

washingtonpost.com

D.C. Police to Check Drivers In Violence-Plagued Trinidad

By Allison Klein
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, June 5, 2008; A01

[D.C. Police Chief Cathy L. Lanier](#) announced a military-style checkpoint yesterday to stop cars this weekend in a Northeast Washington neighborhood inundated by gun violence, saying it will help keep criminals out of the area.

Starting on Saturday, officers will check drivers' identification and ask whether they have a "legitimate purpose" to be in the Trinidad area, such as going to a doctor or church or visiting friends or relatives. If not, the drivers will be turned away.

The Neighborhood Safety Zone initiative is the latest crime-fighting attempt by Lanier and [Mayor Adrian M. Fenty](#), who have been under pressure from residents to stop a recent surge in violence. Last weekend was especially bloody, with seven slayings, including three in the Trinidad area.

"In certain areas, we need to go beyond the normal methods of policing," Fenty (D) said at a news conference announcing the action. "We're going to go into an area and completely shut it down to prevent shootings and the sale of drugs."

The checkpoint will stop vehicles approaching the 1400 block of Montello Avenue NE, a section of the Trinidad neighborhood that has been plagued with homicides and other violence. Police will search cars if they suspect the presence of guns or drugs, and will arrest people who do not cooperate, under a charge of failure to obey a police officer, officials said.

The enforcement will take place at random hours and last for at least five days in Trinidad, with the option of extending it five more days. Checkpoints could be set up in other neighborhoods if they are requested by patrol commanders and approved by Lanier.

The strategy, patterned after a similar effort conducted years ago in New York, is not airtight. There are many ways to get in and out of Trinidad, not just on the one-way Montello Avenue. And pedestrians will not be stopped, which is something critics say might render the program ineffective.

"I guess the plan is to hope criminals will not walk into neighborhoods," said [D.C. Council member Phil Mendelson](#) (D-At Large). "I also suppose the plan is to take the criminal's word for it when he or she gives the police a reason for driving into a neighborhood."

Since taking over as chief in December 2006, Lanier has struggled with the issue of violent crime. She has added patrols, revived a unit specializing in getting guns off the streets and changed commanders in six of the city's seven patrol districts. Last weekend, officers were close enough in one case that they heard the barrage of gunfire coming from a triple homicide on Holbrook Street in Trinidad.

Advertisement



The program is aimed at the city's most troubled areas. The 5th Police District, which includes Trinidad, has had 22 killings this year, one more than all of last year. Since April 1, the Trinidad neighborhood has had seven homicides, 16 robberies and 20 assaults with dangerous weapons, according to police data. In many cases in Trinidad and across the city, gunshots are fired from passing cars, victims are found in cars or cars are used to make fast getaways.

"We have to try to take away the things that are facilitating the ability to commit crime," Lanier said.

Leaders of the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) said yesterday that they will be watching what happens closely and that legal action is likely.

"My reaction is, welcome to Baghdad, D.C.," said Arthur Spitzer, legal director for the ACLU's Washington office. "I mean, this is craziness. In this country, you don't have to show identification or explain to the police why you want to travel down a public street."

Interim Attorney General [Peter J. Nickles](#) said that his office reviewed the initiative and that similar efforts had survived court tests.

"I don't anticipate us being sued," Nickles said. "But if you do want to sue us, the courts are open."

U.S. Attorney [Jeffrey A. Taylor](#) said that D.C. officials consulted his office about their plans and that prosecutors suggested some changes to try to ensure that any arrests would hold up in court. "We applaud the District's efforts to make neighborhoods safer," Taylor said. "Whatever we do has to be consistent with the Constitution."

New York police set up a nearly identical checkpoint in 1992 in a neighborhood of the Bronx that was plagued by drug dealing and drive-by shootings. Police ran the Watson Avenue Special Operation on a random basis, mostly in evening hours. Officers stopped drivers, but not pedestrians, coming into the area, to confirm that they had a legitimate reason to be there.

A federal appeals court upheld the legality of the New York effort, saying in a 1996 ruling that it "served an important public concern" and was "reasonably viewed as an effective mechanism to deter crime in the barricaded area."

D.C. police have used various forms of checkpoints for years. In 1988, for example, they blocked streets and searched courtyards in a pair of apartment complexes in Northeast Washington in a bid to drive out drug dealers. That move came during the crack cocaine epidemic, in a year when the city recorded 372 homicides. Last year, the city had 181 killings.

Former D.C. police chief Isaac Fulwood Jr., who led the department from 1989 until 1992, said he liked using checkpoints because his officers were able to make arrests and gather intelligence.

"They are effective. You recover stolen cars and firearms," Fulwood said. "You've got to have a lot of them if you're going to have them. You need to move as the criminal element shifts."

Some residents expressed support for the plan yesterday, saying they are willing to submit to the checks if it makes the neighborhood safer. "We can't endure any more homicides," said neighborhood activist India Henderson.

But others said they were disappointed police have not developed relationships that would allow them to

gather information and find criminals without resorting to the stepped-up tactics.

"I knew eventually we'd be a police state," said Wilhelmina Lawson, who has lived in the neighborhood for 20 years. "They don't talk to us, they're not community minded."

One of Lanier's plans, the Safe Homes initiative, has yet to get off the ground because of a community backlash. The plan, announced by Lanier and Fenty at a news conference in March, called for police to go door-to-door in crime-ridden areas and ask residents whether they could go inside and search for guns. Residents and some council members voiced concerns that homeowners would feel intimidated by police. Lanier backed off, but said she plans to move forward soon by having residents call police to set up appointments.

Another plan, to arm hundreds of patrol officers with semiautomatic rifles, starting this summer, also got mixed reviews from residents.

[Kristopher Baumann](#), head of the D.C. police lodge of the Fraternal Order of Police, said he was concerned about public perception of the checkpoints and the potential that it could lead to more citizen complaints. He questioned Lanier's overall approach, saying, "There is no strategy and no mid-term and long-term planning."

"That's the biggest disappointment of Chief Lanier's tenure," Baumann said. "One thing we were excited about and optimistic about was, for once, we'd have strategies to combat crime and not just be reactive. But we haven't seen it. It's been a year and a half."

Council member [Harry Thomas Jr.](#) (D-Ward 5), who represents Trinidad and other parts of Northeast Washington, said he had informal discussions with Lanier in which she had mentioned the possibility of the checkpoint announced yesterday, but he got little notice before the news conference. Civil liberties are always a concern, said Thomas, who maintained that residents are so concerned about violence that they will be willing to give the latest program a try.

"I think the general consensus is that we have to do something because people live in fear," he said. "What would you rather have?" he asked. "A positive pattern of [police] checking things . . . or these folks who come into the community and wreak havoc?"

Staff writers Marcia Davis, Dan Keating, David Nakamura, Mary Beth Sheridan and Del Quentin Wilber and staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

© 2008 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[Work In Africa](#)

50+ Work In Africa Opportunities Do Something Amazing Today
www.AmanziTravel.co.uk

[Volunteer in South Africa](#)

from 6 to 12 months in national parks
www.gvi.co.uk

[Volunteer Latin America](#)

Low Cost Volunteer Work in Central and South America
www.VolunteerLatinAmerica.com