

APAP | MetLife Foundation Case Study  
Excellence and Innovation in Arts Access

# VICTORY GARDENS THEATER

Chicago, IL

## Contact

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## Take Note

- The Access Project is unique in that it engages persons with disabilities both as theater audience members and as theatrical artists.
- Victory Gardens Theater (VGT) played a role in creating a disability council within the League of Chicago Theatres and in the launch of a national disability arts festival.
- VGT plans to expand the presence of works by artists with disabilities within its mainstage programming.
- The audience for Access Programming numbers over 2,000 each season.

## Overview

Tony Award-honored Victory Gardens Theater (VGT) is a professional theater dedicated to playwrights and their work. VGT is also deeply committed to creating barrier-free theater that reflects Chicago's diverse population. Along these lines, VGT developed the Access Project, a comprehensive community program for people with disabilities. Among Chicago theaters—and even within the national and international theater communities—the Access Project is unique. It is a model program that engages persons with disabilities both as theater audience members and as theatrical artists. The participation on both sides of the stage is part of what makes the Access Project so special; it ensures not only the ability to experience theater, but to create it and to see the stories of persons with disabilities represented as compelling, important, vital, and diverse.

The overarching goal of the program is to create a truly barrier-free theatrical experience, and this is manifested in assistive technologies; a commitment to physical accessibility, both in terms of facility design (including backstage and dressing areas) and staff training; and ongoing performance programs that feature stories of and participation by persons with disabilities

## Commitment

### Strategic Concepts

- VGT has a deep, institution-wide commitment to physical accessibility, both in terms of facility design (including backstage and dressing areas) and staff training.

### Professional Development

All staff and board members receive training in access issues, ensuring inclusion at all organizational levels.

### Leadership in the Community

The Access Project has received significant local and national attention for its leadership in ensuring access within the art of theater. Outcomes include over 6,500 access services provided within the past five seasons; the creation of a unique ongoing performance series called "Crip Slam Sundays"; the provision of an annual writing workshop for writers with disabilities; the world premieres of three plays by disability playwrights and the presentation of five plays dealing with disability themes over the past five seasons on VGT mainstages; and the creation of a theater community that serves the rights and needs of all people, regardless of physical circumstance.

VGT is one of few organizations to provide training for artists with disabilities. The organization presents Artist Development Workshops, which teach the art of playwriting and performance to individuals with and without disabilities, as well as Play Development Opportunities for original works dealing with disability issues or written by playwrights who have disabilities.

## Effective Practices

### Community Engagement

- Victory Gardens Theater's Access Project represents a community partnership in which participants with disabilities play an active role in program design; all assistive services benefit from the input of community members who use the services in question.
- VGT maintains involvement among artists and audience members with disabilities in the form of an advisory council including artists such as Susan Nussbaum and Tekki Lomnicki, scholars such as David Mitchell, and community members representing Access Living, the Lighthouse, the Association of Late-Deaf Adults, and others.

## Implementation

VGT works to involve people with disabilities as audience members and artists through:

- The creation and implementation of word-for-word captioning;
- The use of certified deaf interpreters for all signed performances;
- The presentation of touch tours;
- Theatrical design for audience accessibility, including concierge-style, open box offices with counters at varying and adjustable heights, as well as dispersed seating for patrons with mobility assistance needs;
- Partnerships with artists with disabilities;
- "Crip slam Sundays," an ongoing series featuring artists with disabilities.

## Evaluation

Evaluation is conducted through both surveys and focus groups with participants and members of the disability community.

## Challenges

VGT's Mike Ervin believes that people generally understand why people with disabilities want to participate in the arts as audience members, but that they question what PWDs might have to say as artists. The Access Project challenges that way of thinking by training writers, producing plays and presenting the Crip Slam.

The pool of good actors with disabilities is limited, and finding the right fit for the roles available can be difficult.

## Advice

- Include members of the disability community within the creation and design of all assistive services.
- Ask the patrons if they're getting what they want. Find the community, talk to the experts and listen to what they say.



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