

DOWNTOWN BIZ

Workers making streets safer

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By Aldo Santin

AN innovative pilot project has transformed the ugly spectacle of intoxicated street persons causing a scene downtown to a thing of the past, the spokesman for the area's business community says.

Stefano Grande, executive director of the Downtown Business Improvement Zone, said staff on the Downtown Watch Outreach program have established a reputation of dealing quickly and efficiently with intoxicated street people.

Grande said it used to take police on average 65 minutes to remove an intoxicated person, but members of the Downtown Watch can do the job in less than 11 minutes.

Grande said not only do the Watch Outreach members respond quicker but in the past year they've developed contacts with the relevant support groups to ensure street people in trouble get the appropriate help they need.

"We've demonstrated that the business community has been able to better manage this issue," Grande said. "The next step is to get these people off the street permanently."

The red-and-black uniformed patrol began in 1995 as sidewalk ambassadors.

However, two years ago the BIZ convinced the province and city hall the Watch could do a better job of hustling drunken homeless people off the sidewalks to a shelter or other accommodations.

Money was found to hire 10 additional staffers as peace officers with the authority to arrest individuals. Grande said the result has been a win for the public, downtown businesses as well as police, firefighters and paramedics.

Incidents during the past year have shown the Watch Outreach staff do more than hustle the drunks, Grande said, adding some individuals who've been mistakenly believed to be drunk were later discovered to have been suffering from medical conditions that Watch members were able to help.

"We'd rather have the police solving crimes rather than dealing with people who are intoxicated," Grande said.

The outreach component is finishing the second year of a three-year experiment.

Grande said that while the program has proven successful, it's too early to remind civic and provincial leaders the program should continue to receive funding.

Grande said the Downtown BIZ is instead working with government officials to develop a strategy to eradicate the social conditions that lead individuals to living on the street.