

# Sliwa to Angels: Be ready

WILKES-BARRE - City streets were dotted with extra sets of volunteer sentinels Saturday as the Guardian Angels hosted their regional conference.

More than 65 members from chapters of the group, a volunteer anti-crime coalition, gathered from around the Northeast to patrol the streets and meet with Guardian Angels founder Curtis Sliwa.

Sliwa's message to those members was simple: Be ready to be called upon.

Law enforcement agencies around the country are seeing their ranks thinned and crime prevention pared back as state and local budgets wither, he said before meeting members.

With federal stimulus funding ceasing next year, he said members need to know police and communities will be looking for ways to address crime while pinching pennies.

"I'm trying to gear them up for the reality that people will be reaching out to them," he said. "The demand is going to be greater. They've got to be ready, and they can't disappoint. We're no longer the last option in the food chain."

For its part, the city's chapter, founded in 2008, has managed to establish a toe hold, its membership fluctuating between eight to 15 people based on the season, said regional leader Scott Koppenhofer. Sliwa's presence and increased ranks on the street had the potential to help boost the chapter's numbers, he said.

"It's not going to hurt it," he said. "We always have a harder time in the winter months. When the weather starts breaking, people tend to come out."

Recently, those efforts to get residents involved have been difficult, said Kristen Kusinow, a sergeant in the group.

"We need members bad," she said. "We're always giving out fliers. People always ask what we do, we give them fliers and we never hear from them again."

Meanwhile, the group still has yet to get a response after efforts to reach out to Mayor Tom Leighton and police Chief Gerard Dessoie. For the past two years, the group hasn't secured a sit-down conversation with either official.

Despite being rebuffed, Koppenhofer said there are no hard feelings between the group and the city.

"There hasn't been anything negative back and forth," he said. "We're doing our thing, they're doing there thing."

A fledgling chapter in Hazleton, established a year ago, is also scrounging for members, recently adding enough people with proper training to begin considering patrols.

Harold Michael, who is one of those trainees, said he doesn't know why residents have been hesitant to join. The chapter has the backing of Hazleton police, city council and Mayor Lou Barletta, he said.

Still, bolstering membership is tough.

"People have their different reasons, maybe they're just afraid," he said. "It's a tough battle, but we're slowly chipping (away) at it."

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