

2002

Project Close at Hand: Addressing Homelessness through Community Engagement

Kristin Wibben
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur>



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wibben, Kristin (2002) "Project Close at Hand: Addressing Homelessness through Community Engagement," *Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato: Vol. 2, Article 2*.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56816/2378-6949.1180>

Available at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur/vol2/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato by an authorized editor of Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Project Close at Hand: Addressing Homelessness Through Community Engagement

Kristin Wibben, Project Coordinator

Edited By: Dr. Janet Cherrington, MSU Faculty Mentor

Department of Urban and Regional Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Abstract

This project examines the power of college students to positively sensitize their host community's residents to the problem of homelessness and to implement "Project Close at Hand", a project that focuses on breaking down the stereotypes associated with homelessness and collecting donations sufficient to save a local men's homeless shelter from closing.

Introduction

It is easy to think the poor are not like you or me. It is easy to call the homeless lazy or to assume they are abusing the system. With attitudes like this, is it possible to motivate people to take action?

The Salvation Army men's shelter in Mankato, MN was in danger of shutting its doors before the winter season of 2001. The shelter, open since 1996, had relied on social services to fund the staff needed to run the shelter. For its first three years, the shelter was funded through a Thomas Lyle Williams Grant, which is available to organizations starting a new program and needing help for their initial start up costs. Under the grant, the first year of the program is funded in full, the second year at 75 percent, and the third year at 50 percent. Then the program is expected to stand-alone.

However, when the Salvation Army men's shelter was expected to be self-sufficient, the budget was insufficient to support another line item, which meant the shelter was never added. Instead, the shelter remained open through overflow funds in 1999 and 2000, which came out of the social service budget. In 2000, a reduced amount of donations required the Salvation Army to trim \$50,000 from their annual budget. Because the shelter was never added as a budget line item, it was the first program to be impacted. Since the shelter was a program the Salvation Army did not want to eliminate, other means were sought to fund it.

Changes in merchant's philosophy

One of the largest funding sources for the Salvation Army is its holiday season Kettle Drive, which is one of their trademark programs. Throughout the course of the Kettle Drive, representatives collect money while ringing a bell outside various stores. In the past, merchants had supported the Kettle Drive by allowing the Salvation Army to station bell ringers in front of their stores. However, in 2001, the Salvation Army ran into difficulties with this particular fundraising strategy. For the first time, the River Hills Mall in Mankato prohibited the Salvation Army from placing bell ringers outside its entrances. The mall did, however, give the Salvation Army a gift-wrapping station where volunteers could wrap gifts for donations. The mall was not the only retail location in Mankato to limit the Salvation Army's Kettle Drive. Wal-Mart also cut down the number of days and hours the Salvation Army was allowed to ring its bell outside their store.

The only merchants that allowed the Salvation Army to continue its Kettle Drive were corporate-owned stores such as Target and JC Penny. Eventually, Target also cut the program, claiming they had sent a letter to the Salvation Army telling them not to ring in front of their stores. The Salvation Army responded by saying they never received the letter, as a result, the Kettle Drive caused tension between the two organizations. The Salvation Army understood it was the right of the merchant to prohibit soliciting, but their concern was -and still is- that if the Kettle Drive were cut, many of its programs would be jeopardized.

Conservative economic community attitudes

When the 1997 tornado hit St. Peter (a neighboring town of Mankato), the Salvation Army emergency services were one of the first to arrive with aid. After the tornado, donations from St. Peter citizens to the Salvation Army were significantly higher than usual. But, as the effects of the tornado became less evident, these donations dropped. Along with the lack of donations from St. Peter, the amount of personal donations from the public in general also dropped, possibly due to an economic recession.

Mankato's men's homeless shelter

The Salvation Army men's shelter is an important component of the homelessness problem in Mankato, since it is the only program that meets this need. While other shelters combine to help homeless children and women, it is the only shelter devoted to helping homeless men. According to the Salvation Army's Captain Bill Mealy, "Homeless men are... the last to be helped."¹ He believes men are last because they are thought to be stronger than women. Further, most homeless men do not have children accompanying them in their homeless crises.

Mankato's overall homeless problem

Homelessness in Mankato is a bigger concern than many of its citizens realize. In the year 2000 alone, the Welcome Inn reported (which houses homeless families) that it was forced to turn away 350 people. Chronic homelessness is defined as individuals having no place to sleep on a *permanent* basis. One challenge in Mankato is that many people are not *chronically* homeless. Instead, many of Mankato's homeless people are only in need of periodic help. Therefore, it is difficult to measure the amount of need that actually exists in the city.

Objective

The hypothesis of this project was: It is possible to sensitize the citizens to the homelessness problem through visual stimulation to sufficiently motivate them to take action through donations.

Methodology

Strategizing increasing awareness and raising donations

Among the many problems the Salvation Army faced with fundraising was the black out period set by the United Way, which prohibits anyone affiliated with the Salvation Army to solicit donations. A secondary issue they faced was how to allocate the donations. The Salvation Army is structured into three separate divisions: The Salvation Army proper, the thrift store and the homeless shelter. Because the Salvation Army is organized this way, checks written to the Salvation Army go to the general fund which supports only budgeted programs. In order for a donation to fund the shelter, the check must specify payment to the Salvation Army Homeless Shelter.

Designing a fundraising campaign

"Project Close at Hand" was specifically designed in the fall of 2001 to save the Salvation Army men's shelter. Its goal was to raise awareness of the homeless problem and in so doing, generate funds to save the shelter. Due to the problems associated with the

¹ Personal Interview with Captain Bill Mealy on September 11, 2001

United Way black out period and the merchants “no solicitation” policy; other ways to collect donations were sought. The plan was to have 155 people from different MSU clubs and organizations wear black t-shirts, which would read, “If the Salvation Army Shelter closes, I’ll be homeless. Please donate.” The volunteers became walking billboards by wearing these t-shirts which eliminated the need for them to verbally solicit.

In addition, 155 volunteers were sought to represent the 155 homeless men who had been helped the prior winter. The visual intent was to have every homeless man represented, so that the citizens and students could see the magnitude of the shelter closing for the winter. In addition, by having volunteers from various cultures and backgrounds, people would be reminded that homelessness is a universal problem. The anticipated outcome was to raise everyone’s awareness of their own vulnerability.

Volunteers wore the t-shirts on both their daily activities out in the community on October 22nd and to their classes the following day—roughly a 24-hour period. While wearing the t-shirts, the volunteers carried a collection can marked “donations” in which citizens from the community and students from the campus. At no time were the volunteers to verbally solicit donations.

The goal was for 155 people to raise \$100 each, totaling \$15,500 or approximately half the shelter funding needed. The other half would come from an anonymous matching grant from a Mankato businessman. Volunteers were told that if they succeeded in raising \$100 each they would receive a certificate from the Salvation Army for their efforts. Top fundraisers would also be given a plaque and honored at a banquet.

Soliciting: direct soliciting versus visual awareness

The t-shirt strategy worked well in counterbalancing the problems associated with raising awareness and soliciting funds. By having the volunteers wear the t-shirt with the message inscribed on it, students literally became “walking billboards”. The effect was that awareness of the homeless problem was greatly heightened. Carrying the collection can, made it necessary for students to exchange words. The black and white t-shirts also generated interest on the part of observers through visual stimulation.

Campaign resources

As with any project, resources were needed to succeed. “Project Close at Hand” needed both physical and human resources, but its biggest challenge was to obtain them without spending any money.

Two critical expense items were the brochures and t-shirts because these were needed to make people aware of the project and raise awareness. The brochures were used to present information on the problem, on the project, and how students and citizen could get involved. A local branch of Kinko’s, donated the printed brochures that were distributed to raise awareness.

The t-shirts were vital to the fundraising campaign and consequently, 155 t-shirts were needed to implement “Project Close at Hand”. The t-shirts and printing would cost approximately \$640. To cover the cost presentations were made to RHA (a campus group that allocates student funds) and to the head of food services.

However, the most critical component was human participation. Without the 155 volunteers, neither the goals of raising awareness nor the fundraising itself could have been accomplished. Most importantly, this resource needed to be totally voluntary.

Getting the word out

This project depended on volunteers to collect donations and to represent the 155 homeless men helped by the Salvation Army shelter last winter. The success of this project also depended on the help of students from Minnesota State University, Mankato. A large segment of the volunteer students were members of various campus clubs and organizations.

Initially, to get groups involved, college students needed to learn about the project. However, it was impossible for one single person to recruit all the various campus groups. A campus club called SURSI (Students of Urban and Regional Studies Institute) responded and became heavily involved in the project. After a list of all the recognized clubs and organizations on campus, it was distributed to club members. In turn, the responsibility to contact these different groups was divided amongst club members.

Initially, phone conversations informed club presidents of the project and asked if they would like more information about the project or whether they wanted a representative to come and talk to their club personally. If they opted for the later, a time and place was scheduled. Then a SURSI member went to the club meeting, told the group about the project, and distributed brochures with more specific information on how to get involved.

Presentations were also made to campus classes, church groups and community clubs. As the day of the project approached, momentum grew as more and more groups heard about the project. A presentation was also made to the Mankato city council requesting money for the project. Although the city council was hesitant about the request, the media was on hand to hear about the project and immediately published a story detailing the project.

On October 23, donations began trickling in. When volunteers dropped off their collection cans, SURSI counted and recorded the donations. Eventually, all the volunteers' donations were tallied.

The media and how it helped

One of the most amazing aspects of "Project Close at Hand" was unanticipated. After the council meeting, representatives from radio stations, television stations and newspapers asked the project's coordinator for interviews and more information about the fundraiser. Media support helped to make the project a success. This was truly an example of civic journalism because the news media not only reported on a problem in the community, but also on one means to resolve it. For example, the day after the city council meeting, the project was mentioned on the news and on the radio. A couple days after the city council meeting, a full-page article appeared in the local newspaper detailing where to send donations. In addition to this publicity, coverage was given in the campus newspaper, which ran a front-page article describing the project and how students could get involved.

Because of the media attention, awareness was heightened and the community became involved. Before the articles in the newspaper were published, about \$8,000 had been collected. After the newspaper coverage the amount of donations grew to nearly

\$12,000. Clearly, the media coverage had a tremendous impact on the community. In addition, campus newspaper coverage stimulated more students to volunteer. Students and faculty also became more aware of the project which resulted in them willingly contributing money.

Conclusion

Today, the Salvation Army men's shelter is open. The project met the objective of breaking down the stereotypes associated with homelessness and collected donations sufficient to fund the shelter for the 2001-2002 winter. It is also an example of how news organizations can create and refine ways of reporting news that engage people in their community. Because of the media attention many volunteers became involved. The citizens of Mankato were also sensitized to the homeless problem and, in turn, realized the solution was in their hands.

Nearly \$8,000 was collected from the MSU students with the community contributing another \$12,000. It is important to mention that part of the overwhelming success of "Project Close at Hand" was due to the media attention. Top student fundraisers were honored at a banquet, all volunteers who raised over \$100 were given a certificate of appreciation. The author was honored as the first person in Mankato to receive the Salvation Army's "Others" Award.² In addition, the USA Weekend magazine featured a small write up on Project Close at Hand in their April 2002 addition. Today the shelter remains open because of the care and support given by everyone involved in "Project Close at Hand".

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kristi Wibben is a senior at Minnesota State University, Mankato and is majoring in Urban and Regional Studies and Speech Communications. During the fall semester of 2001, Kristi enrolled in a course called Community Based Problem Solving. This is an Urban and Regional Studies course that encourages students to engage in Service Learning. The purpose of the course is to identify a need in the community and to do sufficient research on alleviating the problem. This study evolved from that course and was done under the direction of Dr. Janet Cherrington.

² The "Others" Award is the most prestigious award given by the Salvation Army