

Personal Attention Reduces Poverty

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Circles, a national program for helping families get out of poverty, taps an underused resource: middle-class support groups **BY PHUONG LY**

AS A SINGLE MOTHER WITH TWO KIDS, Heidi Wilson struggled to pay her bills. She says she hocked her belongings in pawnshops, took out high-interest payday loans, and bounced checks. What she needed most, though, wasn't more money—it was a good friend.

Wilson, 39, says she had no one in her northern Idaho town whom she could regularly turn to for advice and support. Everyone she knew was stuck in a cycle of poverty, and as a college student with a part-time job, she was actually better off than many of them. At the social services office, the caseworkers who approved her food stamps applications didn't seem to be interested in long discussions.

Then, one evening two years ago, Wilson went to a local meeting of Circles, a national program that brings together low-income people and middle-class community members who want to help them. Sitting in a church fellowship hall with 40 strangers, Wilson remembers that she nearly “freaked out.” But she returned the next week, and the next, becoming more comfortable as the group shared dinner and encouraging words. She took the program's Getting Ahead class, learning the importance of setting goals and planning. Circles assigned her two “allies” who met with her regularly for 18 months—a banker who coached her through budgeting and a college instructor who laughed and cried with her over boyfriend issues.

Now Wilson is free of her payday loan debt, has saved up enough to buy a much-needed used car—with a low-interest loan from a credit union—and is set to graduate in May with a degree in social work from Lewis-Clark State College. “I set the goals, but they were there to support me,” Wilson says of her Circles allies. “They kept telling me, ‘You can do this.’ It changed the way I thought about my future.”

The model for fighting poverty has long focused on providing for a person's immediate needs: food, clothing, and shelter. With Circles, advocates help the person develop financial literacy skills and supportive relationships, which

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become the foundation for rising up. The participants are called “leaders,” emphasizing that they are taking charge of their lives.

The National Circles Campaign developed from a 1995 project in Ames, Iowa, to help families get off welfare by matching them with support groups. In 2003, Circles began seeding programs in other communities, and now operates 65 sites across the country from its base in Albuquerque, N.M. Communities can start and sustain a Circles initiative by raising \$200,000 to \$400,000, and last year the costs for all the sites totaled about \$7 million, according to founder Scott Miller. The 190 funders range from national philanthropies, such as the W.K. Kellogg and Bill & Melinda Gates foundations, to local churches and banks.

Gains made by families are laudable, given that most people have been stuck in poverty through two or three generations. About 64 percent of the nearly 1,200 participants finish the 15-week Getting Ahead class, and their income increased an average of 28 percent during that time. The longer they stay in the group, the more their income rises.

With no more than 25 low-income participants at a time in a local Circles program, the approach is slow but deliberate. “To deal with everything that's going on in a person's life is a slower process than to

Members of a poverty-fighting Circle in Bloomington, Ind. show their support during “Hands on Training.”



provide them with a magic bullet, which we don't have," Miller says. "But if you can get 25 families out of poverty, through that process you'll reveal systematic problems and you can see how to start revamping the system."

CROSSING CLASS LINES

Circles doesn't add resources to a community. Instead, it seeks to tap potential already there—middle-class residents. They regularly help out people like their friends and families, but most don't have opportunities to cross class lines and develop relationships with poor people.

Miller points to his own experience as an example. He grew up in a comfortable Rochester, N.Y., suburb, with a strong support system of family and friends. In college especially, he relied on the counsel of a friend who was a Catholic priest. One day, that friend asked Miller to volunteer at a homeless shelter to put his angst over grades in perspective. The experience shocked Miller; he had never realized that there were people in his community struggling to feed and house themselves.

Miller continued to volunteer at the shelter, and after graduating from Kent State University, he worked for a social services agency in Ohio. Increasingly, however, he says he became frustrated by the lack of a long-term plan for poor families. "They would get financial assistance and maybe, if they were lucky, 30 minutes of counseling and then be referred somewhere else," he says. "It was a Swiss cheese system."

In 1992, he co-founded Move the Mountain Leadership Center, which developed training programs to help people leave welfare, and today he operates Circles. Focus groups of low-income residents led to a key insight and to the creation of the project in Iowa. The participants were asked how many people they could call in an emergency; the typical answer was zero to two. How many people were being paid to be in their lives? The response was eight to 12, from various social services agencies. "Yet they were isolated," Miller says. "Nobody talked to each other."

Circles is designed to pull together those disparate resources. Each initiative is run by a community agency that brings in other social services organizations. As the groups listen to the Circle participants, they can help make changes in the community. In Iowa, Circles initiated a program to provide donated cars to low-income families. In Gettysburg, Pa., Circles helped a farmers market set up a system to accept food stamps. In Bartlesville, Okla., advocates convinced the court system to give low-income people an option to perform community service rather than go into debt for fines.

The crux of Circles is making sure low-income participants, or "leaders," develop people outside of paid social workers to help them. Leaders initially were matched up with a mentor. But the leaders had so many problems that many volunteers, however well intentioned, were overwhelmed—an experience familiar to many social workers. Eventually, each leader was given two to three allies who could work together and share responsibilities.

But it's not enough just to put leaders and allies in the same room. According to noted social researcher Ruby K. Payne, there are "hidden rules of class" that culturally define us and make it difficult to move between social classes. The poor, for example,

are focused on survival; the middle class on achievement. At a Circles program, both leaders and allies receive communications training to help them understand and transcend those barriers. The allies listen to the leaders' problems and push them on whether they're taking the steps to achieve a goal. Allies have helped leaders write résumés, find donated computers, and suggest ways to help their children in school.

Ed Hasenoehrl, a retired bank community manager in Lewiston, Idaho, was one of Wilson's allies and is modest about the impact he had on her. He's more effusive when talking about how Circles changed him. He says he's more open-minded, less judgmental, and a better listener. Being in command and giving directives, he realized, isn't effective when he's working with a person who had multiple challenges in poverty—or with most other people, including his own kids. "There might be three ways to do it, and the third way might not be as good as the first way, but let's give it a try rather than jumping in and saying no," he says. "You can't control people, but you can care about them. It makes for a better and more productive relationship."

HEEDING FAILURE, GOING SLOW

For all of their success, Circles organizers talk a lot about failure. They tell organizers at new sites that it might take someone four or five years to move participants out of poverty because the challenges are so entrenched and complicated. Tempering expectations up front has helped manage the frustrations that are inevitable.

That attitude also emphasizes that the burden doesn't rest only with the poor person, but with the entire community, says Mary Jane Collier, a professor at the University of New Mexico who is studying the program. At typical social services agencies, "you check in and that person decides your future," Collier says. "It creates a system of codependency. With Circles, there are collaborative partnerships, and they're looking more broadly at the systems that produce poverty and what keeps people in poverty."

As Circles spreads, the main challenge is to reach more families without diluting the intimacy that fosters community spirit and communication. Miller says he's learned that the program needs to avoid trying to do too much at once. One of the early Circle sites, Des Moines, floundered from that pressure. Leadership was dispersed among five community agencies, and allies volunteered before the program was ready for them, which caused disillusion. "You've got to go slow to go fast," Miller says.

Circle sites are now fashioned on a franchise model. The Circles organization provides training and curriculum, and it encourages communities to customize them. As the network grows, new Circles sites are matched with an older site with similar demographics to provide advice. Circles is also developing sites smaller than towns—at hospitals, to focus on health, and at colleges, for first-generation students.

There are sure to be setbacks, but as Wilson attests, once a change occurs, it creates a ripple effect. Wilson now helps teach a Getting Ahead class and participated in the Circles at her college. Recently, she and a couple of classmates set a goal to go to the gym at least three times a week, a goal that she had never even dreamed of previously. "It's easier," Wilson says, "when you're not alone." ■