



Homeless Children and Youth

A Study and Action Guide for Your Community

Homelessness – Learn about it! Ease it! End it!

This guide is designed to be used with “My Own Four Walls,” a documentary produced by Diane Nilan and Laura Vazquez with support from Naperville Noon Lions’ Club. The guide was prepared by Maylan Dunn-Kenney in consultation with Diane Nilan and Laura Vazquez. For more information, contact HEAR US, 630/225-5012, info@hearus.us, www.hearus.us.

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HEAR US Inc., a national nonprofit organization dedicated to raising awareness of and sensitivity to homeless children, youth and their families.

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Diane Nilan, founder/president

Introduction

Not since the Great Depression have so many families been homeless. These families are nearly invisible but exist in virtually every community. This study and action guide is your tool for raising awareness about homeless families and formulating solutions that will work in your community.

This guide is primarily written for use by local civic and religious organizations, or better yet, coalitions of local groups. The tools included here will help you plan a successful screening of *My Own Four Walls*. The handouts and discussion guidelines will assist your group in planning for appropriate and effective action. Look through the materials, inform yourself, and talk to people. A handful of interested people can make a difference!

HEAR US gratefully acknowledges the incredible cooperation of the children, teens and families who participated in this project. *My Own Four Walls* reflects the generous collaboration of educators, advocates, shelter directors and HEAR US board and supporters. Tremendous thanks also to Dr. Maylan Dunn-Kenney for her work on this invaluable tool and for her invaluable ongoing support.

**Never doubt that a small, group of
thoughtful, committed citizens can
change the world. Indeed, it is the only
thing that ever has.**

Margaret Mead

Checklist for Conveners

- Review study guide.
- Identify community allies.
- Find local “experts” (district liaison to homeless children, local shelter director, Youth Service Bureau, local shelter volunteer coordinator, child and family service worker, school counselor or social worker, alternative school personnel).
- Set a date (after consulting your allies and experts).
- Reserve a room and equipment for viewing the documentary. (Make sure the audio and video are good quality!)
- Invite press to attend.
- Publicize the event: newspaper(s), radio, and flyers (see sample press release, radio announcement, and flyer).
- Recruit three discussion leaders for small groups.
- Arrange for volunteers to bring refreshments and greet participants.
- Check HEAR US for one small advocacy act that participants can take immediately.
- Prepare a program (agenda for the event, contacts, and the “one small act” information).
- Duplicate programs and handouts. Duplicate packets for groups.
- Collect supplies such as a chart and marker for each group to make notes, memo pads and pencils for participants.
- Prepare a sign-in sheet.
- Arrive early and set up for the meeting.
- Make contact with participants who signed in, asking for help with implementing ideas proposed in the meeting.
- If possible, let HEAR US know how the event went. Sending copies of any news coverage is helpful.

Sample Press Release

Most people think of homelessness as an urban problem affecting adult males. Unfortunately, more and more families in rural areas and small towns are homeless. A local group wants to raise awareness about homeless children with the idea of doing something about it. [YOUR GROUP HERE] is hosting a free screening of *My Own Four Walls*, a powerful documentary that features children and youth from non-urban areas talking about their homelessness.

The documentary screening and local panel [OR “speaker”] will be on [DAY, DATE] at [TIME] at [PLACE]. It is free and open to the public. For more information contact [NAME AND CONTACT INFORMATION OF A CONVENER].

The film was produced by Diane Nilan of HEAR US (www.hearus.us) and Dr. Laura Vazquez of Northern Illinois University, to bring attention to the problems of homeless children and youth.

A panel [OR “speaker” OR THE SPEAKER’S NAME] will discuss homelessness in [YOUR TOWN OR COUNTY], answer questions, and suggest solutions. The panel will include [NAMES AND TITLES OF “LOCAL EXPERTS”]. [OMIT PRECEDING SENTENCE FOR A SINGLE SPEAKER.]

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Sample Flyer

[your organization's name]
presents:

My Own Four Walls

*A compelling look at homelessness from the eyes of experts—
The kids who live it...*

[DATE AND TIME]
[LOCATION NAME]
[ADDRESS, incl. CITY, ST]
Open to the Public ~ Free Will Offering

Perfect film for educators, students, community leaders...anyone curious about homeless families

Over 75 kids (elementary, middle and high school) from small town America courageously stepped forth to share with Diane what it's like being homeless. Heart-stirring observations, inspiring aspirations, plain talk about life without your own four walls...

My Own Four Walls is a must see for anyone who has a home of their own, and cares about those who don't....

Diane Nilan, renowned advocate for homeless kids and adults, set off to make a documentary of homeless kids from non-urban areas across the country talking about their experiences.

With the professional expertise of **Dr. Laura Vazquez**, documentary professor in the communication department at Northern Illinois University, the faces and voices of homeless kids from across the country come alive in *My Own Four Walls*.

Watch this inspiring film, and become motivated to help in your own community. DVDs and Diane's book, **Crossing the Line: Taking Steps to End Homelessness**, are available through the HEAR US website, www.hearus.us.

HEAR US is a nonprofit organization working to raise awareness of and sensitivity to homeless children, youth and families. Contributions are tax-deductible as allowed by law.

My Own Four Walls
Program

Welcome and Introductions	[Convener]
Introduction to the Film	[Local Expert]
Screening: <i>My Own Four Walls</i>	
Discussion	[Convener]
Local Information/Questions and Answers	[Local Expert/Panel]
Study/Action Groups	
Poverty and homelessness	[Group Leader]
Common stresses on families	[Group Leader]
Effects on children and youth	[Group Leader]
Taking Action	[Convener]

Facts about Homelessness

- Over three million people will experience homelessness this year.
- Approximately half of these people will be children and youth.
- Families are the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population.
- To afford the national median fair market rent for a two-bedroom rental unit, a minimum wage worker would need to work 97 hours per week.
- The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act requires public schools to immediately enroll students experiencing homelessness even when lacking proof of residency, birth certificates and school records, immunization records, and fee money or materials.
- Homeless families exist in virtually every community.

Where to Learn More

Alden-Hebron American Literature Class. (2003). *Will you build me a home?*
Hebron, IL: Author.

Nilan, Diane. (2005). *Crossing the line: Taking steps to end homelessness.*
Naperville, IL: HEAR US, Inc. Booklocker.com Press.

Vissing, Yvonne Marie. (1996). *Out of sight, out of mind: Homeless children and families in small town America.* Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.

Books for Children

Johnson, Jerrilyn J. (2003). *Mommy, are we homeless?* Winston-Salem, NC:
Southland Consultants.

Van Doren, Pat. (1999). *Where can I build my volcano?* Naperville, IL: Author.

Web Resources

www.hearus.us/action.htm

Also, see page 24 of this guide.

Suggested Meeting Format

Introductions (5 minutes)

Introduce conveners and speaker(s) and any VIP guests (mayor, city council...)

Short background on how documentary was made. (5 minutes)

Diane Nilan was the director of a homeless shelter for years, watching as the problem of homelessness grew in the United States. Finally she sold her town house, moved into an RV, and began a cross-country trip to raise awareness and sensitivity to the near “invisible” problem of homeless families. Along the way, she videotaped children and young people who courageously agreed to share their stories about being homeless. With fifty hours of videotape and a dream to let children’s voices be heard, she found Dr. Laura Vazquez, a communication professor at Northern Illinois University. Together they created *My Own Four Walls*.

My Own Four Walls (22 minutes)

After video, allow a minute or two for it to “sink in” and then ask for reactions. (10 minutes)

Was there anything that really struck you?

Was anything here new to you?

Panel or Speaker (30 minutes)

Suggested topics:

Assessment of local problem

Local resources

Unmet needs

Ways for community groups to help ease homelessness

Time for questions

“One simple act,” an advocacy task that everyone can do (5 minutes)

Refer to the “take action” link at www.hearus.us for up-to-date advocacy information.

Key information should be on the program handout

Read descriptions of the three groups and introduce group conveners. Attendees select their own groups. (5 minutes)

Poverty: Low wages and lack of affordable housing are a prime cause of homelessness. This group will explore the relationship between poverty and homelessness as well as hear what other communities are doing to help working families afford housing.

Common Stresses on Families: Children are expensive and exhausting! When family members also face other stressors such as sickness or injury, lack of health care insurance, transportation problems, mental health problems, substance abuse, or domestic violence, the consequences can be very harmful for children. Family stressors can contribute to homelessness or result from it. Find out more about family stressors and how to effectively support families through tough times.

Effects on Children and Youth: Loneliness, anxiety, health problems, hunger, and educational disadvantage are some of the problems plaguing homeless children and young people.

Find out how community members can directly ease these harmful effects through donations of time, material goods, or money.

Small groups (20 minutes)

Reassemble the whole group and hear reports and action ideas from each small group. (15 minutes)

Organize to take action (5 minutes)

Identify people to take the lead on ideas coming out of small groups. If there are several community groups represented in the meeting, consider forming a task force with representatives from each group.

Suggested Action Activities

- Check with local shelters or programs serving homeless families to find out their needs (volunteers, food, supplies, seasonal clothing, money, etc.)
- Identify local school district homeless liaison, make contact, and inquire as to their needs.
- Inform school district about the video *My Own Four Walls*.
- Organize individuals or groups willing to commit a reasonable amount of time to advocacy projects for homeless families, children or youth.
- The sky's the limit! Just check to make sure the need is there and your commitment is solid.

Study/Action Group Materials

Few people know that they have the power to bless life. We bless the life in each other far more than we realize. Many simple, ordinary things that we do can affect those around us in profound ways.

Rachel Naomi Remen

Poverty and Homelessness

Use this chart to record your discussion.

	How serious a problem is this for families in our community?	If we're not sure, how could we find out? Who may have more information?	If this is a significant problem, what can be done about it?	Who needs to be involved?
Wages too low for housing costs or little low-cost housing available				
Rising cost of health care				
Few rental units accepting families with more than two children				

	How serious a problem is this for families in our community?	If we're not sure, how could we find out? Who may have more information?	If this is a significant problem, what can be done about it?	Who needs to be involved?
Seasonal employment common				
Other poverty & housing factors?				

Common Stresses on Families

Use this chart to record your discussion.

	How serious a problem is this for families in our community?	If we're not sure, how could we find out? Who may have more information?	If this is a significant problem, what can be done about it?	Who needs to be involved?
Financial resources (credit, banking...)				
Domestic Violence				
Illness and/or death of parent				

	How serious a problem is this for families in our community?	If we're not sure, how could we find out? Who may have more information?	If this is a significant problem, what can be done about it?	Who needs to be involved?
Substance Abuse				
Violent neighborhoods				
Other stresses on families?				

Effects on Children and Youth

Use this chart to record your discussion.

	How serious a problem is this for families in our community?	If we're not sure, how could we find out? Who may have more information?	If this is a significant problem, what can be done about it?	Who needs to be involved?
Interrupted schooling				
Hunger or Poor Nutrition				
Loneliness				

	How serious a problem is this for families in our community?	If we're not sure, how could we find out? Who may have more information?	If this is a significant problem, what can be done about it?	Who needs to be involved?
Emotional insecurity &/or acting out				
Other effects on children and youth?				

Taking Action

**If you find it in your heart to
care for somebody else,
you will have succeeded.**

Maya Angelou

Community Action Plan

Level	Strategies	People Needed	Timeline
1 Awareness			
2 Assessment			
3 Coordination of Resources			
4 Collaboration & Outreach			

ADVOCACY 101 and beyond...

ad·vo·cate

- 1: one that pleads the cause of another;
specifically: one that pleads the cause of another before a tribunal or judicial court
 - 2: one that defends or maintains a cause or proposal
 - 3: one that supports or promotes the interests of another
- www.m-w.com

Who are your legislators?

- State
 - Federal
 - Representative=Congressperson
 - Senators -2 for each state
- ➡ ➡ ➡ **How to find out who represents you?**
www.votesmart.org (just need your zip code)

❑ What happens when you call/write your legislator?

- They first perk up about the issue you're contacting them about...
- If enough people call/write, they'll look into the issue...
- If enough contact is made, a law can be passed or be amended...
- Democracy works!

❑ Pointers...

- Be brief and clear. BILL NUMBERS are important.
- Don't be nasty!
- You'll probably talk to a staffer or voicemail. That counts!
- They're busy, and probably don't know your issue. YOU'RE THE EXPERT!
- Ask for specifics—*sponsor a bill, vote yes/no...*
- It's your right and responsibility!

Some Good Homelessness Advocacy Organizations:

- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth
www.naehcy.org
- National Policy and Advocacy Council on Homelessness
www.npach.org
- National Coalition for the Homeless
www.nationalhomeless.org
- National Center for Homeless Education
www.serve.org/nche
- National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty
www.nlchp.org

These sites have good info and lots of links...

These Little Piggies Are Homeless...



10 GOOD REASONS TO ADVOCATE FOR AN END TO HOMELESSNESS:

HOMELESSNESS HURTS...

1. It hurts those who experience it firsthand.
2. It hurts loved ones who see their family/friends struggle with homelessness.
3. It hurts the whole community, affecting the quality of life.
4. It hurts our entire country, reflecting a lack of respect for lives of all people.

HOMELESSNESS ADVOCACY CAN HELP...

5. Caring and compassion are qualities that spread, causing immediate and long-term results.
6. Those struggling with homelessness often lack the wherewithal to contact their legislators.
7. Many people, including legislators, don't understand homelessness.
8. Homelessness has fallen off the political agenda in our state and federal capitals.
9. Involved, concerned citizens can change that!
10. Tremendous legislative improvements have been accomplished thanks to involved, concerned citizens...*like you!*



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...giving voice and visibility to homeless kids...