

## Neighbors take stand against gangs

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By Lauren Frayer

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Members of the Columbia Heights community gathered last night to pledge their support to stop gang violence.

Mayor Anthony A. Williams addressed the meeting, called in response to a wave of gang activity blamed for at least four deaths since mid-July.

Mr. Williams said he was tired of gang violence, and that anyone who commits a crime in the District — even a juvenile — will "pay a price."

Metropolitan Police Chief Charles H. Ramsey called gang violence a vicious cycle that can be broken only with community participation. He encouraged residents to report suspicious graffiti.

The meeting was called by D.C. Council member Adrian M. Fenty, Ward 4 Democrat, who has been critical of Chief Ramsey for focusing resources on downtown, rather than neighborhoods.

Dozens of residents voiced complaints about the way authorities were handling the outbreak of violence.

Bertram Keller, 56, owner of Roberto's Billiards and a community resident, said he was afraid the violence would spill over into his business, which caters to Hispanics.

"This gang violence has become a black mark on the Hispanic community," he said. "But a lot of Salvadorans are hardworking, honest folks. I would like to see more of the Hispanic community come out and protest the violence."

John Ayala, 33, a volunteer for 15 years with the Guardian Angels, said even though his group takes an active role in stopping crime, he sees the problem getting worse.

"At first, it was just neighborhood crews trying to make a fast buck to buy a pair of tennis shoes. But now it's getting a little more organized because of the media. They hear about gangs in New York and L.A., and they want to get on the map."

Exchanges among residents, the chief and the mayor became heated at times, with residents saying authorities weren't doing enough to protect them.

In 2001, 233 murders were reported, compared with 262 last year. In response, Chief Ramsey last month increased the D.C. CrimeSolvers reward for information leading to arrests and indictments in unsolved homicides from \$10,000 to \$25,000.