



CIRCLES USA

Program Type: Social Capital Promotion

Agency and Location: Circles USA in Albuquerque, NM

Population Served: Low-income individuals and families that are committed to working their way out of poverty

Program Description: Circles USA aims to combat poverty through the use of social capital by creating opportunities for vulnerable individuals to form more peer relationships as well as linking them to "allies" in the community that provide new networks of connections to help them overcome barriers to success and economic opportunity. The Circles model was developed after the organization discovered that social service agencies could reach only a small portion of the population living in poverty with real long-term solutions. Circles' mission is to inspire and equip families and communities to thrive and resolve poverty. The program believes that responsibility for both poverty and prosperity rests not only in the hands of individuals, but also with institutions and communities. The underlying foundation of the Circles model is to engage people and organizations in the community to end poverty together.

Circles describes their model as having three stages: crisis management and stabilization; education and job placement; and job retention, advancement, and economic stability. The program connects participants, called "leaders", with trained community volunteers, called "allies", to create a plan to help the participants exit poverty. These "allies" support leaders as they move through the stages of self-sufficiency while accomplishing their personal and economic goals. Every month, business, government, education, faith, civic, and/or philanthropic leaders in the community are invited to hear directly from people working their way out of poverty. Additionally, Circles USA uses the data from their network of locations to bring solutions to communities, such as the Cliff Effect Planning Tool, which helps families to identify and address gaps in government subsidy programs.

Results: Currently, over 70 communities in 20 states and parts of Canada have joined the Circles network. The Circles model has also been implemented by organizations such as United Way and Goodwill and has an ambitious plan for expanding to 300 counties by 2026, with the goal of reducing poverty by 10 percent in each of these counties. According to the most recent Circles [report](#), Circles leaders have gained income over time, earning on average 39 percent more income after six months, 51 percent more income after one year, and 78 percent more income after 18 months.

Program Perspective: Before joining the initiative, participant Rebecca Lewis assumed, "some are born on third base, and for me, I was positioned somewhere out in the parking lot at the 'big game of life.'" Ms. Lewis now believes, however, that "because of the power of Circles in my life, my sons' stories will be told from a much different starting position."

Another Circle leader, Amber Schwingdorf, noted, "Before Circles, I was struggling. I still struggle, from time to time, but what I have now that I didn't a year-and-a-half ago is support. Circles helped me learn how to budget and save money and my "allies" supported me. I'm trying to break the cycle, so my children don't grow up in poverty. I want them to be successful in life."

A Circle Leader in Indiana said, "Lots of people in poverty don't want to be there, and they would do what it takes to get out if they knew how. That's what Circles provides."

For More Information: Contact Gena Atcher at (888) 232-9285 or Gena@CirclesUSA.org.

