'This is your block'



With a phalanx of police officers at her back, 23rd Ward Ald. Silvana Tabares urges neighbors to get more involved in the fight against crime. --Greater Southwest News-Herald photo by Mary Hadac

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Police stand with neighbors against gangs

By Tim Hadac

A handful of West Elsdon neighbors who say they've sometimes felt alone in fighting gang intimidation, were joined by dozens of police officers, their alderman, a Protestant minister, three Catholic nuns and several crime fighters from other neighborhoods earlier this week.

Even while short-handed due to a barricade situation in the 3900 block of West 63rd Street, nearly 20 police officers and sergeants stood with neighbors at 57th Place and Hamlin at 7 p.m. Monday for an outdoor roll call—a police tactic frequently used to put criminals on notice that they're being watched.

Speaking on behalf of Chicago Lawn (8th) District Commander Brian McDermott—who was at the barricade scene—CPD Sergeant Thomas Gorman told the assembled neighbors that police are "aware of the problem house on this block and aware that the gangbangers are out here and they will not be intimidating you…this is not their block. This is *your* block."

The reputed gang members on the block "have our undivided attention now, for your protection," he added.

The several young men who allegedly have been causing a nuisance were nowhere to be seen, neighbors said—but several dozen of their family members and friends were on hand in what appeared to be a show of defiance.

They sat on the front steps of a two-flat and spilled onto a front lawn and public parkway—many glaring at the neighbors who had asked for police protection. Nearly to a person, they refused to applaud for police when others did—and most refused to accept placards showing support for first responders.

Several also declined to talk with a reporter, but one was overheard denying that a problem exists and claiming that the controversy all stems from anti-Latino bigotry of several white people on the block.

But about half of the neighbors complaining about the reputed gang members, are themselves Hispanic men and women.

"This is about what's right and what's wrong—nothing more," said Ester Flores, who lives near 57th Place and Hamlin. "These gangbangers can hide behind [allegations of bigotry] all they want. But those of us who live here know better. I moved here from Brighton Park to get away from gangs, and I'll tell you I'm through running. The police are right. This *is* our neighborhood. These gangbangers have to go."

According to several people on the block, the several young men causing trouble typically hang out on the front steps of a two-flat, throwing gang signs at passersby —but rapidly retreating to their back yard when police are called.

Bob Stanek, a lifelong Southwest Sider who with his wife, Mary, has been a homeowner on the block for 35 years, said that the neighborhood is no stranger to gang activity and occasional gang violence, "but when you have to live right next to it, that's a different story," he said.

Stanek said that neighbors have contacted the two-flat's owner (a North Side man) to see about getting the reputed gang members evicted, "but he didn't want to have anything to do with it. He ran away from the problem."

Mary Stanek heaped praise upon Eighth District Police, calling them "awesome" and thanking them for their ongoing scrutiny of the goings-on at the block.

Providing leadership at the roll call was 23rd Ward Ald. Silvana Tabares, who mustered several rounds of applause for police and urged everyone to get more active in the fight against crime—starting by attending the National Night Out observance at West Lawn Park, set for the following evening.

She said she is doubly concerned about reports of gang intimidation on the block because it is directly across the street from Peck Elementary School—and school will soon be back in session.

Among those traveling to the block to support neighbors in their fight for law and order were West Elsdon civic advocates Sharon and George Maslona, Clearing Night Force team leader Judy Ollry and Garfield Ridge resident Al Cacciottolo, best known as president of the Garfield Ridge Neighborhood Watch but at the roll call in his day job as Streets and Sanitation chief of the 23rd Ward.