

National Gun Violence Awareness Month kicks off with hopes of a safe summer

by TANDY LAU Amsterdam News Staff, Report for America Corps Member, June 6, 2024



Gun violence prevention advocates including Man Up! Founder A.T. Mitchell (center) rally at City Hall. Credit: Tandy Lau photo

A sea of orange welcomed June as advocates flooded the City Hall steps donning the official color of gun violence prevention for [National Gun Violence Awareness Month](#) last Friday, May 31.

Those present largely hailed from the city's [Crisis Management System](#) (CMS), violence interrupters tasked with preventing shootings without a badge or a gun. Instead, they broker peace on the frontlines, equipped with just their words and neighborhood connections. The "wrap around" efforts vary from mentoring youth and squashing gang beefs to servicing shooting victims and

dissuading retaliation—all to prevent gun violence long before the gun is picked up.

June also marks the first echoes of summer, a season when shootings historically trend upward. [A.T. Mitchell](#), co-chair of the city's Gun Violence Prevention Task Force, told the *Amsterdam News* that CMS is year-round work but focuses on temperature rises.

"We know that when the weather breaks from spring to summer, a lot more people come out in our community and a lot of the unresolved conflicts that they may have been harboring over the winter months or throughout the years come to surface," Mitchell said. "So we oftentimes brace ourselves, we prep ourselves, we retrain ourselves [for] this time of the year. Because the summer is upon us [and] it's going to more likely be more interactions [and] more engagements needed for us to be able to get in front of the possibility of gun violence."

There's a certain optimism among the advocates this summer as shootings are down year-to-date by [more than 15%](#). And this coincides with the increased supply of illegal, untraceable 3D printed firearms, alternatively known as "ghost guns." Legal guns are also less regulated after the [Bruen Supreme Court decision](#) struck down a century-old state law restricting carrying pistols in public two years ago. Yet while lawmakers and police scramble to cut off the supply, CMS tackles the demand.



A New York City Police Department officer lights a candle at a makeshift memorial outside the NYPD's 32nd Precinct. (AP Photo/Yuki Iwamura)

“There’s so many guns out here on these streets, guns legal now for people in New York State to carry,” Mitchell said. “So we, knowing that, have to change the mindsets of people and change the behavior. A lot of our work is psychological. A lot of our work is to the mental health care that we need to provide people.

“How do we change the perception? Because there is a perception that in our neighborhood, you’re supposed to respond violently. And we’re telling people that that’s not the case.”

Like many CMS groups represented on the City Hall steps, Mitchell’s [Man Up! Inc.](#)—which specifically services East New York, Brownsville, and surrounding neighborhoods—started as a labor of love after [a tragic shooting](#). But many have since blossomed from scrappy volunteer teams of concerned parents, clergy, and reformed gang members into fully-fledged nonprofits funded by

the city, state, and federal government. These organizations now boast brick-and-mortar sites and mobile response vans in their toolbelt. [Calliana S. Thomas](#), the inaugural director of the New York State Office of Gun Violence Prevention, told the *Amsterdam News* she's seen many programs develop first hand over the past two decades.

"Many of our programs started with no funding [and] they were working for free in their communities, really pushing for change," Thomas said. "Now they are fully funded and expanding. The amazing thing to see is that community members are at the helm of this revolution."

She adds that the people "closest to the problem" are closest to the solution for ending gun violence. Yet they aren't usually ones most experienced with navigating the nonprofit space. Last fall, Thomas' office opened up applications [for \\$5 million](#) to "create a network of small grassroots organizations who normally wouldn't be able to qualify or meet the requirements of government procurement processes."



Demonstrators march with photos of people who died as a result of gun violence during the Women's March Alliance in New York. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

Gun violence is the [leading cause of death](#) for young Black men.

Back in 2014, then-Mayor Bill De Blasio officially established CMS under the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice. The program's umbrella agency, the [Office of Neighborhood Safety](#), now falls under the banner of the [NYC Department of Youth and Community Development](#) (DYCD) as of last year.

Despite an uptick in CMS funding, including an [\\$8.5 million](#) increase in budget in the current fiscal year, most programs still lack around-the-clock coverage, according to Mitchell. For the gun violence prevention czar, the next logical step is 24/7 services.

While the advocates looked forward, the rally also remembered those lost to gun violence. Not Another Mother founder [Oresa Napper-Williams](#) and fellow organization members wore jackets with their children's faces printed on the back.

"I always say if it was a Crisis Management System in 2006, chances are my child would be here today," she said.

A full list of National Gun Violence Awareness Month programming can be found at https://www.nyc.gov/site/dycd/services/gun_violence_awareness_month.page