An aging house at Landis Street and Highland Avenue has become a toehold for San Diego police and residents fighting crime in City Heights.

Located across the street from the embattled City Heights Park, the house is the new location of a satellite police station. Officers hope it will serve as a visible source of police and community assistance, and of the effort to cut crime and enhance the quality of life in the neighborhood.

"We've seen the demographics and economics change for the worse here, and we've seen the crime rate keep going up," police Chief Bob Burgreen said after the dedication of the station Friday. "But we've seen that something like this can change all that immediately."

Those changes were readily apparent after the first satellite station began in a city-owned Normal Heights home on Adams Avenue about a year ago, Burgreen said. A third station is planned for the Uptown District in Hillcrest early next year.

"Right now, this is going to give us security in the park," said Councilman John Hartley, whose district covers City Heights. "That's going to be the basis of a growing partnership with the people in this neighborhood."

It is hoped that the police presence will create a safe zone in the four blocks surrounding the park, which has been the scene of gang activity, drug dealing and assaults, but also provide a rare open space and recreational resource for local residents.

Basically, the house -- which is currently owned by the city as a site for future expansion of the park -- will serve as an office for police officers during the work week. They can process paperwork, conduct interviews and handle complaints from the home's limited office space.

But citizen participation through the use of the Volunteers In Policing group will be the key to the station's success, Hartley said.

Heading up the volunteers at the City Heights station is Bob Cassell, the owner of a local art store who decided to get involved after his store was broken into for the third time.

"The key to this is the citizen request form that people fill out," Cassell said. Residents who see suspicious activity can note the address and what concerns them, and the
neighborhood policing team is responsible for checking out the information and reporting back to the resident within three weeks, he said.

Residents can also have complaints about zoning, health, fire and litter processed through the satellite office, Cassell said. Volunteers will also work to involve residents in various neighborhood-watch programs.

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