

Circles Initiative

Progress Report – Fall 2019

Executive Summary

Public Health Sudbury & Districts
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Overview

The [Circles Initiative Progress Report](#) provides an overview and progress to date of the Circles Initiative, which was launched in 2017 following receipt of one of Ontario's Local Poverty Reduction Fund grants totalling \$217,000 in late 2016. The funding for this initiative extends to June 2020. The grant was awarded to support the implementation and evaluation of two programs connected with the Circles Initiative into Greater Sudbury: Circles Leader Training and Circles, both licensed through Circles Canada. The Bridges out of Poverty training initiative is also connected with the Circles Initiative but not directly funded through the grant. The Circles Initiative includes three linked programs:

- **Bridges out of Poverty** is a training opportunity for individuals living in middle and upper income that aims to start a conversation about poverty. Bridges out of Poverty workshops invite participants to look at poverty differently by exploring the experiences and realities of people living in poverty.
- **Circles Leader Training** is a program designed to provide individuals living in poverty with tools to transition into economic self-sufficiency through education and employment pathways. Circles Leader Training is designed to help the participants assess their current resources, learn how to build on their resources and create a personal action plan based on their hopes for a prosperous future to exit poverty.
- **Circles** is a program developed to support Leaders living in poverty while they work on their personal action plans to transition into economic self-sufficiency through education and employment pathways. Circles offers support with service navigation, added layers of social support, and community connections. Participants are called **Leaders** as they are leading the way to their future through their personalized life plans. Each Leader is matched with one to two volunteers who serve as Allies throughout the program. **Allies** provide intentional relationships that include friendship, coaching, and practical and emotional support. The goal for Circles Leaders is to achieve economic self-sufficiency within 18-48 months of joining the program. Participants, volunteers, and staff attend Circles Sudbury meetings three times per month for a shared meal and programming.

These programs offer a novel approach to poverty reduction based on principles of social mobility, social inclusion, and social capital. Together the three programs work to reduce poverty by building relationships across all economic groups to help individuals living on low income get out of poverty and build communities in which everyone can do well. The Circles Initiative is

strongly aligned with both the provincial public health mandate and municipal service delivery areas, as well as with the local public health focus on the social determinants of health and health inequities and the local population health priorities of the City of Greater Sudbury.

The planning, implementation, and sustainability of these programs is supported by an inter-sectoral partnership of 16 agencies in Greater Sudbury that form the **Partners to End Poverty Steering Committee**. The Steering Committee is represented by agencies across Greater Sudbury who are passionate about and committed to reducing poverty. They work collaboratively to examine the impact of poverty on individuals and families, identify ways to improve relationships, develop effective poverty reduction strategies, and become agents of change for our community.

The Circles program increases collaboration between community partners to tackle community-wide barriers to help reduce poverty. The Big View benefits our Leaders and their families but also focuses on the 21,000 other members across our community currently living in poverty. The Big View focus in 2018 was the need for greater compassion and understanding about the realities of living in poverty, including the challenges of service navigation. Public Health Sudbury & Districts hosted a one-day poverty simulation event on December 14, 2018, called the Greater Sudbury Poverty Challenge to help address the Big View focus in 2018. Mental health supports and access to affordable housing have been identified as key issues by Circles Leaders in Sudbury and they will be the Big View focus for 2019. A photovoice project was chosen to articulate these challenges in the lives of Circles Sudbury Leaders.

Highlights

In less than two years, the Circles Initiative has already influenced over 1,100 community members. In addition to supporting low income individuals while they work toward economic self-sufficiency, in a new multi-sector approach, this initiative has promoted poverty awareness, increased understanding, helped reduce poverty-related stigma, and inspired local change. The feedback from partners, training, and program participants has been overwhelmingly positive.

Bridges out of Poverty

- Forty-five Bridges out of Poverty workshops were delivered between June 2017 and June 2019 for a total of 849 participants from 113 community agencies
- 98% of participants enjoyed Bridges out of Poverty training
- 90% of participants left the training with a better understanding of poverty
- 100% indicated that they felt that understanding poverty was important for all members of our community

Circles Leaders Training

- Eight Circles Leader Training series have been offered with over 70 community members at different host partner sites since November 2017
- 36 Leaders have earned a high school credit towards their high school diploma for completion of this training
- 67% of graduates indicated that their stress levels decreased throughout Circles Leader Training
- 74% of graduates indicated that their self-esteem increased as a result of Circles Leader Training

Circles

- Circles Sudbury launched in February 2018
- Participants in Circles reported a 25%-27% increase in physical or mental health, family and social support, and improved relationship due to participation in the Circles Initiative
- Participants who joined in 2019 (4) reported an average increase to annual income of 31.25%
- 61% of goals identified by the Circles Leaders were related to education

- 30% of goals identified by Circles Leaders were linked to exiting poverty through full-time employment
- 45% of the short-term goals created by participants have already been completed
- 54% of participants have increased their education by obtaining an Ontario Secondary School Diploma or by pursuing post-secondary education

Community Volunteers

- 54 community members have received training and offered their time as Allies
- 14 Post-secondary students have assisted with this initiative

The Circles Initiative would not be possible without the support of the agencies connected to the Partners to End Poverty Steering Committee and other community partnerships. The partners and agencies have helped support the Circles Initiative in many ways.

Examples of in-kind contributions made by partner agencies:

- Food to support Circles Leader Training and Circles
- Vouchers for bus tickets or taxi services to support attendance in Circles Leader Training and Circles
- Staff support to deliver or co-facilitate Bridges out of Poverty, Circles Leader Training and Circles
- Staffing support through funded training opportunities
- Venues to host programming and workshop sessions for Bridges out of Poverty, Circles Leader Training and Circles.
- Placement agreements to support programming
- Assistance with recruitment and retention of community volunteers to serve as Circles Allies

The Circles program could not exist in Sudbury without the commitment, dedication and compassion of the community volunteers who serve as Allies and friends in the program. Finally, Circles Sudbury would not be possible without the brave Leaders who are working on their life goals and have trusted program staff and the broader initiative with their future wellbeing and prosperity.

Next Steps

The Public Health Sudbury & Districts' Ontario Local Poverty Reduction Fund grant is scheduled to end in June 2020. In order for the Greater Sudbury community to experience the full benefits of the Circles Initiative it is imperative that the program continue beyond the end of the granting period. Third party funding and resources will be required. The operating budget for Circles Leader Training and Circles is estimated at approximately \$135,000 annually, however many of these expenses can be reduced or eliminated by pooling resources with partner agencies. The Circles Initiative is currently seeking a partner with charitable status to serve as the main Circles Sudbury license holder. This will create opportunities to access grants not currently available to Public Health Sudbury & Districts. This will also allow for fundraising ventures with the option of tax receipts for the donors.