

# Circles Testimony: Strengthening Families Through a Grassroots Approach- Circles

(Locations in Project 17 region: Chanute/Neosho County, Iola/Allen County, Ottawa/Franklin County, Pittsburg/Crawford County, Miami County. Coming soon to: Montgomery County/Independence and Coffeyville)

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#### Project 17 Circles is started January 1, 2015 in Chanute, Ottawa, and Pittsburg. April 1, 2015 in Fort Scott. June 1, 2015 in Miami County. Projected start January 1, 2016 in Montgomery County (Independence and Coffeyville).

The mission of Project 17 is to improve the economic opportunities and quality of life of those who live, work, and play in the 17 counties that compose the Project 17 region. In order to achieve this mission Project 17 must improve the region's economic prosperity, improve the available workforce, improve the regions health, and improve civic leadership. Project 17 was born after four Kansas Senators were examining data and noticed that the 17 counties in Southeast Kansas (Allen, Anderson, Bourbon, Chautauqua, Cherokee, Coffey, Crawford, Elk, Franklin, Greenwood, Labette, Linn, Miami, Montgomery, Neosho, Wilson and Woodson) had poverty and unemployment rates significantly higher than the state average. Additionally, the health outcomes in the counties were the worst in the state. These higher than average negative statistics also seemed to be generally concentrated in this 17 county region as opposed to randomly distributed throughout Kansas. A series of community meetings was held and the public became immediately engaged in a conversation around these challenges. Citizens from within the region agreed that the chronic economic challenges, poverty, and substance abuse issues that have plagued the region for so long had to be addressed and Project 17 was a way to help insure a prosperous future for the region. Local citizens also began to put a specific focus on tackling these challenges as a region rather than as individual communities. They knew many things had been tried before to combat these problems but were not successful. However, they believed if an entire region concentrated on making progress in these areas, thereby creating a greater collective impact, a path could be forged toward a sustainable and healthy future for the region.

Through an in-kind grant from the Kansas Leadership Center (KLC) 1000 people in these 17 counties have had the opportunity to receive intense leadership training and some divided into teams to tackle issues they cared about. Three of the teams who received this training came together to focus on breaking the cycle of generational poverty and increasing the capacity of parents to provide for and protect their children. Through this increased capacity stronger families will result in stronger healthier communities. This is a daunting task because the number of people living in poverty in this region is one percent higher than the national average and 2.7 percent higher than the average in the state of Kansas. Additionally, in 2014 this region had an average of 8.3 children per 1000 removed from their home which is 2.5 times higher than the national rate of removals. To begin to change the region and ensure children who can grow up in a safe and loving family Project 17 began to strategize about ways to lower the number of children removed from their home through increasing the protective capacity of parents. Circles was the primary chosen strategy to accomplish this goal.

Project 17 now has more than 1000 citizens involved in strengthening the Southeast Kansas economy, strengthening families, and reducing poverty. Project 17 was notified after months of collaboration and work with various stakeholders, that the national Casey Family Programs foundation would fund Project 17 to start the Circles USA program in three pilot communities, Chanute, Pittsburg, and Ottawa. Subsequently, the City of Fort Scott stepped up to fund their Circle, Miami County was awarded a grant from the Thrivent Foundation, and Montgomery County is \$1,000 short of raising funds for their Circles sites all from private funds. Circles is a national program whose goal is to move people out of poverty and into self-sufficiency. Circles approached Project 17 about what the project was hoping to accomplish. Through these conversations Circles suggested Project 17 could become an "innovation" site with a slightly different goal than their traditional programs. The Project 17 goal, as established by three teams of involved citizens, is to move 10 percent of the region's children out of poverty in ten years and reduce the number of children who are being removed from their home through the use of the Circles program.

Circles is based upon a model where the person in poverty identifies they are ready to change and then goes through a 12 week class that helps them identify their goals, barriers to achieving their goals, and then develop a plan to help them change their situation and move out of poverty. Middle and upper class community members are recruited to be the "Ally" of the person in poverty and help them break the unwritten rules of poverty and move into the self-sufficiency. This supportive relationship builds social capital that allows the person to move into a new phase of their life. Project 17 works in partnership with the Department for Children and Families, Communities in Schools of Mid-America, and KVC to refer families they are working with who are at highest risk of having their children removed from their home. When considering how to break the cycle of childhood poverty and lower the number of children who are being removed from their home. Soft skills training is a large part of the Circles curriculum and families who engage in Circles will not only learn skills that will enable them to better provide for an protect their families but also the critical soft skills that are so often lacking which prohibits them from getting and keeping a job.

If our ultimate goals are achieved, the number of children removed from their home in the region would be in alignment with national child removal rates or better and there would be 1000 less children in poverty which would be a ten percent reduction in the regions child poverty rate. Through the generous funding being provided by Casey Family Programs, Project 17 was able to start the Circles program in three communities and the program began to grow quickly spreading to other communities.

This idea started through citizens coming together in communities and determining that a new strategy was needed to tackle poverty in their communities. Our Circles believe in providing a hand-up and skill building these will lead to good paying jobs which are critical to long-term success. While Project 17's sites are less than a year old we have seen many success stories. First generations of people going to college, people who have not worked for four years finding employment, and people's outlook on life being dramatically changed. It is a long hard process to break habits that have been established for generations, but we are seeing successes because of peoples willingness to change and volunteers willingness to care about the people struggling in their community.

**Why Circles:** Too many children are growing up in unstable poor families which are unable to provide for their basic well-being. 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. Citizens of Southeast Kansas determined Circles, which grew from the knowledge that money and programs alone cannot raise people from the cyclical rut of poverty, would provide a new solution to the generational poverty in the region.

What is Circles: Circles is a grassroots strategy in which volunteers allies are matched with struggling families to provide them friendship, encouragement, and social support to improve their situation, strengthen their family, and get out of poverty. Many believe Circles promises an enduring solution to poverty. Positive long-term relationships bridge race and class to help the poor build social capital and learn how to develop healthy relationships, provide for their family, and 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 and raising a healthy family is a huge task, but such an undertaking doesn't happen without intensive and intentional relationships.

**How Does Circles Work:** Circle Leaders (those at-risk families in poverty) will first complete a 12week training that includes workforce, relationship, and soft skills curricula to teach them how to successfully function in their family and 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 volunteer Allies. This match process creates a circle. A church in each community has offered its facilities for the meetings, community groups will volunteer to cook or sponsor a weekly meal for the meeting, and childcare will also be provided by volunteers in the community. 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/at-risk family): You can't just be poor to qualify to be a Circle Leader and accepted into the program. More importantly the person or family must be *motivated to change*. Circles is different from many programs because no one can be court ordered to attend, although they can be strongly encouraged. This program is for people who say, "Enough is enough, 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?

**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 achievable. 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** – Circles is currently grant funded through the generous support of Casey Family Programs. However, donated funds are needed to ensure sustainable funding in the future.

**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. Referrals can be sent to hmorgan@twsproject17.org.

For more information email: <u>hmorgan@twsproject17.org</u> or call 785-323-7001.

Project 17 Eco	onomic, Chil	d Welfare	, and Health	Data									
	County Health Ranking Health Factors (Out of 101 Ranked Counties) 2015	% of House-holds without a Vehicle 2009- 2013	% of People above 25 years with HS Degree or Equivalent 2009-2013	% of People above 25 years with Bachelors Degree or Higher 2009- 2013	Median House-hold Income 2009-2013	% Persons Below Poverty Level 2009-2013	% of Families below Poverty Level 2009- 2013	% of Pop on TANF or General Cash Assistance 2009-2013	Average number of people served per month by SNAP	Unemployment Rate as of Sept. 2015	Number of Children in Poverty 2013	Child Removal Rate per 1000 pop. Removed from their home FY2015	<u>Children in Need of Care</u> <u>Intake Calls FY2015</u>
Allen	74	3.8	88.6	16.1	40,554	17	11.1	3.6	2034	4.7	845	14.1	353
Anderson	64	6.7	87.4	19	41,713	12.8	9.2	4.5	834	4.7	426	6.5	132
Bourbon	83	6.2	87.5	22	39,591	19.3	12.6	2.1	2437	4.5	1,113	14.2	437
Chautauqua	100	3.7	87.1	16.3	39,529	15.2	12.6	1.8	458	5	210	2.1	64
Cherokee	97	7	86.1	14.9	39,746	18.4	13	3.7	3673	4	1,365	8.8	619
Coffey	27	5.6	92.1	19.9	51,793	9.1	6.2	2.2	694	5.2	289	2.1	165
Crawford	92	5.8	90.2	27.2	37,378	20.6	13.5	2	6668	4.7	2,275	10.9	1,061
Elk	94	2.6	89.2	18	34,089	18.5	12.6	1.8	310	4.3	146	1.8	33
Franklin	70	4.3	90.7	20.2	49,543	13.1	8.9	4.5	3563	4.2	1,354	9.2	701
Greenwood	81	4.7	90.6	16.5	38,346	16.1	11.9	4.1	827	4	344	12	189
Labette	96	5.8	89.7	20.4	40,916	15.3	9.4	2.3	3204	5.3	1,520	10.4	669
Linn	91	5	89	14.2	45,519	12.9	9.8	3.5	1185	5.5	498	8	192
Miami	29	3.4	93.5	23.9	58,936	9.5	6.3	2.9	3010	3.8	1,046	4.1	567
Montgomery	99	10	88.2	17.9	39,669	19.4	14.1	2.8	5739	6.3	2,082	6.6	1,021
Neosho	90	6.1	89.8	16.2	42,071	20.7	16.9	2.6	2515	7.2	1,037	12.7	570
Wilson	98	7.3	81.9	13	38,917	17.8	11.2	1.9	1380	5.9	529	4.7	286
Woodson	95	7.6	90.7	18.2	33,839	19.6	14.9	1.6	398	4.7	186	8.6	85
Region Avg. or Tot.	81.176471	5.6	89.0	18.5	41,891	16.2	11.4	2.8	38,929	4.9	15,265	8.7	7,144
Ks	N/A	5.3	89.8	30.3	51,332	13.7	9.3	2.3	301,377	4.4	133,480	5.2	65,631
Nation	N/A	8.8	86	28.8	53,046	15.4	11.8	3.9		5.1		3.4	
Data Sources: 2009-2013 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Census Bureau; Current Population Survey, BLS; CINC Intake Reports, Kansas DCF, Census Quick Facts, KS Health Matters, Child Trends, SFY2015 Children Served in Out of Home Placement (OOHP) by County, Kansas DCF													

		Project 1	7 Region		KS						
	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014	FY 2015	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014	FY 2015	
Abandonm											
ent	9	15	14	24	25	171	130	154	175	162	
% of TOT	1.9%	3.2%	2.6%	3.7%	4.5%	5.0%	3.6%	3.9%	5.0%	4.3%	
Caretaker s Inability to Cope	47	35	49	43	17	295	275	357	335	247	
% of TOT	10.2%	7.5%	9.2%	6.6%	3.1%	8.7%	7.6%	9.0%	9.0%	6.5%	
Child's Behavior Problem % of TOT	39 8.4%	36 7.7%	41 7.7%	37 5.6%	34 6.1%	239 7.0%	271 7.5%	247 6.2%	240 6.0%	237 6.2%	
Emotional Abuse % of TOT	13 2.8%	34 7.2%	9 1.7%	26 4.0%	20 3.6%	184 5.4%	188 5.2%	170 4.3%	171 4.0%	280 7.4%	
Supervisio	,	,,_,,	,		0.070	011/0	0.2,0				
n	35	35	35	53	108	262	285	300	330	385	
% of TOT	7.6%	7.5%	6.6%	8.1%	19.5%	7.7%	7.9%	7.5%	9.0%	10.1%	
Neglect	97	71	89	136	125	450	431	560	574	640	
% of TOT	21.0%	15.1%	16.7%	20.8%	22.6%	13.2%	11.9%	14.1%	15.0%	16.8%	
Other	55	54	95	101	51	437	507	576	446	373	
% of TOT	11.9%	11.5%	17.8%	15.4%	9.2%	12.8%	14.0%	14.5%	12.0%	9.8%	
Parents Substance Abuse % of TOT	79 17.1%	81 17.3%	108 20.2%	104 15.9%	60 10.8%	606 17.8%	668 18.4%	763 19.2%	747 20.0%	617 16.2%	
Physical											
Abuse	66	87	73	98	68	508	555	578	533	608	
% of TOT	14.3%	18.6%	13.7%	15.0%	12.3%	14.9%	15.3%	14.5%	14.0%	16.0%	
Sexual Abuse % of TOT	24 5.2%	26 5.5%	21 3.9%	23 3.5%	30 5.4%	172 5.0%	204 5.6%	171 4.3%	159 4.0%	164 4.3%	
Truancy	7	10	14	10	15	84	109	98	95	86	
% of TOT	1.5%	2.1%	2.6%	1.5%	2.7%	2.5%	3.0%	2.5%	2.0%	2.3%	
TOTAL	462	469	534	655	553	3408	3623	3974	3805	3799	

## Primary Reason for Removal

http://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/PPS/Documents/FY2015DataReports/FCAD\_Summary/RemovalReason

County	Child Population	Child Pop as % of State	# Children in Poverty	Children in Poverty as % of State	(+/-) Poverty % to Child % of State	Children in Out of Home Placement	Children in Out of Home Placement as % of State	(+/-) Out of Home % to Child % of State
Allen	3,044	0.40%	860	0.60%	0.20%	70	1.10%	0.70%
Anderson	2,005	0.30%	444	0.30%	0.00%	12	0.20%	-0.10%
Bourbon	3,713	0.50%	1,145	0.80%	0.30%	102	1.50%	1.00%
Chautauqua	713	0.10%	212	0.20%	0.10%	8	0.10%	0.00%
Cherokee	5,139	0.70%	1,404	1.00%	0.30%	72	1.10%	0.40%
Coffey	1,901	0.30%	261	0.20%	-0.10%	7	0.10%	-0.20%
Crawford	8,680	1.20%	2,312	1.70%	0.50%	182	2.80%	1.60%
Elk	517	0.10%	158	0.10%	0.00%	1	0.00%	-0.10%
Franklin	6,383	0.90%	1,235	0.90%	0.00%	89	1.40%	0.50%
Greenwood	1,381	0.20%	336	0.20%	0.00%	28	0.40%	0.20%
Labette	4,873	0.70%	1,315	1.00%	0.30%	58	0.90%	0.20%
Linn	2,255	0.30%	467	0.30%	0.00%	22	0.30%	0.00%
Miami	8,569	1.20%	1,110	0.80%	-0.40%	66	1.00%	-0.20%
Montgomery	8,092	1.10%	2,221	1.60%	0.50%	183	2.80%	1.70%
Neosho	4,025	0.60%	1,038	0.80%	0.20%	91	1.40%	0.80%
Wilson	2,185	0.30%	539	0.40%	0.10%	26	0.40%	0.10%
Woodson	711	0.10%	202	0.10%	0.00%	21	0.30%	0.20%
Region Avg. or Total	64,186	8.87%	15,259	11.28%	2.41%	1038	15.75%	6.88%
Ks	723,808	100.00%	135,261	100.00%		6,591	100.00%	

### Project 17 Region Poverty and Out of Home Placement Levels compared to State

http://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/PPS/Documents/FY2016DataReports/FCAD\_Summary/OOHPChildrenbyCountyS