

Project Homelessness

A Model for Social Impact through Theater



This report records the entirety of *Project Homelessness*, a year-long effort to raise awareness of youth homelessness with an original theatrical production based on local realities. It is designed to function as a model to raise awareness of social justice issues through the power of theater.

The project featured several advocacy pieces with the ultimate creation of a play based on thirteen interviews conducted with homeless children and young adults living in Billings, Montana. The show reached an audience of 558 community members over twelve performances, and the project raised funds to support two causes working to end youth homelessness.



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Project Homelessness

of the City of Billings and Venture Theatre was made possible with the generous support of:



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Chapter 1: Opening the Curtain - The Origins of Project Homelessness



“My wife had just one complaint about Venture Theatre’s production of *And I Know...* on Sunday afternoon...no Kleenex.”

– The Billings Outpost

1.0 Introduction

Nonprofits working against poverty can face tremendous challenges. Donor fatigue, emotional exhaustion of employees, and statistics that fail to show improvement despite years of hard work can wear out the stoutest of nonprofit staff, volunteers, and donors. So how does a nonprofit reenergize its cause? How can a nonprofit create empathy about a cause that has become redundant? How do you bring awareness to a community in a creative, illuminating way beyond advertising? Project Homelessness was created to fuel social engagement, inspire compassion, and use community theater as a tool for social change.

Project Homelessness began as an idea to use community theater to heighten awareness regarding youth homelessness in Billings, Montana. The City of Billings discovered it lacked information and data regarding local homeless youth. The face of homelessness was changing from single men to families and their children, but what did these faces look like? The City, with Community Development Manager Brenda Beckett at the lead, knew community leaders had to begin understanding what homeless children were experiencing before they could make any progress to impact childhood homelessness.

The City of Billings dedicated resources through an AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program, the Billings Metro VISTA Project. The intent was to combine efforts with a local community theater, Venture Theatre, to develop a project utilizing theater as a powerful tool to effect social change. Theater has the power to change minds, to evoke empathy, to reenergize and re-form personal understandings beyond the average television ad or public speaker. Project Homelessness was designed with the following goals: to raise public awareness of the high number of children experiencing homelessness in Billings by creating a play inspired by real stories that would call citizens to action, and to generate funds for other poverty-fighting initiatives.

Project Homelessness became a community effort led by two members of the Billings Metro VISTA Project, Jessie Obee and Amy Dixon, to give homeless youth a voice and move a community into action. Thirteen children and young adults were interviewed about their experiences living in shelters, motels, tents, rooftops, and doubled-up in living spaces with several families. These stories were turned into a script by local writers and brought to life by resident actors. The resulting play, *And I Know...*, reenergized a local shelter's donor base and their employees, inspired several local churches to take action, and brought every audience to tears.

*Project Homelessness
was an effective way of
engaging the community
in a difficult and
little-known issue.*

One social service employee who viewed the resulting play wrote, "It was like so many of the kids I work with...It really puts you in their shoes." In fact, over 50% of surveyed audience members via a VISTA-created online feedback survey said the play inspired them to take action: from encouraging their churches to become more active, to simply handing food out to hungry citizens on the streets.

This report operates as a model to assist other communities in creating their own production to illuminate social issues, raise funds, and inspire collaboration. Most chapters will reference recommendations for future productions based upon the experience of what worked and what could have been improved. From the pilot project, *A Heart Without*, to the impact *And I Know...* had on actors and audience members, this report covers over a year of preparation so other communities can begin projects with full awareness of proposed steps, rewards, and potential obstacles. The appendix contains a large selection of materials used in Project Homelessness, including valuable resources.

1.1 The Inspiration: A Heart Without

Project Homelessness is designed as an educational and outreach tool inspired by a 2010 initiative, *A Heart Without*, which partnered Venture Theatre and the Billings Metro VISTA Project. A history of *A Heart Without*, the Mayor's Ten-Year Plan to Impact Homelessness, and information about the Billings Metro VISTA Project is key to developing a comprehensive understanding of Project Homelessness and its original play about youth homelessness *And I Know...*

Models for Project Homelessness

A Heart Without is a series of six monologues based upon interviews with homeless adults from the Billings community. In July 2010, a Billings Metro VISTA Project member, Daniele Reisbig, began capacity-building efforts to benefit the Billings Area Resource Network, an organization dedicated to creating dynamic partnerships between service providers to improve advocacy and access to services for the local homeless community.

Ms. Reisbig was tasked with finding a creative way to raise community awareness about local adult homelessness and \$1,000 in funds to support the 2012 Project Homeless Connect (now Billings Community Connect). Project Homeless Connect is recognized as a national best-practice for addressing homelessness. This one-day, one-stop event assists low-income and homeless individuals and families with accessing social services. Ms. Reisbig believed that sharing stories about local homelessness at a community theater would be ideal as a fundraiser for Project Homeless Connect because of theater's unique capacity to promote civic engagement and community action to affect social justice issues.

Ms. Reisbig became interested in using theater as a forum for discussing local homelessness after researching other Montana dramatic-works productions about homelessness. For example, the *Yearbook Project* involved students from Montana State University in Bozeman in partnership with professors and service providers to collect interviews with homeless individuals from the community. The interviews were then adapted into written monologues, which the students presented before Bozeman's Continuum of Care Committee and at Bozeman's Project Homeless Connect.

Ms. Reisbig also used the Missoula Children's Theatre production, *It Could be Me: Voices from the Pov*, as a model for creating *A Heart Without*. The *Voices from the Pov* was created in 2004 by Joe Bischoff, former Education Director for the Poverello Center (Pov) in Missoula, Montana. The Poverello Center is Montana's largest emergency homeless shelter and soup kitchen. Bischoff believed that capturing the details and hard realities of homelessness through first-hand interviews with Pov residents would foster interest in discussing and affecting homelessness among previously disengaged members of the Missoula community.

Creating *A Heart Without*

In early October 2010, Ms. Reisbig approached Sarah Butts, Venture Theatre's Youth Conservatory Director, with her vision for creating an original works production from interviews with local homeless community members. Ms. Reisbig was pleasantly surprised to discover that Ms. Butts was eager to partner with the Billings Area Resource Network to create a program that featured stories of homelessness from the community as an educational and fundraising tool on behalf of Project Homeless Connect 2011. Ms. Butts agreed to locate playwrights to craft monologues based upon interviews with homeless community members, as well as recruit actors, and direct the production. Ms. Reisbig would furnish interviews to playwrights and market the project within the community.

In early October through mid-November 2010, Ms. Reisbig conducted thirteen interviews, primarily set up by Joe Chalupa of the Billings Mental Health Center's HUB. Ms. Reisbig also created a set of instructions for executing interviews, in which she described the project, its intended goals, and how client confidentiality would be maintained (see appendix).

In early November 2010, Ms. Butts located and received approval from two local playwrights, Ryan Gage and Shad Scott, to craft monologues taken from Ms. Reisbig's thirteen interviews. Mr. Gage, a history teacher at Billings Senior High School, and Mr. Scott, a frequent participant in Venture's original works creation festival, *Wet Ink*, were intrigued by the prospect of creating dramatic monologues based upon local stories of homelessness. *A Heart Without* was performed on December 10, 2010, at Venture Theatre. One hundred people attended, and the event raised \$1,000 for the 2011 Project Homeless Connect.

After the Venture Theatre performances, Mr. Gage turned the monologues into a full play and directed the show at Billings Senior High School. This full format was received more positively than the monologues, and Mr. Gage reports that audiences felt more of an impact. He says, most importantly, the "performance at Senior High led to Project Homelessness, which created *And I Know...* which was hugely successful in raising both awareness and [funding] to combat the issues of homelessness in [the Billings] community."

The final presentation of *A Heart Without* occurred at the Montana Housing Partnership Conference, in Billings, on July 26, 2012. Patrick Wilson, former Youth Conservatory Director at Venture Theatre and personal friend of Mr. Gage, Mr. Scott, and Ms. Butts, presented approximately one half hour from Mr. Gage's scripted version of the production, using the original Senior High School student cast. The presentation did not represent the entire production, although feedback from the audience members reflected a positive impact. One attendee noted it was the best part of the overall conference. Attendee Sue Runkle, Homeless Education Liaison for the Billings Public School System, reports that the brief conference performance was impactful and, more importantly, helped showcase Venture Theatre as a venue to discuss local homelessness and poverty to other local service providers.

Recommendations from *A Heart Without*

Ms. Reisbig reports that the biggest successes came from its effective protection of participant confidentiality and trust; employing existing relationships among service providers and stakeholders, including Venture Theatre and local artists, to produce and promote the program; and successfully reaching its financial goal. Ms. Reisbig was able to take her report and present *A Heart Without* as a model for social impact at the 2012 Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness Conference in New York.

Ms. Reisbig believes that the chief challenges include its short timetable and she strongly advises prospective facilitators to “make sure that you have sufficient time. Bring in as many people as you can to the table, in getting involved with it, because that also increases your reach with making people aware of it.” Finally, Ms. Reisbig regrets not having developed and implemented formal feedback mechanisms to garner post-event audience reactions for reporting purposes. While she reports that audience members described the show positively after its premier, she wishes that she had distributed post-event surveys to audiences to have quantifiable data for reporting and promoting the show’s model after its culmination at Venture.

Despite some setbacks not gathering audience feedback after *A Heart Without*, the event was a monumental success. It is because of the positive experience of *A Heart Without* that Mr. Gage and Mr. Scott would become the playwrights for Project Homelessness. Its model represents the basis for the development, by Ms. Butts and Ms. Beckett, of Project Homelessness.

1.2 Billings Metro VISTA Project and Welcome Home Billings

In 2004, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) challenged communities to develop strategic 10-year plans to impact chronic homelessness and poverty. Subsequently, the Montana Council on Homelessness chose Billings as a pilot project to develop the first 10-year plan and the intent was to create a replicable model for other communities end chronic homelessness.

In 2006, Ron Tussing, Mayor for the City of Billings, supported a resolution to create a committee devoted to proposing, debating, and implementing initiatives over the 10-year period to impact homelessness within the community. The Billings City Council selected twenty members for a Mayor’s Committee on Homelessness to meet monthly to discuss the progress of city-wide homelessness initiatives. In 2006, the community also created the Billings Area Resource Network to establish a network of local nonprofits, private and public organizations, and key stakeholders interested in impacting homelessness in Billings.

In the fall of 2009, the Mayor’s Committee and Billings City Council adopted *Welcome Home Billings*, the 10-year plan designed to increase overall collaborative efforts and resources to assist the homeless in our community. In order to creatively address local homelessness initiatives, the City’s Community Development Division created an AmeriCorps VISTA program in 2009 known as the Billings Metro VISTA Project. The Billings Metro VISTA Project is sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service.

A Heart Without into Project Homelessness

In the spring of 2012, the City of Billings Community Development Manager, Brenda Beckett met with Sarah Butts to discuss creating a production through Venture Theatre to develop and implement a production about local child and youth homelessness. They met in late March of 2012 to craft a VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) aimed at affecting local perceptions of youth homelessness and fundraising for the Billings Community Connect event (formerly known as Project Homeless Connect). Finally, Venture Theatre’s Executive Director, Robert Brian Wood, signed the VISTA Assignment Description application in July 2012. The VISTA members

would begin their annual term as members of the Billings Metro VISTA Project, stationed at Venture Theatre, on July 20, 2012.

Billings Metro VISTA Project members work to create or expand community-based programs, services, and systems that prevent and intervene in homelessness through capacity-building activities. Venture Theatre is a local nonprofit with a mission statement to *Engage, Challenge, and Inspire* Billings audiences through theatrical education and performance, often about social justice issues, Venture Theatre represented an ideal host site for VISTA members to develop, implement, and promote a production affecting perceptions and generating funds to combat youth homelessness and poverty within the community.



Chapter 2: Knowledge Gaps in Billings, Montana



"I never really thought about the children that are left homeless when the adults in their families are left homeless. I always thought of it as an "adult" problem."

– Anonymous feedback

2.1 City Assessment: A Missing Page

In 2009, Ms. Beckett and Lynda Woods, Community Development Program Coordinator, discovered that information regarding homeless youth in Billings was limited while conducting assessments for *Welcome Home Billings*. The Mayor's Committee on Homelessness was aware that the face of homelessness in Billings was changing. According to 2012 Point-in-Time Housing survey results, the number of homeless families with children was on the rise. The question arose: What does homelessness look like for these children?

A five minute informational film had been created by a VISTA member, Jessica Mowry, in 2010 for the Illuminate Poverty blog. Two young girls were interviewed about their experiences being homeless (see appendix). While Ms. Beckett was watching this film, she realized capacity had to be built to show how homelessness affects children and young adults. Without knowledge of their experiences, there could be no effective change to help them out of poverty.

2.2 No Change without Awareness: Youth Homelessness in Billings

Each city has a slightly different picture of homelessness that varies by gender, race, age, population size, and service array. According to 2010 United States Census Bureau data, Billings is the largest city in Montana with 104,170 citizens. Despite being an arguably small city, the Billings School District still had 497 homeless children by the end of the 2011/12 school year. This number does not include children too young to be in school, drop-outs, or homeschooled youth. By June 2013, Sue Runkle, the Homelessness Education Liaison for the Billings School District, collected data showing the number of homeless youth over the school year was 560, meaning 3.5% of the district's children had no place to call home. In 2011, the National Center on Family

Homelessness determined that one out of every 45 children is homeless, with a national average of 2.2%. These numbers show the desperate situation of youth homelessness in Billings when compared to the national average.

Many of these children have families, but some do not. Some live with neighbors and friends, but without a support network many children are forced to live on the streets. Sheri Boelter, Executive Director of the Tumbleweed Program in Billings, reports that they can find shelter in sheds and abandoned buildings, but there are some who live in the massive cliffs that border the city and others take shelter under bridges. The 2013 Billings Housing Status Point-In-Time Survey indicates that as many as 225 children experiencing homelessness each night. The survey also demonstrates that youth account for 28% of the homeless population in Billings.

Since the community at-large was unaware of the grave situation facing so many of its youth, there was little that the City or private nonprofits could do to provide appropriate services. Awareness of a social issue opens the door for funding, volunteers, and fundamental attitude shifts about pre-conceived stereotypes. Project Homelessness hoped to do just that by spreading knowledge and empathy.

2.3 Theater as a Tool

Theater is a highly effective tool for changing perceptions about social issues and *A Heart Without* demonstrated theater's potential for impacting adult homelessness. Audience members are placed in an intimate setting and become absorbed into the world that is being portrayed. For the first time audience members are connected to real people depicting real stories and empathy ensues.

One hundred percent of all feedback interviews and survey respondents from the *And I Know...* online feedback survey said that theater is an appropriate venue for social impact pieces (see Chapter 12). The feedback received from audience members reaffirms that theater has the power to change attitudes and inspire action. Reverend Susan Otey of Grace United Methodist Church said in a VISTA member feedback interview, *"I do think theater is an important aspect of addressing [homelessness], because it brings the issue to a place where I can experience it in a way that I might not feel comfortable experiencing it otherwise."*

Theater and Empathy

Lynn Al, Youth Conservatory Director at Venture Theatre and VISTA supervisor, had been involved in community theater since 1982. Along with her theater experience, Ms. Al was able to bring personal experiences of being a homeless child to Project Homelessness. Post-production, a VISTA member interviewed Ms. Al about her passion for theater as a tool. She explains why theater is perfect for developing empathy:

"We can't really tell our own story. I can tell you my sad story and you may be empathetic to that, but I'm going to [censor] how much I let out. I work to hide some of my emotion... But in a play, you work to do the opposite. You work to show the emotion, because seeing a story is different than hearing a story. Seeing life in action is different from hearing about it second-hand. One of my favorite things to say about theater is that it's training for empathy. You're being put in someone else's shoes. Churches do it all the time... that's why a kid goes on a mission trip, they [gain] empathy. They're seeing it and feeling it. But you can't bring home all the kids."

Dry facts used by nonprofits and individuals addressing poverty are difficult for community members to process. Along with the empathy theater can develop, it also humanizes the data. Ms. Runkle said:

"[People will] listen to or watch a play more so than...listening to me tell them facts and figures, [because with theater] you're impacting their feelings and you're basing it on truth, and they can actually know that there are homeless kids in Billings; that's really impactful."

Ms. Al often sits in the back during performances she produces to gauge audience reaction. In the play *And I Know...* there is a scene in which the Administrator interviews the young homeless girl, Izzy, about leaving the shelter, and the Administrator becomes increasingly urgent that Izzy answer her. Ms. Al said:

"I saw someone sitting next to the Administrator go to put her hand out. She had a physical urge to reach out and stop the Administrator from asking those questions, the urge to tell her to leave the little girl alone...so they were affected on a gut level. That's how you know they're getting it."

Theater versus Film: The Shared Experience

Theater brings homeless youth and their private experiences to life in an intimate setting. Audience members are drawn into a new world even more effectively than film. Ms. Al explained:

"You can see a documentary and it makes you feel fired up and want to do something, but [theater is] different. Not all of your senses are engaged. It builds a different urgency. Through an actor you can see how deeply people are affected as they experience homelessness right in front of you."

Craig Huisenga, local director and Review Group member of the *And I Know...* script, responded:

"One of the things that I love about theater is the shared experience. Not just between the cast, but the cast with an audience, all being in the same room. As an audience member, theater has the ability to be much more powerful than film because you're in the same room with living, breathing people who are going through those same situations and experiencing those emotions."

Theater can draw audiences in a world to develop strong empathy and recreate varied experiences of homelessness before an audience's eyes.

Venture Theatre's Mission: Engage, Challenge, Inspire

Ms. Al believes that one way a theater can fail its community is by focusing on entertaining. Venture Theatre has spent twenty years creating productions that hope to challenge audience members, not simply create good art. That is why Venture's mission is to *Engage, Challenge, Inspire*. Entertainment is important, but it can come in so many other forms. It is theater's unique ability to create empathy and bring audiences into a recreated world that is why it is almost a call to action for theater to draw attention to social issues.

Ms. Al believes that the true challenge of using theater as a tool is not necessarily convincing the community that it can be such, but rather convincing the theater itself. She says that a theater has to realize its own power to make a change within its community, and that they do not have to exist solely to entertain. Ms. Al explains the Venture Theatre mission statement exists to demonstrate its power as a nonprofit:

"Engage is [to connect] with feelings and empathize; Challenge is to look at yourself and how it applies to you; Inspire is how do you reach back to your community and do something?"

This summary of the mission statement shows that Venture Theatre was the appropriate location for Project Homelessness in raising awareness of youth homelessness, challenging stereotypes and preconceptions, and issuing a call to action. By pairing Venture Theatre's mission with the City of Billings desire to inform the community of youth homelessness and discover varied faces of homelessness as data on homelessness changed, theater could be utilized as a powerful tool for social change. The next step was to decide how to fully implement Project Homelessness over the course of the year.

Chapter 3: Creating a Project Based on Need



"This play did change my mind about homelessness because it *humanized* the people that are homeless. I see these folks every day near work and sometimes they are shouting and panhandling, and I feel either threatened or angry. My attitude has changed. I have more sympathy for them."

— Anonymous Audience Member

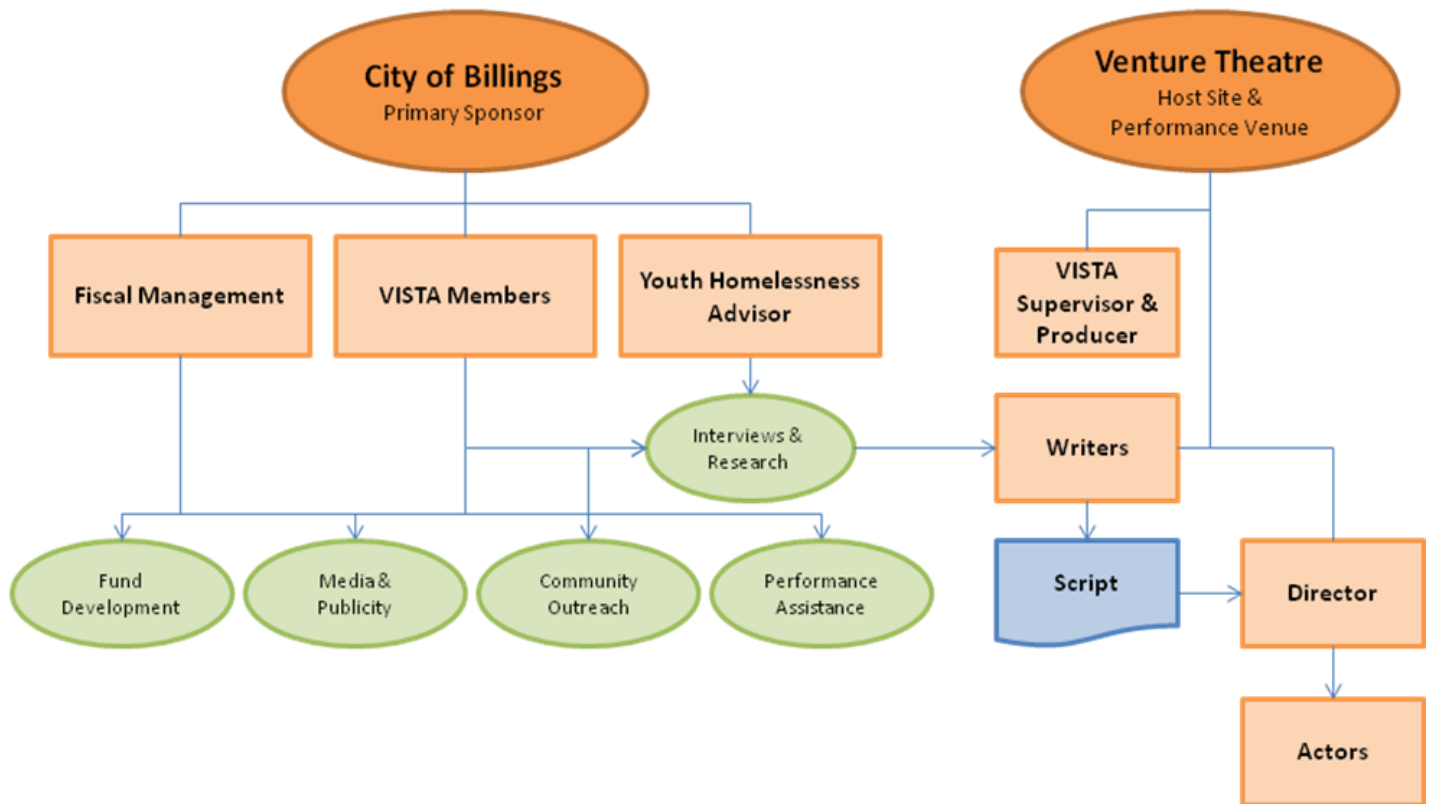
3.1 Project Homelessness: Key Players

A City assessment identified the need: to document and spread awareness of youth homelessness. Ms. Beckett began reaching out to potential key players to implement a project that would accomplish this need. The City of Billings, with Ms. Beckett at the lead, would be the primary sponsor of Project Homelessness and recruit two VISTA members to assist in facilitation. Venture Theatre would host the VISTA members and be the venue for the production. Other identified players included: a supervisor for the VISTA members; an advisor on youth homelessness; a producer; and a director. Mr. Scott and Mr. Gage, writers of *A Heart Without*, were willing to write the script for Project Homelessness.

Ms. Beckett knew the project would need a community member intimate with the realities of youth homelessness. She reached out to Ms. Runkle, Homeless Education Liaison for the Billings School District. Ms. Runkle receives referrals of homeless and precariously housed children and ensures that each child has the same chances to succeed as other students. She would be able to provide the connections needed to find youth for interviews, and provide information and feedback throughout the year.

Ms. Al was passionate about using theater as a tool and became supervisor of the VISTA members, as well as producer for the resulting play, *And I Know...* Ms. Beckett and Ms. Al interviewed and recommended two VISTA members for the initiative. It would be the VISTA members' primary duty to research and interview homeless youth, generate funds, develop media and publicity for the play, create collaborations through rigorous community outreach, and remain available to assist throughout the production process.

Production Key Players & Duties

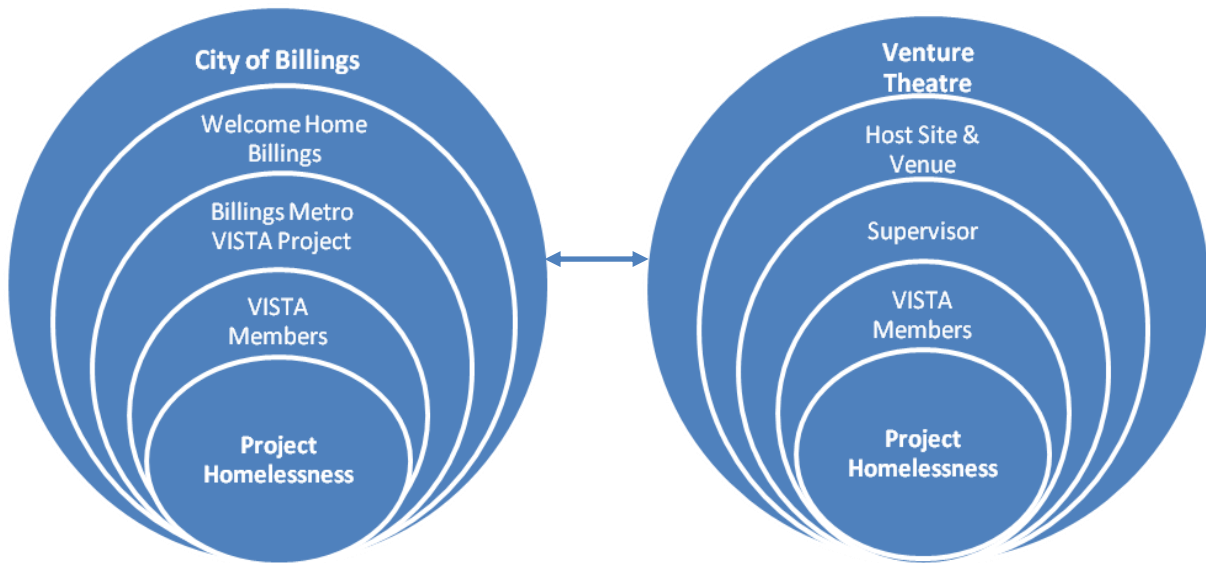


Ms. Runkle advised the VISTA members on the realities of life for most homeless youth and provided interview participants for ten of the thirteen total resulting interviews. Community outreach would create connections for the other three interviews. The City of Billings, aside from recruiting Ms. Runkle as advisor and providing the VISTA members, would also manage all funds raised.

Venture Theatre's role as host site and performance venue also included connections to the writers, directors Wanda Morales and Christie Anderson, and a wide actor pool for the play.

The following chart illustrates roles of the two organizations. The City of Billings identified the need and could provide VISTA members to build needed capacity. The two organizations had already collaborated to create *A Heart Without*, so they joined formally to create Project Homelessness.

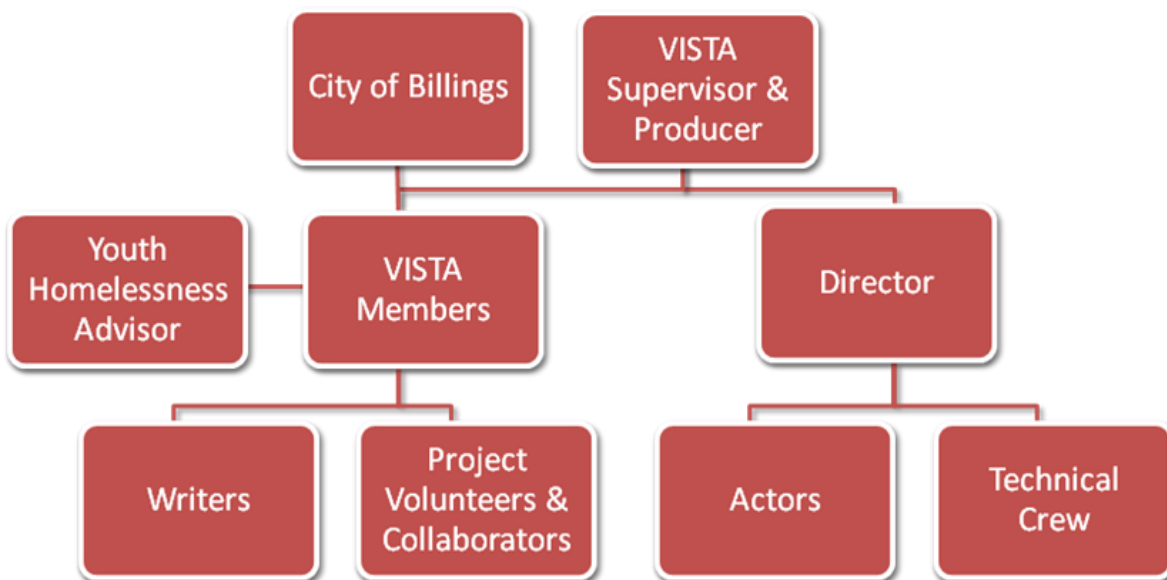
Relationship of Organizations to Project Homelessness



Project Communication

Clear communication is the foundation of any successful endeavor. For Project Homelessness, the communication and hierarchy can be seen modeled in the chart below. The VISTA members report to their supervisor, but also maintain communication with the City of Billings as part of the Billings Metro VISTA Project.

Project and Communication Hierarchy



Summary of Project Members and Key Duties

The following identifies key players and assigned duties:

- **The City of Billings, Brenda Beckett, Community Development Manager:** Sponsored the project through the Billings Metro VISTA Project, provided general oversight and project management, assisted in networking for Project Homelessness, created a webpage hosted by the City to showcase the project, and managed funding raised by the VISTA members.
- **Venture Theatre:** Hosted the VISTA members and provided a supervisor, Lynn AI, who also produced the play. The theater also provided the play venue, engaged two local writers and directors in their network that were passionate about the project, and provided actors.
- **VISTA Members:** Researched local homelessness and interviewed homeless youth, organized community outreach, fundraising, and marketing, including presenting to clubs and organizations and finding nonprofit buy-outs for the play, and assisted in production needs. This included, but was not limited to: advising on the accuracy of all play content to faithfully represent homeless families and children, finding props, assisting in set construction, and light and sound operation. The VISTA members and the producer also influenced the content of the script with support from Sue Runkle. As well as communicating with the writers, the VISTA members were also in charge of maintaining relationships, and recruiting and managing volunteers, with the exception of the technical crew.
- **VISTA Supervisor and Producer:** Lynn AI had several main duties: to supervise the VISTA members and ensure all goals were met while providing a valuable network for fundraising and marketing, and to produce the play, *And I Know....* She oversaw the material in the production and brought personal knowledge of youth homelessness to ensure accurate representation. As the producer, had ultimate veto power over the production material.
- **Youth Homelessness Advisor:** Because of Ms. Runkle's position as Homeless Education Liaison for the Billings School District, she was available to advise, review the script, and provide connections with homeless youth for interviews. Her knowledge and network were invaluable.
- **Local Writers:** Mr. Scott and Mr. Gage took all interviews and research conducted by the VISTA members and wrote a full-length script inspired by this information. The writers communicated with the VISTA members concerning play content and other production needs. They were also available to make script changes at every stage of the production process.
- **Director:** Wanda Morales began as the play's director, and shortly in to rehearsal was unable to complete the project. Christie Anderson, an experienced Venture Theatre actress, made her directorial debut with Ms. Morales's keen casting decisions. The main duty of the director was to communicate with the actors and technical crew to ensure a successful artistic production that was socially impactful. The director controlled the tone and ensured the production's message was presented accurately and powerfully through their actors.

It is important to note that every main player of Project Homelessness participated because of a passion for social justice, especially in spreading awareness of youth homelessness. The production was a "labor of love" for all. This could be stressed enough when content of the production depended on the passion of its members.

3.2 Clearly Defined Goals

Each member of Project Homelessness had to understand and work together to achieve identified goals. Maintaining clear communication and defining hierarchies and duties helped ensure that the project's goals could be met:

- Raise awareness of the perceptions children have while experiencing homelessness.
- Challenge stereotypes with a theatrical production to demonstrate the power of theater as a tool.
- Give a voice to children experiencing homelessness.
- Generate discussions about youth homelessness.
- Raise funds for causes that help break generational cycles of poverty.

A challenge of any project of this nature, and one that was encountered, was keeping these goals clearly in mind. Not every goal was achieved perfectly; there were several times along the year where members would lose sight of expected outcomes. However, every goal was met and resulted in a successful production.

3.3 VISTA Assignment Description (VAD)

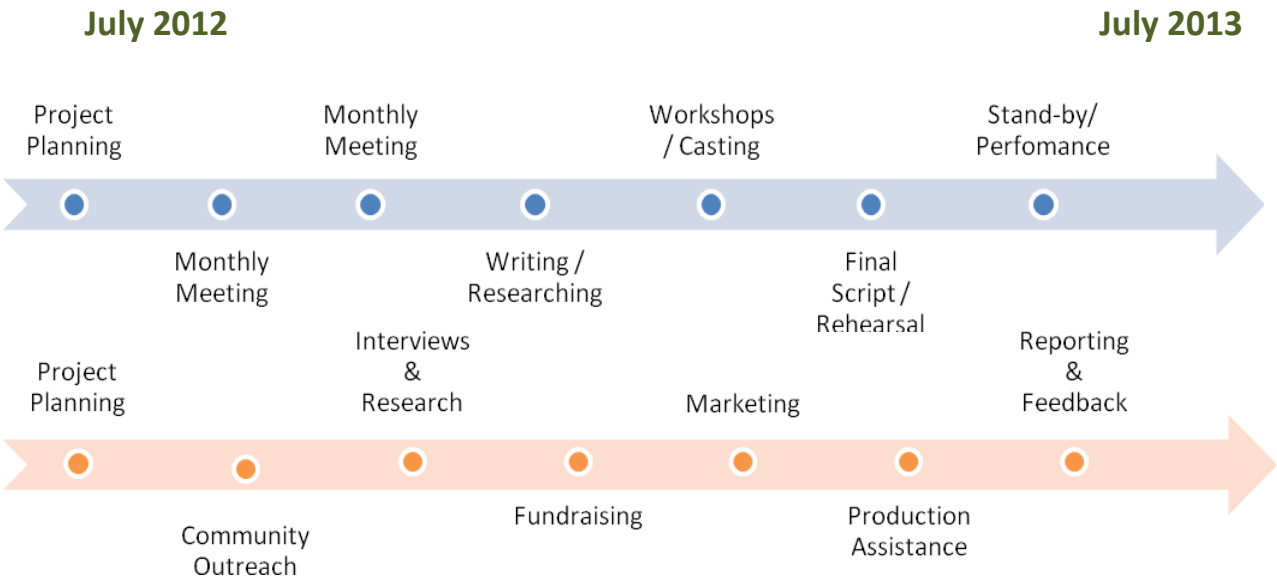
The VAD is a required outline of a VISTA member's goals and tasks throughout their year of service. For Project Homelessness, the VAD maintained the production's direction and ensured that all tasks were met for the year. The capacity building goals of the VAD for Project Homelessness were to:

- Create a production based on interviews with homeless youth.
- Use Project Homelessness as a fundraising venue for poverty initiatives.
- Raise a minimum of \$5,000 in funds to support poverty initiatives.
- Create a Review Group of stakeholders to maintain script accuracy.
- Create a media and proceeds plan.

Billings Metro VISTA Project members must develop quarterly reports indicating the progress and completion of each goal to maintain accountability and transparency. If a similar production is created without the aid of an AmeriCorps VISTA member, it is recommended that team members create a plan outlining specific tasks to complete each goal satisfactorily.

Timelines

The VAD also creates a timeline for the completion of each task across the entire service year. It was necessary to gather the team together within the first month to discuss deadlines, especially for the director and writers to help guide their portion of the production. Each section on the following timeline represents approximately two months of time.



The most critical goals of the project were to complete the interviews and finish transcription by the end of December. The writers completed the script before rehearsals began February 24, and the play ran from April 19 to May 12, 2013. After the play ended, VISTA members gathered data and wrote reports until July 2013.

3.4 Recommendations

Production Time

VISTA members had precisely 365 days to build capacity at Venture Theatre through completion of the production. If a potential project does not have access to this type of resource, the timeline is entirely governable by team members. For Project Homelessness, one year was adequate to achieve all goals. Shorter timelines would require experienced and invested team members for each role, with at least one facilitator willing to work full-time.

Project Ownership and Contracts

For Project Homelessness, all VISTA member deliverables are public domain and belong to the public at large. The script is owned by the playwrights, and the production belongs to Venture Theatre. Clarifying ownership through contracts illustrating ownership and responsibilities would be beneficial, particularly if the script is utilized for other productions in the future. Ownership, roles, responsibilities artistic interpretation and veto power should be established through contracts prior to engaging key players. Care should be taken to ensure the population being represented is portrayed fairly, accurately, and with empathy.

Authority and Communications

Clearly established lines of authority maintain efficiency and production integrity. Lines of communication should follow the chain of command. Project Homelessness benefitted from having knowledgeable producer with veto power to balance artistic interpretations and social message. As new productions are often organic in nature, the content of the script may be altered to better accommodate timing and to avoid misrepresentation of source material. Good management with transparent goals and duties for each member is key to a successful project.

The larger the initiative, the more challenges team members will likely encounter. Maintain a calm exterior and keep communication between project members strong and healthy so the team is prepared to be innovative and dynamic while maintaining a creative flexible and adaptive environment. Remember the intended goals, reevaluate tasks, rally community help, and all problems can be overcome.

Chapter 4: Project Homelessness Beneficiaries



“I believe the most important aspect was that I gained more understanding about how people become homeless and what their struggles are.”

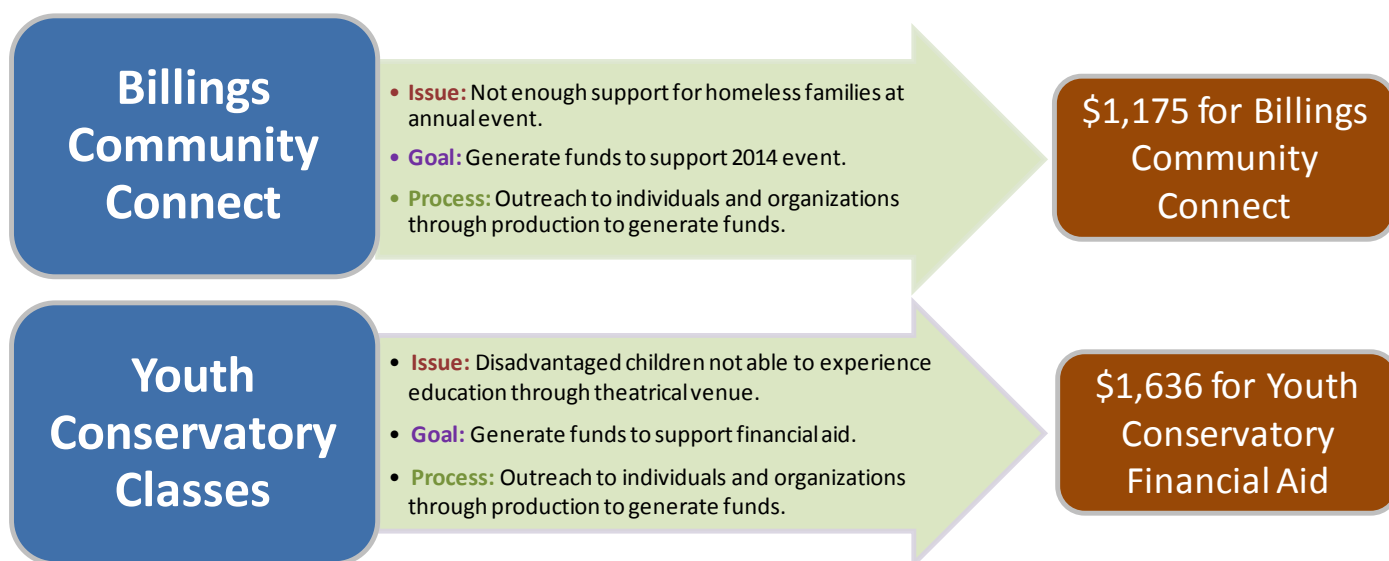
—Anonymous feedback survey

4.1 Local Causes

A key platform of Project Homelessness was providing financial support for two initiatives intended to affect local homelessness and poverty:

- Creating financial aid for underprivileged children to attend community theater conservatory classes, and
- Providing financial resources for the 2014 Billings Community Connect event.

While influencing community-wide perceptions about local homelessness represented a critical component of the project, it was also important for VISTA members to generate funds to combat the effects of local homelessness and poverty, especially among community youth. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the goal was to generate \$5,000 in cash and in-kind resources with a portion of that going towards selected beneficiaries.



As illustrated above, VISTA members raised a total of \$2,811 for beneficiaries. Target goals in cash and in-kind resources were exceeded through receiving financial sponsorships from First Interstate Bank, Stockman Bank, First Montana Title, Altana Federal Credit Union, and generous individual donors. In-kind donations were received by MasterLube and nonprofit stakeholders. In-kind donations and their support of the production will be discussed further in Chapter 7. Cash donations through sponsorships by local businesses were critical to support beneficiaries.

4.2 Youth in the Arts

Ms. Al and Ms. Beckett wanted to create financial aid for underprivileged kids and young adults to attend conservatory classes at Venture Theatre. Community theater has a direct impact upon affecting civic engagement, empathy, and individual, as well as community, growth among its participants. These facts, coupled with the use of theater as a venue to change community perceptions about social justice concerns, made creating funds to support disadvantaged kids to experience community theater directly in line with the project's intent.

Community theater classes enrich the lives of participants through teaching interpersonal skills, enhancing reading skills, fostering volunteerism, cultivating technical and vocational skills, and creating a social structure of friends and mentors. For individuals lacking a strong support network, including disadvantaged children from the Billings community, theater can create a foundation of emotional and educational support. Theater also helps teach interpersonal and coping skills, which may prove especially valuable to children and young adults from volatile backgrounds. Theater encourages participants to think on their feet, establish emotional stability, and work with a team to solve problems through cooperation and thinking "outside the box."

By providing financial support on behalf of disadvantaged youth, the project created healthier, happier individuals by having them experience the healing power of community theater. For example, in the spring of 2013, with Ms. Al's assistance, VISTA members were able to provide two clients of a local homeless service provider with the opportunity to attend a dance class at Venture Theatre. The girls, aged 10 and 13, had a wonderful experience in the class. Their experience highlighted the value that community theater can have upon positively affecting local disadvantaged children.

4.3 Social Services for Families

Funds developed through Project Homelessness were allocated to support the 2014 Billings Community Connect, an annual one-day, one-stop event designed to provide a safe place for homeless and low-income community members to access clothing, employment, housing, medical, legal, and other social services. In 2013, over 48 local providers offered much-needed services to 344 individuals through the event. The event represents a unique collaboration between private and public service providers, city government, non-profits, churches, and concerned individuals. The event also represents an opportunity to conduct valuable point-in-time surveys that provide information about the face of homelessness (including demographic and background information) in the community for future funding and educational purposes.

4.4 Recommendations

Project Homelessness created connections between art and defined impact by generating financial and in-kind donations from businesses and individuals to cover production expenses, and donated portions of those sponsorships to services working to combat social justice issues. When creating a program similar to Project Homelessness, keep in mind that prospective donors and audiences will be more deeply affected by a production with definite goals for impacting poverty and homelessness. Providing financial and in-kind support through an initiative for efforts combating social justice concerns, like homelessness, will amplify its effectiveness.

Chapter 5: Pre-Production Preparation



“Before the play, I always assumed homeless people were just too lazy to support themselves.
Now I realize there are often other circumstances.
I don’t know what has happened to get them to this point in their life.”

– Anonymous survey feedback

5.1 Landing at Venture Theatre

Board members and the Executive Director were agreeable to VISTA members undertaking the project. Before the VISTA members arrived, the theater had the task of deciding how to balance Project Homelessness within its other duties as a community theater. The artistic members of the project had to prepare for the project before they could begin work on the play.

Making Room for Project Homelessness: Classification, Season, and Run Length

The first task on Venture Theatre’s list was determining how to classify the resulting play. The play was to be based on interviews with children experiencing homelessness, the Board and staff debated proper department placement: the Producer’s Series or Youth Conservatory. It was finally decided to be placed in the Producer’s Series, a showcase platform for edgy and modern theatrical productions. Doing this would give an unknown, locally created play more credential as an artistic endeavor and be marketable to a larger audience.

The next questions arose: Would the play be a part of the main season? How many weeks would the play run? Placing the production in the main season legitimized the production and ensured commitment by all parties involved. It also placed the play on equal status with well-known works and could be seen by season ticket holders. Venture Theatre then decided on a four-week run, a departure from its usual length of two weeks. Putting an unknown, locally-created production in the main season required a great amount of faith in the production. The Board and staff were not let down by this faith and the theater made a good profit.

The Black Box

Of Venture Theatre's two stages, the Black Box is the smallest and most dynamic. It has a maximum seating capacity of 75 people, and the performance space is located on a black cement floor. The seating is typically arranged against one wall with three tiered risers running along the length. The space is almost entirely black which creates an edgy, intimate space that is perfect for social awareness pieces. This VISTA member photograph shows half of the set and the risers for seating without chairs during rehearsal of *And I Know...*'s opening scene.



5.2 Writer Preparation

The writing team's prior experience with *A Heart Without* helped make this production successful. Mr. Gage and Mr. Scott met monthly before the interviews were conducted to discuss basic strategies for the plot, their own deadlines, and ways to edit the script. It was their connection to *Go!*, a local artists' workshop, that gave the script its first review, and a second workshop followed including social service providers. They also received research about youth homelessness by VISTA members to read before the interviews were conducted and toured the Women and Family Shelter.

5.3 Director Preparation

Wanda Morales had been chosen to direct the production the because of her directorial skills and her empathy for the subject. She met with the other production members twice before the script was created so she could be made aware of the production's goals, contribute to deadlines for the script, and be kept apprised of progress. Before the script was available, the VISTA members sent Ms. Morales facts about homelessness in Billings, including 2012 data available about family homelessness. This helped the director understand that the City and service providers lacked detailed data about homeless youth, and this play would help fill in faces of the children and allow the community to understand the rapidly growing problem of youth homelessness.

Once the interviews were completed, they were made available to the director to review. Ms. Morales said:

"[The interviews] provided me connection to the impact of homelessness. It instantly made the project personal as I was reading through the interviews. ...That gave me a huge understanding of the direct impact homelessness has on our community."

After all materials had been given to Ms. Morales, she waited until the script was complete and then she began envisioning the play and wrote an audition notice.

5.4 Recommendations

It is recommended that each team member be prepared to hand off their work at each stage. This can be a painful process when every member is dedicated and passionate, as each is personally attached to their work. The process should advance in the following manner:



The experiences of team members during Project Homelessness illuminated the need for clear boundaries from one step in the process to the next:

- **VISTA members** became emotionally attached to the people they interviewed. These interviews were given to the writers, and the VISTA members then became objective members willing to allow artistic interpretation of these people. Interference was only allowed when artistic liberties were taken not in line with overall project goals, or misrepresented realities of homelessness or service providers. They oversaw the truth of the script.
- **Writers** became professionally and personally attached to their work. They handed the script to the director, who interpreted and designed the world they created. The writers were available for consult and edits until the opening night, and they detached and allowed the director to follow her artistic vision and make changes to the script as necessary.
- **Director** handed off control of the production to the actors once the curtain opened on the first night. Each director will have their own methods for release, and facilitators should be available for extra support.

Every team member should have their own tasks and duties. For the artistic aspect, the first four months primarily consisted of planning meetings. The theater must be fully aware and approve of the production, then place the resulting play in an appropriate category and season with the ultimate success of the project in mind. Once management has completed research and interviews, the production members are in control of the play, subject to Review Group advice.

Chapter 6: Community Outreach



"And I Know..." increased my awareness of the prevalence of youth homelessness and how the homeless can be the neighbor next door."

– Anonymous feedback

6.1 Creating a Network to Support Project Homelessness

Community collaborations and partnerships were established and supported throughout the entire year. An effective network provides: community stakeholders willing to invest their time and knowledge, such as the Youth Homelessness Advisor; new and strengthened nonprofit collaborations to the benefit of the community; volunteers for any project needs; potential financial sponsors. The chart below simplifies the benefits of community outreach:



For Project Homelessness and the resulting play, *And I Know...*, collaboration produced through community outreach was necessary to:

- Identify potential stakeholders that would help find youth to interview, who might advise, donate, and/or review the script.
- Allow VISTA members the opportunity to establish close relationships with community members to generate undercurrents of anticipation for *And I Know...* through marketing and promotion of the show as well as discussions about youth homelessness.
- Generate support from, and for, community partners (organizations and individuals) already working to affect youth homelessness.
- Market *And I Know...* to potential audiences.
- Avoid incurring unnecessary expenditures by partnering with organizations and individuals that already had the tool(s) needed for implementation.

By hosting a variety of events, VISTA members created a support network by identifying potential stakeholders. VISTA members engaged prospective community partners to support Project Homelessness through the following ways, and each event is listed chronologically:

- Volunteering at nonprofit events.
- Hosting a Nonprofit Open House at Venture Theatre.
- Participation in theater productions.
- Hosting a Volunteer Appreciation Party at Venture Theatre.

Becoming Active and Visible

The first step VISTA members took to create a support network was to become as visible and active in the nonprofit community as possible. It was important to reach out to all sectors of the poverty-fighting community including: faith-based organizations and churches, nonprofits working to address poverty, and individuals with personal interest in addressing youth homelessness. By volunteering for nonprofits, attending community events, and touring service providers, members became aware local conditions impacting homelessness in the community. This knowledge was invaluable in creating a successful play.

The VISTA members began volunteering at events such as the Montana Rescue Mission's *Walk for Hope*, which was the start of a year-long relationship with the Montana Rescue Mission, and countless other events city-wide. The VISTA members also volunteered at a large state-wide nonprofit conference, the Montana Nonprofit Association. They were able to talk about their project at each event and make connections for a support network to generate volunteers, Review Board members, and help spread awareness of *And I Know...* through word-of-mouth publicity.

In order to further understand homelessness in Billings, the VISTA members participated in several opportunities that showed the realities of adult homelessness. At the beginning of service the VISTA members toured nonprofit service providers for the homeless and low-income community. They were able to see emergency healthcare providers, the Women and Family Shelter as well as Men's Shelter of the Montana Rescue Mission, and food banks. In addition, a VISTA member went on a tour of common hide-outs for homeless individuals lead by a formerly homeless man. A VISTA member spent an evening with P.A.T.H Outreach, a program with The HUB, which stops at locations where homeless individuals are living and provides services to help transition them to permanent housing and healthy living. Both opportunities greatly

influenced VISTA member perceptions of homelessness, and let them see the harsh reality of finding a safe place to sleep at night.

VISTA members also explored Venture Theatre and the City's existing stakeholders and service providers within days of arriving in the community. Having established community resources proved invaluable when undertaking a collaborative project. For example, Ms. Runkle was a critical source for introducing VISTA members to homeless children for Project Homelessness interviews. Having Ms. Runkle's involvement written into VISTA members' assignment description facilitated smooth operation from the beginning.

Nonprofit Open House

Creating a Nonprofit Open House at Venture Theatre allowed VISTA members to broadcast theater as a tool to affect community improvement and spread awareness of Project Homelessness. Ms. Al had long wanted to create a nonprofit collaborative effort between community nonprofits and Venture Theatre. The event was scheduled in September and included a reception, discussion period, and Venture's production of the musical *Tommy*. The Nonprofit Open House had the following goals:

- Show how Venture Theatre can be used as a mutual fundraising tool.
- Talk about Project Homelessness and how theater can be a tool for social change.
- Discuss Venture Theatre's role as a community nonprofit geared toward improving lives.
- Promote mutual collaboration and financial benefit through implementing nonprofit buyouts of Venture productions.

The outcome of hosting the nonprofit night was spectacular: Venture Theatre successfully partnered with the Montana Rescue Mission's Women and Family Shelter as well as six other local nonprofit organizations to establish buyouts of theater productions, promote *And I Know...*, and use theater as a tool to discuss social justice issues within the community.

The event was attended by seven nonprofit organizations, all of which were passionate, engaged, and able to advise Project Homelessness months later. Each invitation was hand-made and hand-delivered to twenty-five nonprofits in the poverty sector. Personally delivering invitations created direct contact with staff, and Executive Directors if they were available, letting the nonprofits know facilitators were dedicated to their attendance.

It is important to note that while theater can be an effective tool for social change, a community theater can also partner with other nonprofits in fundraising: a nonprofit can purchase a buy-out of a Venture production, typically a musical on a slower night, for its donors. Each ticket is then sold to their donors at a higher price of that nonprofits choosing. Not only does the organization get all profits from the donor ticket sales and any further donations, but the theater gains a sold-out house on a slow night and proceeds from concessions sold. Venture Theatre fundraisers are mutually beneficial. They strengthen community bonds and create the opportunity to do collaborative awareness pieces down the road.

The Nonprofit Open House was an opportunity for nonprofits in the social services sector to understand how community theater improves lives, and not simply entertains. Ms. Al uses this analogy to explain: "Venture Theatre works just like Habitat for Humanity, except that we build people, not houses." The event let nonprofits know that participating in a play or taking a class in the Youth Conservatory teaches people critical skills they need for success. Partnerships from the Open House resulted in participating organizations informing clients and recommending disadvantaged youth to the financial aid program.

A critical partnership of Project Homelessness also came from this event. As the only family shelter in Billings, Montana Rescue Mission attended the event with excitement and became fully invested in Project Homelessness for the rest of the year. They would let the VISTA members attend Ms. Runkle's tutoring sessions, interview six youths residing at the shelter, spread the word about the play, take the cast and writers on personal tours of the shelter, and purchase two buy-outs of *And I Know...* for their donors and staff.

The Nonprofit Open House was considered one of the biggest successes for Venture Theatre during the year. It created lasting collaborations with several nonprofits, including NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) who would advise and attend Venture's production of *Next to Normal*.

Involvement in Venture Productions

VISTA members volunteered in various productions in order to create relationships within the theater community. VISTA members established relationships with theater kids, parents, staff, and volunteers, which they later capitalized upon when recruiting volunteers for Project Homelessness, including the flashmob, hanging posters for *And I Know...*, and spreading the word about local youth homelessness.

One VISTA member learned how to operate the lighting equipment for the production of *Macbeth*. This voluntary endeavor would be invaluable months later for *And I Know...* The VISTA member was able to operate lights for the four-week production when no other volunteer could make the time commitment. Furthermore, VISTA members learned about set design and construction, which proved invaluable theatrical know-how for *And I Know...*

Volunteer Events

In early April the VISTA members organized volunteer work events at Venture Theatre to foster interest in community arts organizations as vehicles for addressing social justice concerns. Getting to know existing and prospective theater volunteers creates relationships that allowed VISTA members to comfortably discuss youth homelessness and promote Project Homelessness.

Volunteers give freely of their time, energy, and often their own resources to support dynamic goals. Volunteer parties show much-needed appreciation to the community members that keep nonprofits viable, and can be used as a recruitment tool. Because volunteers often display passion for supporting multiple organizations and community causes, implementing volunteer events at a non-profit creates both a platform to discuss larger social justice issues through establishing relationships with interested stakeholders. It gave Project Homelessness facilitators the opportunity to gauge what individuals would be most interested in promoting a social justice effort through volunteer or fiscal support.

***And I Know...* Review Group**

Creating a network helped participants gather individuals to advise the script through an informal Review Group. After reaching into the community, individuals with the Montana Rescue Mission, Montana State University of Billings, invested local actors, Ms. Runkle, other VISTA members, and Reverend Susan Otey gathered during a workshop to provide valuable feedback and ensure the script maintained accuracy of local realities of youth homelessness and honored those that inspired the script. These individuals were also available for advice throughout the creation of *And I Know...* and helped spread word about the play.

6.2 Generating Community Excitement and Awareness

Aside from spreading knowledge of *And I Know...* through word-of-mouth by all stakeholders, it was important to reach out to the community and generate excitement for *And I Know...*, even before a marketing plan had been decided.

Peter Pan

Venture Theatre's Youth Conservatory of *Peter Pan* was written by all the youth actors and performed through improvisation about children in Neverland Afterschool Program. This unique production was directed by Ms. Al, who wanted to use it as an opportunity to pave the way for Project Homelessness by setting it in an afterschool program for disadvantaged children. The play's central theme was children experiencing poverty. A VISTA member played the role as Mrs. Darling and announced, with Ms. Al, the details and importance of Project Homelessness before each show. The play was able to raise awareness of disadvantaged youth while being a playful comedy.

As we would see with the flashmob and *And I Know...*, it was the actors themselves who were most affected and informed. Discussions were held during rehearsals to get children to understand their low-income and orphaned characters. One child, himself only several steps away from homelessness, was so moved by the knowledge that some children have no homes or toys, that he donated his favorite toys to charity. The toys used as props in the show were donated to the Montana Rescue Mission stores.

Wet Ink Festival: Theme of Homelessness

The Wet Ink Festival is an annual event at Venture Theatre, held in November, during which local writers, directors, and actors write, direct, and rehearse a short play within 24 hours. In order to give the festival focus and to help raise awareness, Lynn Al gave the festival a theme of homelessness and poverty. Two of the five pieces focused on homelessness. It is an enjoyable exercise for the arts community and made them aware of Project Homelessness. Furthermore, while the Festival did not have an admission fee, its facilitators asked attendants to donate canned food for local homeless families to enjoy Thanksgiving.

Christmas Stroll Flashmob: Raising Awareness about Local Youth Homelessness

The juxtaposition of a fun dance routine with sudden statements about homelessness and local child actors portraying homeless community kids had a strong impact upon audiences attending the 2012 Christmas Stroll. Flashmobs allow organizations and individuals the opportunity to interact with disengaged members of a community to discuss social justice issues through engaging, visual displays. The VISTA members organized and implemented a flashmob, with over 50 volunteer participants from local dance companies, churches, and arts organizations throughout Billings, to encourage flashmob participants and witnesses to think about youth homelessness in the community.

The VISTA members partnered with a local dance instructor to recruit dancers and create an original short routine that would catch witnesses' attention with facts, posted on cardboard signs, about local homelessness. A VISTA member interviewed Reverend Susan Otey of Grace United Methodist Church after Project Homelessness was complete. This is what she had to say about the effectiveness of the flashmob:

"Project Homelessness came to me when I was contacted about the possibility of our youth participating in a flash mob, and that seemed like a really great event for our youth. Because, number one, they got to learn to do something that they didn't know how to do: they got to be involved in community, and they learned something about homelessness from doing that. They knew that they were involved in making a difference: in making people more aware of homeless

teenagers, especially.... It was striking to me as we talked about it in a youth group that the youth would say, "Really? There's kids in my high school that don't have homes?" And they were really surprised by that."

It was those directly participating in the flashmob who were the most deeply affected by its message about youth homelessness. While those witnessing the flashmob were entertained by the dance and curious about youth homelessness, it was Grace United Methodist Church youth who were most impacted and inspired to take action. The youth group was so stunned that there were children in their schools without homes that they held a food drive for a teen food pantry located in a local high school.

Pre-Show Announcements

Pre-show announcements let audience members know what the theater will be performing in the coming months, which reaches audience members that may not be reached by other forms of marketing. The announcements occur when the director makes a curtain speech before a performance. There were four shows that announced the upcoming play *And I Know...: Peter Pan, the Pirate Play, Be a Kid, and Guys and Dolls*.

Presenting at Organizations

The VISTA members were able to make informal presentations to three local organizations: Grace United Methodist Church, the Optimist Club, and First Congregational United Church of Christ. At each organization, the VISTA members informed audiences of the seriousness of homelessness in Billings using City of Billings and school district data, then talked about the goals of Project Homelessness and its play, *And I Know...*

Each organization was surprised at the data, and many were unaware that there were homeless youth in Billings. Grace United Methodist had participated in the flash mob, and members of their congregation discussed the issue of youth homelessness after the presentation and attended the play.

The presentation at First Congregational United occurred mid-run of the play after Reverend Thomas Hall and the youth ministry attended a performance. The congregation was very involved after the presentation. They were so passionate about combating youth homelessness that the VISTA members helped them collaborate with other nonprofits to help them fill niches in social services for homeless youth, such as providing free meals and a safe space for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning homeless youth.

Volunteering at Billings Community Connect 2013

By volunteering at the large national best-practice event, the VISTA members learned a unique way to get feedback for the play, spread awareness of the play, and gained a volunteer. The VISTA members volunteered at Billings Community Connect (BCC) 2013 as an AmeriCorps service day and to experience the event participants were helping to fund the following year. During the event, the VISTA members talked with several service providers about Project Homelessness and its play. One VISTA member volunteered at an arts and crafts table designed to get anonymous feedback from BCC 2013 attendants about homelessness. This experience inspired a similar feedback table for *And I Know...* and expanded the production's network. The woman who also volunteered at the table would later design one of the posters for *And I Know...*

“Days until Homeless” Calculator

A VISTA member worked with Ms. AI to create a calculator using Microsoft Excel as a platform to help raise awareness about homelessness and help banish stereotypes by showing individuals how close one can be to homelessness. This calculator shows how many days one could pay their bills if they lost their job tomorrow, taking into account all financial assets and expenses.



The calculator was used as a tool during the performance. The photo above shows *And I Know...* cast members holding cardboard signs with their respective number of “days until homeless.” Each actor was asked to complete the calculator, and the resulting number would then be a part of their cast photo. These cast photos were displayed in the hallway leading to the performance space. Both the cast photos themselves and the above photo were VISTA-created.

Project Homelessness Brochure

A VISTA member created a brochure to help spread awareness before a script had been created, and while interviews were being gathered. It was also used at several events held by Montana Rescue Mission and by the VISTA members during fundraising.

Venture's Project Homelessness

a play, a fundraiser, a call to engage, challenge, and inspire our community

Homeless Children in Billings



Every year 500 children are homeless in Billings. Project Homelessness is a collaborative effort between Venture Theatre, AmeriCorps VISTA, and the City of Billings to bring awareness and funds to the most invisible and vulnerable in our community through the voice of theatre.

Thirteen homeless youth were interviewed about their hardships and triumphs with assistance from Montana Rescue Mission, Sue Runkle with the Billings School District. These interviews were given to writers, Shad Scott and Ryan Gage, who wrote an honest, funny and challenging play that will premier April 19th, 2013, titled, "And I Know..."

Funds collected will go towards getting disadvantaged youth into Venture Theatre to experience the power of the arts. Funds will also ensure the success of 2014 Billings Community Connect, a one-stop annual event connecting social services to homeless and near-homeless individuals and families.

Why Venture & VISTA?

Venture Theatre is passionate about using theatre as a tool to raise awareness of social issues, and creating healthy, strong children with the skills they need to become confident leaders of our community. The Youth Conservatory works behind-the-scenes at building a better future for Billings children, and we want all children to have access to the arts, regardless of their income.



AmeriCorps VISTA is a federal volunteer program designed to fight poverty in our nation, and Welcome Home Billings works specifically to end homelessness in Billings. Venture Theatre has paired with VISTA and Billings to advocate for our homeless youth in a creative and powerful way. We need your help to spread the word and let these children be heard!

We Need Your Help!

We have collected the stories of these invisible children and created a production, but we cannot do it all alone. Your generous donation will help change the lives of Billings children and support the production.

Your donation will:

- Provide financial assistance to get disadvantaged youth into Venture Theatre classes & summer camps
- Support the success of the production
- Ensure Billings Community Connect continues its critical work for the homeless
- Be tax-deductible
- Be honored in the playbill of "And I Know..."

We also need your time and skills! If you want to volunteer, please fill out the information on the back and send it to Venture Theatre, or contact us directly.

If you need more information please call and we will be happy to schedule a personal meeting!



Quarter Sheet Flyer

City staff aided VISTA members in the production of this general quarter sheet hand out. Small flyers are an easy way to give audience members ready access to information on how they can help with the overall initiative.

Help End Homelessness!

You can help fight local poverty and homeless in the Billings community.

Educate: Take time to learn about the different reasons for homelessness! Share information with friends and family to help dispel stereotypes.

Donate: There are many local organizations serving those in need! You can donate food, money or household items to service organizations assisting the homeless.

Volunteer: Service opportunities are abundant in Billings. You can volunteer at the annual Billings Community Connect event in January or tutor homeless children through after-school and summer care programs.



Together, we can make a difference!

www.welcomehomebillings.org

The following local organizations are helping those in need:

Community Crisis Center	Rimrock Foundation
Family Service, Inc.	RiverStone Health
Friendship House	Saint Vincent de Paul
Harvest Church	Salvation Army
Head Start, Inc.	Mental Health Center
Healthcare for the Homeless	The HUB
Housing Authority of Billings	The People's Law Center
HRDC District 7	Tumbleweed Program, Inc.
Interfaith Hospitality Network	Yellowstone AIDS Project
Montana Legal Services Association	YWCA Gateway House
Montana Rescue Mission	

Together, we can make a difference!

www.welcomehomebillings.org

Exploring Other Community Arts Initiatives about Homelessness

While VISTA members did not always directly work with other artists and providers in the community addressing homelessness through original works, being aware of initiatives can bolster the potential for collaboration and partnership as well as shed light upon local interpretations of social justice issues.

For example, Venture Theatre facilitated a January 2013 event, *The Fringe Festival*, in which local artists presented original works at Montana Avenue venues over two consecutive weekends. One event piece, directed by Patrick Wilson, former Venture Youth Conservatory Director and *A Heart Without Housing* Conference presentation director, segmented stories about mental illness and homelessness.

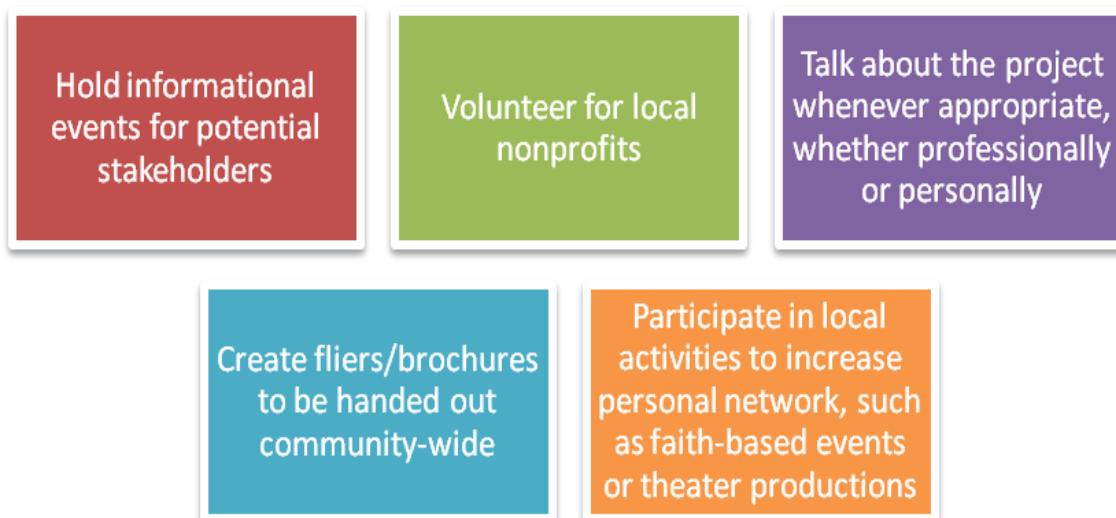
The piece, *I Conjure a Stubborn Faith*, engaged ten local performers, including a dancer, two poets, a high school student, and Wilson, to present their views about homelessness through their respective media. A VISTA member volunteered at the Fringe Festival and used the opportunity to discuss local homelessness and affecting it through artistic performance.

6.3 Recommendations

VISTA members advise establishing community partnerships as early as possible within an original works creation process. While further collaboration between *I Conjure a Stubborn Faith* and Project Homelessness was never explored beyond initial conversations about the issue of local homelessness during the Fringe Festival weekends, we encourage future facilitators to investigate what local artists have done and are creating to address social justice issues. Artistic collaboration and note comparison are especially valuable for those without extensive theatrical experience.

Get to know as many service providers and stakeholders as possible within a community when undertaking a program similar to Project Homelessness. Efforts can never begin too early, or outreach too much as long as efforts remain dynamic and generate community excitement. All team members should, through thorough outreach, understand their community and services provided through nonprofits to effectively and accurately raise awareness of their chosen issue.

The following chart presents simple ways to outreach in a community:



Organizations and individuals seeking to implement original works productions like Project Homelessness should work with community faith-based organizations and providers early within the creation and production process, as well as secular organizations. VISTA members received invaluable support and cash resources from Billings' faith-based community through buyouts of *And I Know...*

Overall, the three following pieces of advice can help create support and spread awareness:

- **Be Aware:** When reaching out to community nonprofits, keep in mind that they sometimes change addresses without updating websites or phonebooks. It is important to remain flexible, patient, and open-minded when working with the nonprofit sector in a community. If possible, try to engage local nonprofits on a friendly, personal level. For example, a hand-delivered invitation for the Nonprofit Open House was a wise decision by the VISTA members because it created a relaxed, personable atmosphere for interaction.
- **Find a Champion:** Try to find a champion within the organization to lend a sympathetic ear to the intended message, including faith-based providers. While not all providers may listen to the intended social justice message or foster social justice goals, the program is more likely to succeed with the help of someone within an organization that has an established relationship with a member of the project team.
 - *Example:* A youth minister at Faith Chapel felt strongly about affecting youth homelessness in Billings and, therefore, represented the church's buy-out liaison for a performance of *And I Know...*
 - *Example:* The Montana Rescue Mission Development Director and Volunteer Coordinator, Gary Drake and Sheila Cole, respectively, worked closely with VISTA members and were eager to facilitate buy-outs of *And I Know...*
- **Faith-Based Outreach:** Churches are wonderful resources for locating and recruiting volunteers, as the social justice message of churches echoes the vision of non-profit and service providers dedicated to ending poverty and homelessness in a community. Even in the face of legal restrictions prohibiting VISTA members from personally engaging in religious activities due to their federal assignments, they could still promote the message of *And I Know...* and discuss affecting local youth homelessness at religious organizations.
 - *Example:* VISTA members presented about *And I Know...* in front of members of Grace United Methodist Church and First Congregational United Church of Christ in Billings at two Sunday services. Approaching faith-based communities is an encouraged step to maximizing effectiveness.

Reach out to providers and stakeholders as soon as possible when undertaking an initiative comparable to Project Homelessness. There is no such thing as outreach that is "too soon" within a program, and identifying, establishing relationships, and working with local churches and faith-based organizations can represent an asset to maximizing impact, volunteers, and funds.

Chapter 7: Interviewing Youth Experiencing Homelessness



"I think the interview process is tremendously important. To have people's real words, their language, to have the ways that they talk about themselves is vital to presenting something in an authentic way."

— Reverend Susan Otey

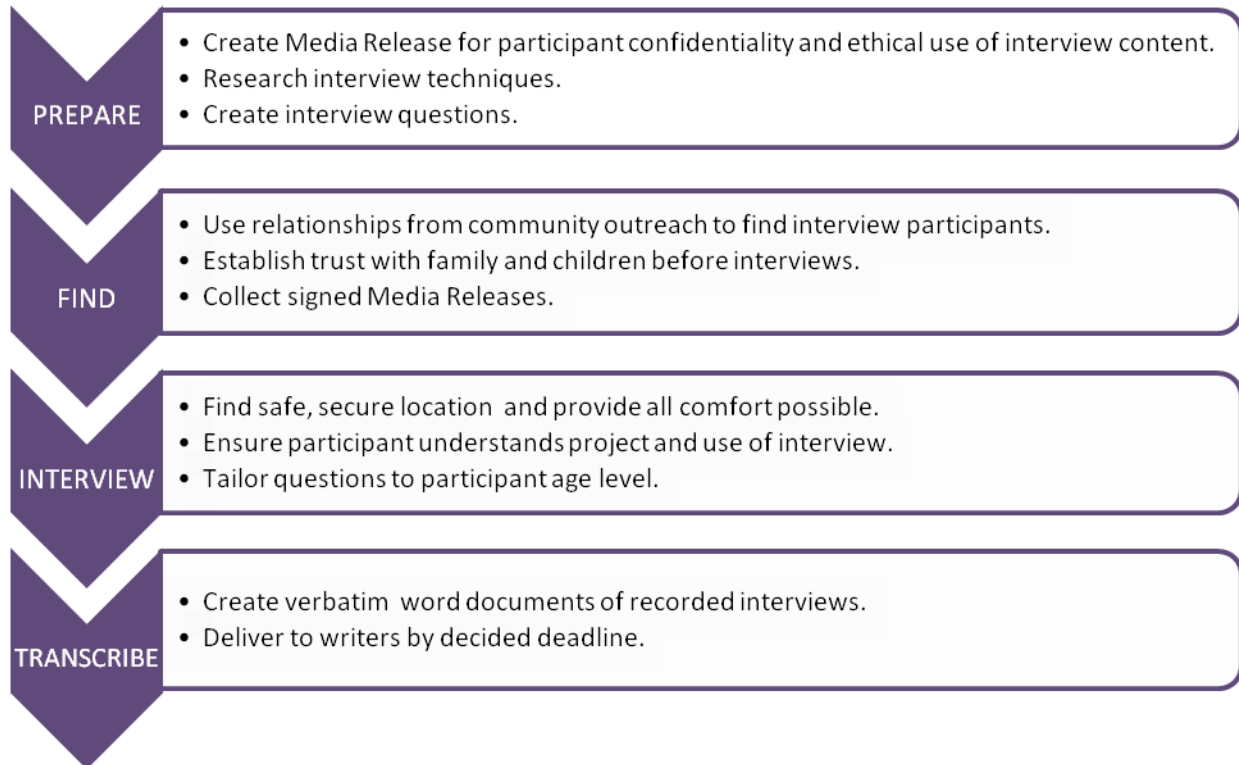
7.1 Preparing for Interviews

The process of interviewing young adults and children that are experiencing, or had experienced, homelessness represents one of the most critical elements of Project Homelessness. The interviews served as the fundamental sources for the writers, so eliciting compelling, honest stories from individuals about their experiences was paramount. The VISTA members each interviewed six to seven individuals and then passed the materials along to the writers after they were transcribed and names altered. Once these stories were shared and became a part of the script, it was a duty of the VISTA members and Review Group to ensure that these stories were portrayed with accuracy and empathy.

VISTA members had to consider the following when preparing to interview children and young adults:

- How to locate children and young adults who had experienced homelessness.
- How to establish trust relationships with interview participants, especially young children.
- How to protect the comfort and confidentiality of participants.
- How to represent the initiative honestly and accurately to participants, including what would happen with their interviews.
- How to ethically craft and administer effective interview questions.
- How to emotionally prepare for interviews that often included heartbreaking details and experiences.

The overall interview process can be simplified as follows:



Transparency between Interviewer and Participant

Before conducting any interview, especially with minors as participants, it was necessary to be completely transparent with regards to how each interview would be used and how each story may be altered. Each participant should know that artistic liberties will most likely be taken with their stories, and it is not guaranteed that any of their interview content will appear in the play. Remaining open and honest about all aspects of the production and how their stories were used helped establish trust with participants and their guardians.

VISTA members let participants and their guardians know that sharing experiences and stories of hardship can be a tool for finding closure, empathy, and evoking community compassion and response to the issue of homelessness. They were aware that each story was valuable and would be used, through theater, to raise awareness and create action for the end of youth homelessness.

Stakeholder Support for Interviewing

The production benefited immensely from the support of stakeholders that had been established through community outreach when VISTA members sought to locate and establish trust relationships with potential interviewees. Ms. Runkle allowed VISTA members to volunteer at the Women and Family Shelter for months before they began interviews with shelter children. She was the primary source of finding individuals willing to share their stories of homelessness with VISTA members. Aside from Ms. Runkle, several other non-profits gave the VISTA members references for young adults to interview.

Conducting interviews through the Montana Rescue Mission was logical because of the shelter's admission policies. Locating children to interview proves especially challenging because of legal requirements for parental consent. However, given the experience of homelessness among many children and young adults, obtaining parental or guardian consent for interviews would prove impossible. Because the shelter does not admit

unaccompanied minors as guests, all children with whom the VISTA members established relationships and interviewed had guardians living there.

Interviews collected outside of the shelter were from young adults over 18 years of age that had experienced homelessness as a child. All young adults could legally offer consent for their participation. They were able to relate the conditions of homelessness that they experienced as children with their adult lives. This ultimately added a layer of continuity to the interviews overall, and it allowed the playwrights to create connections between stories of youth and adult homelessness.

7.2 Interviewee Comfort and Confidentiality

When conducting interviews, it is imperative to protect the trust and confidentiality of participants. If, at any point during an interview, it becomes apparent that a participant is uncomfortable, experiencing mental health issues, becoming defensive, or is visibly struggling emotionally or physically, then the interviewer must take all measures necessary to protect the interviewee. In some cases, the interviewer must end the session. Ms. Reisbig emphasizes in her interview with a VISTA member the importance of protecting interview participants beyond all other considerations when undertaking a program similar to *A Heart Without* or Project Homelessness:

"[Y]ou should make sure you're being careful about their stories, and you don't want to make the art more important than the person. We had a policy with the people that we interviewed; we let them know that, if, at any point, they didn't want to have something 'out there,' or if they didn't feel safe or if it wasn't for them, then we agreed to pull it... For the most part, people are really happy about having their story told..."

For children - who are often not able to verbally express discomfort - paying attention to physical signs of discomfort was essential. If a child became uncomfortable for any reason, all efforts were made to alleviate it, whether by changing topic or ending the interview.

VISTA members created media releases (see appendix) to administer to interview participants and, for minors, their guardians. The most important part of securing effective, honest stories was establishing trusting relationships with participants before beginning the interview process. VISTA members played games and tutored children at the Women and Family Shelter After-School program. One VISTA member bought a young adult couple lunch and casually talked with them for a two hours before turning the recorder on and beginning the interview about their stories. Other interviews began with long conversations until the participants were ready for the recorder to be turned on.

Dynamic Interviewing and Youth Comfort

Ms. Al recommended that the members investigate effective interview techniques before composing questions to ask of homeless kids and young adults. She also shared her experiences as a teacher working with children, as well as her past as a homeless child and stressed the importance of tailoring interviews to fit the participant's comfort level and experiences.

The comfort of child participants is most important. Having toys available can provide something for them to do as they talk. During one interview with a very young child, the VISTA member decided it would make the child more comfortable for them to be interviewed by their older sibling, who was available in the next room. The VISTA member then allowed the two siblings to interact and ask their own questions about every-day life.

7.3 Conducting Interviews

Tools

A few tools were necessary to complete the interviews. Interviewing can traditionally be done in two ways: listening with a pen and paper and writing down pertinent quotations, or recording the interview in full using a recording device. A recording device was used in order to maintain the accuracy of each participant's story and give the writers as much information as possible. Project Homelessness used a small digital recorder with USB capabilities to upload interviews onto personal computers. Using a small device was advised by Ms. Al as it would be more comfortable to the young children being interviewed than a larger device that might be more intimidating. Digitally recording interviews is highly recommended and also includes the lengthy process of transcription.

In addition to a recording device, computers were necessary to upload the interviews and transcribe them into word documents. For interviews with youth at the Women and Family Shelter toys were available for extra comfort, although most children preferred bringing their own toys.

Locations

Project Homelessness interviews were held at multiple locations. The older participants were interviewed at locations of their choice. One teenager was interviewed with their parents in the hotel in which they were living. Several other young adults chose to be interviewed at local coffee shops. Letting independent young adults decide on their interview location gave them control and allowed them to choose a place they were most comfortable.

The minors were interviewed at the local shelter where they were living. These more sensitive interviews were conducted in a computer room located next to a tutoring room, which had Ms. Runkle and other children present. This room had two large windows so parents and Ms. Runkle could watch and ensure the child was safe and comfortable. Multiple times the parents stopped by and asked how their child was doing, and take them down to dinner. No interview with a minor was allowed to last more than an hour, and many lasted only twenty minutes.

Interview Questions

Considering what questions and stories of homelessness to explore before interviewing a participant helps streamline the interview and ensure its impact upon future audiences. It is important to consider and craft interview questions that do not alienate interviewees, especially when working with children. Finding a balance between keeping the interview honest and practicable as well as guaranteeing the participant's comfort was critical.

Create open-ended questions that allow participants to disclose as much, or as little, information as they wish. It was imperative that they dictate the content of the interview, as it protects their sense of control and comfort. Homeless individuals, and perhaps especially children, often have experienced profound losses of control. So providing a sense of power, control, and dignity through encouraging participants to share their stories represents a primary benefit of programs like Project Homelessness.

Here are sample interview questions employed by VISTA members:

- What is your favorite class in school?
- Where did you grow up?

- What did you have for dinner?
- How many siblings do you have?

Such questions are benign and non-threatening. However, they can open the door for a participant to ultimately shed light upon and openly discuss homelessness and poverty. Even though “benign questions” may not directly prompt discussion of homelessness, they encourage the participant to disclose details about his or her lifestyle. This, in turn, may open the door to talking about more challenging personal experiences, including abuse and homelessness.

In most cases the participants were very willing to discuss their experiences with homelessness openly with the interviewer. When dealing with children, questions such as, “What does the word “homeless” mean to you?”, and asking them what they picture can be appropriate if the child is comfortable. These questions can be especially illuminating when the youth participant is between the ages of ten and fifteen. The minors that shared their stories were particularly excited to be given a voice. One child was so thrilled that they wrote down funny quotations from her family one night, and the writers used these quotations to flesh out familial relationships. Because of their vulnerability as minors it was imperative to protect and cherish the power of their stories as they went through the stages of script writing, rehearsal, and performance.

7.4 Maintaining a Healthy Mind: Support Systems

Interviewer Health and Well-Being

Interviewing homeless young adults and children can be heartbreaking. VISTA members learned early that it is critical to have a network of trusted friends and mentors to approach when emotionally dealing with traumatic stories of homelessness, poverty, and abuse.

VISTA members were encouraged to approach their site and City of Billings supervisors with emotional concerns stemming from interviews. While they could not legally disclose personal information from interviews, discussing stories shared during interviews, while protecting the confidentiality of participants, allowed VISTA members to emotionally distance themselves from tragic stories through sharing them with others. It is important to have people you can share difficult stories and details from interviews while preserving confidentiality and trust of participants.

7.5 Transcription

VISTA members transcribed all interviews with homeless kids and young adults, which they then passed along to the playwrights. Transcription is not the same as typing; it is listening, understanding and *then* typing. The process is very time-consuming. A single hour of recording can take up to four hours to transcribe. Individuals undertaking a program similar to Project Homelessness must either allow time to do their own transcription, purchase transcription software, or clearly explain to volunteers how much time an interview will take to effectively transcribe.

Transcription Details

It is up to the interviewer how much detail to include in transcription. One VISTA member included the laughter of participants to help show the writers how youth emotionally handle difficult subject matter. This

can help translate the tone of an interview. By including laughter or a somber tone, this can prevent the writers from misinterpreting how participants tell their stories.

Including some non-verbal details, such as the participant's age, gender, and relevant and/or interesting characteristics, can add depth to the individual for playwrights. For example, one participant had tattoos on her face. While the VISTA member collecting the interview thought little of it, her inclusion of the detail to the interview content stood out to one of the playwrights. He strongly emphasized the individual's tattoo in Project Homelessness: *And I Know...* However, do not share details that will clearly identify an interview participant to audiences.

7.6 Challenges

Obtaining Varied Samples

Ensuring the production fairly represented the homeless youth population in Billings was a challenge. The people who were interviewed were not dictated by any particular set of circumstances, sexual orientation, gender, or race. Illuminating the problems of unequal numbers of the local homeless population relating to race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation was not a primary goal of the initiative. Participants were interviewed based on their willingness and ability to gain personal or guardian consent. This resulted in accidental equal participation of genders. Participants were also primarily white, because Billings' primary demographic is Caucasian (89.6%), according to 2010 United States Census Bureau data.

A production can be tailored to illuminate issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation if they decide their community is in need of these themes. Such initiatives would require a different set of questions, interview participants willing to openly discuss such issues, and would need service providers able to find willing participants that match these qualities. The community was not equipped to address youth homelessness in such depth, only in breadth so the community could begin to understand youth homelessness exists within the community at all. Detailed data regarding homeless youth was the gap that spurred the creation of Project Homelessness. Social Service providers are working on generating detailed counts of citywide youth homelessness to begin completing the picture of this issue.

Staying in Touch with Transitioning Participants

Another challenge was keeping in contact with interview participants. This was due to the simple nature of their situations: participants rarely stayed in one place for long. In the shelter, families rarely stay beyond a few months. Individuals will move from motel to other living arrangements at any time, and all of these may move out of the state.

Because transportation can be too expensive for most homeless families or individuals, any participants who wished to attend the play or become more involved were often unable due to this restriction. VISTA members tried to assist by carpooling, but it was frequently impossible to coordinate schedules. Unfortunately, no interview participant was able to watch the play.

Despite the challenge of frequent moving and transportation, no participant regretted sharing their stories and enjoyed the experience.

Authenticity: Getting the “Whole Truth”

Interviews are valuable tools for garnering honest stories and feedback that created an emotionally compelling statement about youth homelessness that statistics, facts, and reports alone could never convey. However, they fall prey to problems of authenticity, interviewer and participant bias, and outside variable interference.

It was sometimes difficult for interviewers to clearly distinguish between truth and falsehoods. In order to overcome this obstacle, VISTA members and playwrights for *And I Know...* placed less emphasis upon “truth” or “falseness” of children’s stories of homelessness and structured stories of homelessness that focused upon characterization and relationships between children and adults experiencing homelessness.

Project Homelessness focused on community assumptions and emotions surrounding the issues of youth poverty and homelessness. Therefore, whether or not a participant “lied” during an interview session was less important than their perception of homelessness, how homelessness had changed their value system and outlook, and the participant’s peripheral, non-verbal characteristics (their appearance, bearing, and way of relating to others, etc).

While objective “truth” can be difficult to identify through interviews alone, letting participants know that their stories were valuable decreased the likelihood that they would misrepresent their experiences. Furthermore, ensuring confidentiality lessened the probability of falsehoods in interviews.

7.7 Recommendations

Trust and Confidentiality with Interviewees

Creating a trusting relationship with a participant is paramount to garnering honest, effective interviews. However, there is not one correct way to administer interviews. An ethical media release, trust with the parents, their children, and young adults, honesty with how the interviews can be used and altered, and a comfortable environment can be enough to create a similar production. Incidents of reported domestic violence of a child must be relayed to appropriate authorities.

Spend as much time as possible with participants before recording their stories. Furthermore, create, review, and implement guidelines for ethical interview collection. The Institutional Review Board represents a good source for developing ethical interview policies and procedures. Be sure to administer detailed media releases to participants that accurately and precisely explain the project, including its intended goals, audiences, and role(s) that a participant’s story will contribute to it. Finally, get in touch with community service providers to serve as liaisons between team members and interview participants. Most school districts will have a Homeless Education Liaison who may be able and willing to help.

Changing or omitting personal details from interviews, including names, dates, and places, and sometimes genders is recommended before sharing with playwrights. If a service provider is mentioned by name in an interview, it is recommended that provider’s name be omitted from transcription unless the provider is a knowledgeable partner and has had the opportunity to review and approve the material.

During a feedback interview, Ms. Runkle had the following advice for communities wishing to undertake a similar endeavor:

“Build...collaborations between, and network amongst, the homeless providers. And also, establish those relationships with the kids. They aren’t just- you’re not just going to walk in and stick a microphone in their face and have them tell you their story. The whole thing is built upon

the trust that Jessie and Amy [the VISTAs facilitating Project Homelessness] had built with these kids and their parents, and myself, for that matter, so that they trusted that their story would be told in a truthful and respectful way.”

Participant Appreciation

Appreciating and keeping participants involved or aware of Project Homelessness progress cannot be stressed enough. These individuals have allowed their private lives to be shared to help change their communities, and their interviews made the production possible. Small tokens of appreciation, such as gift cards, continued updates on progress, and opportunities to be involved are all ethical and crucial parts of such a project.

Offering incentives to interview participants and their parents was not crucial because participants were very willing to share their stories. However, Ms. Runkle gave food cards to participating youth for their contribution. The gift of a food card to participants was worthwhile in showing much-needed appreciation to those who shared their private stories. Children became excited to be able to afford a treat for themselves and their siblings.

Keeping interview participants aware of a project’s progress is valuable in soliciting their support for it and, perhaps more valuably, their eagerness to openly talk about the program and encourage community attendance and participation. All participants should be able to become involved in the project if they want to, so it is important to have tasks available they can help accomplish. Such tasks can include distributing play posters and volunteering to usher during performances.

While sustained correspondence after project completion is not always possible, it can increase the probability that participants receive services and support through networking and communication. For example, one interviewed family was able to receive grocery and vehicle maintenance donations as a result of their sustained contact with the VISTA members who interviewed them.

Be sure to thank interview participants after each interview. Many homeless children and young adults have had little to no opportunity to feel respected as a consequence of their life experiences. Listening to their stories, making eye contact with them, getting to know them on a personal level, and staying in touch as much as possible during and after the interview process, is a small step in restoring participants’ sense of dignity and humanity.

Interviewee Health and Well-Being

If an interview participant is visibly struggling with physical, emotional, and/or mental health issues during the interaction, whether within the context of a recorded interview session or not, attempt to ensure the participant’s trust, comfort, understanding of the project, and confidentiality. Ask if they need help; if they cannot cogently respond or do not understand the question, approach a mental health professional or service provider whom they know and trust on their behalf.

Be sure to receive permission from participants to record the interview. If interviewers intend to transcribe the interview, tell participants about the transcription process. Explain the media and confidentiality agreement before they sign it, and when working with children, share as much information about the project as possible with their parent(s) or guardian(s). Copies of media releases and confidentiality agreements, a description of the project, sample interview questions, and contact information should be available to give to interview participants. Interviewers encountered no difficulties with participants’ comfort or their confidentiality.

Interview Importance

While interviews are not a complete way of researching an issue, they represent the most effective tool for capturing individually devastating consequences of experiencing homelessness. Project Homelessness was built from the interviews shared with the VISTA members, and it was these stories that made local data about homelessness real and tangible for the 558 community members that bore witness to their stories through *And I Know...*

Decide early in a project meeting how many interviews the writers would like. Project Homelessness provided thirteen interviews of varying length. It is advisable to have 10-15 interviews for script content. More than 15 can become overwhelming during a year-long project.



Chapter 8: Writing, Casting and Rehearsing



“Get to know the homeless in your community. Listen to their stories and find out what their problems are, and what resources are there to try to help them get out of that.”

– Review Group member Craig Huisenga

8.1 Turning Chaos into Order: Writing *And I Know...*

It can be overwhelming as a writer to receive over 70 pages worth of interviews from thirteen different people, most of who had never met one another and were experiencing different aspects of homelessness. It would be up to Mr. Gage and Mr. Scott to take these interviews and turn them into a coherent script that adhered to the ultimate goal: to challenge stereotypes and raise awareness of local youth homelessness. After Mr. Gage and Mr. Scott read through the interviews, they had to decide how they would create characters, where they would establish the setting, and then begin writing.

By January 1st, the playwrights received all thirteen transcript interviews and additional information regarding youth homelessness. The VISTA members handed off their information, and it was finally time for the production team to take control of the production. Mr. Gage and Mr. Scott would write the script, *And I Know...*, and hand it over to Ms. Morales to create a play. During this time the VISTA members would be working behind-the-scenes with continued fundraising, marketing, and ticket sales.

Characters

Mr. Gage reports, “Once we got the interviews coming in, we met more frequently and initially started creating some story ideas. Ironically enough, the first idea we had of the three sisters coming into the shelter on their own and being split up in the end was the idea we went with.” They were able to establish very early on which characters would be the center of the play, and they were based on three interviews with sisters staying the Women and Family Shelter.

Their script, *And I Know...*, ultimately had eight characters. The sisters would interact with a variety of residents, and two staff members. Most characters were based off the writer's interpretations of interview participants, but each character could be based on just one participant, or be created based on multiple interviews. The results of their characters moved audiences deeply and, according to the Review Group, accurately portrayed homeless youth, adults, and social services staff members. Susan Otey, a member of the Review Group, said during a feedback interview:

"I think, to me, what made the show credible was that, because I actually volunteer at the Women and Family Shelter, I knew many of the families that were interviewed for this, and I could hear some of those voices. It made it very real for me. I guess the one thing- I think the interview process is tremendously important. To have people's real words, their language, to have the ways that they talk about themselves is vital to presenting something in an authentic way."

It was writer and team member dedication that maintained interview authenticity, honored the stories of participants, and made the play impactful to viewers. By creating characters that stay true to the people they aim to represent, Project Homelessness: *And I Know...* could achieve its goals:

- To raise awareness of youth homelessness and challenge stereotypes with a theatrical production that demonstrates the power of theater as a tool.
- To give a voice to children experiencing homelessness.
- To generate discussions about youth homelessness.

Establishing a Setting

The VISTA members had established a wonderful relationship with the Montana Rescue Mission, particularly through Sheila Cole, the Volunteer Coordinator, who had attended the Non-Profit Open House. She would become a member of the Review Group and help purchase two buyouts for Montana Rescue Mission. The VISTA members arranged to have the writers tour the shelter to give them an ability to better understand one aspect of homelessness in Billings. VISTA members felt it would help them envision the lives of the six children who had been interviewed at the Women and Family Shelter. Mr. Gage reported:

"Our visit to the local shelter really solidified that as our setting because of all the wonderful and virtually unknown things that happen there. That became the second message to get out to the audience: these people are trying to do right by themselves and society and there are avenues we can take as a community to deal with the issue in a positive and rewarding fashion."

The shelter seemed the natural fit to try and tell the experiences of people dealing with homelessness that don't fit the "hobo on the street" stereotype. That was the most important message to get across no matter where we set the play or who the characters."

The shelter the writers developed in the script was *inspired by* the Women and Family Shelter, but it was not *based on*, nor directly set, in it. Mr. Gage and Mr. Scott managed to balance certain realities of the shelter, like the need to do chores and its dedication to helping its guests achieve full independence. However because it was *inspired by* the shelter the writers could still take artistic liberties and break rules without misrepresenting the local family shelter.

The Writing Process

Having two writers can create a great dynamic and provides twice as many ideas, and is especially useful during the short time frame they had to finish the script. In two months the playwrights had produced a full script about children, adults, and staff working in a shelter. Mr. Gage says of the process:

“The interviews, the setting, the story just popped to us as we brainstormed ideas, drank lots of coffee, and talked about these people we were getting to know on paper. It was really important that all came so naturally because it helped us actually write the play within the time frame we had to work.

Once we had the play storyboarded out (8 scenes per act; 2 acts) we then divided up the scenes 8 a piece without much disagreement on who would write what. Mr. Scott and I share some similar writing traits, but we are also unique writers. That really helped because I think certain scenes jumped out to his strengths and others to mine. We gave ourselves a few weeks to draft out our separate scenes and then the work of bringing them together into one voice began as we reworked the script draft by draft to refine it.”

Workshops

The writers needed feedback for their script through *workshopping*: a traditional tool used by writers to create peer-reviewed, publishable material. The first workshop was set up by the writers themselves. They gathered in a local artist workshop space called *Go!* managed by Patrick Wilson. The workshop was attended by artists, directors, and actors who could give creative advice on the script. Several attendees read the script, and then everyone contributed their thoughts and advice.

After the first workshop, the writers made any necessary changes and produced a second draft. It was the VISTA members that organized the second workshop (see appendix), which would be attended by a Review Group of over 15 stakeholders, such as Ms. Runkle and Sheila Cole from the Montana Rescue Mission. This workshop was highly effective in eliminating many elements of the script that either misrepresented homelessness or service providers and their regulations.

8.2 Script Difficulties and Successes

Difficulties

The greatest difficulty in writing a script for a social impact purpose for a community project is balancing the art of the script with the realities for homeless youth and service providers. For Mr. Gage and Mr. Scott, taking feedback from the second workshop was the greatest difficulty of the script writing.

“...There was some really good feedback, but we did have to deal with some feedback that, although very appreciated, didn't really fit the purpose of the reading in terms of the theatrical work to be done. But, we had a good mix which in the end was very beneficial for the play speaking to an audience both theatrically. But initially, I think we both left a little dejected from all the work we had done and looking at some very serious things to consider in terms of changes plus still having to write the final scene.”

Successes

According to *And I Know...* writers, the play's greatest success was audience turnout. The greatest reward a playwright can experience is seeing the appreciation and emotional response of an audience to his or her work. Mr. Gage explained:

"I think how much of an audience we got was the greatest success. And I don't just mean in terms of actual people in the theater, but more importantly we got a lot of people talking about it and, hopefully, doing something about it in our community. I know our play had a lot to do with that, but it had such a great marketing job done by [the VISTA members] that I think really accomplish what the project and play were set out to accomplish from the start. The fact that we pumped out an awesome full length script in a couple of months was pretty incredible."

The writers' greatest success was creating a script that lead to goal accomplishments by raising awareness, challenging stereotypes, and giving a voice to children that are often considered invisible.

8.3 Plot Summary

Mr. Scott and Mr. Gage wrote a summary of their script for audition notices and other media needs:

The Project Homelessness play, And I Know..., is the story of three sisters - Izzy, Molly, and Emma - who find themselves on the doorstep of a homeless shelter as they attempt to reunite with their parents who live in another state. As well as watching their journey unfold, we are introduced to other characters who have sought refuge and guidance from the shelter to get back on their own two feet. The play is seen largely through the eyes of the three sisters as they learn the truth about homelessness through their own experience, and more importantly, through how others have dealt with homelessness.

8.4 Auditions for a Unique Show

Wanda Morales and the VISTA members worked to spread awareness of upcoming auditions. They used the Project Homelessness Facebook page, the Venture Theatre website and Facebook page, and posted notices on the theater building. On February 24th, Wanda Morales held auditions. The audition notice, writer's plot summary and character description are located in the appendix. Ms. Morales says of her directing experience and casting process:

"I also have directed both youth and adults. That provided me confidence in the audition process and proving a structure for the rehearsal process. I'm a very open person and make sure I provide a safe environment for actors to be expressive. My personal asset would be- I am very supportive of an actor's personal growth. I understand that the journey of a performer belongs to that individual and it's my job to challenge and inspire them. And together we tell a story."

Audition turnout was quite successful considering three other performances in the city were using a majority of male and child actors. Ms. Morales had each potential cast member talk about their thoughts on homelessness and why they wanted to be a part of the process. VISTA members were present to talk about Project Homelessness, answer any questions, and provide support for the director. Ms. Morales was able to satisfactorily cast eight characters despite male and child actor shortages.

One challenge when casting a show that represents real social issues can be actor experiences. Two actors cast in *And I Know...* had experienced, or had family experiencing, homelessness. This can prove to be both an asset

and a challenge. The director had to be prepared to handle the additional emotional stresses that would be placed on these actors by the content of the script. One actor flourished, the other had to remove himself from the play.

8.5 Beginning Voices: Rehearsal

Ms. Morales developed a rehearsal schedule that ran from Monday to Thursday evenings at lengths of three hours. Three weeks into the rehearsal process, Ms. Morales had to hand the play over to debuting director Christie Anderson. Christie Anderson was an experienced actress at Venture Theatre and took on Project Homelessness with support from producer Ms. Al.

Ms. Al helped Ms. Anderson by providing personal insight into youth homelessness, and provided the cast with effective warm-ups to get into their characters for this unique play. VISTA members provided food donated by a local nonprofit to keep the cast fed through long hours of rehearsal and supported the director with knowledge about youth homelessness.

To help the actors better understand homelessness and their characters, the cast was taken on a tour of the Women and Family Shelter of the Montana Rescue Mission. The photo below was taken by VISTA members during the tour and shows director Ms. Anderson with young actor Izzy Kay in the Learning Center.



The image below depicts an emotional cast warm-up before a dress rehearsal:



Ms. Anderson created a play that showcased the strengths and weaknesses of each character, and captured the themes of family, religion, and what it means to be without a home. The three main characters, sisters Izzy, Molly, and Emma, formed a bond so tight that each actor was able to openly cry during the final scene. Below is a photo from blogger Jodie Tenicin Smith of the final scene in *And I Know...*:



8.6 Recommendations

Playwrights

Working in a timeframe of two months can be a huge challenge that will limit the number of drafts that can be made before the script begins being rehearsed. Allowing more time for writing could be very beneficial for another project. This would also allow the script, as an unknown, locally crafted piece, to be read for the artistic community to generate excitement and further legitimize the project.

While setting the play in the shelter still moved audiences to tears and drew attention to the local shelter, it also drew attention away from the most vulnerable homeless youth: those who are unaccompanied minors. This is especially important in Billings since there is no youth shelter, only transitional housing for twenty young adults. It is important to carefully discuss setting with the project team and decide which setting will promote initiative goals most clearly. It is also important to have workshops as often as possible, especially with stakeholders that can help ensure the script is as accurate to its subject as it can be.

The Cast

The closeness between actors and characters was a common theme within the experience of bringing *And I Know...* to life. When undertaking a similar project, participating adults should offer emotional support to younger cast members. Furthermore, those making casting decisions for a production like *And I Know...* should be aware that cast members may bring emotional baggage, past experiences, and preconceptions about social justice issues to their interpretation of a character. We encourage directors, production team, and cast members to discuss and/or keep a journal about their relationship to their character and participation within a project.

It is important that actors be able to “step out” of their characters in order to maintain mental health and well-being during an emotionally heavy production like *And I Know....* Engaging in theater games and exercises that foster emotional distance between self and character can prove helpful within similar projects. Ultimately, participating, though emotionally challenging, rewarded actors with a better understanding about local homelessness, close-knit relationships with other members of the cast, and an opportunity to positively affect a serious local issue.

Directors

Ms. Al had one recommendation for other projects hoping to use theater as a tool to affect social issues. In order to effectively get audiences drawn into the world being portrayed, it is critical for each audience member to willingly suspend their disbelief. This means audience members will make allowances for inconsistencies, stage entrances, and give themselves over to the story and disengage with reality for a few hours.

“In a theater that’s called willing suspension of disbelief, that’s the ability to say I give myself over to this and I’ll follow the story with you. She said, a couple time she was pulled out by the Administrator, that she actually thought about herself in the world, but they were able to pull her right back into it. It finally met its twenty year goal.”

One common theater tool is to break the fourth wall by having actors invade the audience’s personal space, usually as an attempt to show that the characters exist in real life, not just on stage. In Ms. Al’s opinion, this has the opposite of the intended effect:

“As theater people we get these ideas like, “Oh yeah, this will show that the character is us if they sit in the audience.” No, you aren’t. There’s an actor in your space, sitting right next to you.

The audience reaction is, get out of my space. Instead of drawing them into the stage, we like to move into their space and sit in their lap. But that doesn't create intimacy; that makes people put their barriers up."

Ms. Al suggests that to create the greatest level of intimacy and impact upon an audience, the actors should be limited to the stage. As with *A Heart Without*, she says a simple set and actors that force audience members to be willingly drawn into the world without breaking the fourth wall is a very effective way of using theater as a tool.

Ms. Morales would give the following advice to any director hoping to create a social impact production:

"As artists we reflect off our culture and society and produce work to share. This project is an opportunity to use theater as a forum to share, educate, and tell a VERY relevant story that we essentially are all so very close to.

Challenge and cultivate your actors as a director so they feel proud of their work. Actors don't share what they are a part of if they are not proud of the work they are doing. Create good art first then SHARE. Encourage your actors to talk about their work and involvement."

Chapter 9: Fund Development



“After watching the play, I will make further donations to organizations serving children.”

– Anonymous survey feedback

9.1 Fund Development Goal Overview

Project Homelessness had a fundraising goal of \$5,000 in cash and in-kind donations. It was decided that all funds raised by sponsorships would go towards the expenses of marketing, set construction and props, and other production expenses. The remaining money would be divided 50/50 into the two beneficiary programs, 2014 Billings Community Connect, and financial aid. All proceeds from ticket sales and concessions would be kept by the theater, so it was important to keep production costs low and find as much financial sponsorship as possible.

It was decided early that the City of Billings Community Development division would manage all funds raised by Project Homelessness. This would lend a high level of transparency and accountability and help gain the trust of prospective donors. The City, through Ms. Beckett, would also be able to confidentially and ethically portion financial aid to qualifying youth.

The project ended up raising \$6,150 in business and individual sponsorships, and additional funds in personal donations for the Youth Conservatory during a church buy-out. All fund development occurred within a three-month timeframe.

9.2 Outreach

The first step of Project Homelessness fund development was utilizing stakeholder networks to establish what local businesses and foundations would be good matches for giving to a unique, creative endeavor. After

targeting appropriate organizations, VISTA members acted on the advice of Lynn Al, VISTA supervisor and Youth Conservatory Director, and began researching these prospective companies and their giving histories.

Community outreach established strong stakeholder investments and was ultimately able to overcome local donor fatigue. Time and again it was the personal connections production members created that made the endeavor a success. With a constrained timeframe of three months, it was the personal connections that allowed Project Homelessness to reach and exceed its goal.

In-Kind Donations

The relationships established by community outreach helped VISTA members gather in-kind donations. In-kind donations are useful in cutting costs by providing free advertisement, food, costumes, props, or set pieces.

The VISTA members were able to use relationships built by community outreach to furnish the set of *And I Know...*, borrow costumes, and find meaningful props. The VISTA member's connections with the Montana Rescue Mission and their investment proved invaluable. Facilitators were able to borrow costumes through their retail stores, including clothing needed for props, and small decorative items. The volunteers in the sewing room of the Women and Family Shelter of Montana Rescue Mission made six blankets to use as props during a scene set in a sewing room. This donation lent an authentic aspect to the set.

MasterLube

A local philanthropic company donated space in their monthly magazine for an article written by a VISTA member about the play. This article reached an audience of over 400 community members. The company then displayed *And I Know...* posters in each of its stores, and offered to buy tickets for any employee that wished to attend.

9.3 Creating a Budget

Team members decided what costs would need to be covered by donations. Ms. Al helped outline potential expenses that set construction, props, and other production needs could accrue. VISTA members decided they wanted beneficiaries to have equal shares of the funds raised. This helped outline how funds would be allocated after all expenses had been covered.

9.4 Creating a Proposal and Pursuing Sponsorship

A one-page proposal was written by a VISTA member outlining goals, expected outcomes, and use of sponsorship money. The language of each proposal was tailored to specific companies. Each proposal was sent out with added attachments for a more in-depth look at the project, including: a newspaper article written on VISTA members about Project Homelessness, the first scene of the play, and a page of an interview with a child.

In one circumstance, the VISTA member was able to sit down with a prospective donor and give a small presentation about why the production was a perfect candidate for financial sponsorship. The meeting was held in the performance space of the play, and the VISTA turned on stage lights to provide a creative atmosphere showcasing how the production might appear. A personal connection was made during this presentation, and a \$5,000 sponsorship resulted. In other cases, brief group presentations were made during

organization meetings and email packets sent to any interested parties. These small presentations resulted in sponsorships by Stockman Bank and First Montana Title.

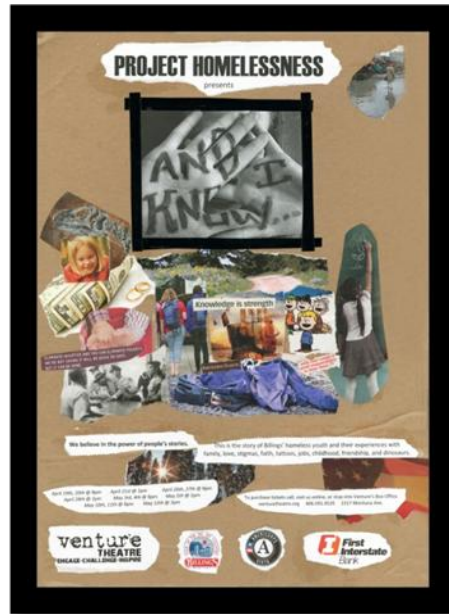
9.5 Recommendations

If possible, begin fund development as soon as project goals and plans are solidified. If the hosting nonprofit is eligible by having clean audits, begin applying for grants immediately.

Use all networks and online tools to find prospective donors. During the recession, philanthropic donations have greatly declined and it may prove to be a challenge to reach goals. Therefore, be prepared to tighten budgets and search for in-kind donations to furnish sets and advertise.



Chapter 10: Marketing and Ticket Sales



“This play gave people a face. I realized that they are people with stories and feelings. I had always turned a blind eye to the homeless.”

– Anonymous survey feedback

10.1 Strategies for Marketing

The effectiveness of Project Homelessness chiefly stemmed from its aggressive promotion within the community through advertising, community outreach, and a media plan. Developing marketing strategies was part of VISTA member VADs. VISTA members engaged in creative campaigns to raise awareness about the issue of youth homelessness specifically through Project Homelessness by:

- Engaging in social media postings on Facebook.
- Electronic mailings through Venture Theatre’s Vendini Patron Management System.
- Sending postcard notices to committed Venture Theatre patrons.
- Establishing relationships with local providers, churches, and committed theater patrons to foster word-of-mouth publicity of the show.
- Discussing the show through local media venues.
- Creating promotional videos about the show in relation to local youth homelessness as a community concern.

It was aggressive community outreach that helped spread advertising of the production more than any other method. Community outreach created an effective network through which to send email notifications. Audience members are more likely to attend if they have heard positive information from a trusted colleague, friend, or family member. The most useful marketing strategy was utilizing the media contacts already established by Venture Theatre and its directors.

Media Plan

A brief one-page media plan was constructed by a VISTA member to outline all media sources through which the team wanted to advertise. The plan targeted local television stations, public radio stations, newspapers, and online entertainment sites.

Getting a project broadcast on a television station or interviewed on a radio station can require a contact through networking. It was through Project Homelessness' network established by its members and stakeholder that *And I Know...* appeared on three networks with a total of four broadcasts. Two local radio stations played Public Service Announcements for *And I Know...*, and VISTA members were able to interview briefly on one.

It was Venture Theatre's good relationship with the local newspaper that resulted in the publication of two separate media articles. One article was published in the first half of the year after a VISTA member reached out to reporter Jaci Webb of the entertainment section. Ms. Webb created an article to bring attention to the initiative as a whole, and later wrote a piece spotlighting *And I Know...*. The production also appeared in a smaller newspaper with a rave review.

A marketing campaign was purchased with a local online entertainment site, which posted a large banner for the play for the month of April, made announcements, and had it posted on their calendars. The VISTA members also reached out to over ten local online calendars to advertise *And I Know...*

Facebook

In October, Mr. Gage created the Project Homelessness Facebook page to let interested community members follow the project's progression. While it represented a small portion of marketing, it did gain 148 followers and was used to advertise to 60,000 community members and sell tickets. Mr. Gage designed the following flier to display on the Facebook page using a VISTA member photograph for the poster design.



Posters and Fliers

With Ms. Al's help the VISTA members created posters and fliers to advertise for the production. Ms. Al had formerly been the Marketing Director for Venture Theatre and used her experience in the field to create dynamic advertising. She advised the VISTA members to create multiple designs for posters using a collage method. An example can be seen at the beginning of this chapter.

VISTA members took photographs of *And I Know...* actors with the title written on their hands for the main poster image around which a collage would be created. VISTA members and two volunteers, one from the Billings Community Connect event, used images from magazines and information on the play to create a collage on a piece of cardboard. These images were then professionally scanned and printed. Five different designs were created and 120 copies printed. Volunteers spent an afternoon spreading these posters around Billings.



Ms. Al designed an image using a VISTA member title photograph to be used for advertisement on cast t-shirts. This image soon turned in to the play flier that could be cut into quarter-sheets and distributed through actors and businesses, and was used in the design for the postcard that was sent to 90 Venture Theatre patrons.



10.2 Presenting Project Homelessness for Ticket Sales

Community outreach represents a good portion of advertising for Project Homelessness: *And I Know...* Creating a network and garnering stakeholder support helped spread excitement and knowledge about the play. Presentations were made to help encourage ticket sales, especially to large organizations capable of purchasing buy-outs.

Presenting at Organizations

The VISTA members were able to make informal presentations to three local organizations: Grace United Methodist Church, the Optimist Club, and First Congregational United Church of Christ. At each organization, the VISTA members informed audiences of the seriousness of homelessness in Billings using City of Billings and school district data, then talked about the goals of Project Homelessness and its play, *And I Know...*

Each organization was surprised at the data, and many were unaware that there were homeless youth in Billings. Grace United Methodist Church had participated in the flashmob, and members of their congregation discussed the issue of youth homelessness after the presentation and attended the play.

The presentation at First Congregational United Church of Christ occurred after Reverend Thomas Hall and the youth ministry attended a performance. The congregation was very involved after the presentation. They were so passionate about combating youth homelessness that the VISTAs helped them collaborate with other nonprofits to help them fill niches in social services for homeless youth, such as providing free meals and a safe space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning homeless youth.

Lunch and Learn

On April 17, 2013, *And I Know...* co-writer Ryan and VISTA members discussed youth homelessness in Billings and promoted the production at a Lunch and Learn event, hosted at Billings Senior High School. Lunch and Learn events are weekly informational gatherings, typically held in high school libraries, in which community members, teachers, and engaged students present about issues or initiatives that foster education and community involvement. Mr. Gage teaches American National Government and History at Senior High School, and he believed it represented a wonderful opportunity to encourage young people from the community to attend the show and, more importantly, learn about the seriousness of local homelessness.

The event was a success: over 15 Senior High School students, faculty, and staff attended. Interested students were offered free tickets to attend a performance of *And I Know...* Three students attended a Sunday performance of the show, and one brought two friends.

10.3 Montana Rescue Mission Buyout

Staff at the Montana Rescue Mission organized two buyouts of the production for Montana Rescue Mission donors and staff. This decision was hugely beneficial to the production. The first buyout, specifically for donors, was filled to capacity. After seeing the performance, many donors remarked that it was their first time being able to connect with the cause they had been financially supporting for many years. The VISTA members held discussion sessions both nights, and shook hands with every audience member after the show. The effects were tremendous. Staff reported feeling more energy after years of caretaker fatigue. Several donors made larger contributions and were moved to action in the community.

Gary Drake, Development Director, wrote in an email to VISTA Members (see appendix for a full letter of appreciation):

“The buzz we got from our 2 buyout nights was, and is, amazing! Everyone I talked to, and we had about 120 or so come on the 2 nights... were blown away by the power of the play itself and the amazing actors, particularly the two leads. All in all, I think this play was one of the most powerful tools for telling the impact of homelessness on kids that I have seen to date.”

10.4 Recommendations

Program facilitators should investigate venues to discuss a project, especially to community youth. Reach out to local middle schools, high schools, and colleges: chances are they will have some opportunities for community discussion about social justice initiatives. If possible, have someone available to assist project members with graphic and software design to create promotional posters for a project. Begin marketing campaigns early, especially in tandem with community outreach. Multiple designs can lend originality and reach a wider audience.

Chapter 11: More than a Performance



“To just go and say, ‘119 kids were on the street last night,’ that’s just a number. But to take one of them and show we had a one week old baby on the streets last night. To show it, it’s powerful, but saying it? It’s just a number.”

— Social services provider feedback

11.1 Pre-Show Pieces: Photos, Poetry, and Other Resources

The production team decided that having resources and creative impact pieces displayed in the hallway leading to the Black Box would be an extra way to raise awareness of youth homelessness. Artwork and cast photos were displayed on the hallway walls, and a table was set up to display feedback cards and city resources about homelessness.

Cast Photos and Homelessness Calculator

Director Christie Anderson believed using the VISTA created Days until Homeless calculator accompanied by cast photos would be a dynamic way to show audience members how close each of us it to homelessness. A VISTA member took photos of each cast member holding a cardboard sign of their respective days until they would be homeless. Craig Huisenga, a local director and Review Group member, said:

“I thought one of the most effective things actually was the pictures of the cast members in the lobby on the way in holding signs that showed how many days they were away from being homeless themselves if they lost their income or if they lost their place to live. I thought that was really effective in terms of making you think about yourself and how easy it would be for you to end up in the same situation.”

Shelter Guest Poem

The Women and Family Shelter graciously allowed a poem written by one of their guests to be displayed during the production. The poem was titled, "It Could Be You," about how easily any individual could become homeless, fitting perfectly into one of the themes of *And I Know...* The poem was displayed next to the cast photos.

Shelter Youth Artwork

VISTA members scheduled an artwork day with Ms. Runkle at the Women and Family Shelter on a Monday when the children did not have school. Along with providing temporary care of the children for the parents to enjoy needed private time and giving the children an artistic outlet, the paintings the children created were displayed in the hallway. They were a colorful reminder to audience members that the homeless youth are ordinary children facing extraordinary circumstances, and they live a block away.

This artwork is peppered throughout the manual as chapter illustrations. Each child must remain anonymous, but the twelve attending children were between the ages of six and twelve.

Other Resources

Community resources were placed on the feedback table to provide more information for interested audience members, including quarter sheets about ways audience members can help fight homelessness, Welcome Home Billings informational pamphlets, maps illustrating the location and contact information of local service providers and other resources.

Thoughts in Art: Feedback Table

After attending the 2013 Billings Community Connect, a VISTA member had decided that Lynda Woods' *Voices of Homelessness* collage table would be a creative way to get feedback from audience members that may not be willing to participate in post-show discussions. Audience members could choose from an array of crafting supplies to create collages or write simple messages about the play. Thirty-two cards were created including drawings, inspirational collages, and constructive feedback. Several of the cards are used as chapter pictures. Below is a VISTA photo of a portion of anonymous feedback cards and the sign that was on display.



The following are quotations from feedback cards:

- This play was very inspirational, had great meaning and gave a clear picture of what people go through and how the shelter helps get them back on their feet to be out on their own. Thank you!
- You all did a wonderful job! It brought tears to my eyes and gave us more drive to volunteer!
- Fantastic show! A real eye-opener! Funny and very sad- all at the same time! Do this every year!
- I think that I definitely feel a lot differently now about homelessness than I ever did.
- I will start now helping my community with being a mentor to the youth and giving financially. We need to give as Jesus would have us do!
- I really liked the play. Made me stop and think.
- The characters tonight were so different... but not bad!
- The play was awesome! The cast did such an amazing job! The play was simply amazing.

11.2 Post-Show Discussions

Fostering and documenting post-show discussions with audience members of *And I Know...* represented a key component to VISTA members' evaluation for the creation of this report and ensuring its success. However, keeping audience members in their seats to engage in post-event conversation with VISTA members proved to be the most difficult aspect of the post-show feedback process. Audiences of theatrical shows typically exit the theater almost immediately after the cast receives applause, so directing audiences of *And I Know...* to remain seated after the cast exited proved challenging, at worst, and non-conventional, at best.

Please Stick Around!

Director Christie Anderson encouraged audiences to “stick around for a conversation with VISTA members about the show and ways to combat youth homelessness in the community” during her pre-event curtain speech. Furthermore, VISTA members encouraged audiences to fill out feedback cards, posted on a small table in the hallway leading to the event venue, to be filled out before, after the show, and at intermission. However, the value of receiving verbal feedback from audiences immediately after their experience viewing *And I Know...* cannot be overstated. Watching, noting, and responding to audiences in person created a close bond with them through the shared experience of theater. It represented a key component of post-show feedback.

The most effective post-show discussions occurred after the Montana Rescue Mission and Faith Chapel buyouts. MRM and Faith Chapel forewarned audiences that a post-event discussion would take place. Therefore, the buyout attendees of those performances predominantly stuck around to converse with VISTA members.

11.3 Video Recording

VISTA members created a series of informational videos, with documented reactions from cast, production team, and community members about the show and youth homelessness, to broadcast the production and issue to potential donors, audiences, and interested stakeholders. The interviews with relevant participants, including Wanda Morales, the writers, Sue Runkle, Craig Huisenga, Reverend Susan Otey, and Lynda Woods, Community Development Coordinator, highlighted the connection between local youth homelessness and the urgent nature of the initiative.

11.4 Recommendations

Pre-Show Pieces

All pre-show pieces were well-received. The Resource Maps were in high demand and needed to be refilled several times. One recommendation would be to have a volunteer present at the feedback table, encouraging audience members to leave comments. By doing so, more feedback would be gathered. However, as with post-show discussions, most audience members needed time to decompress and think about the play material, and often were too emotional to participate.

Post-Show Discussions

While the VISTA members gathered excellent feedback from individuals and groups that spent time discussing homelessness after the play, it should be noted that, as stated above, most audience members were too overwhelmed with information and emotion to participate in discussions, or one-on-one conversations.

Post-event discussions typically revolved around audiences seeking clarification and facts about local homelessness. Having informational brochures, facts, and statistics to present to interested audience members is useful when facilitating post-event discussions, as audiences may desire facts to contrast with the emotionally charged experience of a play about a social justice concern. The VISTA members, with the help of Ms. Beckett and Lynda Woods of the City's Community Development, created a quarter-sheet with facts, titled *Ways to Help*, with a list of service providers and resources in Billings to distribute at performances of *And I Know...*

It is important to have a series of icebreaker questions to engage audiences in post-event feedback sessions. For example, Ms. Al encouraged VISTA members to begin discussion periods by asking audiences how they felt about the girls being split up at the end of the play. However, some vested audiences, including MRM donors/stakeholders and Faith Chapel congregants at *And I Know...* buyouts, were chiefly interested in discussing specific ways to affect homelessness in the community through personal, church, and non-profit involvement.

Post-event discussions can be difficult to effectively garner and are completely contingent upon the makeup of audiences and the urgency with which program facilitators encourage participation. In the event that verbal audience feedback cannot be garnered, we recommend adopting an audience "comment card" table. Some individuals may simply feel more comfortable expressing their opinions, reactions, and concerns about a program anonymously on paper. In either case, VISTA members recognized early within the production process that people touched by *And I Know...* desire to talk about it.

Recording a Project

Create informational videos about a project and post them on relevant sites, including YouTube and Facebook. Offering short (2-10 minute) informational videos which establish the connection between statistical data and theater as a tool to affect positive change for social justice concerns, can help promote as well as create relationships with local service providers, churches, nonprofits, and potential interested stakeholders. For example, VISTA members offered an informational video about Project Homelessness to First United Congregational Church of Christ preceding their presentation at a Sunday service.

If project members do not have videographer experience, be sure to consult information sources about how to effectively create short informational videos. Ms. Beckett directed the VISTA members to an organization, Lights. Camera. Help., that hosts an annual nonprofit film competition. The organization's webpage, "lightscamerahelp.org," is a wonderful resource for new nonprofit filmmakers. The VISTA members submitted a short (less than five minute) video about youth homelessness in Billings, with segmented interviews from Lynda Woods, Ms. Runkle, Mr. Gage, and Mr. Scott, to the 2013 "Lights. Camera. Help. Film." contest.

Chapter 12: Closing the Curtain - Results



"Homelessness is...just...people waiting to go somewhere better.
That's what homelessness means to me."

– Tanner Stitchman, age 9, actor in *And I Know...*

12.1 Final Numbers

By the end, the production raised over \$2,500 in cash funds to donate to Billings Community Connect and financial aid for Venture Theatre's Youth Conservatory. The show was attended by 558 people, which represents almost one community member for every homeless youth in the school district this year, according to Ms. Runkle's data. The initiative was deemed an enormous success and brought a tidy profit to Venture Theatre since financial donations took care of most production costs.

As two anonymous attendees wrote, "This play was very inspirational, had great meaning, and gave a clear picture of what people need the shelter, and how the shelter helps get them back on their feet to be out on their own."

12.2 Production Team Impact

Project Homelessness impacted all participants, including VISTA members, the production team, community nonprofits, and audiences. The production had an especially powerful influence upon its actors. Acting involves becoming intimately familiar with a character and investing in their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Given the emotionally heavy context of homelessness, poverty, and abuse depicted in *And I Know...*, actors within the show often experienced a powerful connection with their respective characters and adapted their perceptions about local homelessness and poverty because of the experience.

Cast Reactions

Cast members reacted strongly to participating in *And I Know...* For example, Amanda C. McCave, who played the Administrator, said, “It’s educational, and it’s been a great process getting to know the people in this show.” When asked if her perceptions about local homelessness changed as a result of participating in the show, she stated that, “it’s changed how I think about homelessness. It’s opened my eyes to the problem that kids have with homelessness. You know, I was a part of the last Project Homeless Connect. I helped Patrick [Wilson] work on monologues, which focused on adults. You know, people have issues, and this one focuses on the kids.” When asked to comment about having the show set within a homeless shelter, Amanda responded, “I think it’s a great idea that the show is written at the shelter. It gives such a perspective, because most people don’t know about the people in the shelter- the kids- they live their daily lives. You might know someone who lives there.”

The child actors in *And I Know...* were also powerfully impacted through participation. The lead child characters within *And I Know...*, Izzy and Chase, were portrayed by two youth actors new to theater, Izzy Kay and Tanner Stitchman. When asked if participation changed his views about local homelessness, ten-year-old Tanner reported, “[t]his show changed what I think about homelessness. Before, I thought of a guy on the street, probably with no shoes, just cardboard sign. Now I just think they’re waiting.”

Thirteen-year-old Mackenzie Gilsdorf, who played Molly in *And I Know...*, admitted that the play deeply changed her perceptions about homelessness. She stated, “[b]efore this play, I thought, ‘why don’t they [homeless people] just get a job? But now, I think that it’s a lot harder than that. And they do need help, and it would be nice to give them something more... like... food, because you don’t know what they’re going to do with the money, but I think it’s really nice.” She reported that playing a character in the show could be difficult at times because “it’s not just a character you step into, because this is actually happening.”

Each show was a powerful experience for the cast and required actors to cry and bring a tremendous amount of energy. Several actors agreed that the show was very different from any other that had acted in because of the audience. The actors reported that the audience was so impacted by the material of the play that they simply absorbed the emotion and were able to be impacted, rather than emotionally interacting with the cast like in a typical production. They described this as the audience feeling like a “void.”

As the feedback indicates, and as emotional responses by audience members demonstrated, the play met its goal of creating empathy and understanding through the emotionally-charged performances of its actors. Many actors were more deeply invested and emotionally available in this production because they were representing real people in their city. For the young actors, it will impact the way they understand poverty and treat people for the rest of their lives.

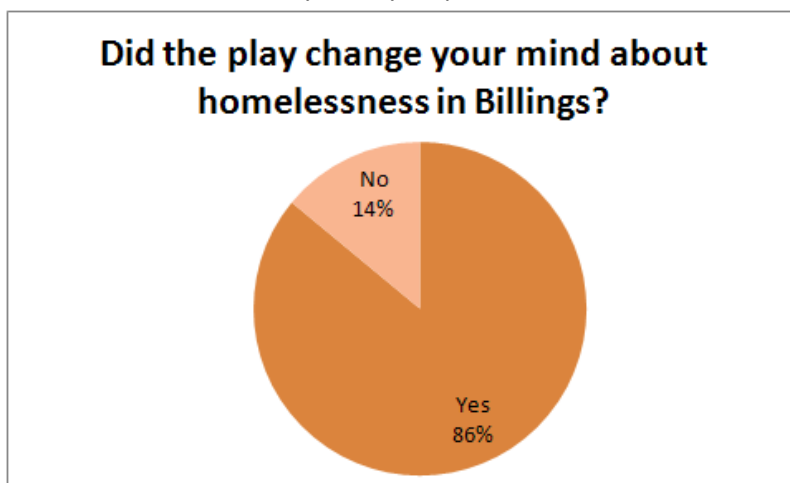
12.3 Feedback and Effectiveness

While the primary and most effective way of collecting feedback was during post-show discussions and interviews with key audience members, an online survey was also created to gather quantitative data on the effectiveness of *And I Know...* to alter perceptions and create action. A VISTA member used Survey Monkey to answer the following questions:

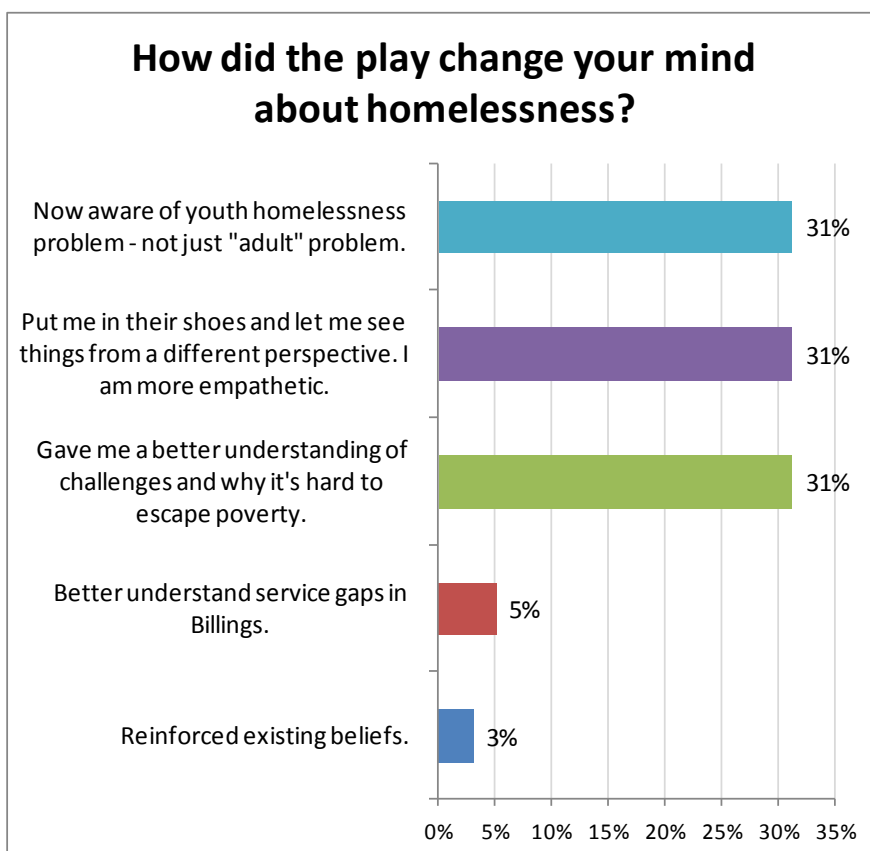
- Did the play change your mind about homelessness in Billings? How?
- Did the play inspire you to take action? How?
- Do you think theater is an appropriate venue for social impact issues?

- What would you recommend to a community wishing to do their own Project Homelessness?
- Why did you go to the show?
- What is the most important thing you took away from the show?

The surveyed was issued to audience members who had given Venture Theatre their email address, as well as linked on Project Homelessness' Facebook page. The total number of possible survey responses was 115. The following charts represent answers from twenty survey responses.

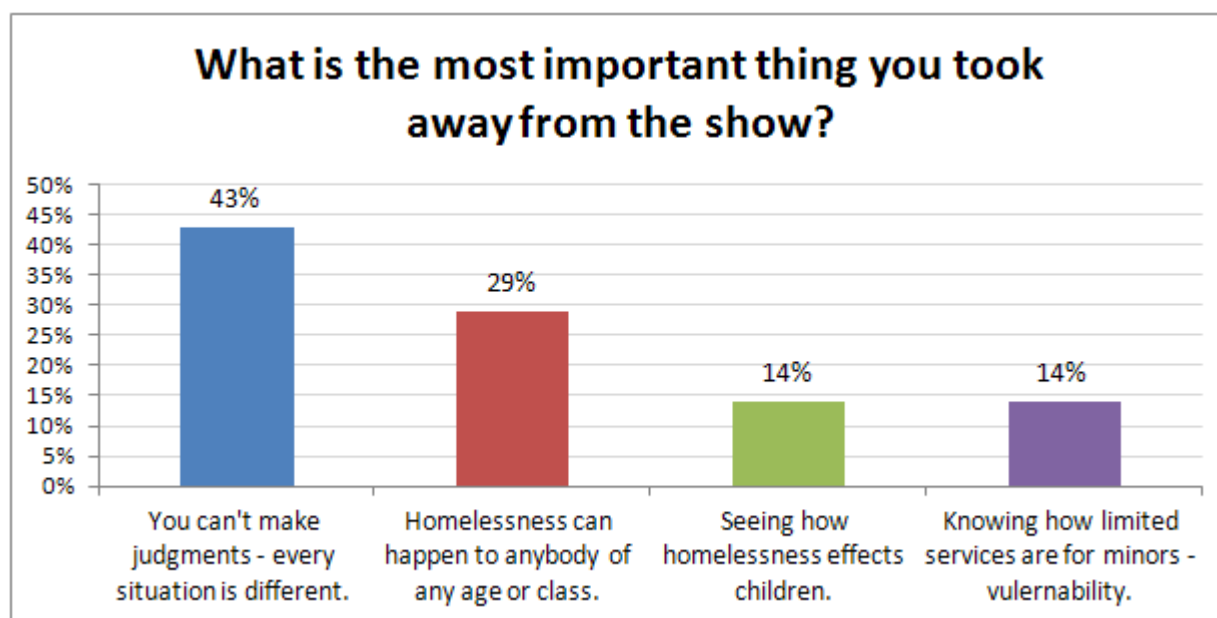


The majority of those surveyed responded that their perceptions about homelessness had changed after seeing *And I Know...* Those that did not have their perceptions changed said that it reinforced their existing notions of homelessness. Based on the sample of data the VISTA members were able to collect, Project Homelessness was able to achieve its goal of raising awareness and challenging stereotypes.



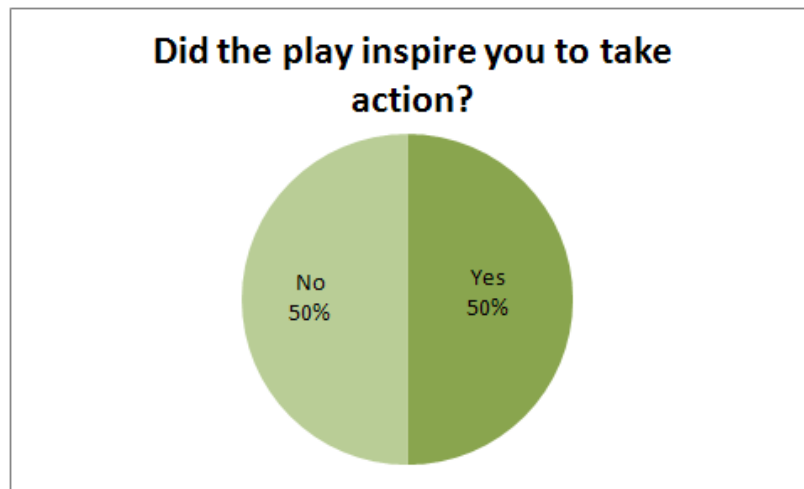
In terms of how the play changed audience perceptions about homelessness, the responses were a three-way tie between understanding why it is difficult to escape poverty, increasing their empathy, and raising their awareness of youth homelessness. By this feedback, primary goals of challenging stereotypes and raising awareness were achieved. Surveyors could choose more than one response, and not all surveyed were required to respond. For Craig Huisenga, the play helped banish stereotypes by challenging the types of people we assume are homeless:

“One of the strengths of the show is that it makes you aware more of the variety of people who are homeless. That it’s not just the stereotypical drunk laying on the street... its families. Its people who are challenged- have mental or behavioral health problems; they have trouble getting insured for, or they just don’t have the support [system] to seek out. And that it’s families who are broken up; it’s people who have lost their jobs.”

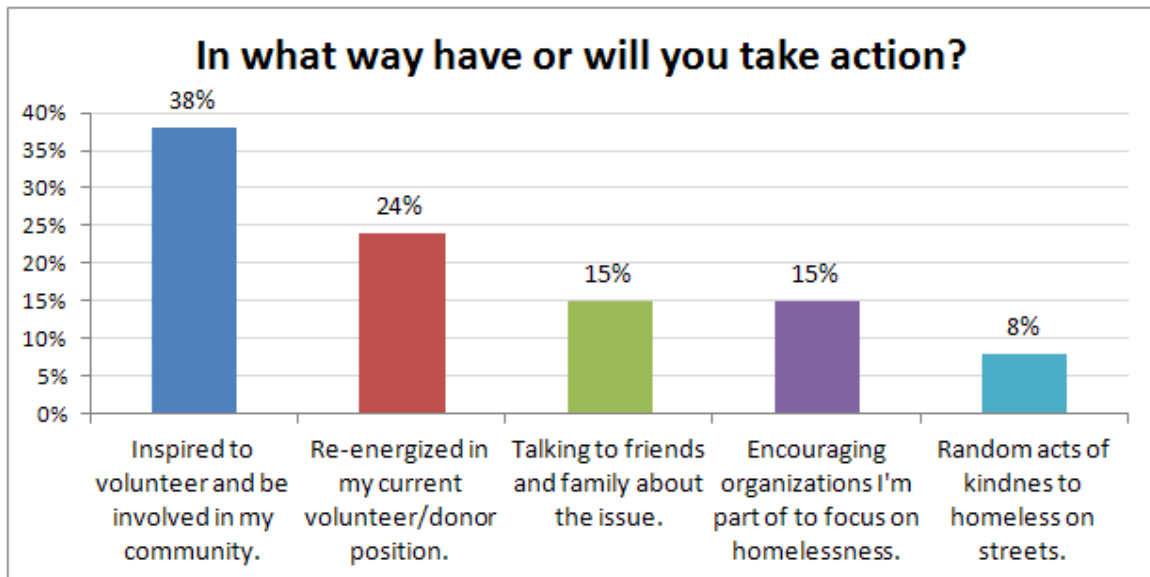


For this question, surveyed audience members were allowed to write out their own response. These responses then could easily be put into four themes, and each question could be put into one or more responses. This sampling of audience members shows that the play was effective at changing perceptions about homelessness stereotypes by understanding that every situation of homelessness is unique and has numerous causes, most of which are out of control of those experiencing homelessness. It was also useful in showing that homelessness can affect any social class or age group, especially youth. In a VISTA member feedback interview, Reverend Susan Otey responded to the above question:

“The most important thing I hope people take away from this show is that people who are homeless really do care about the same things we care about, and that many of them don’t have the same coping strategies. And that if we want to solve the problem of homelessness, then what we’re going to have to do is address some of the root causes- that aren’t just putting people in houses, feeding people- but it’s looking at what are people’s coping skills? What are people getting involved with? What support networks do they have? How do they process things? How do they understand language, and what’s their value system? And how does their value system interplay with the value systems of institutions and organizations.”



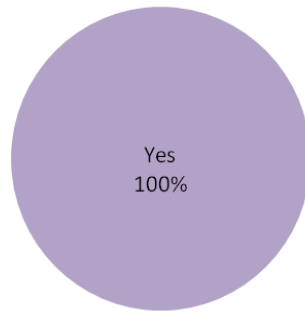
Of the twenty surveyed, half were inspired to action. Several responded that they had already been taking action (24% in chart below), and thus no inspiration was necessary. Others claimed that they would take action if an appealing opportunity was presented to them.



The greatest success was inspiring others to volunteer and be more involved, as *And I Know...* hoped to be a call to action. Based on other feedback from post-performance discussion and those interviewed, few knew youth homelessness was even a social issue, and many did not understand how serious it is. Because of this new awareness, those that had previously been ignorant could now take action.

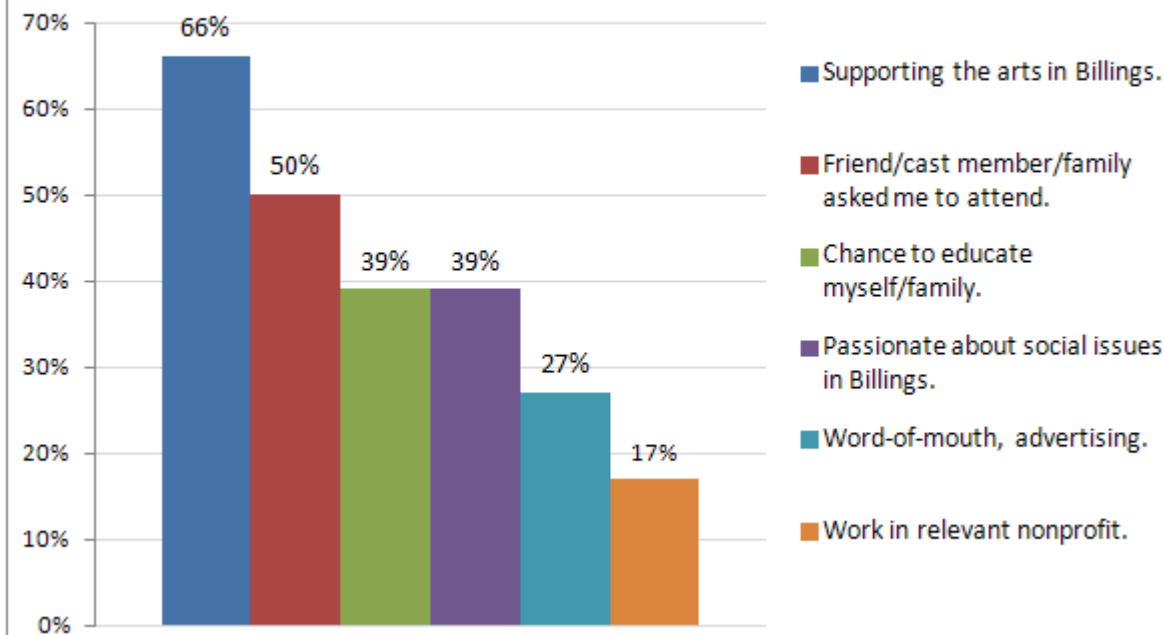
A wonderful ripple effect of this new knowledge is having audience members spread awareness by talking with friends and family. One woman said: "I spoke with a friend on the mission committee at a church and encouraged her to switch their mission to local kids in poverty instead of international." Others audience members, now feeling empathy for the homeless visible on streets, took notice of them and reached out, offering food.

Do you think theater is an effective venue for social impact pieces?



Every individual interviewed and surveyed responded that theater is an effective way of raising awareness. This is very critical feedback as it reinforces the fact that theater is a tool, and can be used to help change the communities in which we live. Even if their mind was not changed, they still responded positively that using theater was an appropriate way to accomplish what Ms. Beckett had hoped when she began imagining Project Homelessness over a year before.

Why did you go to the show?



Discovering why an audience attends is critical for any project. Those surveyed had the option of selecting multiple answers, with the primary response being to support arts in Billings. One of the biggest appeals of Project Homelessness was that it was entirely community-created, and the resulting play was unique, powerful, and transforming. Having original work in a community theater is satisfying for all involved, and drives its own ticket sales. Secondly, the power of cast and crew networks cannot be undervalued. Giving everyone involved in the project a way of spreading the word through their network is key. Posters, fliers, and t-shirts were our main method that cast and crew could use to invite friends and family.

12.4 Overall Project Challenges

Despite overwhelmingly positive feedback, every project will inevitably encounter difficulties. An important aspect of every endeavor, artistic or otherwise, is to accept the project's limitations in the scope of themes. Nothing could bring that to light faster than an anonymous feedback card we received. The card read: "Why are all of the actors white? And not homeless? What is the role of race in the problem of homelessness? Why was the only Native character a rapist?"

And I Know... could not encompass every aspect of homelessness in order to highlight other thematic issues about homelessness and poverty. The play focused on relationship dynamics within families, between friends, and with God, which helped show the primary difficulties of being a homeless family or runaway youth. The writers chose to follow themes that arose coincidentally from the majority of interviews.

Race is a complex and challenging aspect of Billings that would be enlightening to focus on in future community projects. Goals and interview content dictated race would not be a viable theme. For interview participants, classism was a much bigger part of their lives than racism. It is ultimately important for any future project to think thoroughly about as many themes as possible within the scope of a serious social justice concern.

Homeless children and adults could not act within *And I Know...* because the production required an enormous time commitment and, perhaps more importantly, reliable transportation, which puts extraordinary and often impossible pressure on families or individuals already struggling to make it day-to-day. Even for relatively financially stable families the rehearsals and a month of performance was a great strain. As it was stated earlier, opportunities for involvement should always be available to anyone who wants to contribute. The most important part of Project Homelessness was keeping authenticity and allowing true stories of homelessness to be heard.

Writing a script from scratch with community writers is a beautiful, organic, but challenging process. Because of the length of time available for script workshops, it was often not until the second weekend of performances that small loopholes and other inconsistencies were noticed. Even with a script that was only workshopped twice, it still achieved its goal because of the skill of the writers and the support of the project. *And I Know...* moved every audience to tears and created a ripple effect throughout Billings. It changed minds, reinvigorated Montana Rescue Mission staff and donors, and built community capacity for empathy. It is important to accept the limitations of the project and thrill in what can be achieved. Nothing will be perfect and there is so much to be learned. Every artist and nonprofit should accept criticism gracefully, and respond gratefully. After all, this project is not just about raising awareness and illuminating poverty for the community; it is just as much about impacting the participants. As much as it inspired the viewers, it was those in the project that were most changed.

12.5 Closing Remarks: Final Curtain

Project Homelessness and its play, *And I Know...*, effectively accomplished all programmatic goals, including addressing community stereotypes about homelessness, raising awareness about the experiences of homeless children and young adults in the community, and raised over \$2,500 in funds to alleviate the effects of local youth homelessness and poverty. All participants within the project, including Venture actors, the production team, VISTA members, City of Billings employees, participating organizations and churches, audiences, and interviewees, experienced the power of community theater as a tool to tangibly affect a social justice concern. While challenges were experienced, participants and facilitators ultimately learned that theater, though sometimes chaotic and messy, brings a brand of vitality, passion, and urgency to the community-wide discussion about youth homelessness and ways to combat its grave effects.

We hope that this guide serves as a model when an organization undertakes initiatives similar to Project Homelessness. Marrying the emotional vulnerability and intensity of community theater to existing work from service providers, organizations, and individuals to affect local social justice issues can make the project a powerful tool to create positive, lasting change.

We encourage organizations to use this model and create their own impact project using theater as a tool. The compassion, empathy, and motivation audiences experience through stepping into the lives of others through community theater represents a compelling tool to help end the suffering of vulnerable members of the community.



APPENDIX

Online Resources

Project Homelessness Resources & Materials

www.ci.billings.mt.us/play

City of Billings - Community Development Division, Homeless Initiatives Website

www.ci.billings.mt.us/homeless

Welcome Home Billings Website

www.welcomehomebillings.org

Illuminate Poverty Blog

www.illuminatepoverty.blogspot.com/2010/07/billings-homeless-youth.html

A Heart Without Interview Procedures

Interview Process, by Daniele Reisbig:

- **3.1** With a desired result of 9-13 completed monologues and 20 viable interviews, the interviewer will conduct 40-50 interviews.
- **3.2** Interviews of individuals experiencing homelessness in the Billings area will be conducted through the Mental Health Center (The HUB), Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH), and other interested organizations.
 - **3.2.1** In the interest of full understanding and collaboration, no interviews will be conducted with clients through these organizations without first obtaining written approval from the leaders of the organizations involved.
 - **3.2.2** There will be drafted and approved informational packets given to each organization, which will include a copy of the questions that will be asked, information about where and when interviews will be conducted (most likely within the participating organization's facilities), a copy of the waiver that the interviewees will sign, a copy of the rights and responsibilities that the interviewee will read (or have read to) and sign, a copy of any other materials provided to the interviewees, and additional information as requested by the organization.
- **3.3** All interviews will be sound recorded in the interest of accuracy. All recordings will be carefully labeled, stored in a secure area, and disposed of after use.
- **3.4** Interviews will be conducted in secure areas with a minimum of two exits. Both Interviewer and interviewee will have access to an exit at all times. Support staff (such as organizational staff or volunteers) outside the interview area will be available to assist the interviewer or interviewee at any time during the session.
- **3.5** No interview will last longer than 60 minutes. Additional interviews may be scheduled. If another interview is conducted, the rights and responsibilities information and waiver will be reviewed and a second waiver will be signed.

- **3.6** Before the interview, the interviewee will be given a detailed explanation of the project, how their interview will be used, and they will be given information about how to contact the interviewer if they have any questions or concerns in the future. The interviewer will provide full disclosure of the project to the interviewee will be given time at the beginning of the session to ask questions about the project and their potential role in it. It will be stressed that their interview may not be used for the final product and, if used, may be modified for dramatic purposes.
- **3.7** When conducting interviews, the interviewee will be informed of their rights.
 - **3.7.1** They have the right to leave the interview at any time, refuse to answer any question by saying “pass,” and to ask the interviewer not to include answers given.
 - **3.7.2** They also have the right to request an additional party to be present such as a caseworker, counselor, or friend so long as their participation is constructive to the process. Advocates may not respond to questions directed to the interviewee but they may advise the interviewee of their rights and responsibilities or advice ending the session.
- **3.8** The additional party will be given rights equal to an interviewee and will be required to read and review the rights and responsibilities information and sign a waiver. However, additional party should only act as an advocate for the interviewee. If the interviewee’s advocate is not constructive to the process or, if the advocate desires to leave the interview area, the interviewer reserves the right to end the session, in which case the interview material previously recorded will be used only in the capacity allowed by the interviewee. However, the interviewer may provide the interviewee with the following options:
 - **3.8.1** To end the interview session immediately, at which point the interviewee and their additional party will have to leave the interview area. There will be no additional interview sessions and the interview material previously recorded will not be used;
 - **3.8.2** To end the interview session immediately, at which point the interviewee and their additional party will have to leave the interview area. The interview material previously recorded will be used only in the capacity allowed by the interviewee. They may reschedule another interview without the additional party. The interviewee will be allowed to bring another additional party to the interview;
 - **3.8.3** To continue the interview without the presence of the additional party. The interview material previously recorded will be used only in the capacity allowed by the interviewee.
- **3.9** They will also be informed of their responsibilities to refrain from making threatening statements or gestures. They are not allowed to have any weapons in the interview room. If/When the interviewer asks the interviewee to leave the interview area, they must comply.
- **3.10** The interviewee will be informed that the interviewer may share written transcripts of their session(s).
 - **3.10.1** In the event that the interviewer is aware of a potential threat to the interviewee or others, the interviewer may share written transcripts of interviews with qualified individuals strictly for the purpose of evaluating the potential threats. Transcripts will only be shared with qualified caseworkers, counselors, PATH team members, Joseph Chalupa, qualified employees of the Montana Rescue Mission, or qualified employees of other mental health organizations or organizations that help the homeless in Billings, MT. If their session is reviewed, the interviewee will not be identified. These individuals will be required to sign a confidentiality form.
 - **3.10.2** The interviewer will inform the interviewee that they are acting as a mandated reporter. The interviewer is required to report suspected child abuse or maltreatment – or cause a report to be made – when they are presented with *reasonable cause* to suspect abuse or maltreatment. The interviewer is also required to report any suspicions they may have that the interviewee or advocate may commit self-harm or harm to others.

- **3.10.3** After potential threats and identifying details have been removed, written transcripts of all interviews selected for use will be shared with Sara Butts of Venture Theatre and various writers for the purpose of writing the play. The interviews will be identified with a numbering or code system.
- **3.11** The interviewer will avoid discussion of illegal activities and stress to the interviewee the importance of avoiding subjects that could place them or anyone else in danger if the information were made public. If the interviewer believes that the information provided could endanger the individual or and/other individual(s) mentioned, the interviewer will omit the information from their findings or alter the details sufficiently to protect the interviewee/other parties.
- **3.12** Questions: Wording may be altered to compliment information learned during the interview or to be more understandable as age and education level will vary between participants. Additional follow up questions may be asked during the interview.
 - 1) How old are you?
 - 2) How much education do you have?
 - 3) Where do you sleep at night?
 - 4) Where/when do you eat?
 - 5) What do you do if you get sick?
 - 6) Do you have any close family? Children?
 - 7) Who are your friends? What do you do together?
 - 8) Do you have a job? If so where do you work? If not, how do you get money?
 - 9) What do you do for fun?
 - 10) Tell me something that happened recently that made you happy? Made you unhappy?
- **3.13** All organizations/government departments/or businesses mentioned in the monologues will be notified after interview sessions are finished. Any organizations who would like their identity to remain in project will submit a written authorization of their consent. All others' names will be changed/details will be altered to help prevent identification where possible.

Project Homelessness Media Release

Welcome Home Billings

Venture Theatre, Inc. and Billings Metro VISTA's *Project Homelessness: And I Know...*

Interviews, Photo Shoots, Video Recordings

MEDIA WAIVER AND RELEASE

Thank you for your interest in *Project Homelessness: And I Know...*! This effort is an extension of "Welcome Home Billings," the city's plan to impact and prevent homelessness, and Venture Theatre's 2011 *A Heart Without* production, which highlighted local stories of homelessness and poverty through the presentation of dramatic monologues.

Project Homelessness: And I Know... represents a collaborative effort between Venture Theatre and Billings' Metro VISTA Project (MVP), a component of the City of Billings' ten-year plan to impact homelessness, Welcome Home Billings.

The chief goal of *Project Homelessness: And I Know...* is to emphasize that poverty and homelessness can happen to anyone, including children. We believe that this production represents an effective forum for engaging the public to discuss issues of poverty, homelessness, and youth disengagement within Billings.

Thank you for your interest in this community effort.

I, the undersigned, acknowledge the information presented in this interview is correct and truthful, and may be used in the media. Venture Theatre, Inc. and the Billings Metro VISTA Project are allowed to utilize any of the images, recordings, or video, of myself taken during my participation for future promotional, advertising, or educational purposes for *Project Homelessness: And I Know...* I understand that my image, likeness, or comments may be reproduced and included in any media utilized by Venture Theatre, Inc. and Billings MVP to achieve these purposes, including but not limited to television, print, and internet media.

I specifically grant Venture Theatre, Inc. and Billings MVP the absolute right and permission to use any interview contents, photographs, and video recordings for no consideration and at no cost to Venture Theatre, Inc, Billings MVP, and the City of Billings. I understand that all interview, photographs, and video footage shall remain the sole property of Venture Theatre, Inc., the Billings MVP, and the City of Billings. I hereby waive any claims that I may have, and specifically release Venture Theatre, Inc., the City of Billings, Billings MVP, their employees, and staff from liability of claims arising out of the use of my image, likeness, or interviews.

Participant Name

Signature (or that of legal guardian)

Date

Witness Name

Signature

Date



Invitation to Second Workshop

February 1st, 2013

Dear _____,

It gives me great pleasure to invite you to be one of the first in our community to attend a reading and review session of Project Homelessness' play. Venture Theatre and AmeriCorps VISTA have collaborated to raise awareness of youth homelessness in Billings through the creation of an original play based on the lives on 13 homeless youth. Shad Scott and Ryan Gage are in the rough draft process of the script and need your support!

It would be wonderful if you could attend the reading on Saturday, February 9th, at noon, in Venture Theatre's Black Box. Light refreshments will be served.

Your input, commentary, and awareness of our project are greatly appreciated! I hope you can help by hearing the power of these amazing stories and spreading the word to your colleagues, friends, and family.

Warmly,

Jessie Obee and Amy Dixon

AmeriCorps VISTA members

Venture Theatre

Audition Notice

By Wanda Morales, Ryan Gage, and Shad Scott

Audition Notice: And I Know...

Audition Dates: February 25 and February 26 @ 6PM
Possible Call Backs February 27 @ 6PM

Directors Note: No Prep Needed Prior To Audition
However Please Be Prepared To Express For 1
Minute Your Opinion or Feelings on
Homelessness and This Project.

Please email Wanda at wandaivette78@yahoo.com with any questions regarding auditions.

Project Homelessness

"And I Know..." was written for Project Homelessness, a Venture and AmeriCorps VISTA initiative aimed at advocating for the end of youth homelessness in Billings. This play was strongly inspired by 13 interviews with homeless youth and young adults living around our community conducted by Amy Dixon and Jessie Obee. "And I Know..." will raise community awareness and funds for helping homeless children and families in our community!

Synopsis

The Project Homelessness play, "And I Know...", is the story of three sisters (Izzy, Molly, and Emma) who find themselves on the doorstep of a homeless shelter as they attempt to reunite with their parents who live in another state. As well as watching their journey unfold, we are introduced to other characters who have sought refuge and guidance from the shelter to get back on their own two feet. The play is seen largely through the eyes and experiences of the three sisters as they learn the truth about homelessness through their own experience, and more importantly, through how others have dealt with their own experiences.

Roles

And I Know... has roles for youth and adults. The play requires 4 youth roles ranging in ages from 10-19 years old, as well 5 adult roles ranging from 20-80 years old. There is 1 additional adult role which operates as a voice over but the character is never seen. All parts feature substantial roles in the play and its story arc.

Youth Roles (4)

Izzy - Female; 10-12 years old.

Izzy is the youngest of the three sisters. Overall, Izzy is a feisty young girl who has a lot of fun in life when she has things figured out, but when she is unsure of something she can retreat into somewhat of a shell she has created for herself.

Molly - Female; 13-15 years old.

Molly is the middle child of the three sisters. Molly is the rock for her sisters to lean on when necessary. She helps keep tab on Izzy when her older sister has more important issues to tackle for their well-being.

Emma - Female; 16-19 years old.

Emma is the oldest of the three sisters. Emma is the "adult" in the family for her sisters and is always looking out for their well-being. She begs to be a kid inside, but her role keeps her feet on the ground taking care of her sisters.

Chase - Male; 10-12 years old.

Chase is the young boy who is already staying at the shelter and is roughly the same age as Izzy. Although he is a little like the "little, old wise man" for the sisters, he is the epitome of what it is to be a child and a boy. He loves to play and has an incredibly active imagination. If you asked Chase what the most important word in the English language is he would say, without hesitation, "*friend*".

Adult Roles (5)

Zach - *Male; 25-35 years old.*

Zach is married to Brianna and father to Katherine (never seen in the play, but an important part of their story). Zach is the quintessential "*don't judge a book by its cover*" male character. His appearance is definitely hardened from a difficult life, but has a very solid outlook and has always done what he's had to in order to take care of what matters the most to him; his family.

Brianna (Bri) - *Female; 25-35 years old.*

Brianna is married to Zach and mother to Katherine (never seen in the play, but an important part of their story). She is roughly the same age as Zach. Bri's appearance is the first thing that always stands out to people, even more so than Zach's appearance. This is due to a fairly prominent, and permanent, tattoo she has on her face (as well as perhaps a non-traditional hair color dye job). Like her counterpart, she is more than meets the eye and a really good mother.

Brody - *Male; 25-35 years old.*

Brody is married to Zoey (never seen in the play, but important to Brody's story). If there's a story to be heard in the shelter, Brody is probably the one that is going to tell it. And more than likely, it's going to make him (and you) laugh about it. He's the kind of character that could probably preface any story with, "*I probably shouldn't be alive today, you see, here's what happened...*". Yet, every story has a purpose, and he knows it.

Destiny (Desi) - *Female; 20-30 years old.*

Destiny is all alone. She has been that way most of her life. Desi has the kind of story that makes you wonder how she can even still be here today, but at the same time make you believe that there is nothing in this life that can't be overcome. It's just not going to be easy when everything conflicts inside.

Chaplain Carter - *Male; 45-80 years old.*

Chaplain Carter is the shelter's resident chaplain. He is a kind and wise older fellow who is easily likable because he treats everyone with respect and dignity and never offers spiritual insight unless it is desired. Chaplain Carter is a friend to anyone who needs an ear to listen and a spiritual guide to anyone who wants to open their heart to God.

Counselor - *Male; older male; 40+ years old.*

Counselor is the only role in the play that has dialogue but is never seen. The role was created to keep the focus solely on the person in the shelter that he is interviewing in a scene. The Counselor scenes are intended to feel more like non-traditional monologues within the story arc of the play, with the Counselor guiding the individuals through the process of their stories and self-reflection. This role should be performed live using a microphone rather than pre-recorded.

Letter of Appreciation from the Montana Rescue Mission

“And I know . . . “

What an amazing and transformational experience to be a part of the genesis and the realization of this incredible play!

I have been involved in serving the homeless and poor in Billings for most of my adult life. I served on the Board of Directors of the Montana Rescue Mission and was its Executive Director for over 20 years. My time has given me a unique perspective on the most vulnerable of our citizens but this play made me feel, perhaps for the first time, the reality of the experience of a homeless child. I was in tears at many points in the production and that feeling has stayed with me ever since.

Not only was this a transformational experience for me, it also impacted our donors in the same way. We had folks, many of whom have supported the ministry of the Montana Rescue Mission for years, come up to us afterward and thank us for giving the opportunity to see the work of the Mission and the tremendous affect that homeless has on the kids. The play prompted many to say that they will never look at homeless in the same way again.

I can't say enough about the sweat and tears, and probably some blood as well, that the writers, producers, promoters and, most particularly, the actors poured into their roles. The dedication of the VISTA volunteers, who were the original movers in this production, was amazing. You could tell that this was not simply an exercise or assignment but a life changing process for them as well. The kids were spot on. The play was able to show the diversity of people who find themselves homeless in an unflinching, but compassionate, way and to begin to tell their stories as well.

I know that “And I know . . . “ will have a lasting impact on the way the homeless are viewed in Billings and that it will have same impact anywhere the homeless are being served. I was truly blessed to have played a small role in this play and thank God that he brought this to such a powerful realization.

Gary Drake
Director of Development
Montana Rescue Mission
gdrake@montanarescuemission.org
www.montanarescuemission.org
406-697-0884