

“We Continue to Keep This Crisis in the Forefront”: Women Survivors of Homicide Advancing Justice

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Abstract: *Homicide has an effect on the community, as family members are left to grapple with the loss. The Women Survivors of Homicide Movement (WSOHM), based in Boston, MA, is a grassroots effort aimed at empowering women of color to advocate for themselves as a homicide survivor. A systematic analysis was conducted to examine how power and privilege impact the groups’ approach to change-making. Mixed research methods were employed including key informant interviews and document review. Findings indicate WSOHM employs multiple strategies to achieve its goals, which are focused on bringing attention to unsolved murders in Boston and ensuring survivors and victims are given respect from law enforcement and city leaders. Implications for social workers working with community organizations are also discussed.*

Keywords: *Unsolved homicide, grassroots action, community empowerment, community violence, macro social work*

In 2016 there was an increase in organizing efforts in response to the murder of Black people by police (Brunson & Wade, 2019). This has led to questions about the role of the police in public safety. In this paper we explore community organizing for the issue of homicide in predominantly Black neighborhoods in Boston, MA. The Washington Post reports that of the 54,868 homicides in 55 cities in the United States over the past ten years, 50 percent did not result in an arrest and remain unsolved (Rich et al., 2018). Almost three quarters of the victims in these cases were Black. Due to the high homicide rates in Black communities, there are also several family members and friends left behind to deal with the aftermath of the murder, these individuals are the survivors of homicide victims (Sharpe, 2015). Moreover, urban cities with high concentrations of killings have the lowest arrest rates (Rich et al., 2018). There are also pronounced racial inequities in arrest rates, whereby homicides with a White victim are more frequently being solved (Rich et al., 2018). The failure of the police to investigate and address homicide in communities of color and the criminalization of homicide survivors (Rich et al., 2018), further brings into question the role of police in communities of color.

We explore the role of grassroots organizing in homicide response through an illustrative case study of the Women Survivors of Homicide Movement (WSOHM). WSOHM is a local community organization based in Boston, MA, founded in 2014 by a Black woman who wanted to have a purpose behind the pain of her husband being killed thirty years ago. The organization focuses on providing resources (i.e., financial support, mental health) to women of color (mainly Black women) who have had loved ones killed and empowering them to advocate for their loved ones’ murder being solved. WSOHM is the focus of this study because although it is at the grassroots level, it has had tremendous

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success leveraging support from key stakeholders to raise awareness about the issues Black survivors of homicide face in Boston. This paper will highlight how this organization brings their members together to effect change on the issues surrounding homicide and community violence in Black communities in the Boston area, and how their efforts can be a model for social workers to follow when trying to effect change on a major social issue.

Employing case study methodology, we examine the development of WSOHM as a local community agency, strategies and tactics employed and their impact on local law enforcement practice related to homicide investigations. We also explore the impact of their efforts on the experiences of survivors of homicide victims in Boston. WSOHM is described in detail and discussed in the context of the literature and implications are explored. The case of WSOHM illustrates the power of community action in advancing local change. We discuss the ways in which social workers can support these efforts, namely because they are an organization committed to supporting underrepresented minorities who are not receiving adequate, equitable support from key stakeholders such as the police department.

Background

Criminologists have estimated that over 200,000 murders have gone unsolved nationally since the 1960s (Kaste, 2015). Unsolved homicides leave families with uncertainty about what happened to their loved one and not knowing if their loved one's killer is still in the community. After a homicide case has been unsolved for a year, the chances of it becoming solved decrease drastically. This leaves the family members and friends of the victim uncertain if their loved one's case will be solved, which can be frustrating. Unsolved homicides have important implications for the relationship between police and the public which further complicates matters when it comes to investigations and obtaining witnesses (Kaste, 2015). Stigma surrounding the reason homicide victims die can cause tension between the community and the police department (Sharpe, 2015). Boston, MA is one of the cities where this is the case. The majority of homicides occur in predominantly Black neighborhoods in Boston, which are Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury (Planas, 2015). Many of the women who are affiliated with WSOHM live in one of these communities and their loved ones' murders remain unsolved. The focal points of the organization are teaching women and their families to advocate for their loved ones' cases to be solved, and engaging city leaders in caring about the high numbers of homicide in their communities.

Homicide has been described as having a ripple effect on community well-being, as family members and friends are left to grapple with the loss of loved ones. In the literature, those who experience the homicide of a loved one are referred to as the survivors (Hertz et al., 2005). This is the preferred identification because it reflects how individuals and families are left behind to carry on after the murder has occurred. Surviving the homicide of a loved one is a complex process which involves inevitability (the death is unexpected) which can cause feelings of loss of control (Sharpe, 2015; Sharpe et al., 2014). Those in Black communities who have lost someone to homicide must navigate life after loss in the context of stigma, a lack of resources, and distrust of systems and practitioners due to

historical oppression (Piazza-Bonin et al., 2015; Sharpe, 2015). This process is further complicated in the case of unsolved homicide because the surviving family members may feel a lack of justice and perceive law enforcement as failing to protect the community (Sharpe, 2015). Grappling with the reality of their loved one not getting justice can contribute to feelings of anger and hurt. It also further adds to the racially based inequities that only Black survivors of homicide victims go through, such as being doubly stigmatized by society because they are already marginalized as Black people, and stereotypes are placed on the victim as to why they were killed (Sharpe, 2015). For example, police may assume that the victim was involved in gang activity. The members of WSOHM are an example of a group of people dealing with navigating the aftermath of the homicide of a loved one. They are chosen as the case study for this paper as an example of taking a social issue and using advocacy to both raise awareness and demand attention and solutions from their city leaders and stakeholders, which is something that social workers do all the time.

Homicide in Black Communities

In 2015, there were over 15,000 homicide-related deaths in the United States (US) (Thompson & Tapp, 2023). Black communities, specifically, are disproportionately impacted by homicide violence (Sharpe, 2015). The national homicide rate in 2010 was 2.92 per 100,000 for whites compared to 17.90 per 100,000 for Blacks (Thompson & Tapp, 2023). Moreover, homicide is the leading cause of death among Black males ages 12-17 (Johnson, 2014), who for the last 100 years have been more impacted by homicide than any other US racial group. Homicide-related violence has far-reaching impacts, beyond the victims, their family members, and the broader community must bear the consequences (Hernandez, McDaniel & Bradshaw, 2024; Perez-Sastre et al., 2024). For example, it is estimated that over 50% of urban youth have been exposed to community violence (Borg, Rabinak, & Marusak, 2023; Rajan et al., 2019; Brady et al. 2008), which has been linked to a number of adverse health outcomes including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Brady et al. 2008; Buka et al., 2001; King, 1997; Ozer & Weinstein, 2004), and depression (Smith et al., 2020; Fitzpatrick et al., 2005; Ozer & Weinstein, 2004; Overstreet, 2000).

In Boston specifically, the homicide rate was at its peak in 1991 with over 44,000 violent crimes and 243 murders reported that year (Massachusetts Crime Rates, n.d.). Since that point it has declined fairly steadily for the past 20 years. Of note, Boston is a city of neighborhoods, and the rate is not consistent across neighborhoods. Between 2015 and 2024 most homicides in the city of Boston occurred in the Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan neighborhoods (Boston Police Department Crime Hub, 2024), which are all areas within which most residents are people of color. Additionally, Boston, despite its relatively low number of homicides, boasts the highest percentage of unsolved homicides nationally. Over 1,000 homicides in the city between 1970 and 2016 remain unsolved (Planas, 2015). This issue has gained national attention because of the huge impact it has had on families (Sharpe, Joe & Taylor, 2013). With the majority of these unsolved homicides being Black victims, this has created a lot of anger and frustration in Black communities who are grappling with the murders of their loved ones. Many of the individuals and families who WSOHM work with have loved ones whose homicides are currently unsolved. Their work aids in holding the Boston Police Department accountable and coming up with actionable

steps to decrease the high unsolved rate. The issue of unsolved homicides in Boston disproportionately impacting Black communities is highlighted in this paper because the WSOHM specifically targeted this issue through the work their organization does.

Method

A qualitative instrumental case study design, in which cases are selected to understand a specific issue (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2008), was used to examine WSOHM. This approach is common in social science research and focuses on the study of a case in a real-life, present-day setting (Creswell, 2007). In this case, the strategies used by members of WSOHM to improve police response to homicide and homicide survivors were explored. In addition, community change associated with WSOHM strategies was examined. Data included a document review, media scan and key informant interviews (Creswell, 2007).

An initial meeting was conducted with WSOHM to explore the goals of the organization and determine primary media outlets as well as to gather key program documents. Documents included organizational mission and vision statements. Media sources included the Boston Herald, as well as the social media sites of WSOHM including Facebook and X, formerly Twitter. First, a search was performed to identify media articles. The keywords “homicide,” “violence,” “unsolved,” and “murder” were used to search Herald archives. Once article titles were identified, they were reviewed with the founder of WSOHM to determine their relevance. Fulltext articles were then obtained from microfilm at the Boston Public Library and stored on a secure server. Second, the most recent Facebook and X posts from the organization’s social media pages were downloaded and stored on a secure server. Third, working with the director, videos about the organization were identified online and downloaded to a secure server. Finally, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the founder of WSOHM at the organization’s headquarters to gather additional information about the organization such as the history, the mission, and the activities. This was a onetime interview that lasted for an hour and a half. This interview was considered one of the key informant interviews that is discussed in more detail below.

The case was first analyzed, then specific parts of the case were assessed (Creswell, 2007). A chronology of events and key themes were examined to explore the complexity of the case (Creswell, 2007), a member of the research team coded the documents and met with a second researcher to process the themes and to develop a codebook. Each data source was coded inductively, focusing on the data itself without preconceived categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researcher read each document multiple times to immerse herself in the data, to search for meaningful patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and to reflect on questions and reactions to the codes. Using Nvivo, text from each document was labeled with codes. The codes were sorted into possible themes based on the six strategies of change (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this paper, three of those strategies will be focused on because those were the most relevant to the work that WSOHM does. The themes were reviewed by the team to ensure the data within each was cohesive (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The larger story

within the data was identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and key informant interviews were conducted with stakeholders (n=3) to further inform the narrative.

Key informant interviews were conducted with the WSOHM founder, Boston Police Department and Boston Herald representatives to contextualize themes that emerged during the document analysis and media scan. Interviews were conducted in person at a location identified by the participant and lasted approximately 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were then coded thematically using the same process that was used to analyze the documents (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A second researcher also coded the interviews to check for coding discrepancies. If any arose, the researchers discussed in a meeting and came to consensus about the final codes that would be used in analysis. Themes from the interviews were used to contextualize the larger story within the data. In the final phase of analysis, the researchers selected illustrative quotes to produce a succinct, cogent story of the data within and across the identified themes from all of the data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

A total of 170 artifacts were collected and analyzed. As noted in Table 1 artifacts included Boston Herald articles, Facebook and X posts and videos featuring WSOHM. Additional documents included the organizational mission and vision as well as the organizational webpage. Findings indicate WSOHM employs multiple strategies and tactics such as mass mobilization and popular education to achieve its goals. The overall objective of WSOHM is to bring attention to unsolved murders in Boston and to ensure the survivors and victims are treated with dignity and respect. This organization is an example to the social work profession as to how to advocate for a particular issue and raise awareness about it to stakeholders effectively.

Table 1. *Types of Artifacts Examined*

Type of WSOHM Artifact	# analyzed for case study
Boston Herald articles referencing them	50
Facebook & Twitter posts from their social media pages	100
Videos featuring them	20

In the sections that follow we present an analysis of the WSOHM, the strategies and tactics they have employed and their overall impact.

Women Survivors of Homicide Movement (WSOHM)

Founded in 2014, WSOHM was launched by a local community leader Ms. Mary Franklin whose passion for solving homicides is fueled by the tragic murder of her husband, Melvin Bernard Franklin on October 15, 1996, in Dorchester, MA. Twenty-five years later, his murder remains unsolved. WSOHM originated from a program called Melvin's Mission, a day program (also founded by Ms. Franklin) that offered resources

including a weekly support group for women survivors of homicide. At the time, Melvin's Mission was the only available support group for women survivors, other community programs focused solely on mothers. Ms. Franklin, however, recognized the need for programs to support women survivors more broadly, such as daughters, spouses, aunts, grandmothers and friends. Over time, it became clear that women survivors of homicide did not have a voice when it came to decisions related to the investigations of the homicides of their loved ones. In 2014, WSOHM was founded to build capacity among women survivors to play a larger role in addressing unsolved murders, while healing from the trauma they have experienced.

Organizational Structure and Target

WSOHM does not have a formal membership structure, instead they have an open-door policy in that all survivors are welcome to get involved. More importantly, if survivors feel they need a break, the door is always open for them to come back. Currently there is a core group of ten active members who spearhead the group's activities. These ten members are focused on building momentum around addressing the large numbers of unsolved homicides in Boston for Black victims by attending all WSOHM sponsored events and demonstrations.

WSOH focuses its efforts on multiple targets. Internally, WSOHM is focused on women of color in Boston who have lost a loved one to murder. In the key informant interview with Ms. Franklin, she states that many of the women are very low income and experience structural barriers when it comes to accessing resources. She also notes that accessing needed resources can be further complicated by PTSD (often undiagnosed) that the women are living with.

Externally, WSOHM is focused on systems change and creating the conditions that support women survivors as they seek justice. Much of this work has been building relationships and serving as a bridge between law enforcement and families. As such, the external targets include homicide detectives and the assistant district attorney's office. A third external target the WSOHM has focused on is elected city officials. WSOHM recognizes that politicians 1) play a significant role in what they refer to as the "epidemic" of unsolved murders, 2) have the power to pass laws, secure funding for program, initiatives and infrastructure and 3) can pass new legislation related to unsolved homicide.

WSOHM Strategy

In his seminal work *Six Strategies for Community Change*, Checkoway (1995) outlines methods employed by action groups to catalyze change which include: mass mobilization, social action, citizen participation, public advocacy, popular education and local services. In order to enact these changes, communities and/or organizations are operating under the fact that politics have an influence on outcomes, final decisions are most likely in the hands of other people, and that in order to influence decisions that cause changes, they must adapt methods that are appropriate for the particular context (Checkoway, 1995). Our qualitative analysis of WSOHM indicates that they are employing three of the six strategies: public

advocacy, mass mobilization and popular education. These themes were the most salient in NVivo and will be described below.

The primary strategy employed by WSOHM is public advocacy which is both legislative and administrative. Legislative advocacy has focused on educating the public, elected officials and their constituents about the impact of unsolved murders in the Boston area. They strive to bring attention to the fact that there are thousands of unsolved murders dating back to 1970. In the key informant interview with Ms. Franklin, she stated that, they continue to keep this crisis in the forefront. They have done this in several ways. One way is through the use of media campaigns. They partnered with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) and launched a campaign that included posters placed in every train and bus in Boston with messages about the impact of homicide in majority minority communities. This campaign was a major undertaking; however, it was difficult for them to measure impact due to the nature of individuals riding the train not being able to report their reaction to the posters. More importantly they advocated for legislative action designed to support women survivors and to reduce the rate of unsolved murders. Meanwhile, administrative advocacy has targeted the local police department and district attorney's office. This work has also included education, but more importantly has been focused on the revision of policies and procedures. In the case of the police department this work has focused on intake and follow-up procedures.

A second strategy employed by WSOHM is mass mobilization. This involves bringing together large numbers of people to work on an issue as well as engaging partners on all different levels to raise awareness and demand change. In the interview with Ms. Franklin, she stated that using mass mobilization, WSOHM unites women survivors, as she believes that survivors, are every woman. They are wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, schoolteachers and preachers. WSOHM uses social media to enhance their mobilization efforts. Six years ago, they released a music video, "The Circle we Share," which highlights that it is the responsibility of all people, not just Black people, to ensure that the murders of Black people are solved (Boston Herald, 2018). Beyond mobilizing via social media, WSOHM work through local non-profit organizations, city institutions, businesses in the Black community and religious institutions. Drawing in those impacted, in addition to supporters and stakeholders from across these multiple sectors, has helped WSOHM to gain a great amount of support for their work in Boston and beyond, shining a bright light on unsolved homicides nationwide. Recently, Ms. Franklin, the founder of WSOHM, was featured in the Washington Post. This article feature was expected to help her garner national visibility and additional support. However, to date, she has not received substantial financial support to be able to continue to advance her work on a larger scale. While people recognized that unsolved homicides and the cyclical violence in her neighborhood are a problem, no one individual or agency took the opportunity to offer her support. However, WSOHM mobilization efforts together with their advocacy has provoked a reaction locally, which has led to a survivors' room at the police station, a public response from elected officials related to unsolved homicides in the city, and new data collection strategies that allow survivors to update their family members' files in real time.

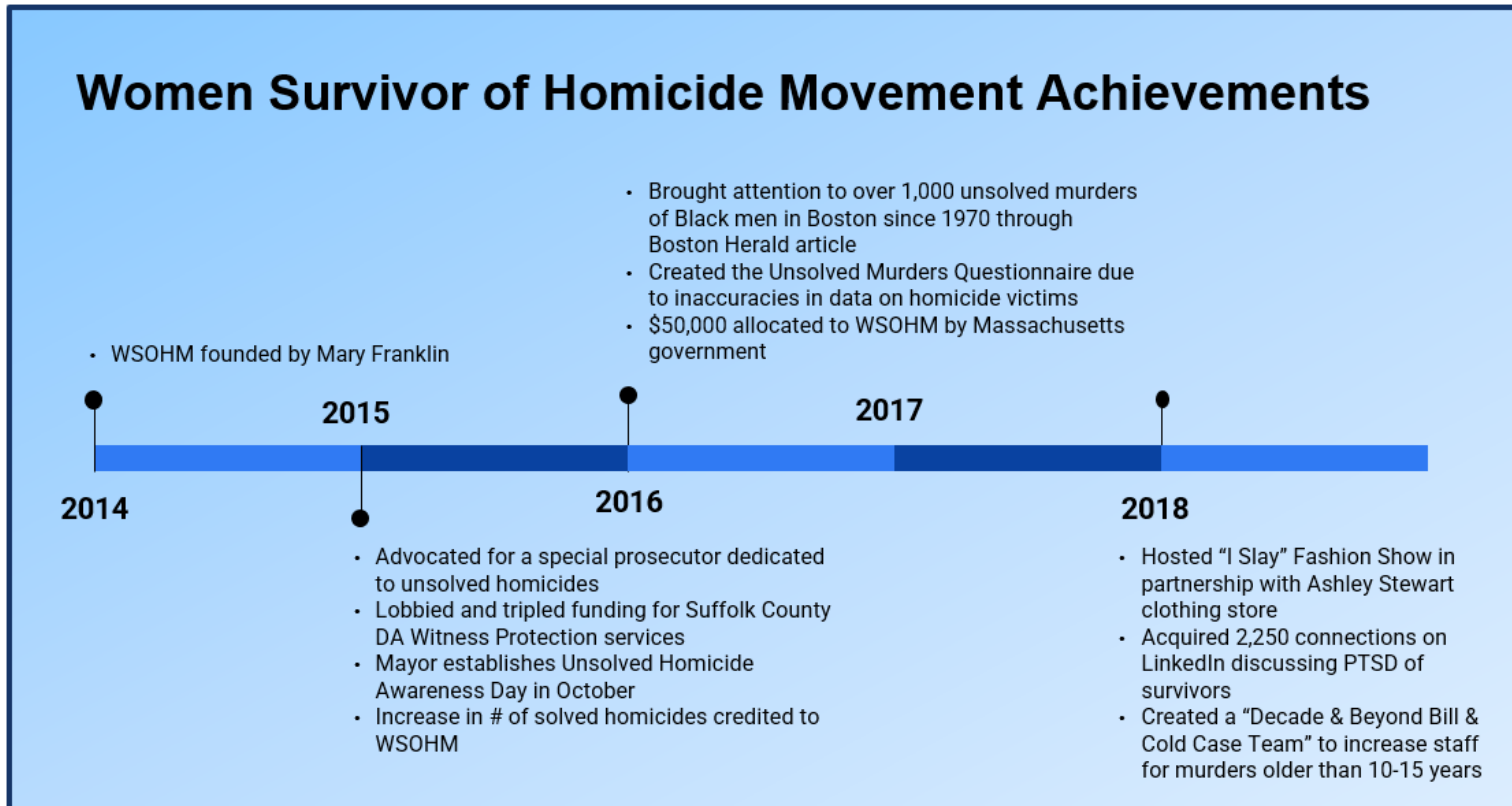
Finally, WSOHM has employed elements of popular education as a strategy for change. In order to get the community involved to support a particular issue, they need to

be educated on the state of the problem, the historical background, and the progress that has been made to date. They then can decide how or whether they want to get involved. WSOHM used small meetings to provide education on the issues around both homicide in Black neighborhoods and the ways that people can get involved in advocating for their deceased loved ones. Convening small groups of survivors, WSOHM catalyzes dialogue among women on a topic, in which they are often encouraged to remain silent. As they come together and share their stories, the women learn from one another, critically examine their circumstance and confront the inequity embedded in their experience. For example, there was a meeting held at headquarters (Ms. Franklins' apartment) with four women who have lost loved ones to murder in the past five years. The women received advice about how to interact with the detective assigned to their case and how to work with the newspaper to put information in an article to help witnesses come forward for a monetary reward. Through this process of individual advocacy, women come to see structural factors or the root causes of circumstance that negatively impact their daily lives. Collectively, as part of WSOHM, they can begin to act, advocating for change. Checkoway (1995) describes the aim of this process as "alter[ing] consciousness from conforming to reforming to transforming" (p. 12). WSOHM provides a space for individual and community transformation. Their other goal is to educate people about PTSD that survivors face and how it is under-diagnosed and not recognized enough amongst this population. The above strategies are aspects of community organizing, which enables the organization to achieve its goals. Community organizing is a form of collective action through which individuals build a shared understanding of issues and seek to catalyze positive change within their communities (Rubin & Rubin, 2007).

WSOHM Achievements

Since its beginnings in 2014, WSOHM has made great strides with respect to their primary goals, which are to raise awareness about unsolved murders in Boston and ensure that women survivors are treated with dignity and respect by law enforcement and local officials. The timeline seen in Figure 1 highlights critical successes of the action group. In 2014, they implemented a survivor's room located in a community center in one of the predominantly Black neighborhoods in Boston. The room is designed to be a calm space in the community where families of unsolved murders meet with their detectives. It is also located in the community where many of the survivors live, which makes it more convenient for travel purposes and is more familiar to community members. Before the survivor's room was established, families had to meet with detectives in interrogation rooms. For many, this was a traumatic experience because of the setup of the room and the location. This one-of-a-kind room was created with support from the Boston Police Department, as the homicide detectives had to agree to come to the survivor room to meet with families. It is a significant step in the right direction for both catering to the needs of survivors and improving relationships between the Black community and the police department in Boston.

Figure 1. *Organizational Timeline with Women Survivors of Homicide Movement Achievements*



WSOHM also focused on establishing a media presence in 2014, which led to the development of a partnership with the Boston Herald (Herald). The Herald is a local Boston-based media outlet that has an online reach of millions and a paper market that extends to many New England area states (e.g., New Hampshire and Vermont). What started as a story about a passionate activist trying to bring awareness to unsolved murders of men of color in Boston has led to strong support from the paper. The paper's coverage of WSOHM keeps the organization's mission at the forefront of community issues, serving as a reminder to organizational leaders and public officials. In addition, WSOHM has established a giving back project where they offer financial support to survivors in the form of bill payment, groceries, cards for the train, and schools supplies for children. This program is funded by both the founder herself and community fundraisers that she has led over the years.

In 2015, the organization successfully lobbied for funding to the Suffolk County District Attorney's Witness Protection services to be tripled, moving the budget up significantly. The goal behind this action was to strengthen the relationship between the DA's office and the community. Ms. Franklin described how many of the cases can be solved because members of the community have information on the perpetrators, however they are afraid to come forward because of fear of retaliation. WSOHM believed that if witnesses have a better experience, it might increase their trust and encourage them to give more accurate information concerning a case to the police, which will in turn help the unsolved rate decrease dramatically.

Another important success for the movement was the declaration of October 15th as "Unsolved Homicides Awareness Day" by Boston Mayor Marty Walsh in 2015. The goal of establishing the day was to shine a spotlight on the city's high volume of cold cases, thereby increasing awareness of unsolved homicides in the broader community (Planas, 2015). The day is commemorated by a flag raising ceremony where the mayor and other officials make remarks. There is also a public prayer vigil. This day is important because city leaders have pledged to take more direct action in dealing with both the high homicide rates in majority Black neighborhoods and the high rates of unsolved homicide cases. Being in solidarity with the community members gives them hope that issues will actually be dealt with. More recently, WSOHM has focused their efforts on data collection practices at the Boston Police Department. Through their work with women survivors the movement discovered inaccuracies in police department data, (i.e., victims' names spelled wrong and incorrect locations of deaths). This realization catalyzed their 2017 data initiative, the Unsolved Murders Questionnaire (UMQ). UMQ is an online survey tool that allows survivors to update their loved ones' case. Serving as an intermediary, WSOHM provides updated case information to the police department, which then updates official case records.

In 2018 the movement aimed its efforts on community education related to unsolved homicide and PTSD. They partnered with the Ashley Stewart clothing store located in the Roxbury area of Boston in 2018. Ashley Stewart is a plus size modern women's clothing store with locations all over the United States. Together they hosted a fashion show event called "Slay for Justice." In addition, they staffed an educational table in the store at which

women were provided with both informational materials and community resources. At the event they collected data from women to explore the extent to which patrons were impacted by murder. They found that of the 200 Black women who entered the store during the data collection period, 150 of them had been impacted by murder.

Over the last ten years the movement has made significant accomplishments drawing attention to unsolved homicides in Boston and the impact of homicide on women survivors. In an effort to inform grassroots efforts and social work practice, we sought to examine tactics and strategies employed by the movement.

Discussion

There have been a number of forces that have influenced the work of the movement, some posing challenges and others facilitating success. The passion of one homicide survivor sparked a movement to effect change in the way that unsolved murders of people of color are addressed in an urban community. A number of lessons can be learned through the examination of WSOHM and the various successes and struggles they have had as an organization.

One of their biggest successes has been leveraging the media in developing a strong relationship that has given WSOHM a platform to raise awareness about both the issues of unsolved murders in Boston and the needs of homicide survivors. Since the inception of the movement in 2014, the Herald has written over a hundred articles about the movement and the work they are doing. These range from smaller articles to a whole front page and a subsequent three-page spread highlighting the purpose of the organization and the work that they do. This amount of coverage has definitely raised awareness and additionally helps to hold elected officials and other entities (such as the Boston Police Department) accountable to the demands that the movement has publicly made. By using this media outlet to raise awareness, it can help to build capacity for this small grassroots organization. Capacity building can strengthen the infrastructure of smaller organizations with fewer resources. In a study of 125 grassroots organizations done by Sobeck (2008), it was found that investments in building capacity can increase the success of smaller organizations. However, those efforts were more focused on operational funding, peer networking and technical assistance (Sobeck, 2008). While WSOHM was effective in raising awareness through their partnership with the Herald, they may have been targeting the wrong audiences, as a different audience may have connected them to individuals or agencies that could have helped grow their organization.

Another huge success that the organization has had is their ability to develop relationships with key stakeholders, and then use those relationships to effect change with the issues that WSOHM is passionate about. For example, Ms. Franklin has been very strategic about the people that she chooses to engage with for the sake of raising awareness about the issue of unsolved homicide in Boston. She has developed a close relationship with the district attorney of Suffolk County (the county in which Boston is located) and had many meetings with him and other staff in his office. Since developing this relationship, she was able to get them to approve an increase in the budget for the witness protection program. This direct example of impacting policy change is consistent with

grassroots organizations and macro social workers who have the ability to be effective in advocating for social change (Jackson-Elmoore, 2005). Many witnesses do not come forward when they have information because they are afraid of retaliation and do not feel that they will be provided with quality protection. An increase in witness protection funds will allow the office to provide better options to keep community members safe and prevent further violence. Those who have information to solve the cases can help decrease the large number of open cases.

Secondly, Ms. Franklin has developed a relationship with the Boston Mayor and his office. This relationship has caused him to institute a “Unsolved Homicide Awareness Day” on October 15th, where a flag is raised at city hall to raise more awareness about the issue. The city holding a public rally and vigil in the downtown area makes a huge statement that this issue deserves attention from the top leadership. Her relationship with the mayor also allows her to call the city out for not being more responsive and action oriented when it comes to trying to solve the murders that are still not. This relationship has provided direct support to her organization and its membership and has helped raise awareness in greater Boston about the issues surrounding homicide. Furthermore, by establishing an annual day, it shows that the leadership of the city feels unsolved homicides are an important enough issue to raise attention to. They have committed both personnel and money to making real change in the high number of unsolved homicides in Boston. This is a direct example of advocacy to action that social workers can learn from.

Along with the many successes of the organization, there have also been challenges and lessons learned worth noting. One is the lack of support that the organization sometimes struggles with. Most often the bulk of the work being done with the movement is by Ms. Franklin herself, or the same few women that she is able to mobilize. While having a leader in a grassroots organization who possesses some of the characteristics of a strong leader, such as being actively involved, having confidence, and being individually motivated, Fisher (2013) says that is often not enough on its own to propel an organization forward. Most of the events planned by the organization struggle to get the numbers they need to be able to make a statement to elected officials and other stakeholders that this is an issue they should care about. In the key informant interview with Ms. Franklin, she said that if she could get 100 women affected by homicide to stand with her, that could really make a statement. She believes the lack of involvement from the communities who are affected by this issue is one of the reasons that there are still so many unsolved murders in Boston.

Another issue that the organization has struggled with is sometimes having a lack of sufficient funds. Many of the events and community outreach that the organization puts on are oftentimes funded out of the pocket of the founder. Many of the organization’s community outreach events are paid for out of pocket by the founder. This group has struggled financially because they do not have the financial capital to get the widespread traction that they need. Additionally, the office of the organization is a home office, in which Ms. Franklin has converted her one-bedroom apartment into a space that functions as the “headquarters.” The financial limitations of the organization make it hard to both hold larger events and make a substantial impact in helping survivors in the community with what they have need of. For example, if the homicide victim was the primary income

earner in the home and that income is now lost, the remaining family members may need immediate financial support to hold them over until other arrangements can be made. This is the type of support that Ms. Franklin would like to be able to provide, but her small grassroots effort does not have the resources to do so. These financial issues that WSOHM faced are consistent with other grassroots organizations, as many of them are doing critical work in the community, but struggle to gain access to the financial capital they need to do the work on the scale it is needed (Aydin, 2022; Dana et al., 2021; Flores & Samuel, 2019; JumaAgaya, 2021; Sobeck et al., 2007).

Finally, this organization has learned that to hold city officials and key stakeholders accountable on community issues, it sometimes must take drastic measures that will be risky to embark on. When members of the organization staged a protest in the mayor's office, it lasted for many days and required members to sleep in the office, which brought police presence. However, they did not waver in their efforts, even though it posed a risk to their safety and freedom. They learned that if you are passionate about something, you have to put effort into convincing others to care. What this organization has done over the years serves as an example to the macro social work world of how to advocate for change on an issue that heavily impacts the community on multiple levels. It represents the fact that advocacy work can be long and hard but making small steps towards a larger goal overtime can help keep momentum and in the long run facilitate systems changes, which is one crucial thing that social workers strive to do.

Limitations

This analysis is not without limitations and one of those is the scope. This study only interviewed the founder and a few entities that have worked with the organization. Further study on this organization would include interviews with more of the members or women who have been involved with the organization at some point in time. Interviewing more parties would increase the view from which this study discusses the organization. Another limitation is that all artifacts that were gathered were the ones that could be found. There were some newspaper articles and videos that could not be located due to the date they were originally published.

Conclusions and Implications for Social Work

The story of WSOHM highlights the important ways in which community members can challenge systems to catalyze change. It is often the case that systems are not designed with input from impacted populations that they are serving, as such well-intended individuals can do harm. Grassroots efforts like WSOHM are critical for systemic change. The WSOHM represents an example of an organization that was started by a community member whose loved one's homicide is unsolved, and her work has made substantial changes to the way homicides are investigated in Boston and has raised awareness on the issues for those dealing with the aftermath of homicide in these communities. Social workers should work to partner with organizations such as this one to provide clinical and financial support that will continue to advance the work still needed to be done to eradicate homicide in Black urban neighborhoods in the United States.

The case of WSOHM has important implications for social workers, who are well poised to engage with grassroots leaders such as WSOHM to advance change. Organizations such as this one are poised to work together with macro social workers, who in recent years have a call to assert themselves more in the work they are doing in the community (Sousa et al., 2019). Social workers can support such efforts through community practice partnerships. For example, social work clinicians are trained to support individuals suffering from the aftereffects of trauma experiences, such as the development of PTSD symptoms. The members of WSOHM are in desperate need of culturally aware clinical support, and clinicians could partner with this organization to provide resources in a variety of ways, such as individual counseling and support groups. In addition, social workers are well poised to bridge institutions and grassroots efforts to advance changes that community members would like to see. Moreover, social workers can advocate for the inclusions of impacted groups and residents in the design of programs and policies as well as for the reallocation of law enforcement funding to a grassroots community program that support community well-being and healing. WSOHM represents an organization that advocates for a marginalized population, which is in line with the mission of the social work profession. This organization would benefit from partnering with social workers because they can help develop programming that will meet the needs of the individuals and families receiving services. Social workers can assess the strengths and needs of the community, identify areas for improvement, and develop strategies to improve the condition of the community. There are many social work institutions that have existing partnerships with entities such as the police department and criminal justice system, placing them in a good position to be a bridge between community and stakeholder. By improving the relationship between the two, real change can be made, and the issue of cyclical community violence can be tackled.

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