

Acting Out Reality: Homelessness Takes Center Stage at Theaters throughout the Country

Many theaters put on plays to help the audience escape reality, but some are taking an alternate approach, displaying the harsh facts of homelessness on stage for all to see. Utilizing actors of various ages, backgrounds, and abilities, a few theaters share what makes their plays about homelessness worth seeing.

Act One: Venture Theatre in Billings, Mont.

Six teenagers recite four-minute monologues portraying homeless individuals living on the streets of Billings in *A Heart Without: Real Stories of Homelessness*. Daniele Reisbig, a former AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer for the Billings Area Resource Network and creator of this production, conducted interviews with area homeless, ages 16 to their late 60s, which were transformed into monologues.

One of the teens portrays a young woman abused for years by an older brother and now struggling with mental illness; another portrays a father who sometimes imagines jumping in front of a train, but then, he says, "I think of my kids."

Though still in their teens, the actors are able to tackle these difficult issues and take on the complex personas of the homeless individuals they portray, according to Sara Butts, associate artistic

director of Venture Theatre. "The actors doing the project are more mature students who have experience with tough material," she says. What's more, this is not just another part in a play for the teens. "It is a very big deal to them to tell someone else's story," Butts adds. "They never got to meet the individuals they represent on stage but they know some of them have been in the audience."

The impact this project has had on the actors and homeless participants is substantial, but is not the main goal of the program. *A Heart Without* aims to educate the Billings community about homelessness and raise support for Project Homeless Connect, a one-day event sponsored by the Billings Area Resource Network, where over 50 service providers and 150 volunteers provide a wide range of supports and referral services to at-risk and currently homeless people.

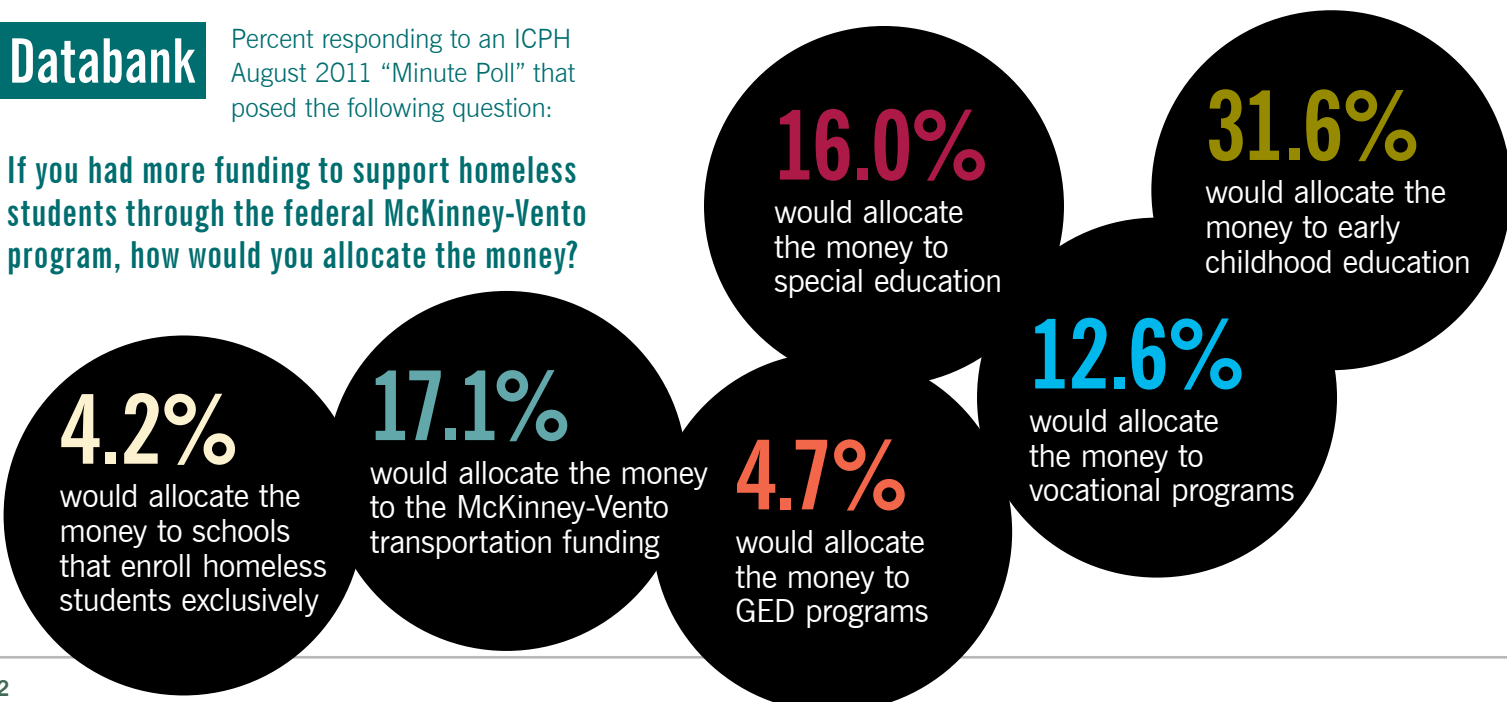
Act Two: Roseneath Theater Company in Toronto, Canada

It may seem impossible to have an upbeat, funny play about family poverty and homelessness, but *Danny, King of the Basement* is exactly that. Constantly short of enough money to pay for rent, Danny and his mother are always on the move. Danny uses his imagination and positive outlook to overcome his transient lifestyle.

Databank

Percent responding to an ICPH August 2011 "Minute Poll" that posed the following question:

If you had more funding to support homeless students through the federal McKinney-Vento program, how would you allocate the money?



on the Homefront



The Venture Theatre in Billings, Mont. shows the many faces of homelessness in this scene from their series of monologues, A Heart Without: Real Stories of Homelessness.

The touring production of *Danny* has played in 30 states in the United States and in many of the schools in Ontario, Canada. According to a study by the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, children who see the play are more likely to self-identify as being homeless or poor. “Danny is the hero in the play,” says Natalie Ackers, general manager of Roseneath Theater Company. “It helps identify the students in the school who are living in unstable housing. Students will tell their teachers, ‘I’m like Danny,’ and not be ashamed.”

Danny speaks to adults as well as children, according to Ackers. After seeing the play, “Parents look closer at their children’s friends to see if any of them are homeless. They will put an extra sandwich in their child’s lunch if they suspect one of their child’s classmates needs it.”

Act Three: zAmya Theater Project at St. Stephen’s Human Services in Minneapolis

Homeless and non-homeless youth and adults come together at zAmya to create theatrical productions. Originally its own entity, zAmya in 2009 joined forces with St. Stephen’s Human Services, a social service provider offering emergency shelter, street outreach, and employment and family assistance.

During National Hunger and Homeless Awareness Week, just before Thanksgiving, zAmya presents its annual *Roadshow*, performing seven plays in seven days. The following 52 weeks, zAmya offers its show on a fee-for-service basis. *Homeroom* was the 2010 *Roadshow* play, about a fictitious school where the classroom topic is homelessness.

The idea for *Homeroom* came from a zAmya actor who is also a teacher, explains Angela Headland, community arts and education coordinator at St. Stephen’s Human Services. “She recently asked her students what came to mind when they thought of a homeless person. She got very stereotypical responses,” Headland says. “In our play we discuss stereotypes, but we also provide statistics and true stories that counter those stereotypes.”

zAmya, comprised of ten members, ages 18 to their late 50s, includes people from all walks of life. “Most were homeless at one point in time, some by themselves, others with their families,” says Headland. Professionals interested in acting or passionate about the issue of homelessness are also part of the cast.

To hear zAmya actors tell it, the power of the plays leaves as much of an effect on them as it does on the audience. “I joined zAmya in October 2010, and it was really good for me,” says Courtney Waage, a formerly homeless youth from St. Paul, Minnesota. “Working with zAmya really helped me overcome a lot of fear—fear of getting up in front of a crowd, and speaking and acting in front of a lot of people. I never thought I could do that.” ■