Thank you, everyone, for your participation. This Fourth World People’s University (FWPU) session continued the theme of homelessness, with a special focus on communication.

**Guest:** Margaret O’Dwyer  
**Attendees:** Abraham, Christelle, Colleen, Emma, Eric, Guillaume, Josiane, Kiley, Kimberly, Marcia, Marie-Claire, Marlon, Maxine, Monica, Odile, Patrick, Rosetta, Stacy, Theresa, Virginie, Yvette, Zena  
**Youth:** Ethan, Blake, Tyson, Brandon, Adele, Celestine, and Vital with babysitter Eddie

**Introduction**

In a welcoming circle, we warmed up with a game to share our names. Marie-Claire recalled the creative activities from our preparation meetings in April. In the first preparation meeting, small groups built trees based on the situations where, before or during homelessness, communication is a challenge. The idea came up to use trees as a special way to think about communication. The roots described situations; the trunk, challenges; the branches, tools to improve; and the leaves, the more positive outcomes. During the second preparation meeting, we chose three situations where communication is challenging during homelessness, whether in the shelter system, the family, or the street, and we developed forum theater scenarios. What really struck all of us during the winter was that Forum Theater highlighted the role communication plays. That’s why we chose to go deeper into the question of homelessness, both by taking the angle of communication and by continuing with Forum Theater as a tool.

To prepare for the presentations by our members, we modelled how Forum Theater works by showing a short scene then demonstrating how the scene could be played differently, with changes suggested by audience members.

In this report we organized and selected highlights from the transcripts of the day into the sections below. Our ultimate goal is to put our knowledge and our diverse experiences together to find ways to end poverty, to end homelessness. Please feel free to write us with your thoughts, feedback, and ideas at nycteam@4thworldmovement.org.

**Introducing our guest**

**Summary of three scenarios with changes**

1) In the shelter system  
2) In the family  
3) In the street

**Dialogue topics that emerged:**

• How to reach out, talking with strangers, building trust  
• Difficulty of life in the street  
• Maintaining dignity while offering to help  
• Social workers, responsibility/experience  
• Family life—all ages  
• Sharing information

**Take-away for our guest**
Introducing our guest

Our guest, Margaret O’Dwyer, is from the Working Group to End Homelessness (WGEH), which works at the United Nations to encourage countries to make sure that homeless people are counted. This is important in the global debate to end poverty. Margaret, a 25-year member of the Daughters of Charity, is a non-governmental organization (NGO) representative of her community to the United Nations. She tries to promote dialogue about poverty at the UN to improve the lives of people living in poverty. She also communicates to her community what is happening at the grass-roots level at the UN. Prior to moving to New York, she lived and worked for ten years with inmates and with students with disabilities in Southeast Asia. At the UN she works with the WGEH to gain more attention for the issue of homelessness.

Summary of three scenarios with changes

1. In the shelter system:

Plot: A young woman with two children is speaking with a social worker. The children are very rowdy while their mother is trying to speak with the social worker, who insists the client go to stay with her family. The social worker says she is not eligible for shelter. The mother begins to cry and says the family won’t fit in the New York City apartment; it is too small for all of them because it has only one bedroom. When the social worker offers her a ticket to go to other relatives out of town, the mom cries and says that she doesn’t want to leave New York and that the out-of-town relative kicked them out. She doesn’t want to sleep in the street with the kids, and the shelters are horrible. Why can’t they find her an apartment?

The audience proposed three changes:

1. A woman steps in and says she will take the children out to play to give the mom a chance to speak calmly with the social worker.
2. A new social worker steps in to suggest they just have to wait ten days, and can the mom bring documents?
3. Another one-step in to say, "I can find your documents in the computer and bring them to my supervisor."

2. In the family:

Plot: A mother and daughter argue over where to spend the waiting time of ten days to become eligible for the shelter system. The daughter suggested they stay with an aunt; because she has a new baby whom she wants to be safe and she doesn’t like moving from place to place. The mother wants to use the temporary shelter because she’s embarrassed and tired of stressing out her sister, who by the way also talks about them behind their back. The daughter says she already called the aunt and she is going to her place. The mom is furious that the daughter went behind her back.

The audience proposed several changes:

New daughter explains she’s tired of staying in the shelter and moving every ten days,
The mom sticks to her plan to wait, and not call the aunt.
New mom steps in and explains why they can’t stay with the aunt.
New daughter: "I want us to stay as a family too, but you have to understand that I am really tired and have a young child."
New mom: "My heart is tired, but everybody in the projects will know we’re staying there."
New daughter: "We need to think of somewhere else to stay together besides the shelter. It's not good for any of us."
New daughter: "I know that there’s something happening between you and auntie, but you never told us really. If you could explain, I could understand."
New mom: "They are my sisters, and I’ve asked for help before. No one, not even my family, knew that I was in the streets. Why would everybody know my business? So they want to do it out of the kindness of their heart? Now, they want to be seen as doing something; it's not from the heart. It’s been three times, so…”
New daughter: "Now I understand how auntie acts with you; you’ve been humiliated. I don’t want that to happen to you. Do you really think in ten days…"
New mom: "I can’t say for sure, but I’m hoping, since this is the third time."
New daughter: "We’ll give it a try, and if in ten days we don’t get the shelter, I will go to auntie."
New mom: "We could give it a try, but I won’t be going there. You and the baby go, and I’ll find someplace."
New daughter: "Me and the baby are going to miss you."
Another mom: "We’re going to stay in the shelter as a family and work this out."
Another daughter: "I’m not trying to disrespect you — you’re my mother; I understand we are one family. If we do stay in the shelter for ten days, we may have to go our separate ways, because I’m old enough; I’m not a kid anymore. You need your own apartment and I need my apartment. We can’t stay here."
New mom: "We didn’t plan for you to bring a child into this world."
New daughter: "Let me tell you, I wasn’t ready either, but I’m old enough to take responsibility."
New baby: "I want to stay with grandma! Tonight where do we sleep?"
Grandma: "We are going to stay in shelter for now."
Moderator: (End of scene.) One can see how difficult it is to step into someone else’s shoes.

3. In the street:

Plot: A homeless woman is sitting on the street as three friends pass, chatting about work and life, when one of the friends says, "Stop, let’s ask how the lady is doing." The other friend says that is very dangerous. The first friend wants to get the lady a coat because it is very cold outside. The friends go away. Across the room is a bench with a homeless man, and a woman trying to sit on the bench with him. They are arguing about sharing the bench. The homeless man doesn’t want to talk to anyone. When the friend comes back, she finds the first homeless lady gone from where she was sitting on the street. The man scares away the lady trying to talk with him.

The audience proposed these changes:
For the homeless man, a new person stepped in. For the person wanting to talk with him, also a new person tried to talk with him about the cold and possibly sitting together on the bench. When the man insisted on his space, the next actor came up as he said, "I don’t want to go to a shelter." She said, "I just want someone to talk to." He replied rudely, "I don’t want to talk!"
A new actor stepped in for the friends and said, "I understand you don’t want to go to the shelter, but I want to ask you, How are you today?" (He crouches down to be at eye level with the woman sitting on the ground). He asked, "How long have you been here? Why don’t you want to go to a shelter? It’s cold out here."
New actor for lady: "When I went to a shelter, they stole my stuff."
New friend: "I know a center where they have hot meals. You could find a job."
New actor: "What will I do with my stuff?" (She points to bags)
New friend: "I will carry them with you, if you will try to come to the center."
New actor: "Oh, okay, let’s try."
**Dialogue topics that emerged**

Virginie: Let’s ask our guest to tell us how the situations resonated with her experience at the UN.

Margaret: I thought I should be jumping in (to the scenarios). But, I am relatively new in New York and have not gone to the shelters. It makes me want to go to the shelters and experience that. I thought, I can’t speak authentically because I don’t know what it’s like. Every day I pass people sleeping in the street and I always have that internal feeling of being torn: How do I respond to them? And what I saw today showed how to respond.

Virginie: Next, think about the connections between communication and homelessness. A lot of what Margaret said was the question about people living in the street. It’s a question we all have: "What should I do? What can I do? What is the answer?" I am not sure there is one.

**How to reach out, talking with strangers, building trust**

Participant: For me the issue of communication is very important because we didn’t really have knowledge of what homeless people encountered. But what I experience was that communication with a homeless person is taking a risk. Because each one reacted differently depending on how they were, at the very moment you approached them. As for engaging in conversation ("How did you get like this?") I tried to respect her space and not feel I have the right to say, "How are you going to get out of this?" Because I don’t know the circumstances, I feel it’s not my place to go there. I just want to extend my hand and acknowledge you — you are a human being with problems. That was my experience.

Participant: The actual things we saw happened to me and my daughter, in the shelter, back and forth with family. It was exactly like that. I had the option, where I live, to reach out. I told them if they need anything, on Friday we have a soup kitchen at our church. I invited them to come get clothes, food, meet people. It took them so long. About a month ago when we were serving the food, two of them actually came to the soup kitchen, ate, and took clothes and coats. I felt good about that because we got a chance to talk to them. They have been in the shelter system, had been beat up, experienced domestic abuse. They had stories as well. I can’t turn up my nose at them. We have to let them know they are welcome, and to welcome each other. Some do prefer to stay homeless; and there’s nothing you can do. It hurts me that I can’t help them. I made one difference and was happy about that.

Participant: One thing I realized this afternoon is that there is no communication unless you build trust. If you see someone in your office for ten minutes, it’s hard to build trust. The other thing is how to treat people as human beings. Today we talked about us trying to engage with someone in the street. In the subway, people are asking you for money; we are invited by them. But in the street, we are inviting them. It’s interesting. The notion of time is very important for communication.

Participant: Knowing the situation we played, it was true. It took me a few weeks before this person asked, "How are you?" It was hard to not be patronizing, just passing by, or intruding. It was very difficult to connect with the person. Finding the right position, I am not here to show I am better than you, but to show that you are likeable. What kept me going back there was connecting with my feelings. Each time I tried, he told me "No," but at some point I was leaving the seeds. I am not finding a solution; I am discouraged; and what kept me going back to this person was to follow my heart. Another thing: social workers are overloaded and they are in places where they are not wanted. If everybody could connect with one homeless person and have a guide on the internet, I could check for them. It’s overwhelming for
all these people. The problem with time is important, so if everybody tried to connect with one person, I feel it might be some kind of solution.

**Difficulty of life in the street**

Participant: I lost everything, in the same situation. For me it was the hardest situation in life. What goes on in the night in the subway, you see people coming with a bag, luggage, a blanket, and they are going to stay in the subway because there is no place else to stay. All the wagons will be full with homeless people. These people are smelly, dangerous — all levels. We need basic access to bathrooms, benches. All is closed after midnight. We are human beings; we need something to help us not die.

Virginie: The topic being communication, in your experience — as in your scenario in the street, people can be very harsh with each other — can you see how communication makes a difference?

Participant: When I started with ATD Fourth World, Guillaume gave me a book to help analyze the situation: Don’t go straight to talk to them. Don’t talk to them unless you are sure. The homeless are only just surviving; their situation is terrible. For example, I wanted to lie down and I saw a chair that was occupied by another homeless person, so I went to sit close to this guy who was sleeping, and when he saw me he yelled at me like crazy and threw the chair at my face. If I hadn’t moved I would be dead.

**Maintaining dignity while offering to help**

Participant: In the morning I used to get a bagel and cream cheese from the store. And this guy has been in the same place for about two or three years now, and I see him every morning wearing the same pants and sneakers, torn up every time. Every time he goes to the store, I see him and I want to talk to him, but not knowing his situation. Last week, I came to the store to get my bagel and cheese. I didn’t see him for a couple of days, then I saw him. He said he went to the hospital and he’s okay now. He’s living with his grandmother. So we talk. We found a couple of places to help him out with clothing, and a place downtown where he can go bathe, for men only. He went there one day and the next day I saw him: he was cleaned up. Wow! We still have conversations. Every day it’s the little stuff — talking, getting to know them despite appearances.

Participant: I live downtown. This homeless man sat there in front of the check-cashing place. One day, I said, "Hi." My daughter asked, "How come you talking to the homeless man?" When we go, we ask Dad, "Can we give him a dollar?" Now, my daughter is fourteen. When I see him I say, "Hi," and when I have food at home, I bring it to him. Now whenever I go he nods, says, "Good morning." We have a routine when we see each other now. My daughter was touched by this experience. She was coming home from work, at a restaurant where she worked with her twin brother. She sees this homeless lady and offered her food. She answered, "No thank you; I don’t want your food." My daughter said, "No problem." She came home and told me, "I want to give the homeless lady some food." The last thing me and my kids want to do is give them money.

**Social workers, responsibility/experience**

Participant: Something that always comes up in our groups: the choice to live in the street or the shelter. What can make a shelter better? As a social worker, I know the role of a social worker can be really complicated, working in a system where I can’t provide something I want for them.
Participant: Communication is important to have understanding of the population you are serving; that’s where communication breakdown happens. If a social worker doesn’t understand the population, the dynamics of the culture other people live in and are accustomed to, it’s hard. The scenarios resonated with me because I experienced each of the situations.

Participant: One of the difficulties of the social worker is that she has to comply with the process, the bureaucracy, the programs that have rules: "Are you qualified for this program?" That doesn’t help a person who is in need of specific things right away, but the program — the bureaucracy — doesn’t offer the social worker the leeway to do that. I would think the best thing is for social workers to have empathy and tell the truth about the programs.

Participant: I agree, it’s about empathy; that’s all it takes. One can tell something negative in a good way; for example, "You can’t get that program because of so and so." It would help. I had social workers tell me stuff out of their role. It's up to the individual to be able to step out of your role and suggest this and that for a family. As for the shelter, honestly the streets are cleaner than the shelter. I’ve been in a women’s shelter. There’s no privacy in woman’s shelters, with overcrowding and mentally ill and lesbian people.

Participant: Let’s face it: social workers, people who do this work, don’t get paid nearly enough for the work they do. On top of that they need a degree in psychiatry. On top of that programs change, and the flux, even the language, keeps changing. The funding streams change. And they keep on adding more hoops that they need to jump through. On top of that you have a lot of services that are duplicated. That is how you have clients who slip through the cracks.

Participant: Everyone is talking about men’s and women's shelters. It’s a shame: two months ago, a teenager stayed out late, so his family kicked him out; then they kicked him out of the shelter. He said, "I can’t deal with this because I have school, football practice." I’m not saying what he did was right, but he needs to be able to function. He turned 21 now, and is in an approved extension program. He was staying there and not doing what he was supposed to do. He is in the shelter, but his parents are here too. He was only 15. The shelter for the teens is only fifteen days. He went through this until his extension was done. Now he has transitioned from a teenager to a pre adult shelter. So now he has a room with others who are around 21 in the apartment complex. He’s the type of person who needs people contact. He called me and said, "I can’t do this no more." I asked him what happened. I had got furniture and a TV for him. He said somebody broke into his room and took it all. The only thing you can do is transfer to another apartment complex, stay out of the shelter. So he did that for the winter — some days he stayed with me — for fifty days. Then they say, "Where did you stay for fifty days?" I had to write a letter explaining, "You told him to do this so he could switch."

Sharing information

Participant: We all have information and knowledge about access to services. I have a rolodex with places to call. When we meet people, remember all of us have information we can share.
Participant: There is a city liaison, with numbers to call. The paper is posted here. There is a wealth of information out there — how can we connect people to it?

Participant: We should put together a tool kit for People’s University and what is happening at the United Nations.

**Take-away for our guest**

Margaret: When you go to systems in the city sometimes it is like a brick wall. It’s better to think of an onion skin layer. At the UN six months ago, a group of us got together to create a working group on homelessness to raise the issue of homelessness at the UN, to get a conference on the topic, to get awareness in all the countries to work together. We want countries to count the numbers of homeless people. Unless countries count, they can’t admit there’s a problem to solve. Next year we hope to have a conference, with the experts being the people living in homelessness, not some guy sitting at a desk to make policy. Periodically we have panels of speakers. If we use this model (Forum Theater), it would be more effective than the panel. I took notes here to take back to the UN. We’re trying to create an international platform on homelessness, not heavy-duty hierarchy, but sharing information in one spot.

The FWPU dialogue could have gone on for hours. After the dialogue, everyone shared a buffet supper and wished good luck to Kiley, who completed her internship with ATD and is going home to Chicago.

Best wishes for a great summer, and look forward to seeing you in September.

Sincerely,

The FWPU Prep Team: Christelle, Emma, Kiley, Marcia, Marie-Claire, Patrick, Stacy, Virginie