

Broke and Battle-Scarred, D.C.'s Guardian Angels Scrounge for Cash

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The D.C. Guardian Angels have put out a call via email for more members and donations.

The citizen crime fighters are revving up to, among other things, continue patrolling Metro this summer.

As founding member John Ayala points out in an email, riders could certainly use the safeguarding:

"In the month of May, there was a 17 yr old shot on a metro bus, a grandmother ass[a]ulted on a metro bus, a 15 yr old girl sexually ass[a]ulted outside a metro station, a 21 yr old man was fatally stabbed at a metro station and there have been several fights on Metro buses and trains and the summer has not begun."

Ayala says this summer the Angels will be keeping an eye on on both trains and buses, and also conducting "foot patrols in Chinatown, Anacostia and other places throughout the city."

If you're not familiar with the do-gooder group, it consists of trained volunteers, armed with nothing but radios, who help out cops when they need it, break up fights, and generally protect those who need protecting. All while wearing a red beret.

Unfortunately for Ayala and crew, they'll likely be doing so completely broke. That's no exaggeration. Ayala tells City Desk: "Our account in DC is actually zero."

Ayala founded the local Guardian Angel chapter 21 years ago, when drugs and violence plagued D.C. streets with an intensity that makes many who experienced that time shudder.

One reason the organization is broke, he says, is that in the two decades they've been fighting for DC, the city hasn't given the group a single dime.

Ayala says he's tried to get money from the District in the past but was discouraged by all the "red tape" he has to go through.

That the city has never chipped in to help the Guardian Angels would seem amazing, as the bereted criminal stoppers have rarely shied away from putting themselves on the line for their city. Ayala has a wound to prove it.

Back in the 90s, when the Angels were running an operation they called "Crack Down on Crack," Ayala took an ice pick to the back.

"We got into a big throwdown," he recalls of the incident in Southwest D.C. Around the same time, he says, another Angel was clobbered with a baseball bat, and had to have a steel rod put in his arm.

Still, none of the blood spilled by Angels has earned them any cash.

Ayala says it's been hard to get by. The Angels can't afford an office right now, and have a hard time paying for uniforms. New recruits need to be outfitted with pants, t-shirts, and boots, plus a jacket with the angel logo on it.

The cost can run more than a \$100 per recruit. Ayala once hoped to cover the expense through citizen donations, but that hope has fallen flat.

The last public donation the group got was for \$200, he says, and that was a year ago. That means the expense of getting a uniform and paying bus and train fares comes out of the pocket of the individual crime fighter. "Sometimes it discourages the guys who go on patrol," says Ayala.

Despite the shallow pockets, Ayala sometimes thinks the lack of public funding is a blessing, considering

how other nonprofits have gotten millions from the city, and squandered it. "The guys are messing it up for other nonprofits," says Ayala.

It's obvious that Ayala is talking about the Peaceaholics organization, an anti-violence group made up of reformed criminals. The organization--which works with at-risk youth--has enjoyed municipal support in the form of multiple grants.

Ayala says the Angels have run similar programs for youth without getting much support for it. He says the Angels have done school presentations that teach youth about issues like bullying and date rape. Ayala scoffs at the idea that the ex-offenders have supposedly been given so much help because, regarding violence, "they've been there."

"Well, we're Angels," he says, "We've been there, too."