

Residents, police can stop crime By MARTIN ALAN GREENBERG

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The random slaying of 10-year-old Kathina Thomas shocked many Times Union readers and may have stirred some West Hill residents into civic action. In fact, a few Albany-area residents already have promised to reclaim their gang- and drug-infested neighborhoods. Governmental leaders, however, have noted that in recent months there has been a consistent pattern among city residents of refusing to provide necessary information so that the police and prosecutors can do their jobs. Read more

If this pattern continues, there appears little likelihood that this tragedy will become the hoped-for catalyst for the establishment of law and order in West Hill. It was only 16 months ago that Kathina's family moved from Guyana to Albany, in part, because of the opportunities an American education would give her. Ironically, on the same day of her May 29 slaying, the city of Albany initiated "Operation Impact," an anti-crime program that places State Police troopers in Albany's high-crime neighborhoods to augment local police efforts. The program targets gang members, drug dealers and people wanted on old warrants. Since the shooting, news stories and several editorials have been published in the Times Union. More than 110 reader comments have appeared on the newspaper's Web site. Many of the opinions expressed include references to specific ideas for dealing with crime in the streets. The ideas range from tearing down the abandoned buildings along First Street to making better use of the state Witness Protection program by informing the community how, if need be, entire families can be relocated. One writer with significant big city police experience emphasized the need to form two special four-person teams of police that would target area crimes and would make greater use of the existing laws permitting the stopping and questioning of suspicious people. Ideally, these teams would supplement those units of city police, state troopers and U.S. marshals who already are being deployed to find bail absconders and other people who are wanted for serious and gang-related crimes. In high crime areas, though, there really is no substitute for the "community policing approach" that requires the formation of partnerships between the police and the community. Community policing includes officers who walk the streets and become more knowledgeable about residents and local conditions while attempting to improve relationships between the minority community and the city police. Such an approach is also exemplified by "Project Ceasefire," the Chicago program that uses ex-convicts to encourage youths to forgo violence and by the Rochester crisis intervention team that mobilizes hospital counselors, clergy and social workers to develop safety plans for young victims. In Rochester, victims 18 or younger are not released from the hospital until such a plan is in place as a way to prevent future acts of revenge. Effective violence prevention in West Hill will require a joint city and county effort, because each level of government offers services that are essential to success. Since 2004, the city of Oakland and Alameda County in California have engaged in a partnership initiative that seeks to create safe neighborhoods in Oakland. It focuses on the traditional approaches to crime reduction through law enforcement efforts as well as an emphasis on reducing those factors that are directly correlated with high rates of violence in communities. Those factors include the lack of economic opportunity and constructive activities for youth, blight and physical deterioration, and the absence of strong networks among community residents. "Community building coordinators" in each neighborhood help residents to organize and become involved in developing their own violence prevention plans and community improvement projects. The coordinators also link families to a range of services -- such as job training, after-school youth activities and crisis response for families affected by violence. Such initiatives need to be implemented and maintained until West Hill has been made peaceable. At the same time, programs for both parents and students need to be implemented to teach that violence is both "cowardly and selfish," as one newspaper reader phrased it. One person who posted a response on the Times Union Web site pointed out that a police residency requirement might "go a long way to accountability in the neighborhoods." Unfortunately, union pressure is likely to prevent that from being mandated. But the city could set up an "urban homestead program" for local and state peace

officers. Under such a program, those with peace officer duties are given significant discounts toward the purchase of homes in distressed neighborhoods. Several of the many ideas mentioned on the Web site require additional human resources. Auxiliary police, for example, are citizen volunteers who aid police after careful screening and training. Well-trained and qualified specialized auxiliary police units could assist in the staffing of hospital crisis teams; serve as community building coordinators; present violence prevention courses; and help to educate the public about victim services (including witness protection). Where such auxiliary police units have been recruited in urban areas, relationships between police and minority communities have been significantly improved. Martin Alan Greenberg is an assistant professor of criminal justice at The College of Saint Rose and the author of several community crime prevention books including "Citizens Defending America: From Colonial Times to the Age of Terrorism." He was formerly an auxiliary police deputy inspector and a senior court officer in New York City.
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