



Why Circles: Billions of dollars over decades have failed to reduce poverty significantly in the United States. Some progress has been made but the war on poverty clearly has not been won. Circles USA grew from the knowledge that money and programs alone cannot raise people from the cyclical rut of poverty.

What is Circles: Circles is a strategy many believe promises an enduring solution to poverty, which is that long-term relationships bridge race and class to help the poor build social capital and learn how to break the cycle. The idea is to plug the poor into the kinds of informal social networks which have long propelled people to prosperity, and help them become a valuable part of the community. Getting out of poverty is a huge task but it doesn't happen without intensive and intentional relationships.

How Does Circles Work: Training for Circle Leaders (those in poverty) and Allies (those who serve as a mentor/coach to the Circle Leader) has a target start date of January 2016. Circle Leaders will first complete a 12-week training that includes workforce and soft skills curricula to teach them how to successfully function in the workforce. Circles not only wants someone to get a job, but to also keep that job. After completion of this training each leader is encouraged to be matched with two Allies. This match process creates a circle. Circle Leaders meet once every week over the course of 18 months, while Allies are only required to attend the weekly meeting once a month after their Circle Leader has completed their training. However, many Allies attend meetings more than the required once a month because they find they receive benefits from having new friends and the group has developed a sense of community.

Who can participate as a Circle Leader (person in poverty): You can't just be poor to qualify to be a Circle Leader and accepted into the program. You have to be in poverty, but out of crisis, be mentally stable, free from substance abuse, and most importantly--*motivated to change*. Circles is different from many programs because no one can be "ordered" to attend. This program is for people who say, "Enough is enough and I am ready to change my situation." We are specifically focusing on families with children. We want to build parental capacity to ensure they are able to take care of their children and prevent them from entering the child welfare system.

Who can participate as a Circles Ally (mentor/coach/friend to person in poverty): Anyone who is financially stable and mentally sound can be an ally. Often retired people make excellent allies and also really enjoy making a new friend and interacting with the families (especially the young children). Business people, church members, or anyone who just wants to make a difference in the life of others would be an excellent ally. Allies will go through a few hours of training and education to help them dispel some common myths about people in poverty and understand how to set boundaries as they help their Circle Leader work toward achieving their goals.

What are Circles Outcomes: Nationally, success is measured when Circles Leaders are stable for at least two years after their 18-month circle term and have increased their income by at least double the federal poverty line. Poverty is defined as \$23,850 for a family of four. Nationally, Circles participants who completed the 18-month program, on average, increased their income by 27 percent and their cash assets by 88 percent.

Does Circles Replace Any Local Social Service Organization: Circles does not duplicate but only compliments existing efforts of other organizations. Circles partners with existing organizations to accept referrals for people who could benefit from the program in finding long term solutions to the cycle of generational poverty. Circles also has a local "Guiding Coalition" made up of community volunteers and existing social service organizations who help drive the Circles program, and help Circle Leaders achieve their goals.



How can you help and become a part of Circles, working to end poverty in Montgomery County.

Become an Ally – Volunteer as few as 3 to 4 hours per month to form a supportive friendship with a Circle Leader.

Provide, Cook, or Fund a Meal - Meals are provided each week for Circles meetings. Food creates a common opportunity to bond and fellowship. Many different groups might take responsibility for providing one of the weekly meals: a civic club may take one week, a church group may take another week, a local sorority takes a week, etc. When the whole community pitches in, providing a meal every few months on a rotating schedule becomes very doable. We are happy to answer questions about frequency and meal counts for interested volunteers. Meals need not be fancy (a pasta dish, salad, and bread), pizza, or large sub-sandwiches are frequently provided as the weekly meal. Meals could be sponsored, cooked at home and brought to the church where the meetings take place, or cooked on-site.

Be a childcare provider - Childcare is provided each week so that parents can focus on developing their plan to get out of poverty, and then working with their Ally to implement that plan. Sports teams, national honor society, student council, sororities, school classes, Sunday school groups, and clubs are all excellent options for providing childcare, and Circles creates an on-going opportunity for these groups to volunteer in the community.

Join our Guiding Coalition – Be part of a team to recruit new participants, develop a sustainable funding plan, ensure childcare and meals are available, plan programs or work with the community to address barriers to success.

Donate funds – The Circles program in Montgomery County will not become a reality without a license from the Circles organization. Project 17 has negotiated a lower cost for the communities it serves but we need to raise \$4,500 plus funds to ensure sustainable funding in the future. A fund has been established with the Independence Community Foundation and are tax deductible.

Refer a Circle Leader – If you know someone in poverty who could benefit from the Circles program, feel free to refer them to the program. Once we receive their contact information we will reach out to them to determine if they are ready to make a change and would be a good fit for the program. All information is kept confidential.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT: JULIE VOELKER

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