



CIRCLES.USA
Thriving Families, Thriving Communities



The Circles Journey

2001-2014

Mary Jane Collier, Ph.D. University of Michigan and
Brandi Lawless, Ph.D. University of San Francisco

THE CIRCLES® JOURNEY: 2001-2014 Integrating Research, Practice and Application so that More Communities Thrive

Authors:

Mary Jane Collier, Professor, University of New Mexico, Coordinator, Circles Research and Evaluation; and Brandi Lawless, Assistant Professor, University of San Francisco

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Dedication:

We dedicate this first Journey Report to all the Circle Leaders, Allies, Circles Chapter staff, community volunteers, Circles USA Leadership Team and funders who make Circles possible.

I. THE CIRCLES® MODEL: A SNAPSHOT OF THE JOURNEY

The model and training are based on the key practice of meeting in circle. A **Circle** is a particular kind of face-to-face meeting where individuals develop a relationship that is supportive and reciprocal. A beginning circle is made up of one **Circle Leader (CL)** who is an individual moving out of poverty, and two to four **Circle Allies**, middle and upper income community volunteers willing to support the CL achieve her/his goals. The participants moving out of poverty meet in circle with each other beginning with a 12-week basic course that introduces topics such as financial goal-setting, budget management, long-term planning, expansion of social capital through networking, cross-class and intercultural relationship development, conflict management, and workplace

communication skills. Allies also participate in a separate circle of training to build their knowledge about poverty, systemic barriers, and community resources, and build skills in problem solving, cross-class and intercultural relationship development and community networking.

After completing their training, Circle Leaders moving out of poverty and Allies are linked into circles with Allies. In weekly meetings Allies provide social support, enhance skill development, and increase access to community resources that CLs may not know about or cannot access without advocacy. The weekly meetings have six key components: a community meal, child care and programming for the children, community building, leadership development opportunities, workshops for further skill development, and social activities; all of which collectively increase the success of the CLs moving out of poverty. A local Circles site typically works with 15 – 20 Circle Leaders at a time.

In this next level of Circles there are workshops and resources on job readiness, crisis management, and emotional stability support. Meeting these three needs enables CLs to retain jobs and eventually advance to better paying jobs that meet their economic stability goals. Circles refers CLs into the existing network of educational programs, job training, and placement in order to increase their earned income. When CLs have maintained employment for a period of time they may be ready to further their education and training. Support from Allies who understand the culture of the community college or the university may help them determine what type of training is best, navigate rules for financial aid, study effectively, negotiate with departments and faculty, and handle crises specific to low-income students. Allies also tap their own

personal networks to help CLs find better jobs and establish long-term careers.

After a few months, the circle is opened to more community members and opinion leaders to work with a systemic community barrier preventing families from moving out of poverty. Called Big View, interested community members, Circle Leaders, and Allies meet regularly and collaborate to find solutions to deal with barriers and roadblocks that Circles families face. Big View meetings are educational (to change the mindset of community members) and results oriented (to change the goals of the system) with action plans developed to address the systemic barriers that families are experiencing.

A Journey of Collective Change for Individuals, Families and Communities

Circles enables communities to move along a new path with families moving from poverty into economic stability. Circles also gives diverse groups the opportunity to chart their own journeys, create new stories, and shines a light on their abilities and motivation to enter into the workforce and make their way out of poverty. As a nationally recognized network focused on helping families move into economic stability, Circles continually assesses and then addresses these unmet needs and encourages cross-sector collaboration and sharing of resources. Allies learn first-hand of the obstacles facing families in poverty and how the overall structure of government programs and policies discourage rather than encourage accepting better pay due to loss of benefits and assistance. They learn to collaborate with community leaders to manage a systems barrier such as transportation or lack of affordable housing. Allies become more vocal and effective advocates for change. Circles has been recognized by numerous local and national

news outlets as a necessary solution to the overwhelming national problem of poverty including CBS Evening News, Huffington Post, CNN, NPR, PBS, and *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

II. HOW CIRCLES® DEVELOPED

The Circles model emerged from a project of the Mid-Iowa Community Action Agency known as Move the Mountain Leadership Center (MTM). The Annie E. Casey Foundation invested approximately \$1.7M from 1992 to 2005 to fund MTM's Transformational Leadership Program (TLP) and Circles. The Transformational Leadership Program's primary theory of change was based on the assumption that leaders of nonprofits spent most of their time managing programs rather than articulating their vision and enrolling others to achieve the vision. For example, based on interviews of seven local school superintendents, there was a consensus that about 30% of their students were "at-risk" and that this number would be higher, not lower, in five years. When asked how much of the time do they manage rather than lead, the typical response was 90% managing, 10% leading. When asked what percent should they be leading if they were going to have fewer kids at risk in five years, most said 90% leading, and 10% managing.

Move the Mountain provided executive coaching, planning and a grant writing team in order to develop strategic partnerships among the 50 plus participating organizations. Several projects were funded with innovation funds but the results were lackluster. The population of MTM's service areas included 170,000 people. The budgets of the participating organizations totaled \$320M a year and they employed over 5,000 people. How could this much money and this many employees not be

enough to educate and support this small population toward better outcomes each and every year? This was the question MTM sought to answer.

Move the Mountain developed a systems model based on the work done by Dartmouth Professor Donella Meadows, who theorized that there was a hierarchy of leverage points for changing a system. Low-impact leverage points increased the supply of, for example, turkeys given out at Christmas to people in poverty. It feels good to those who give and receive turkeys, but the number of people in poverty does not go down because of it. Low-impact strategies are designed to manage poverty rather than helping people out of poverty, and help only a small number of people rather than changing systems that would transform the lives of thousands of people. High impact strategies are designed to change the mindset of the community so that communities take steps to effectively address poverty. High impact strategies encourage people to organize to plan actions and problem-solve collectively.

By 1995, MTM was engaging people with low-income in the planning processes to identify new high-impact strategies. As the primary director of MTM, Scott Miller was exposed to the theories of change that undergird Re-Evaluation Counseling (RC), twelve-step groups, and Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). One of the foundations of RC is the value of building relationships across race and class lines for the purpose of healing society and its people. Twelve-step's theory of change includes the importance of mutual self-support, a set of life principles known as "the 12 steps", rituals during meetings, inner guidance from a higher power, and also guidance by a seasoned member known as a sponsor. ABCD's theory of change is based on the idea that the people

experiencing the problem must self organize to solve their problems. In this approach neighborhoods and communities recognize their assets and capitalize on them, rather than having outsiders identify deficits and then provide fragmented and disconnected services to fill the deficits. These influenced the evolving Circles theory of change.

Circles became a process to build social and economic capital for people who wanted to change their lives and become more economically stable. Weekly meetings were established with dinners, childcare, and facilitators who could help people build new networks, develop plans and get the support they needed to achieve them. Over time communities began to weave in other tools to address the special challenges of certain groups like those in domestic shelters, young single mothers, those needing literacy training, people leaving welfare, and so on.

Beginning in 2013, MTM became known as Circles USA (CUSA). Inspired by theories of change based on finding tipping points for large scale change, and on collective impact through involving multiple levels of systems, individuals, families, communities, institutions, agencies and businesses; the goal of CUSA is to train Circles chapters to reach a 10% tipping point for collective impact in their communities. By focusing on 10% of all households in a defined geographical area, and involving multi-level systems, our theory of change is that this collective impact can permanently impact families and change systems policies and practices that are barriers. The various agencies and businesses, supported by institutions and Circles, are held accountable to supporting people to earn 200% or more of the federal poverty guidelines. High-impact strategies through collective impact collaborations can significantly reduce poverty and even create

the conditions that could one day end it altogether.

III. PRINCIPLES/VALUES THAT MAKE CIRCLES® UNIQUE AND EFFECTIVE

Meeting “in circle” is a practice that has been used by communities throughout the world since ancient times to make decisions, solve problems and offer support.

Tracy Thompson points out in her 2011 article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* that “circles of change” have long been used as a way to “encourage respectful conversation” and equalize positions of power. We see that clearly in Circles USA with the inclusion of participants from various income groups, as well as stakeholders in a variety of social positions. Thompson states, “In a well-functioning Circle, members experience a strong sense of belonging, a compelling commitment to shared goals, and a high level of accountability to themselves and to the group...” (p. 42). In expanding the participants and “Circle” beyond the low-income leaders, Circles USA expands the responsibility for alleviating poverty. With their addition of “Big View” meetings, the sense of commitment and accountability that Thompson describes is shared by community members, policy makers, volunteers, and leadership members. In this way Circles USA has successfully built trust and accountability across class divides and has worked toward structural accountability.

Circles USA is all about collective impact.

In the often cited *Stanford Social Innovations Review* article on “Collective

Impact” (Winter, 2011) John Kania and Mark Kramer stated that the five conditions of collective success and impact are a common agenda, shared measurement systems, coordinating mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone support organization. In a re-reading of the groundbreaking article three years later (*Stanford Social Innovations Review*, February 3, 2014) Chris Thompson added that collective impact is also long-term work, collaboration requires capacity (which includes the capacity for process) and collective impact requires funders to shift their perspective (toward on longer term results, collective processes, measuring reporting systems and community leadership for cross-sector collaboration).

Circles USA has a common agenda being implemented across over 70 chapters across the U.S. Circles USA is a national backbone support organization that oversees measurement procedures and data systems, coordinates national, regional and local activities such as conferences, community of practice gatherings, workshops, hands-on-trainings, research and fundraising. Communication between Circles USA and the local chapters is continuous and utilizes multiple forms with a regular internet newsletter, webinars, web postings as well as site visits, conferences and meetings. An integrated online data system has been designed in order to increase the consistency and reliability of data collection and analysis. This enables ongoing evaluation. Circles has always taken a long-term approach with a broad multi-systems view, and the model clearly involves multiple government, educational, organizational, nonprofit and profit

organizations, as well as community groups in efforts to move families out of poverty.

In order to reduce poverty in our communities, the entire anti-poverty, workforce, and educational institutions must address the underlying problems of poverty rather than settle on providing units of services to address various symptoms of poverty. A collective impact approach is being designed in numerous Circles chapters across the country to reach a “tipping point” that transforms the community’s strategies from low-impact band aids to high-impact solutions that help individuals through all three stages of becoming economically stable: solving immediate crises, preparing for and entering the workforce, and retaining and advancing into jobs that produce enough income to not only survive, but to thrive.

To finally decrease the rate of poverty in the U.S. Circles offers a longer-term three-phase support system to build capacity rather than providing short-term support and subsidies for basic needs.

The current state of practice to reduce poverty in the U.S. is focused on alleviating the symptoms of poverty rather than solving the underlying problems. The major interventions being used in the field include providing subsidies for basic needs such as food, healthcare, housing, utilities, and clothing; as well as providing short-term supports such as counseling, job preparation and placement, parenting, life skills classes, and educational programs. Increasing poverty rates indicate that these approaches have not had significant impact. According to the US Census Bureau, the poverty rate of the U.S. has increased from 13.2% in 2008 to 16% at the end of 2012.

The primary limitation associated with the current strategies is the lack of providing a consistent support system that is capable of engaging women and men over all three necessary phases in moving out of poverty: 1) crisis management and emotional stability, 2) job training and placement, and 3) economic stability through education and career advancement. Circles offers a support system throughout all these phases.

Circles chapters work with local schools, businesses, churches, and agencies to answer the call for comprehensive, coordinated, integrated services.

Circles partners with a multitude of funders and social service agencies, educational institutions, health care providers, employers, financial advisors, etc. at all stages of Circles, to provide outside resources for Circle Leaders, to offer expertise related to curriculum topics and experiences, to provide Allies and workforce development training, and to support Big View efforts to manage systemic barriers.

Circles recognizes that poverty impacts different cultural groups in different ways; providing equality of opportunity for success means accounting for different levels of historical trauma as well as present experiences of differential treatment based on race, ethnicity, and other group categories.

“...the real explanation for why the poor are where they are is that they made the mistake of being born to the wrong parents, in the wrong section of the country, in the wrong industry or in the wrong racial or ethnic group. Once that mistake has

been made, they could have been paragons of will and morality, but most of them would never even have had the chance to get out of the other America” Michael Harrington, “The Other America”, 1962. (Cited in the ACF Workshop on Intergenerational Social and Economic Mobility, ISEM, Washington, D. C., May 16, 2014).

Circles Curriculum contains material on culture and communication, stereotypes and privilege, and coaches are encouraged to have expertise with local cultural diversity.

Circles recognizes that poverty affects high numbers of women and single mothers.

The National Women’s Law Center states the poverty rate for women in the U.S. is 17.8 percent, more than one in seven women – the highest rate in nearly two decades. Sara McLanahan, Princeton University, reported at the ACF workshop on ISEM, Washington D.C., May, 2014, that the trends associated with the *Second Demographic Transition* – delays/declines in fertility and marriage, increases in cohabitation and divorce, and increases in maternal employment – are playing out very differently for women in different socio-economic positions. College-educated women are changing in ways that increase children’s economic resources, while less educated women are changing in ways that reduce children’s resources. These changes are reinforcing income inequality and reducing social mobility.

Circles makes a commitment to women to support them through all three stages of crisis management and emotional stability, job training and placement and education and career advancement in order to establish economic stability. Furthermore, we provide women with a new social network of peers who are moving out of poverty as well as middle and upper-income Allies offering a minimum of 18 months of collaborative support.

Circles understands how race, ethnicity and gender work together to affect class mobility and also recognizes that poverty affects individuals in all cultural and social groups.

Isabel Sawhill from the Brookings Institution, reported that in the U.S. the groups least likely to reach the middle class, starting with the least likely, are Blacks, then all groups in the bottom income levels, then Hispanics, and then all women. All these groups have significantly less chance of reaching the middle class compared with men and whites (ACF Workshop on ISEM, Washington D. C., May, 2014). The increasing rates for poverty in the U.S. however, affect diverse cultural and social groups.

Circles recognizes that this is the time for a new conversation about poverty.

Approaching poverty and economic mobility as involving multiple systems, organizations and groups is a more comprehensive and realistic picture of how poverty works. Blaming the poor, the rich, the government, a particular cultural group, or a certain lifestyle, hasn’t worked to reduce poverty. It is not the responsibility of just the poor, just the wealthy, just the government, or just local communities to deal with poverty. In Circles the potential for change is located within and across individuals, groups,

organizations, communities and institutions. In Circles we ask everyone a key question, “What do we really want for our communities and families?”

Tackling poverty requires many people working from many angles: The “Big View” Approach

Circles USA is different from other organizations in that it works on multiple levels to achieve its mission. Whereas some organizations focus on how individuals alone can move out of poverty based on individual effort, the Circles USA website notes, “We believe that responsibility for both poverty and prosperity rests not only in the hands of individuals, but also within societies, institutions, and communities” (Circles®, 2014). Circles USA has implemented its “Big View” program successfully across the country. In Big View meetings, multiple stakeholders are asked to tackle poverty at a macro (societal) level. Participants are asked, “What is keeping people from thriving in this community?” The answers are well thought out, practical and collaborative. Across the country, Circle Leaders, Allies, community leaders, and policy makers come together to tackle community-based problems that perpetuate poverty. At one site, for example, Circle Leaders identified the need for second-hand clothing stores that sell professional clothing for plus-sized individuals. Seeing few resources in this area, participants sought donations and created their own store, appointing one Circle Leader as the business manager. At another site, participants worked on a policy level by exploring “the cliff effect”—the consequences of earning slightly more money and having housing, food stamps, and health care assistance taken away (causing these people to fall off of a cliff).

Circle Leaders at this site prepared narratives and have been lobbying local policymakers to create ways to gradually decrease assistance. How “Big View” issues are explored varies from site to site, yet the influence remains the same; participants at all levels are encouraged to think of poverty as an issue for individuals, families, and society at large.

Circles ensures that the model and curriculum are effective, high quality, and clearly relevant through being internally and externally data-informed and research-driven. As well, Circles is highly informed by participants, community members and ongoing assessment.

Evaluation Studies

Evaluation studies have been regularly conducted, and results used to guide model and training curriculum revision. For example, a national evaluation of the Circles model and training was conducted by a team in Lane County Oregon and in 2009, the Wilder Research Group Studied Circle Leader Progress based on exposure to initial training. More recently, in 2012 a National Formative Evaluation study was conducted by Professor Mary Jane Collier, University of New Mexico, and Brandi Lawless, Assistant Professor, University of San Francisco. Based on 90 interviews with Circle Leaders, Allies, coaches, coordinators, Guiding Coalition members, funders and the national leadership team, they offered the following summary:

“We concur with the conclusions offered in the 2009 Oregon Assessment Report that the Circles model continues to be strongly endorsed, is creative and flexible.

We add that with expanded attention to contextual and structural barriers, the theoretical basis in social capacity building is sound. We further note that the leadership and staff have a realistic, valid and practical view of poverty. For instance the leadership defines poverty and prosperity as the joint responsibility of societies, institutions, communities, as well as individuals. The leadership is committed to apply results from the formative evaluation to guide training and curriculum revision..."

In 2012-2013, a pilot evaluation of a new Circle Leader training curriculum was conducted at seven chapters by Mary Jane Collier, University of New Mexico. An Ally training curriculum evaluation procedure utilizing focus groups was also piloted in two sites. In 2013, graduate student interns from the University of Michigan conducted a study of Circles organizational structure and activities in relation to other national organizations and programs.

The Year-end 2012 Circles USA Survey showed noteworthy results. The 518 Circle Leaders who had been participating in Circles for at least six months improved their ability to become economically stable in the following ways:

- 69.3% reported an increase in social capital—people now available to them for support
- 71.5% are now volunteering in the community, which increases self-esteem and a sense of pride as they make a difference in other people's lives
- 92.5% reported safe housing
- 34.2% more now have health insurance

- 73.6% now have reliable transportation
- 36% got valid driver licenses
- 34.6% obtained cars
- 29.9% reported paying off credit
- 38.1% opened a new savings account
- 32.1% enrolled in new education
- 33% found new employment

Updated Data System and Instrument Design

A new online data system, including training videos and accessible support for all chapters was launched in the fall of 2013. As well, a Circle Leader Life Assessment Tool, selection procedures, and the Circle Leader Progress Report Form were revised just prior to launching the new data system. A draft Ally Survey was updated late in 2013 and is under revision.

Research and recommendations from external sources such as federal agencies, foundations and key academics are regularly being reviewed by Mary Jane Collier, University of New Mexico, Circles Evaluator, and her colleagues and doctoral students, and brought into conversations about model and curriculum refinement.

This Journey Report is one example.

IV. CHARACTERISTICS THAT MAKE CIRCLES® UNIQUE AND EFFECTIVE

Circles is a general model that is based on collective impact, has integrity, core elements that are generalizable, and elements that can be adapted to diverse settings and groups across the U.S.

Poverty alleviation programs have more generally focused their efforts in urban

communities. Some scholars argue that poverty in rural and suburban areas has been overlooked (See *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, August 15, 2013). Circles has been unique in efforts to work in rural, suburban, and urban communities. Through the lens of *situational* and *generational* levels of poverty, Circles works to build social and financial capacity in multiple communities.

Circles has a comprehensive and relevant theory of change, and a combined focus on individual, community and institutional level change.

The Circles theory of change starts with creating circles in which individuals moving out of poverty can develop key connections and relationships. During meetings in circles, the first step is enabling all participants build knowledge about the broader context and scene—the systemic nature of poverty and economic mobility. This includes learning about histories, laws, federal policies, and the systemic nature of poverty and its impact on diverse cultural and social groups. Sharing personal stories shows that no one is alone but also shows where stories are unique; both of which build foundational relationships. After understanding the broader scene as well as how economic challenges have impacted individuals in similar and different ways, then we turn to identifying goals and desired results. Current motivation, abilities and behaviors are then built individually and together to achieve these desired results. Building social and economic capital are interdependent in our theory of change. Support from Allies, other Circle Leaders, community volunteers, community resources, and from opportunities to expand skills in workforce training and education is

a continuing part of meeting in circles weekly meetings. Circles then comes back, full circle, to address change by tackling a local community systems barrier such as an institutional policy related to cliff effects, bank procedures, or educational admission, to enable more families to successful in attaining economic mobility. Therefore the circle is the key to a strong beginning for individuals to move into change, enables relationships with key others to enable change among Circle Leaders, Allies and other community volunteers, and finally enables systemic and sustainable change and collective impact through community collaboration.

Circles addresses eight primary barriers to economic stability.

These include:

- 1) Lack of education to secure higher-paying jobs;
- 2) Inadequate workforce development solutions from government programs;
- 3) Lack of "bridging social capital" (relationships with people who earn more money) which open doors to new problem-solving solutions and higher-paying jobs;
- 4) Inadequate financial management skills to establish sufficient back-up plans;
- 5) Lack of post-placement support from peers and/or community-based programs,
- 6) the "cliff effects" from dramatic loss of subsidies with slight increases of earned income;
- 7) Challenges in motivation, time, and energy to focus on advancement once employed; and
- 8) Lack of "soft skills," such as understanding the unwritten rules of the workplace. The Circles curriculum covers each of these issues, assists CLs in putting together both a plan to overcome these barriers, as well as expand circles of support.

Individuals moving out of poverty lead the Circle.

Circle Leaders have the highest motivation and investment in their circles, know the most about poverty, as well as benefit the most from expanding their abilities to communicate effectively, solve problems and demonstrate leadership. When they lead the circle, they are charting their own course toward economic stability.

Circles includes progressive knowledge/skill development.

Circles training starts from the individual level in which CLs, Allies, guiding coalition members build knowledge, new behavioral skills, emotional stability, and acquire new motivation and abilities to move into economic stability. This foundation is applied to cross-class relationships with Allies & CLs, and then beyond, in which individuals build access to resources, support each other and build even more social capacity. This foundation is then applied to working in larger groups inside Circles and with the broader community, to develop leadership, invite more individuals into the community circle, and join Big View action planning to address local structural barriers that prevent economic mobility.

Circles is a long-term experience encouraging individuals to: remain involved; practice and grow leadership, financial and social skills; obtain support from multiple people and resources; provide support for each other; and increase the potential for communities to collaborate, problem-solve, and achieve sustainable community level change.

Long-term involvement of Circle Leaders is essential since long-term strategies are needed to develop as well as sustain

economic stability. Several chapters across the U.S. have offered alumni events, created mentoring activities, organized workshops for job advancement, and invited alumni Circle Leaders to step into leadership roles on the Guiding Coalition. Marion & Muncie Circles Chapters have created an Ambassador group of their longest-transitioned Circle Leaders. Seven women who have continued to be active with the Circles community have formed a group they call the ELITE (Encouraging Leaders in Their Empowerment). The Ambassadors accompany a community leader in the region as s/he speaks to churches, service clubs, business groups, etc. to start new Circles chapters. Since new communities have no Circle Leaders to provide testimonials, these women share their stories to help mobilize the community to further support the emerging Circles work there.

Circles enables those moving out of poverty to practice leadership and become contributors to community level changes.

Eisenberg's (2014) opinion piece in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* explains that one successful strategy in efforts to alleviate poverty is to challenge those who are currently poor to become leaders. In describing President Lyndon B. Johnson's "war on poverty" he states, "what was probably the most astonishing product of the Johnson antipoverty programs was that for the first time in history, the federal government made a deliberate effort to encourage needy citizens to organize, to put pressure on local authorities to solve problems" (see *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, January 16, 2014). Circles continues this legacy by naming individuals in poverty "Circle Leaders" and encouraging them to not only take control of their own agenda

and goals, but to also contribute their knowledge and leadership in “Big View” meetings.

Circles includes development of diverse forms of social, economic and cultural capital.

While other poverty alleviation organizations focus their efforts on financial capital, Circles uniquely demonstrates the benefits of building social capital by designing a program that encourages individuals to build cross-class relationships. Participants have described these relationships as mentorships and even “families”.

Additionally, Circles has been working on building cultural capital both by attending to how stereotypes and cultural representations work with and against economic mobility, and by encouraging effective intercultural communication in relationships that bridge class, ethnicity, race, age, and religion.

Circles creates resource and support networks that enable socioeconomic mobility through cross-class alliances, and sharing knowledge about community resources.

Attending to relationships between inequality, opportunity and mobility, Miles Corak, University of Ottawa, reminded audiences of the ACF Workshop on ISEM, Washington, D. C., May 2014, that today most jobs, especially for individuals positioned in the middle class, are found through networks of friends and families. This constrains opportunities for families in poverty to become economically mobile. Circles creates partnerships with Allies and identification of community resources to overcome this constraint.

Circles provides training in communication skills in cross-class

relationships, leadership, conflict management and problem solving along with tools for creating financial stability.

Communication skills enable Circle Leaders to move through the three stages of crisis management and emotional stability, job training and placement, and education and career advancement in order to establish economic stability. Communication skills also enable all participants to develop sustainable relationships, support each other, share leadership and collaborate for Big View community level change.

V. LOOKING AHEAD: APPLICATIONS OF CURRENT RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN NEW DIRECTIONS

Two-generation strategies are being advocated by Urban Institute, OPRE, Aspen Ascend and Harvard Center for the Developing Child. Two-generation strategies involve giving simultaneous attention to & services for parents and children.

The Aspen Institute Ascend Network combines two-generation strategies with a broader systems approach. Their website provides the following explanation: “...to mobilize two-generation organizations and leaders to influence policy and practice changes that increase economic security, educational success, social capital and health and well-being for children, parents and their families. This approach links early childhood education, postsecondary employment pathways, economic supports (asset building, housing), health & well-being (mental health, addressing adverse childhood experiences) and social capital.” Ascend’s goals in 2014-2016 are to “design, scale and share new two-generational

models, identify best and next practices to build family resilience and new mindsets among practitioners and policy experts, technology and storytelling as tools for greater impact, and effective approaches to leveraging and aligning resources.”

Circles is exploring “two generational strategies” in several ways.

Training and programming is provided for adults and children in many chapters. Circles focuses on increasing social capital, postsecondary employment pathways and economic supports, which then impact children and families. Also, Circles uses several of the strategies listed above. At many of the sites, free childcare is provided while parents participate in community building exercises. Circles childcare goes beyond the typical model of watching children and includes programming that encourages children to think about economics and social relationships.

Strategies to reduce adverse childhood experiences that become sources of toxic stress on families (especially those living in poverty) are being studied by The Harvard Center for the Development of Children. This stress produces multiple and interrelated negative consequences for families related to abuse, neglect, violence, and illness. The National Crittenton Foundation has approached Circles USA to use the Adverse Childhood Effects (ACE) assessment tools in designing Circles programming for women leaving Crittenton treatment programs and entering back into community life.

Circles is working to enable adults and parents to build skills that are essential in ensuring that their children can better manage and minimize the effect of adverse factors on the family.

According to the video *Building Adult Capabilities to Improve Child Outcomes* produced by the Harvard Center for Development of Children, there are many skills that can be developed by adults of children who are at highest risk due to adverse factors. Such skill development requires training, coaching and practice, and is based on more than presentation of information. Skills dealing with how to address adversity include: using focus of attention, planning, monitoring, delaying gratification, problem solving, working in teams, and self-regulating. These skills are already being given attention in Circles. The Harvard Center recommends implementing approaches to build skills and capacities of parents as well as community agency representatives, identifying ways to reduce toxic stress, and giving attention to removing systemic barriers. Circles provides coaching, training and skill-building practice with adults over at least 18 months, invites community volunteers and agency representatives to become Allies and build their skills, and, through Big View, works to overcome a community barrier that is contributing to toxic stress for families. **Circles is coordinating a national call to action for Circle Leaders and their Allies to share their first-hand experiences around cliff effects; and with local, state and national leaders, take collective action to make subsidy program adjustments.**

One final example of where Circles is focusing going forward is a national call to action related to financial cliff effects. Circles is coordinating Big View strategies to remove the cliff effects that discourage and penalize Circle Leaders from earning new income. With even small amounts of

new income currently, people lose disproportionate levels of public assistance programs like Medicaid, Food Stamps, TANF (cash assistance) and childcare subsidies. Raises in earned income often are not large enough to cover the complete loss of subsidy programs. Circle leaders and their Allies are being trained to share their experiences with local, state, and national system leaders, and the public at large in order to affect necessary adjustments in these programs.