

'Angels' take on sex workers

GLYNNIS UNDERHILL | CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA - Jan 22 2010 10:42

The Cape Town council is opening a training academy for neighbourhood watches and the local chapter of the American red-beret Guardian Angels, a controversial volunteer organisation that is trying to clear the streets of prostitutes.

And about 20 Guardian Angels from across the world are expected to fly into Cape Town to patrol the city in a bid to prevent crime during the World Cup. Sex workers are gearing up for an influx of clients during the tournament.

Both People Opposing Women Abuse (Powa) and the Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Task Force (Sweat) have expressed alarm about the city working with an organisation that they believe sees sex workers through a moral lens and not from a human rights perspective.

There are also fears that the Guardian Angels programme will encourage vigilantism.

The Parow group of the International Alliance of Guardian Angels claims to have reduced prostitution in the area by up to 80%. Charl Viljoen, a city employee and the city's spokesperson for the Guardian Angels and neighbourhood watches, takes pride in the achievement.

Viljoen said that the Guardian Angels scared off "pay-for-play" clients by photographing them and trying to talk to them about the health risks.

"When the flashes go off, clients flee. They're most concerned about anonymity and they don't want their wives to find out," he said.

"We aren't concerned with what goes on behind closed doors at escort agencies, but we believe street prostitution finances the gangs and drugs."

The council sent Viljoen to New York in 2005 to train with the Guardian Angels, unarmed citizen crime patrollers who have provoked both controversy and acclaim. In the past year Cape Town's partnership with the Guardian Angels has quietly expanded, with Viljoen training chapters in Parow, Ocean View, Kuils River and Gordons Bay.

Training courses involve first aid and martial arts because "angels" often make citizen's arrests while waiting for police.

Chapters have also opened in Durban and Potchefstroom.

The Guardian Angels was launched in the early 1980s by New Yorker Curtis Silwa, a high school dropout who was fed up with the city's crime, especially on subways. The New York newspapers were full of the group's crime-busting exploits.

But as Silwa and his private army began grabbing headlines, there were misgivings. Mayor Ed Koch denounced them as "paramilitaries", but the city eventually opened up negotiations and began working with them. The Cape Town municipality has given Viljoen offices for a training academy in Parow, but he said: "The Guardian Angels do not need much funding, as their work is voluntary."

Curbing prostitution is just one of the group's concerns, said Viljoen, who insisted that creating role models for youth is a key focus. He said no member had ever been accused of committing an act of violence.

Overseas volunteers expected to arrive for the World Cup would pay their own air fares, he said, but would be fed from the city's coffers and housed in the Parow offices.

The work of the Guardian Angels during the tournament would focus on keeping tourists safe.

Sweat's Vivienne Lalu has asked the Women's Legal Resources Centre to investigate the city's partnership with the Guardian Angels.

Lalu said Cape Town's special vice squad continues to arrest prostitutes.

Last year Sweat won a court interdict stopping the police from repeatedly arresting prostitutes when they knew they would not be prosecuted.

The city has appealed against the judgment, but the interdict has been suspended.

"Sex workers are anticipating increased business during the World Cup and hoping, like everyone else, to make some more money," said Lalu.

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