

Landlords, Businesses Look To Balance Beefed-Up Security With Friendly Faces

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CHICAGO — Visitors to Chicago's State Street will now be sharing the sidewalks with armed guards as they meander between stores.

Last month, the Chicago Loop Alliance, a group that creates and manages urban experiences to attract tourism and encourage downtown investment, hired two armed security guards to patrol State Street, from Wacker Drive to Congress Parkway, during weekends and select weekday hours.

At a time when the nation is grappling with increasing security in commercial real estate, the Loop Alliance's armed security program is an anomaly.



Building owners and **property managers** are balancing the need for tighter security measures with maintaining the welcoming nature of retail storefronts and office and multifamily lobbies. More often than not, armed security is being eschewed for well-dressed security personnel trained to diffuse situations with communication, not

guns.

Even State Street's armed presence is being presented as a pleasant perk: Chicago Loop Alliance CEO Michael Edwards said the armed security patrols are an extension of his group's ambassador program, which provides enhanced hospitality services and is intended to improve the pedestrian experience for State Street shoppers, office workers and tourists.

Security is evolving as an amenity, Titan Security Executive Vice President David Pack said. Building owners are looking for security to be prepared for emergencies and provide the traditional duties of a doorman or concierge.

“The day of the police-style uniform is gone,” Pack said.



The shift has extended to the physical, as well. Pack said owners are replacing hard security approaches such as metal detectors and magnetometers with fastlane turnstiles, which only allow authorized personnel and guests to pass through. Security personnel are being

trained to provide customer service and handle emergency situations as needed. They are often hailing taxis and ride-shares while maintaining a presence at ground level to handle minor disturbances.

This type of security is costing more time and money.

Operating expenses for Chicago Central Business District office buildings increased 18.7% last year, according to BOMA/Chicago's [2017 economic impact study](#). The median national salary of an armed security guard is \$25,710/year, [Bureau of Labor Statistics data](#) shows.

Pack said wages for entry-level security guards rose 18% in two years. The minimum wage for security at BOMA/Chicago buildings is \$13/hour, and most BOMA/Chicago member buildings try to stay ahead of that, in order to attract the best talent. The outfit alone is a doozy: Class-A properties are paying \$1,200 to \$1,300 per person annually for custom suits, shirts, ties and alterations, Pack said. That is well above the typical "hard look" police-style uniform, which costs approximately \$300 to \$400 per person annually, and even above the traditional basic suit for building security, which costs \$800 to \$900 per person.

"Security ambassadors are the first people tenants and brokers see at a building. As different events happen across the nation, we'll see more training and time being spent on the quality of emergency response plans and the consistency of training given to the staff," Pack said.



Edwards said the Loop Alliance's armed security — a mix of off-duty and retired law enforcement officers and trained private security personnel — was launched to fill in the gaps when law enforcement is stretched thin. Edwards said Loop Alliance member retailers were concerned about slow response times to suspected shoplifting and public disturbance calls.

"We understand their limits. They understand our needs," Edwards said.

The Loop Alliance's safety team is staffed with social workers who can manage relationships and connect people who need social services to groups that provide them. The team also includes retired cops and security personnel who can only detain a suspect until law enforcement arrives and off-duty officers with the power to arrest people suspected of crimes like shoplifting.

Edwards said the program is necessary in Downtown Chicago, which has become a 24/7 live-work-play destination. But armed security on the public way raises liability issues. Block & Associates attorney Jerry Boyle, a regular volunteer with the Chicago Lawyers Guild, said armed guards patrolling State Street give the idea the program is intended to intimidate panhandlers and street performers to move elsewhere, and he worries guards may lack the training to diffuse low-level disturbances and deal with people suffering from mental health and emotional issues.

"A private security guard is the most dangerous person to have on the street because of the lack of qualifications," Boyle said.

Wooten said employees at SWSS are required to undergo 20 hours of firearms training and 20 hours of basic security training, and must requalify annually.

State Street retailers *Bisnow* spoke to are receptive to the program. Andrea Morales, an employee at The Body Shop at 3 North State, [told the Chicago Sun-Times](#) she is excited for the patrols as she has had to deal with disruptive people entering her store in the past.

Guns on the streets, smiles in the lobby



Pack said armed security programs like the Chicago Loop Alliance's are not a trend, but are more site-specific.

Chicago's Noble Square Cooperative, for example, just implemented a new security system that is a different spin on the same theme. The 481-unit housing cooperative in Wicker Park hired Statewide Security and Safety Group in April to reassess its security needs. It determined that a more welcoming presence was needed inside the building, and brought in security personnel who look more like concierges and doormen than police.

"People want to know they have protection at the front door. An armed guard made them feel unsafe," President and CEO Richard Wooten said.

But the armed guards did not go away completely; they now patrol Noble Square's campus. Kyrisha Johnson, a property manager at Noble Square, said it is too early to determine if the program will lead to higher occupancy rates, but the residents' peace of mind is immeasurable.

"We still want to feel like we're at home. We'd like a more welcoming presence in

the neighborhood,” Johnson said.

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