Citizens to hold rally, take step toward armed patrols of Hartford Saturday

Christine Dempsey, Staff writer

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Concerned citizens will gather at Unity Plaza in Hartford Saturday -- where a driveby shooting killed one man and wounded another this summer -- to participate in an anti-violence rally and to launch patrols by armed civilians.

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Many members of the group will be openly carrying guns when they arrive at Unity Plaza in the North End as they take a step toward launching regular armed patrols. Their goal is to prevent further gun violence in a city that had 28 homicides this year — 16 since Memorial Day.

Participants will include Cornell Lewis’ Self-Defense Brigade, Lewis said Friday. Members of the Huey P. Newton Gun Club, named after Black Panther Party co-founder Huey P. Newton, and the Connecticut John Brown Gun Club, which calls itself a “liberatory community armed self-defense” group, also may attend, he said.

Lewis said city residents, specifically Tracy Funnye, a candidate for mayor, approached him with the idea of citizen patrols. Funnye is the main organizer, he said.

“Basically, the community contacted me, saying, they don’t feel safe in the community,” Lewis said. “They embrace the concept of legal, armed community patrols.”

“The purpose of tomorrow is to signal a new direction for the community. That’s the purpose,” he added. "And the purpose also is to demonstrate that people have a right to carry arms at these events and to have community
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After the rally, people who will be legally armed, will walk the streets, Lewis said.

“They will meet with us tomorrow and learn how we operate,” he said. “We will train them.”

One of the things he teaches is how to calmly deescalate a tense situation instead of immediately reaching for a gun, Lewis said.

Asked if he will check to be sure people have permits for their guns, he said no.

“The people who travel with me are on the up and up,” Lewis said. “We all have our permits. This is not some rag-tag group of people we put together with guns.”

He said the group will not be openly carrying guns after Oct. 1 when a new law prohibiting the practice goes into effect.

Funnyle said Saturday's event isn't just about armed patrols. There will be face painting for children and a truck with video games, she said.

A representative of Access Health will be on hand to help people sign up for health care coverage, she said. And she reached out to a pastor to say a prayer.
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Christine Dempsey is a breaking news reporter with Hearst Connecticut Media Group. Christine is a veteran reporter with decades of experience at newspapers in Connecticut and New York, including The Bristol Press, the Journal Inquirer and The Hartford Courant. She has covered everything from town meetings and light features to breaking news. She has ridden in patrol cars and even bicycled with officers to better learn how police do their jobs. She has won awards for her crime stories, tales of heroic rescues and for chronicling the lives of people experiencing homelessness. She loves to tell a good narrative story.

As long as they are operating within the law.

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Reaching Christine on

A man, 22, was fatally shot there in a drive-by shooting on July 18, police said. A man who was with him was shot as well. The second man survived, police said, as did a man who was with him nearby on July 31.

Lt. Aaron Boisvert, police department spokesperson, said, “I can tell you that they have second amendment rights like the rest of us.”

Asked what police think of citizens doing armed patrols to discourage gun violence, Lt. Aaron Boisvert, police department spokesperson, said, “I can tell you that they as they are operating within the law.”

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