shots fired" and aggravated assaults. That's when community leader Michael LaPlante decided to do something. After his phone call, the Angels flew in.

Rochester, now protected by angels. They walk the city streets at all hours of the night as a visual deterrent to crime.

"We're out at 2 in the morning, 1 o'clock, midnight."

Dressed in their red jackets and berets, this watch group was created for the city's residents to fight back against an increase in violent crime. Some call them vigilantes. They call themselves an extra set of eyes and ears for the police department, and they say people are noticing.

"It's about time you guys got here, you know. And we need something like that in Rochester," comments guardian angel member Vicki Zook.

2008 was the turning point for many citizens and also the Rochester Police Department. That's why the 5-person street crimes unit was formed.

"The incident that really triggered the reason for the street crimes unit was at Watson Park," explains Rochester police Sergeant Kent Perlich.

The place where a high-profile drive-by shooting occurred just a few feet away from where children were playing. Within a few months after the shooting, several more occurred in almost every quadrant of the city.

"I think we are going to see influxes here and there as far as violent crime increases and decreases, but overall, what I see is a general pattern of increase in criminal activity," says Perlich.

If you look at this chart of aggravated assaults and drive-by shooting offenses, while there are spikes, the average number of incidents has nearly doubled from 10 to 20 in a 9-year span.

"It's not simply an enforcement issue. It's an issue of economics, an issue of gang intervention, it's an issue of education," explains police Captain Brian Winters.

One way officials say they can prevent crime is by providing children with positive outlets. Something the Police Athletic League has been doing for a while now, by having officers volunteer their time to play sports with children. To show them, they're not the bad guys.

As for the Angels, their services tend to be more direct and useful in dangerous situations.

Before any Guardian Angel can walk the streets, they have to go through roughly 13 weeks of training, including defense martial arts.

"We want to be able to sit there and protect whoever is the person getting attacked first. And then we want to make sure we can contain a situation where it doesn't escalate any further," explains Guardian Angel Dayton Buege.

They keep up their training twice a week. They learn take-down moves for their own self defense. The organizer of the Rochester chapter says the whole purpose of the Angels is to bring the power back to the people.

"It gives you a sense of empowerment, a sense that you're really doing something for the community," explains Michael LaPlante.

So, have they helped? Both police and the angels say it's too soon to tell, since they've only been patrolling for a couple of months.

Currently there are about a dozen members and the Guardian Angels are actively recruiting. They're also willing to just teach people self-defense.

The Angels aren't the only ones fighting back in the community. United Way is creating a community gang initiative which should start this month. For more information on the initiative or how to join the Guardian Angels, [click here](#).



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