

New numbers say downtown is now safer

Break and enters reduced

By Matt Preprost

DOWNTOWN workers and merchants have a reason to feel safer this summer.

The number of commercial and residential break and enters in the downtown has dropped by 23 per cent during the first five months of 2009 compared to the same period the previous year, according to the Winnipeg Police Service's CrimeStat.

Stefano Grande, executive director of the Downtown Winnipeg Business Improvement Zone, said his downtown watch program is helping put downtown shoppers, residents, and merchants at ease.

"When groups like us respond to issues with police, positive things happen," Grande said. "The downtown has become a much safer place because of our program."

The BIZ Downtown Watch program was launched in 1995 to help police monitor and take back control of the downtown area.

You can't miss the watch patrol. Dressed in black safety vests stuffed underneath bright red jackets, unarmed but carrying handcuffs, up to 10 watch ambassadors patrol the downtown streets during the day. The patrol involves five different beats, making sure that north of Main Street, the downtown core, The Forks and Broadway are covered.

Behind the BIZ's headquarters on Portage Avenue across from Portage Place Shopping Centre sits the mobile outreach patrol unit — a behemoth customized van stocked with medical and personal supplies.

Between the mobile unit and the foot patrol, the BIZ's Downtown Watch acts as extra eyes and ears for emer-

gency services, taking the homeless off the street and helping intoxicated people get to detox.

"We're not here to replace the Winnipeg police," said Chad Kendel, supervisor of the safety and outreach program.

Since its inception, the Downtown Watch has handled more than 6,000 calls and has saved the city an estimated \$5 million.

"All of a sudden, you've got all these resources to handle more important calls," Grande said. "Instead of responding to intoxicated individuals, they're able to respond to something more serious."

Kendel, a sociology graduate from the University of Winnipeg, started as a volunteer with the BIZ in 2004. Many of the young people he works with on patrol would like to become police officers.

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It's a Thursday afternoon, and Kendel and his patrol partner Lisa McIntyre have been patrolling downtown for the past 45 minutes.

Positive trend

Break and enters downtown:

Commercial:

Jan. 1, 2008-June 1, 2008: 153

Jan. 1, 2009-June 1, 2009: 116

Change: -24 per cent

Residential:

Jan. 1, 2008-June 1, 2008: 68

Jan. 1, 2009-June 1, 2009: 55

Change: -19 per cent

— Source: CrimeStat, WPS



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Chad Kendel and patrol partner Lisa McIntyre walk the beat near Portage Avenue.

The van pulls into a back alley and around to the Salvation Army on Main Street. It's cloudy and windy, and a small crowd is huddled outside the doors.

Kendel and McIntyre make their way across Main Street and search the corners of alleyways beside the construction site of the new Winnipeg Regional Health Authority building. Everything's clear — no one sleeping under makeshift structures, no one rummaging through the big blue garbage bins.

In the midst of the search, a call comes in on Kendel's radio. The street patrol has found a man slumped against the window of Staples just outside of Portage Place. He is on the verge of passing out.

Ten minutes later the patrol pulls up at the intersection of Portage Avenue and Vaughan Street. They're the first responders on the scene.

Kendel and McIntyre kneel down beside the man, who is lethargic and

says he's in pain.

"Squeeze my hand as tight as you can," Kendel instructs, checking for signs the man might have had a stroke.

"It's important to determine what that person might be suffering from," Kendel says. "We need to make sure we don't confuse something like diabetic shock with intoxication."

Fire paramedics show up five minutes later and take over. By the time Kendel and McIntyre file their report and leave the scene, the fire paramedics have strapped the man to a board, and are waiting for an ambulance to arrive.

"Our involvement at the onset is important," Kendel says afterward. "The man was in a lot of pain and trouble. Who knows how long he would have been there without anyone else noticing. This highlights the importance of what we do."

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