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Philadelphia police chief seeks 10,000 black men to patrol violence-plagued streets

The Associated Press

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PHILADELPHIA: The city's embattled police chief, acknowledging that police alone cannot quell a run of deadly violence, has called on 10,000 men to patrol the streets to reduce crime.

Sylvester Johnson says black men, in particular, have a duty to protect more vulnerable residents. He wants each volunteer to pledge to work three hours a day for at least 90 days.

"We are definitely encouraging black men to be involved in it," Johnson told The Associated Press on Thursday. "We have an obligation to give back. We have an obligation to protect our women, our children, our elderly."

But Johnson said he would not turn away men of other races.

"We have to put the tourniquet where we're bleeding at this point," he said. "We're not restricting anybody."

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The program's backers include Dennis Muhammad, a former official with the Nation of Islam, a black Muslim group, who has been hired by police departments in Detroit, Syracuse, New York, and other cities to conduct community-sensitivity training.

Philadelphia, the sixth-largest U.S. city, has nearly 1.5 million residents, 44 percent of them black. It has notched 294

homicides this year. More than 80 percent of the slayings involve handguns, and most involve young black males.

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Johnson plans to introduce the "Call to Action: 10,000 Men, It's a New Day" program on Oct. 21, three months before his planned retirement.

"He won't get anywhere near that number. If he gets 1,000 people, it will be great," said Heather DeRussy, who leads a local Guardian Angels chapter that has recruited just seven members in the past two years for its volunteer street patrols. Given its size, the group focuses on a single north Philadelphia park plagued by prostitution and drug use.

DeRussy lauded Johnson for his effort but said she fears the volunteers will find it dangerous to patrol their home turf.

"In their own neighborhoods, with the 'Don't snitch' mentality, they're kind of putting themselves in harm's way, because there are going to be people who disagree with what they're doing," DeRussy said.

The men who join Johnson's program will not carry weapons or make arrests but will instead emphasize conflict resolution, similar to the Guardian Angels' ground rules.

Police in other cities have hired Muhammad in recent years to provide sensitivity training to officers and community members, but it was not immediately clear whether any have deployed a volunteer patrol force.

Johnson, who has led the police department for seven years, appears increasingly frustrated by the daily gun violence. He and other city leaders have blamed the Legislature for not passing gun-control measures.

Mayor John F. Street, whose term is up at the beginning of 2008, has voiced support for the program, but it was not clear whether he would become involved. His office did not return a call for comment Thursday.

Street and Johnson have both endured withering criticism from frustrated residents and community leaders who say they should do more to halt the violence.

One gun-violence researcher said the idea of putting citizens on patrol had the potential to show children that adults care.

"A steady exposure to violence just creates this toxic environment for children and youth. As adults, we don't want them to think they have to handle it on their own," said Rose Cheney, executive director of the Firearm and Injury Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

"If, by putting people out there — not just as a town watch, but as resources who connect them to what they need from adults — that can be very promising," she said.

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