

South Tucson Launches Community-Led Patrol to Combat Crime, Drug Use, and ICE-Related Concerns

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— Categories: Crime



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In response to persistent crime and drug issues, the City of South Tucson, Arizona, has introduced a new community-based initiative aimed at improving public safety and reducing drug activity. City leaders unveiled the “Defend Nuestro Barrio” campaign on Thursday,

marking a grassroots effort to involve residents in identifying and addressing problems on the streets.

The initiative, which translates to “Defend Our Neighborhood,” will deploy community patrols twice a week over the next month. The program seeks to map out hotspots for drug use, particularly fentanyl, and other criminal activities. South Tucson Mayor Roxanna Valenzuela, in an interview with *13 News*, emphasized the need for local engagement, stating, “We have to put some skin in the game and... take ownership and also hold others accountable.”

Mayor Valenzuela acknowledged the city has long struggled with controlling fentanyl use but has been constrained by limited funding. “There is a huge strain on our budget,” she said. The new initiative is designed to bridge that gap by empowering citizens to take a more active role in community safety.

Community organizers, including Casa Maria’s Pablo Roblas, reported going door-to-door across the city to inform residents about the patrol efforts. Roblas said this direct outreach is intended to improve the program’s chances of success, noting, “We went out and knocked on every single door in South Tucson... that’ll give us more of a chance of success.”

The patrols also aim to connect with the homeless population in the area, many of whom are affected by drug use. Mayor Valenzuela clarified that the city is not seeking to criminalize homelessness, but it will not tolerate disruptive behavior. “What we’re not trying to do here is criminalize homelessness,” she said, “But we are not going to tolerate the disrespect of our community.”

Residents who attended the campaign launch expressed support. “If we don’t do it, it’s just going to get uglier for us,” said long-time resident Gilbert Rivera. “We want to be able to walk in the streets like back in the day.”

However, not everyone is convinced. Some critics voiced concern over how the unhoused will be treated under the program. Roblas responded by saying most unhoused individuals approached offered little feedback and remained neutral. Still, he noted that some gathering areas for drug users are on properties marked with “no trespassing” signs, giving law enforcement grounds for action if needed.

Importantly, city officials clarified that police involvement would be minimal and would only be used as a last resort. The overall tone of the campaign is intended to be inclusive rather than punitive. “They’re real people, they are families, they live in our communities, and our approach is not hostile,” said Mayor Valenzuela.

Another component of the initiative addresses concerns surrounding U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Although few ICE raids have been reported within South Tucson city limits, city officials noted the rising fear among immigrant communities. Police Chief Danny Denogean and Mayor Valenzuela expressed the city’s desire to protect families from what they described as racial targeting. “The fear is very real. Some of our families are hiding,” Valenzuela stated.

In a significant boost to the city’s safety efforts, the Pascua Yaqui Tribe awarded South Tucson a \$1 million donation dedicated to public safety initiatives. Leaders say this funding, paired with the new patrol program, represents a meaningful step toward long-term change.

“We don’t know for sure if this is the best way to go about it,” Roblas admitted, “but until you put it in practice, you don’t know.” The city hopes that by involving its citizens directly, it can make progress where previous efforts fell short.