

Bridging Cultural Divides to Combat Domestic Violence

Dwa Fanm, the New York City Police Department and the Kings County District Attorney's Office

In diverse neighborhoods such as those throughout Brooklyn, New York, efforts to improve community safety often have sensitive and complex roots.

Distrust between immigrant community members and police can be exacerbated by racial tensions, prior incidents of violence, perceived bias and differing cultural norms around issues such as domestic abuse.

A grassroots service organization called Dwa Fanm (which means “women’s rights” in Haitian Creole) navigated these challenges and more when they stepped up to address domestic violence in Brooklyn’s Caribbean communities. Founded in 1999 by a group of eight Haitian-American women, Dwa Fanm’s activities grew over time to include a close partnership with the New York Police Department (NYPD)—perhaps an unexpected but critical ally to the organization’s cause.

THE ROOTS OF DWA FANM

Farah Tanis, Dwa Fanm’s founding Executive Director, recalls early meetings around kitchen tables and on porches in Brooklyn, talking about how deep domestic violence problems ran through the Haitian-American community and how conventional efforts to stop the violence were failing. “At the beginning,” remembers Tanis, “the goal was to form relationships, not necessarily with the police, but with leaders in the community and local government - anyone in a position of power that we could advocate with so the people in our community would get services. Then women started coming to us saying, “This is what’s happening in my home, this thing you call domestic violence. I think I’m a victim.””

Tanis and her colleagues recognized that Haitian-American women seeking safety needed assistance accessing services and navigating the criminal justice system. Dwa Fanm set out to raise awareness in the

Haitian and Caribbean communities about what domestic violence looked like, how to recognize it as a crime and whom to contact for help. “There were major issues of fear and mistrust (of police) that related back to Haiti,” she says.

Corruption within the police department runs deep in Haiti, the country of origin for most of Dwa Fanm’s clients. Domestic violence is not regarded as a criminal offense, and Tanis describes occasions where police

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Dwa Fanm and the NYPD celebrate their 2008 MetLife Foundation Award. Left to right: Michael Rubinger (LISC), April Hawkins (MetLife Foundation), Chief Kathy Ryan (NYPD), Farah Tanis (Dwa Fanm)



MetLife Foundation

are called to a scene to beat a woman or child. “Over there, if you call the police, they’ll ask you, ‘Did you cook for him? Did you sleep with him?’” says Tanis. “And if you say ‘No,’ they’ll say, ‘Well, you need to do your job.’”

Recent incidents involving use of force by NYPD officers against Haitian New Yorkers have also been the subject of much controversy and media attention, which

mutual respect, Dwa Fanm overcame these constraints to combat domestic violence while building much-needed alliances between community members and police.

SELF-DEFENSE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

When Haitians and other Caribbeans move to the United States and learn, among other things, that domestic violence is a punish-

women who are Dwa Fanm clients believe that the best way to protect themselves from domestic violence is to fight back, often aggressively. For the police arriving on a scene that involves such acts of self-defense, these scenarios present a complex web of violence that can be difficult to parse, since both parties can show signs of injury.

“We were seeing a lot of dual arrests, false reports, and retaliatory arrests where the police had to determine who the attacker was,” recalls Tanis. Dual arrests are incidents when both parties, husband and wife or boyfriend and girlfriend, are arrested on a domestic violence call. Other times, only the woman would be arrested if the man exhibited more immediate signs of injury, such as bleeding; this was even more likely if the woman did not speak English, and her husband or his mother was the only translator on site. “The officers might not realize that a man may have been beating a woman all week long, or threatened that when he came home, she would get a another beating. Women were fighting back in response to these threats,” says Tanis. These patterns of arrest outraged women in the community, because they were being arrested for what they viewed as justifiable self-defense.

These women were not the only ones looking for a solution. The NYPD was also looking for help in understanding a high volume of domestic violence calls and reports, and in dealing with community members who carried distrust of police with them from their home countries. “When we get calls to certain scenes, our first priority is safety; our second priority is to arrest the offender,” says Kathy Ryan, chief of the NYPD’s domestic violence unit. She acknowledges that complex family dynamics at play in many domestic violence incidents present difficult circumstances for officers to assess when responding to calls. While the NYPD trains officers to prepare for such situations, Chief Ryan notes that “it’s critical that we have groups like Dwa Fanm” to assist.

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— Farah Tanis, former Executive Director, Dwa Fanm

adds to distrust between Haitian community members and police. In many ways, the relationship between Haitian-American women and the NYPD could not have been more strained when Dwa Fanm initiated its police partnership. But by emphasizing communication, cultural sensitivity and

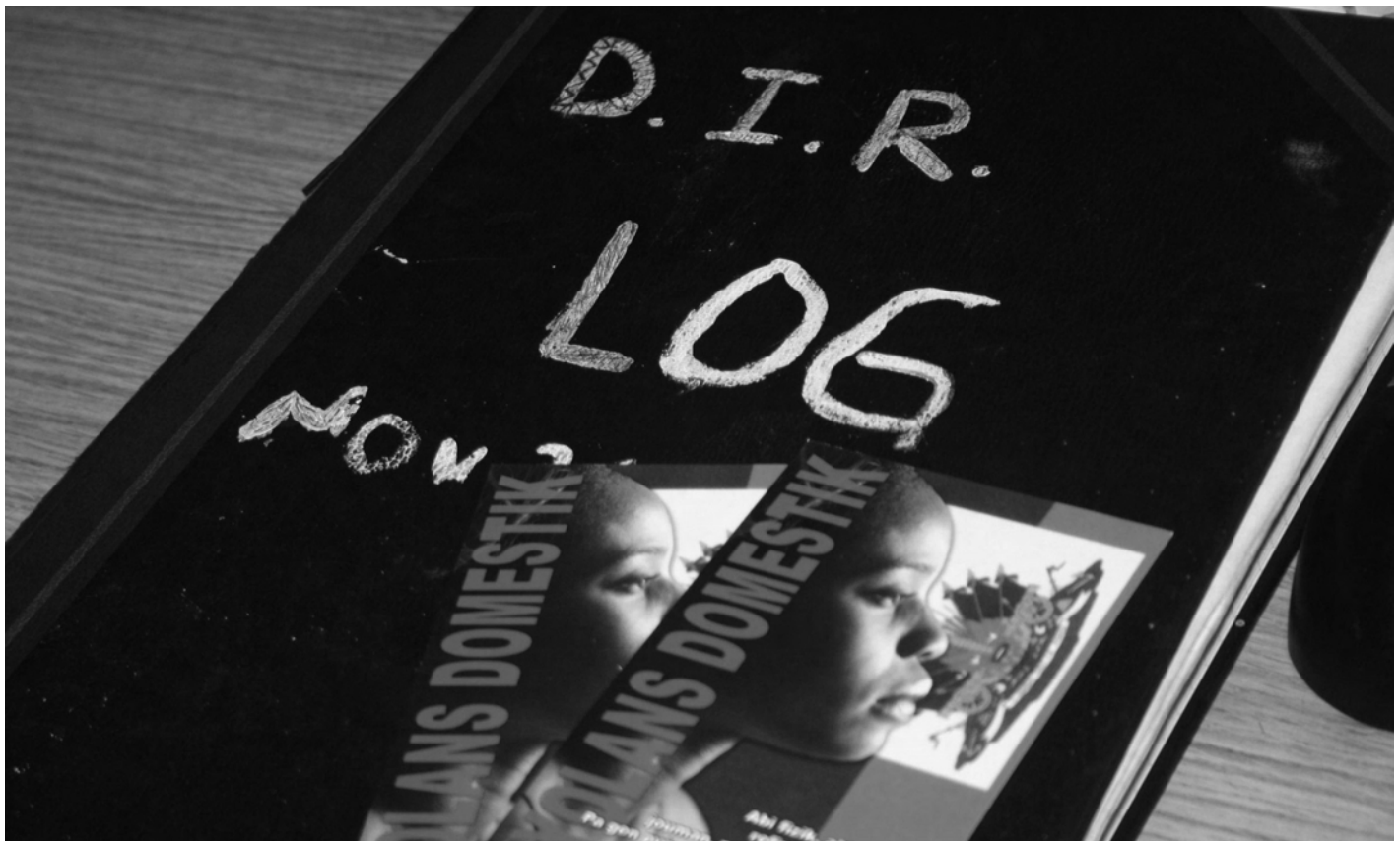
able criminal offense, both women and men have to realign their conception of violence at home. For some, this is a relief, but for many women, it is a dramatic and frightening shift away from the self-defense strategies they learned to employ in their home cultures and legal systems. Many

EXPANDING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY WITH HELP FROM LAW ENFORCEMENT PARTNERS

Dwa Fanm’s partnerships with the NYPD and the Kings County District Attorney’s Office were critical not just for achieving program goals, but also for building the capacity of the small non-profit to expand its services over time. Funding secured through the D.A.’s Office helped Dwa Fanm hire experienced case management staff who support domestic violence victims on a daily basis out of Brooklyn’s Family Justice Center. The co-location of Dwa Fanm case managers, NYPD officers and prosecutors helps ensure that immigrant women receive necessary services and guidance as they navigate the legal system.

Dwa Fanm’s services now include:

- ▶ Outreach, education and leadership development programs to prevent domestic violence in Brooklyn’s Haitian and Caribbean communities
- ▶ Culturally- and linguistically-competent legal services for immigrant women who are victims of domestic violence
- ▶ Financial literacy training, skills development and other economic empowerment programs for women
- ▶ Services for children affected by domestic violence and other abuse



After building a partnership around the Summit Meetings and trainings, the NYPD 67th Precinct eventually granted Dwa Fanm access to its Domestic Incident Report log, subject to strict terms of use around confidentiality and contacting victims. This enabled Dwa Fanm to target its case management services where they were needed most in the community.

BRIDGING COMMUNICATION GAPS

After several years of focusing its efforts on education for women about domestic violence, Dwa Fanm turned its attention to the larger communication gap between the Haitian community and law enforcement that was spurring high dual arrest rates. Dwa Fanm organized its first Summit Meetings for survivors of domestic violence and NYPD officers in 2002. These meetings were eye-opening for all parties. For women in the community, they reframed law enforcement as allies, and for the police, they explained some of the confusion that surrounded the patterns of domestic violence within the Haitian and Caribbean communities.

Tanis remembers that participants seemed to walk away from the meetings with renewed respect for one another. “At a certain point, one of the officers said, ‘I am so glad that we are having this meeting,’

and she apologized for anything that might have caused grief for the women because of [law enforcement’s] lack of understanding of the culture. So it was a groundbreaking meeting for everyone.”

Out of these meetings, the Mayor’s Office to Combat Domestic Violence created the first multi-lingual brochures detailing NYPD domestic violence incident procedures, translated by Dwa Fanm into

Communities: Critical Information for Police Officers, both with input from Dwa Fanm.

EXPANDING THE COLLABORATION

One of the participants in the Summit Meetings was Lucia Raiford, then chief of the NYPD’s domestic violence unit, who agreed to facilitate the launch of a partnership between Dwa Fanm and what would

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French and Haitian Creole. In addition, the NYPD created a training curriculum on responding to domestic violence incidents in the Haitian community and produced a booklet entitled *Domestic Violence in Diverse*

become the first of four NYPD precincts. In addition to providing access to the people and resources in this first precinct, Chief Raiford worked closely with Farah Tanis on developing a partnership model



Farah Tanis, former director of Dwa Fanm, presents Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes with a certificate of appreciation for his office's support.

that would benefit law enforcement as well as the community. “Lucia Raiford actually came in and helped develop the program. She would have me send her the proposals once a week – she was like a teacher, and she would send it back with a million corrections. She was really engaged in the process, so when we went into the actual precinct and talked to the sergeant in the domestic violence unit, they were very open as well.”

The 67th Precinct was in the heart of Dwa Fanm’s Brooklyn neighborhood. As the Dwa Fanm partnership took shape, the precinct was receiving between six and seven thousand Domestic Incident Reports annually, which include all calls related to domestic violence, even if an arrestable offense has not been committed. Often the precinct would have only two officers who specialized in domestic violence calls; this meant that many of the officers who were responding to these calls did not have specialized training in domestic violence and were not familiar with the circumstances that characterized this violence in the Haitian and Caribbean communities.

In response, one of Dwa Fanm’s first

initiatives within the Precinct Project was to take advantage of “roll call,” a recurring orientation meeting that coincides with shift changes at the precinct, so that new officers can learn about issues going on in the neighborhood before they head out on calls. In 2003, Dwa Fanm staff began attending precinct roll calls and teaching new officers about domestic violence in the Haitian American community. Soon,

Dwa Fanm trains officers about the cultural context for domestic violence in the Haitian American community at roll call. It also distributes information about NYPD procedures to community members to reduce fear.

all the street-level officers at the precinct had met Dwa Fanm’s staff and had learned from them how to place the scenarios they were encountering within a specific cultural context. This ensured that the lessons learned from the earlier Summit Meetings were spread among all frontline officers and command staff, rather than resting with just one or two community officers assigned as

liaisons to Dwa Fanm.

But the central work of the Precinct Project was the outreach to women and others who had already experienced domestic violence. The 67th Precinct granted Dwa Fanm access to its Domestic Incident Report log, in exchange for strict confidentiality and an agreement that Dwa Fanm would not contact anyone who requested not to be contacted. From this log, Dwa Fanm was able to focus case management services on women who were likely to suffer from additional abuse.

“We created a High Propensity List, based on the one that the precinct had been using, so we could determine who was high risk,” recalls Tanis. “We didn’t have a big staff, so we had to prioritize our calls.” From there, Dwa Fanm could not only help these women navigate the police and judicial systems, but could also help prevent more violence in homes where it was most likely to recur.

THE NEXT LEVEL

Another component of the Precinct Project and Dwa Fanm’s general outreach was the establishment of a 24-hour hotline for the Haitian and Caribbean communities. The hotline provided information as well as more immediate services like translation and relocation to safe havens. Dwa Fanm also publicized the hotline among

law enforcement and, later, at the District Attorney’s office.

Farah Tanis remembers the early days of the hotline well, since it was routed directly to her cell phone. “The Precinct would call at 11:30 at night, then victims would call, and staff at the D.A.’s office would call so we could contact a victim and talk to them on the phone. Or a lot of times, the hotline

was the first point of contact, so we'd tell the women we would meet them somewhere, either a church or a hospital, or they would come to the office and we would find a way to get them services."

In part because of the success of the hotline, Dwa Fanm expanded its outreach to include work directly with the District Attorney's office, eventually becoming the only Haitian service organization to be co-located with the NYPD and D.A.'s staff at Brooklyn's Family Justice Center. Dwa Fanm allocated staff to be on call for the D.A.'s office, to work with their Haitian clients and explain the prosecution system in their own language. As with law enforcement, the judicial system in Haiti had frightened both men and women from taking legal action in the U.S., and many women refused to prosecute because they feared that they themselves would be held accountable for crimes in which they were the victims. Although this new work with the D.A.'s office taxed Dwa Fanm's resources, the D.A.'s office recognized the

value of the partnership and helped Dwa Fanm cover costs by hiring them as a subcontractor. This enabled Dwa Fanm to follow clients through the court system, educating the Haitian community about the role of the courts in the U.S. and the power of prosecution.

RESULTS

Dwa Fanm's work with the NYPD and District Attorney has yielded dramatic results on several levels. Perhaps most notable is the improvement in how community members and police interact around incidents of domestic violence. Since the program's inception, dual arrest rates and complaints of unfair treatment by domestic violence victims have plummeted in the precincts where Dwa Fanm is working. In 2002, Dwa Fanm received approximately one dual arrest report each week from the 70 victims it was serving, and nearly two-thirds of those clients complained about police treatment. While the organization now serves nearly four times that many victims,

it received no reports of dual arrest in 2007, and only two clients noted a complaint about police service all year. Dwa Fanm staff see this as an indication that officers are putting into practice the cultural information and training protocols that Dwa Fanm developed with NYPD leaders and the Mayor's Office.

In addition, Dwa Fanm has good reason to believe that its Precinct Project has helped to decrease domestic violence in Brooklyn's Haitian communities. While the Mayor's Office and NYPD do not track the ethnicity of crime perpetrators or victims, they note that family related homicides decreased by 11% in Brooklyn from 2002 (the date of the Dwa Fanm program's inception)



Dwa Fanm's partnership with the officers of the NYPD's 67th Precinct has now been replicated in three additional Brooklyn precincts.



RADIO SOLEIL

Although it is not often seen as a means of communication between local law enforcement and communities, radio played an important role in Dwa Fanm's overall strategy. The organization engaged Radio Soleil, New York's Haitian radio station, in its education campaign against domestic violence in the Haitian community. In an unusual turn, they convinced the popular host of Radio Soleil programming—a well-regarded member of the Haitian community—to welcome NYPD officers on his show to talk about the police perspective on the issue. Women who had survived and spoken out against domestic violence joined the officers, giving them a very public voice and bolstering Dwa Fanm's efforts to shed light on the issue in the larger community.

The recurring show enjoys a broad audience of both men and women, and is aired on weekend afternoons when families are most likely to be listening. Here, as at Dwa Fanm's Summit Meetings, both survivors and law enforcement are given a seat at the table. And through Radio Soleil, the community has a seat as well. By using a trusted channel for this component of its outreach, Dwa Fanm broadened the conversation about the myriad ways that domestic violence was affecting the Haitian community and put a human face on the NYPD officers seeking to address violence issues.



Trainings for NYPD officers on the cultural context for domestic violence in the Haitian community helped to reduce dual arrests and improve incident resolution.

to 2006. Major domestic violence felony crimes have also decreased. Haitian New Yorkers attest that reductions in violence in their community are a part of this story. Community members regularly call Radio

Dwa Fanm an Award of Distinction in 2007 and featured its work at three learning exchanges around the country sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice.

would make good models for Dwa Fanm. Tanis contacted Mary Haviland at CONNECT NYC, which had piloted a precinct program in the late 1990s. Rather than starting from scratch, Tanis learned from a veteran about proven strategies for collaboration with law enforcement and the challenges her organization was likely to encounter. Haviland remembers working with Tanis on adapting CONNECT's program to meet Dwa Fanm's needs; "Farah and I worked together for six months to set up the program. We were almost like their own private consultant on domestic violence and programming, because we had a model that they could draw from and modify in the ways that they needed to in order to succeed. I think our experience helped Dwa Fanm not falter and move forward with confidence. It's also true that Farah is an incredibly determined woman and a very gifted problem solver."

Dwa Fanm and the NYPD expanded their outreach by working with the leaders of Radio Soleil, using the station's popularity in the Haitian community to broaden the conversation about domestic violence and police response.

Soleil noting that the biweekly programs featuring NYPD officers and Dwa Fanm have helped them understand the domestic violence issue and access help, both as perpetrators and victims.

The NYPD and D.A.'s office acknowledge Dwa Fanm's pivotal role in these safety improvements. As one example, Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes awarded

WHY IT WORKED: THREE STRATEGIES

1) Building on the Work of Others

When Farah Tanis of Dwa Fanm began to think about programming, she looked around to see what community groups were already working on issues surrounding domestic violence, and what programs

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Dwa Fanm also took advantage of other existing resources. For example, once the Precinct program was off the ground, Dwa Fanm took part in its existing roll call practice. The organization also increased the audience for its outreach by working with the leaders of Radio Soleil, using the station's popularity to broaden the conversation about domestic violence. Lastly, Dwa Fanm reached out to the newly formed Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence (OCDV), which provided money, technical assistance and policy resources that helped Dwa Fanm build its capacity. The OCDV also provided direct access to city agencies, like the New York City Housing Authority. This access was invaluable to Dwa Fanm, as it allowed them to cut through layers of bureaucracy and find the right person quickly when a particular advocacy case required contacts within city government or agencies.

2) Phasing and Trust

Dwa Fanm's success required a patient and deliberate approach to programming. Rather than tackling the full spectrum of legal processes and police procedures that address domestic violence or other crime concerns in the Haitian community, Dwa Fanm approached the challenge incrementally, beginning with outreach and education in their community and then broadening to partnerships with police, the District Attorney's office, and the Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence. Although Dwa Fanm's programming now encompasses a full spectrum of domestic violence issues, from prevention to prosecution, it began by addressing the Haitian community's most basic need – the need to bring the problem out into the open and talk about it in a safe

and supportive environment.

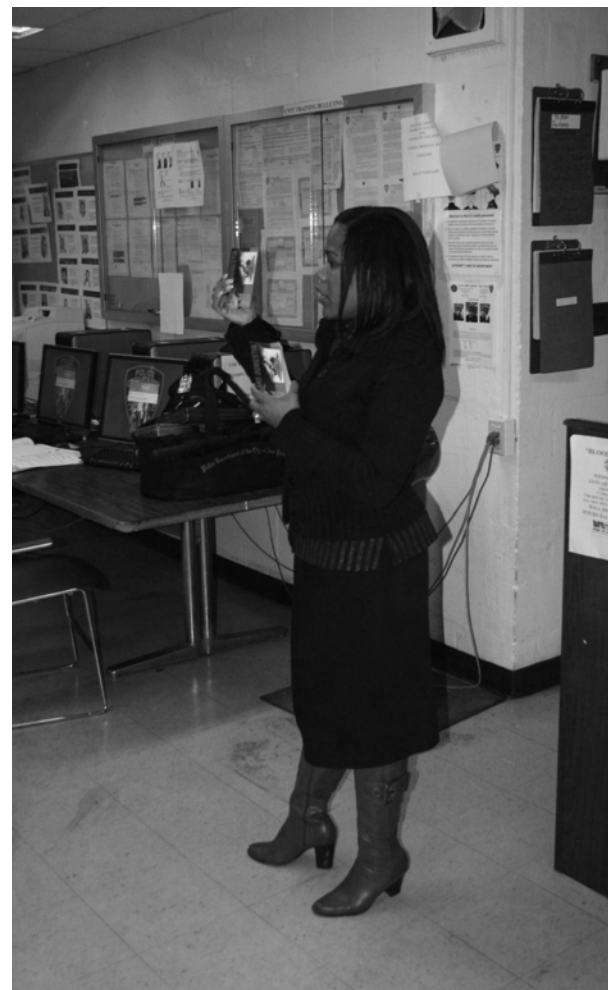
With this in mind, Dwa Fanm began by reaching out to women in the community, talking about what domestic violence looked like and how it was treated within the U.S. legal system. The success of this first phase built a bedrock of trust between the community and Dwa Fanm; this, in turn, made it possible for Dwa Fanm to host the three Summit Meetings that brought community members together with police to dialogue about their concerns— an achievement in and of itself. Recognizing an ally, Chief Lucia Raiford encouraged the 67th Precinct to partner with Dwa Fanm, and gradually, both sides demonstrated a commitment to partnering and respecting one another's distinct roles, reinforcing the trust that was built in the earliest days of the collaboration.

The success of this partnership led to more relationships with government, specifically the District Attorney's office. By the time that Dwa Fanm was contacted by the D.A., the organization had already proven itself to be a valuable and responsive collaborator. The D.A.'s office was eager to improve its own work with the Haitian-American community, and Dwa Fanm had exhibited the capacity and professionalism that the office

required. This new partnership proved valuable to Dwa Fanm both programmatically and financially, since the D.A.'s office was able to hire Dwa Fanm as a subcontractor on an existing grant, enabling the small non-profit to hire additional staff to expand its services.

3) Champions at All Levels

"You have to work the relationship at the precinct level," recalls Mary Haviland of CONNECT, "but you also have to work it at the headquarters level. Without the support of somebody high up in the police department, the project would never have flown." Although she was speaking of the CONNECT program, a template for Dwa Fanm, Haviland could have been talking about Dwa Fanm's experience. In fact, it was Haviland who engineered Dwa Fanm's



Dwa Fanm staff proved their credibility over time, which led to opportunities to speak with officers at roll call and otherwise expand the NYPD partnership.



Dwa Fanm's Director of Programs, Manushka Douglas, works with officers at the precinct station and at Brooklyn's Family Justice Center.

first meeting with Chief Lucia Raiford at police headquarters, which opened the doors to the 67th precinct. “At the ground level, if we hadn’t gotten the okay at the top or the response from Chief Raiford, I’m not sure what would have happened – an ‘Okay’ is fine, but if [the police] are not actively participating, that ‘Okay’ doesn’t matter,” says Tanis.

When Chief Raiford left her position, Tanis was nervous that the new chief, Kathy Ryan, would not be as supportive of the program. However, in the interim, Dwa Fanm had gained allies at the precinct level who spoke well of the partnership.

Dwa Fanm excelled as a partner with law enforcement by recognizing the importance of the work that the NYPD and D.A.’s office were already doing, and by facilitating existing efforts.

“We called (Chief Ryan) not knowing what would happen, because we’d lost our ally at police headquarters, and we were really nervous,” recalled Tanis. “We didn’t know how she’d react. So we introduced ourselves, and we said, ‘We’d like to sit and talk with you.’”

Dwa Fanm’s strong reputation at the 67th precinct had preceded them, and Chief Ryan volunteered to meet with Tanis and her staff on their own turf. “It was amazing – here’s Chief Kathy Ryan, coming to our little humble office to meet with this little Haitian organization to find out what we need,” Tanis said. “She knew that the officers were open to us, and she wanted to continue the collaboration – so she opened the door to three or four additional precincts.”

With the support of the Chief, Dwa Fanm has since replicated its Precinct Project in three additional NYPD precincts

in Brooklyn, where it provides monthly trainings to officers and accesses the log books that inform its outreach and case management services. This expansion is evidence that Ryan knew that the work of Dwa Fanm, like that of other community

partners throughout the city, was critical to the NYPD’s mission and was often overlooked.

“They are so, so valuable,” says Chief Ryan. “They must get a lot of satisfaction out of knowing that they helped a victim, but they don’t get a lot of recognition. Their work is always behind the scenes, but they’re doing unbelievable work that really almost cannot be measured. It’s invaluable.”

The essence of partnership lies in recognizing the strengths of all partners and finding ways to leverage those strengths for mutual benefit. Dwa Fanm excelled as a partner with law enforcement by recognizing the importance of the work that the NYPD and D.A.’s office were already doing, and by facilitating existing efforts. In the process, Dwa Fanm brought understanding and cultural sensitivity to these institutions, helping them do their work more effectively, while giving survivors of domestic violence a voice in the community and a chance to understand that here in the U.S., the police can be among a survivor’s strongest allies.

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