

Newly formed civilian patrol attracts 16 members

By Steve Reilly • sreilly@gannett.com • June 12, 2010, 6:35 pm

BINGHAMTON -- There's a new watchdog ready to roam the city's streets, and it wears a red beret.

The Binghamton chapter of Guardian Angels, an unarmed civilian defense group, officially formed this week, after local martial arts instructor Bill Doheny received a flood of responses following media reports of his request for volunteers.

Doheny said the 16 members who have joined the group so far come from all walks of life, but they all share a common cause -- deterring crime by putting extra eyes and ears on the city's streets.

"I just want to help out the community and make it a better place for people to live without having to worry about bad people there, and get the place cleaned up," said Billy Haynes, 19. "There have been a lot of problems."

Tariq Gillespie-Speller, a 21-year-old college psychology student whose father served in the Long Island chapter of the group, said he is "always interested in finding ways to serve the community."

"It's something that always interested me," said Gillespie-Speller, who is also a volunteer firefighter. "As soon as I found out they might be opening a local chapter, I was right along with it."

Doheny said the angels would patrol troubled streets in groups of four, each looking in a different direction. While most members would have martial arts or security experience, physical confrontation would be an absolute last resort.

Although the group has the approval of the national Alliance of Guardian Angels, it has yet to receive the city's blessing.

While some chapters across the country work alongside local law enforcement, others lack the approval of police departments and must act on their own.

"We feel our police are doing a great job, and it shows in the reduction in crime in the last year in Binghamton," said Andrew Block, executive assistant to the mayor. "But we're always looking for ways to make our community safer, and will continue to do so."

The Guardian Angels are planning to set up a meeting with city officials so they can provide information on their operations and intentions.

In the meantime, the legion of new members has already begun training as a group to patrol the city's streets.

"You really can't go wrong; it'll be a good thing," said Mark Christiansen, 26. "It's going to be a big deterrent."