Nonviolent Peaceforce



Case Study

Night Markets: Community Partnerships for Safety

United States

I. Executive Summary

As small businesses felt the impact from the pandemic and anti-Asian harassment surged across the U.S., Nonviolent Peaceforce became a key safety partner for Think!Chinatown (T!C)'s Night Markets and Block Parties in New York City's Forsyth Plaza area, situated between the Manhattan Bridge and Chinatown—an initiative designed to bring neighbors back into public space. In this partnership, NP promoted community safety by providing protective presence on the ground when needed and training volunteers in de-escalation and situational awareness practices grounded in Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP). This partnership was critical, as T!C and their volunteers have been key actors in responding to and preventing anti-Asian violence in their community.

Over the next two years, NP's role evolved from direct intervention to a more supportive, capacity-building approach as organizers developed their own volunteer safety team. Today, T!C has established safety infrastructure and protocols for public-facing events, and the T!C team is equipped to independently address most conflicts that arise. This case study reflects on the evolution of NP's partnership with T!C and examines how this community partner continues to apply UCP practices. It demonstrates how direct protection practices, especially when rooted in community partnership, can foster both immediate safety and the conditions for longer-term peace.

II. Context and Program Intervention

Responding to Anti–AAPI Hate

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities experienced a sharp rise in harassment and violence across the United States. In New York City, these incidents shaped how community organizations approached public programming, safety, and visibility. Many neighborhoods were grappling with the social and economic impacts of prolonged shutdowns. Public spaces which were once central to community life had become sites of risk and uncertainty. Amid these challenges, T!C launched its summer Night Market in 2021 to bring neighbors back into public space and support local small businesses. The open-air event quickly became a vibrant gathering point, drawing hundreds of attendees each week for food, art, and cultural programming rooted in Chinatown.

From the beginning, safety was a central consideration. Organizers were committed to creating an environment where community members—especially those most impacted by anti-AAPI hate—could gather without fear. As the Night Market grew (at their peak, the

events drew approximately 3,000 community members), so did the complexity of safety needs. Organizers navigated concerns including anti-Asian harassment, the safety of women staff and volunteers, interactions with unhoused community members, and broader logistical challenges such as crowd flow, traffic, lighting, and extreme heat. Despite these demands, they had limited capacity and few trained volunteers to manage safety on the ground. During this same period, NP was expanding its work to address rising anti-AAPI hate by teaming up with the Asian American Federation for their Hope Against Hate campaign, a community-based initiative providing coordinated and ready-to-go solutions to bring immediate safety and wrap-around support for community members impacted by anti-Asian violence.

Through targeted trainings in de-escalation, situational awareness, and community-based safety strategies, NP supported organizations in developing alternatives to policing and strengthening their ability to respond to harm. For the Hope Against Hate campaign, NP has held over 600 safety training workshops to train over 17,918 individuals in 14 languages.

NP's Initial Support and Direct Intervention

While T!C was not initially one of the 70+ *Hope Against Hate* members, they became connected to NP through the broader networks of community safety in New York City, having seen NP facilitate safety at civic action events. What began as an informal request for insight quickly grew into a close collaboration centered on the Night Market.

T!C organizers were committed to creating a welcoming, culturally rooted space, but did not want to rely on police or armed security. Instead, they sought support from NP to develop a nonviolent, community-based approach to safety. Specifically, NP's Qaaree McDaniel worked closely with T!C's Anna Ye, who acted as the safety lead for the Night Market, to understand the specific needs of the space and co-develop a safety approach rooted in community care and response. Through regular check-ins, the teams:

- Identified potential safety concerns ahead of each weekly event
- Conducted pre-event safety briefings and post-event debriefs
- Built shared understanding of community safety needs

During this initial partnership phase, NP began providing on-the-ground support at Night Markets, offering protective presence while simultaneously training staff and volunteers. This dual approach—direct intervention alongside capacity building—allowed T!C to immediately address safety concerns while laying the foundation for long-term, community-led solutions.

NP's capacity enhancement support included:

1. **De-escalation Training:** NP facilitated workshops for T!C staff focused on de-escalation and situational awareness. These sessions also served as relationship-building spaces, helping participants feel more confident and prepared to support one another during events. Staff reported they were also able to use these skills immediately to be more supportive for their volunteers doing set-up/tear-down work.

2. **Safety Planning and Spatial Design:** NP supported T!C in developing a proactive safety plan tailored to the Night Market. This included rethinking how safety could look in practice—*does it look like people stationed in different spots? Or does it look like people actively moving throughout and interacting, engaging with organizers, attendees, and vendors?* For example, when vehicles needed to enter the market space for vendor setup, trained volunteers helped guide traffic and communicate with attendees—reducing confusion and preventing escalation in situations that could otherwise feel threatening.



Transition to Community Ownership

After supporting multiple T!C events, NP gradually shifted from a lead role to an advisory position. Thanks to this collaboration, the night market has seen no major incidents of violence in the past three years, creating a safer environment for all who attend.

The NP team trained approximately 20–30 staff and volunteers per Night Market, allowing T!C to take on primary responsibility for safety with a network of support. As New York recovered from the pandemic and T!C gained more experience with large events, they started also hosting Chinatown Block Parties—events which extended into the Fall.

One volunteer's deescalation during a block party

One volunteer, Sunti,* responded to an individual attempting to drive an unmarked vehicle into a permitted event space during a Chinatown block party. Vehicles in crowded public spaces pose significant safety risks—both in terms of potential harm and the fear they can create—making careful navigation and de-escalation especially critical.

The driver claimed to be an undercover officer, presented what appeared to be a badge, and demanded access through the block. Based on this information, Sunti initially allowed the vehicle to proceed slowly through the crowd to avoid escalating the situation or creating panic. However, midway through the block, the driver exited the vehicle and became hostile, shouting that the event did not have the right to be there (despite having proper permits).

Drawing on de-escalation strategies from prior trainings, Sunti was able to remain calm, assess the situation, and engage in a way that prioritized the safety of attendees. At the time, NP's Qaaree McDaniel was already operating in an advisory capacity, but their presence still provided critical, real-time support—reinforcing Sunti's ability to apply these skills under pressure. Ultimately, Sunti successfully de-escalated the situation and convinced the individual to leave without further incident.

Reflecting on the experience, Sunti noted: "Because of Qaaree's presence, I was able to de-escalate the situation."

Moments like these illustrate how training, combined with light-touch, in-the-moment support, can equip community members to respond effectively in high-pressure situations—bridging the gap between learning and practice while reinforcing confidence and autonomy.

**Name changed*

A final community safety workshop reinforced key skills and marked this transition toward community ownership. This transition was reflected in expanded capacity, and also in growing confidence among T!C staff and volunteers. Team members increasingly took the lead in navigating complex situations, applying de-escalation techniques in real time.

> ***"Nonviolent Peaceforce has been an incredible supporter and a vital community safety resource for our Chinatown Night Market… Their guidance and in-person support helped us build a strong plan for heat, crowd control, police presence, and outside agitation."***
>
> ***- Anna Ye, Special Events & Culinary Programs Manager***

By 2025, NP's role fully evolved from conducting active patrols and interventions to providing on-site support through tabling, handing out booklets and hand sanitizer, and offering availability as needed. In one event alone, our team distributed 150 booklets of safety resources in traditional and simplistic Chinese and English—and each time, were able to hold a brief conversation about holistic community care, whether it be sharing a short tip or helping an attendee sign up to volunteer for a patrol.

III. Learnings

A. Shifting Understandings of Safety Means Shifts in Safety on the Ground

Over the course of the partnership, T!C's understanding of safety deepened and became more visible in practice. What began as a small group of individuals informally monitoring the space evolved into a coordinated team of 20–30 trained volunteers at each Night Market. This growth reflects the intentional care and investment T!C placed in building a community-led safety model.

As Anna Ye shared: "I've learned more about community safety in the past two years from NP than I have my whole life. Despite that, being a part of this training really felt like ground zero for learning about what community safety truly means."

B. Clarity is Crucial in Trustbuilding

A key component of the partnership was developing clarity—both in identifying safety needs and in articulating specific asks. NP supported T!C in working through the process of clearly defining roles and expectations. This clarity strengthened collaboration and ensured that support was responsive and effective. T!C's trust in NP's expertise allowed the partnership to deepen, creating space for honest dialogue and iterative learning.

C. Safety is a Long-Term Process

One of the clearest takeaways from this partnership is that safety does not happen overnight: it is built over time through consistent effort, trust, and adaptation. As T!C's network and capacity grew, so did the scale and sophistication of their planning.

For example, the Night Market expanded from partial to full street use, supported by detailed site maps, clearer vendor coordination, and more intentional spatial design. These operational shifts reflect a growing ability to anticipate and mitigate risks before they arise.

D. Space and Community Play an Essential Role in Safety

The Night Market itself plays a critical role in fostering safety. As a vibrant gathering space that brings together diverse groups of people, it creates what can be understood as "pockets of peace"—environments where cultural expression, connection, and shared ownership contribute to a sense of collective care.

Safety is not only about responding to harm, but also about cultivating spaces where people feel they belong.

E. Mutual Learning is Key

This partnership was not one-directional. While NP provided training and support, T!C's work also informed NP's broader approach. Observing how T!C engages community through storytelling, cultural programming, and public space activation offered NP valuable insights into how safety practices can be adapted and applied across different contexts.

IV. Conclusion / Looking Ahead

While the transition away from direct support can feel bittersweet, it also marks a successful outcome of the partnership. T!C now leads safety efforts at their future events with confidence, equipped with a strong foundation of skills, systems, and volunteer capacity.

While the Night Markets ended in 2025, T!C brings the lessons forward through their Block Parties and other community gatherings. NP's role moving forward is less about direct presence and more about connection and continued support as needed. The team has linked T!C to the broader Hope Against Hate network to ensure access to additional resources and

community. Notably, T!C formally joined the initiative as a partner in 2024, reflecting the strength and continuity of this relationship.

This partnership demonstrates a replicable model for community-led safety: combining direct support, skills-based training, and a gradual transition to local ownership.

These lessons have already informed NP's broader initiatives, including the Hope Against Hate "SafeWalks" program in New York City 2022-2023.

SafeWalks was designed to help AAPI folks navigate public spaces safely in response to the rise in hate incidents. NP and trained safety volunteers patrolled neighborhoods, wearing clearly marked vests and handing out flyers with de-escalation tips and where to find other resources. The program also included specific 'safe' businesses along the route: each small business, from barbers to corner stores, that participated in the Safewalks program put up welcoming signs in their windows and was equipped with helpful flyers. Community members would know there was a place to turn to safely.

After initial support, NP stepped back from direct accompaniment; the program continued with NP providing training, volunteer debriefs, and leadership support. This shift exemplifies a similar "propagation" of community safety to the Night Markets.

As Qaaree McDaniel reflected: "I often think of the words 'who keeps us safe?' It's a quote that we use here often in New York to acknowledge how empowering we as a community can be—because at the end of the day, **it is "we" who keep us safe."**

This case underscores the broader insight that sustainable, nonviolent safety emerges when communities are equipped to act for themselves. By embedding skills, fostering confidence, and cultivating networks of mutual protection, NP and its partners create systems that can be adapted and replicated across neighborhoods, strengthening collective safety.