

## New downtown hotline aims to curb troublemakers

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Residents, visitors and companies of downtown Winnipeg now have a hotline they can call to report aggressive panhandlers, drunks and other non-emergencies as part of a wider effort to clean up the neighbourhood.

Stakeholders in the Downtown BIZ strategy say they want to make the area safer and change people's perceptions so they feel comfortable downtown.

"If people don't feel they're safe in a certain area they're not going to come," said Winnipeg police Chief Keith McCaskill, who supports the business-led initiative. "There's no secret there is crime (downtown), but overall it's not a bad area."

Since McCaskill became chief of police in late 2007, he's touted the need for community groups to take ownership of their neighbourhoods and work with police.

By calling 958-SAFE (7233) or #SAFE on an MTS cellphone, Downtown Watch ambassadors will respond to the non-emergency. People can request a safe walk or report things like unruly behaviour.

The service operates 24 hours Tuesday to Saturday and 7:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Sundays and Mondays.

People must still call 911 for emergencies.

"Our goal is to ultimately create an even safer downtown ... where people can feel safe and welcome walking the streets at any time of day or night," said Stefano Grande, executive director of Downtown BIZ, at a news conference yesterday.

"We know already we can reduce crime through this program," he said afterwards. "This is more than a policing problem. This is a community problem. We have to work together to figure it out."

The hotline is part of the wider Downtown Security Network, a BIZ initiative to link companies and organizations and their security teams. More than 80 have signed up. The network allows members to exchange information about crimes and safety concerns to improve arrest rates and prevent crime.

In one case, security from Cityplace alerted security at MTS Centre about a shoplifter, who was tracked on the venue's video surveillance system, helping police to arrest the person, said Kevin Donnelly, senior vice-president and general manager of MTS Centre and chair of the Downtown BIZ safety committee.

Officials say they hope to see more examples of that as the program progresses and more members come on board.

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