

# Circles Initiative

Progress Report – Fall 2019

Full Report

Public Health Sudbury & Districts  
November 2019



**Public Health**  
**Santé publique**  
SUDBURY & DISTRICTS

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## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the many Leaders, Allies and community partners for their valuable contributions to the content of this report.

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## Citation

Public Health Sudbury & Districts. (2019). *Circles Initiative. Progress Report – Fall 2019. Full Report*. Sudbury, ON: Author.

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# Overview

This 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 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 individuals 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.

*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.*

# Background

In the City of Greater Sudbury (CGS), 13% of the population is currently living in poverty (Statistics Canada, 2017). Moreover, 20% of children under the age of six are currently living in poverty within our City (Statistics Canada 2017). There are many individual programs and services within CGS that seek to alleviate poverty, such as those that focus on food security, drop-in programming, infants and young parents, housing, mental and physical health care, employment, clinical case management, financial assistance and harm reduction. These programs are often delivered by agencies or program staff in isolation with limited connections and collaboration between and among service providers. Studies show that poverty elimination programs that focus only on changing individuals and their circumstances are much less likely to be successful than multi-targeted efforts that also focus on changing the way systems and communities work together to address poverty (Rothwell, 2014; Raphael, 2003). The Circles Initiative represents the first comprehensive inter-sectoral community approach to poverty reduction in CGS.

The Ontario Works (OW) program is designed to promote self-reliance among clients and provides temporary financial assistance to individuals while they look for employment. Only one per cent of people on OW leave the program for a job in any given month. Further, half of the people who leave the system eventually return to Ontario Works, with 80 per cent returning within a year<sup>1</sup>. The Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) helps people with disabilities by providing income and employment supports. The number of people receiving support has been growing by 3.5 per cent each year, significantly outpacing Ontario's population growth. (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2018).

Poverty has a tremendous human and financial cost to Canadian society. In October 2019, the cost of poverty was estimated to be between \$27.1 to \$33 billion each year from costs arising from health care, the justice system, lower employment levels and resulting loss of tax revenue (Feed Ontario, 2019). Children living in poverty show higher incidences of almost all health-related problems (Raphael, 2002) and living in poverty may triple the chances of developing diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Canada without Poverty, 2019). High users of health care are more likely to come from disadvantaged population groups, be unemployed, and have limited social support, and in Ontario 5% of health care users accounted for 65% of health care costs from 2009 to 2011 (O'Neil et al., 2019). Addressing poverty therefore can work to improve the health and quality of life of community members, but also can alleviate pressure on the health care system and other social and public services that address poverty or issues related to poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> Provincial average.

Public Health Sudbury & Districts in partnership with agencies across Greater Sudbury, was successful in obtaining one of Ontario's Local Poverty Reduction Fund grants in late 2016 totalling \$217,000. 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. Goals of the three programs that make up the Circles Initiative are to:

- support individuals and families while they work on their personal goals to exit poverty;
- strengthen relationships with community agencies to collectively reduce poverty; and
- shift awareness and attitudes within the community about the realities of living in low income to foster greater compassion and commitment to poverty reduction.

These programs offer a novel approach to poverty reduction based on principles of social mobility, social inclusion, and social capital. This approach differs from other community efforts in that there will be multiple sectors working collaboratively to alleviate poverty and that there will be members from all economic groups in the community mobilized to support low-income participants.

The three linked programs are:

**Bridges out of Poverty:** a training opportunity 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 in contrast with those people living in middle and upper income.

**Circles Leader Training:** 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:** a program developed to support individuals 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.

Although new to Sudbury, evaluations of Leaders and Circles in other Ontario municipalities show very promising results towards poverty reduction and have seen high program completion rates (>80%) (Collier, Lawless, 2014). In addition, 33% of Circles graduates enrolled in new education programs and/or found employment (Collier, Lawless, 2014). Six months after Circles completion, nearly 70% reported an increase in social capital, 92.5% being in safe housing, and

38% opening savings accounts (Collier, Lawless, 2014). Further, 31% and 49% of Circles participants in Guelph and Sarnia exited from social assistance (Circles Guelph Wellington Guiding Coalition, 2016). Interestingly, Sarnia found the greatest positive impact to be experienced by children of the Circles participants (Brigler et al., n.d.). This may ultimately translate to a reduction in intergenerational poverty.

## Social Capital

The concepts of social inclusion and social capital are foundational pillars of the Circles Initiative that help support individuals and families to exit poverty and achieve economic stability. Individuals living with low income often experience social exclusion through limited opportunities and means to participate in key aspects of mainstream society, often resulting in further economic deprivation. Circles Leader Training and Circles programming are built around the principles of social capital and social inclusion to promote economic growth and stability.

**Social capital** is a term widely used in the social sciences that describes the sum of actual and potential resources available in an individual or a group's social network (Mulunga, Yazdanifard, 2014). Social capital increases as the individual or group accumulates additional relationships. Increasing social networks can increase opportunities and supports for upward mobility related to employment and education (Mulunga, Yazdanifard, 2014).

**Social inclusion** is based on the concepts of belonging, acceptance and recognition. Social inclusion is considered a process defined by increasing or promoting opportunities for full and equitable participation of diverse and marginalized populations in society (Mulunga, Yazdanifard, 2014). In contrast, social exclusion is a process characterized by unequal integration of diverse and marginalized populations into society, which can be both a cause and consequence of poverty (Burton, Welsh, 2015; Daly, Silver, 2008). Social exclusion is linked with social stigmatization, blame, and isolation which can translate into feelings of not being valued or included in society (Mulunga, Yazdanifard, 2014).

The Circles program focuses on increasing the social capital and enhancing the social inclusion of participants by connecting them with significant resources, supports, and relationships. By increasing social capital, participants engage in the process of social inclusion which aims to improve dignity, ability, and opportunity for individuals regardless of their social identity (Mulunga, Yazdanifard, 2014). Circles focuses on three types of social capital: linking, bonding, and bridging. All three forms of social capital are needed to succeed.

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## Circles Focuses on Three Types of Social Capital

*Linking: Linking individuals and families to community resources*

*Bonding: Fostering relationships and bonding with peers*

*Bridging: Fostering relationships with people from different economic backgrounds*

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Studies have shown that bridging social capital has a particularly strong effect on the social mobility of individuals who face social and health inequities. However, individuals who face social and health inequities generally possess few of these valuable ties (Burton, Welsh, 2015). Connecting individuals and communities have far-reaching benefits, “when information, ideas, relationships, supports and resources are shared, talents and assets can be mobilized and combined in multiple ways” (Ministry of Health, 2019). The Circles Initiative engages individuals and families in poverty as individuals with unique gifts, leadership qualities, and perspectives that can greatly contribute to communities as they drive for solutions to alleviate poverty. “When people and organizations work together in different ways over time, they begin to foster a sense of shared identity and belonging. Multiple players from multiple sectors can all play a role in continuous neighbourhood improvement” (Ministry of Health, 2019).

## Steering Committee

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. The Steering Committee formed in late 2016 with six participating agencies and has now grown to a total membership of 16 agencies. The agencies represent many sectors of the community including education, mental health and addiction, employment services, health and housing, social services, Indigenous social services, early childhood education, community and social development, worker’s rights and advocacy services, and public health. 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. Given that the programs that form the Circles Initiative were not developed locally, an Indigenous Advisory Committee and a Francophone Advisory Committee were established with the goals of identifying if and how each program should be customized or adapted to ensure their relevance in our Northern Ontario context. The Indigenous Advisory Committee is chaired by Rachael George, Apatisiwin Employment Coordinator with the N’Swakamok Native Friendship Centre



and the Francophone Advisory Committee is chaired by Raymond Landry, Homelessness Network Coordinator with the Centre de santé communautaire du Grand Sudbury.

## Partners to End Poverty Steering Committee

- Barrydowne College, Rainbow District School Board
- Canadian Mental Health Association
- Centre de santé communautaire du Grand Sudbury
- City of Greater Sudbury
- Jubilee Heritage Family Resources
- Mid North Network for the Coordination and Development of Adult Learning
- Monarch Recovery Services
- N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre
- Our Children, Our Future
- Public Health Sudbury & Districts
- Social Planning Council of Sudbury
- Spark Employment Services (formerly Sudbury Vocational Resource Centre)
- St. Albert Adult Learning Centre, Sudbury Catholic District School Board
- Sudbury Workers Education & Advocacy Centre
- United Way Centraide North East Ontario
- YMCA Employment Services

## Alignment of Circles Initiative with Community Partner Priorities

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 Circles Initiative is aligned with and overseen by the Partners to End Poverty Steering Committee. The Partners to End Poverty Steering Committee was established to advise and support Public Health Sudbury & Districts and other partner agencies in a community partnered approach to implement and evaluate the impact of poverty awareness and poverty reduction programs into the City of Greater Sudbury. The agencies represented by the Partners to end Poverty Steering Committee have been working to improve the lives of people living on low income. All partners recognize the need for poverty reduction in the community, with the

understanding that everyone has the right to meet their needs and live with dignity. The Circles Initiative provides a platform for community agencies and providers to work together for the common goal of ending poverty in our community. As a community we all do better when poverty is reduced.

## Ontario Public Health Standards

The Ontario Public Health Standards, 2018, indicate that local boards of health shall modify and orient public health programs and services in ways that decrease health inequities. This includes designing strategies that work to improve the health of entire populations while decreasing health inequities experienced by those most vulnerable community members (Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, 2018). “Health is influenced by a broad range of factors, including social determinants that affect the conditions in which individuals and communities live, learn, work, and play” (Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, 2018). Locally, Public Health Sudbury & Districts is committed to actions that will reduce health inequities and create opportunities for all members of our communities to achieve their full health potential, including focused efforts on poverty reduction.

The Circles Initiative has the capacity to positively influence Leaders’ and their families’ access and experiences with the social determinants of health. Below is a list of the 16 key social determinants identified by the Ontario Public Health Standards. The social determinants of health underlined below are the ones that the Circles program has focused on in supporting our Leaders to date:

- Access to health services
- Culture, race, and ethnicity
- Disability
- Early childhood development
- Education, literacy, and skills
- Employment, job security, and working conditions
- Food insecurity
- Gender identity and expression
- Housing
- Income and income distribution
- Indigenous status
- Personal health practices and resiliency
- Physical environments
- Sexual orientation and attraction
- Social inclusion/exclusion
- Social support networks

The Circles Initiative also aligns with the recommendations listed in the most recent report of the Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario, “*Connected Communities: Healthier Together*”, which recommends that:

- governments highlight the critical importance of connected communities and foster their growth;
- public health units play a lead role in enabling community; and

- we challenge ourselves and each other to make community health and well-being a priority (Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, 2019).

The report emphasizes the notion that being connected to other people is essential to our well-being, that strong resilient communities reduce isolation and that individuals, organizations, communities and governments must work together to create a society that values and invests in social connection and community (Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, 2019).

## City of Greater Sudbury Priorities

The City of Greater Sudbury believes in recognizing the specific needs of all citizens and ensuring an inclusive, accessible community for all (City of Greater Sudbury, 2019). Greater Sudbury provides programs and services to support individuals and families, including those struggling with poverty, with programs such as the Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Programs (ODSP is not delivered by the CGS). The Circles Initiative aligns, builds on, and works with the programs to support individuals and families to exit poverty through education and employment pathways. The Circles Initiative also aligns with Greater Sudbury's current focus on population health, including the identified ten key priority areas below. The priorities underlined below are ones that the Circles Initiative has supported to date through Bridges out of Poverty, Circles Leader Training, and the Circles program:

1. Indigenous Youth: Reconciliation through education and knowledge transfer
2. Families: Strengthened family and social networks for children and youth
3. A Compassionate City: Culture of understanding and support
4. Housing: Affordable, sustainable and available Housing
5. Age-Friendly Strategy: Welcoming community for all ages
6. Resiliency: Resiliency of individuals in neighbourhoods
7. Mental Health: Individual mental health and well-being
8. “Play” Opportunities: Play for all ages
9. Holistic Health: Holistic health
10. Healthy Streets: Healthy streets (City of Greater Sudbury, 2018).

# Bridges out of Poverty

Bridges out of Poverty is a training opportunity that aims to start a conversation about poverty. Bridges out of Poverty workshops explore the different experiences and realities of people living in poverty and people living in middle and upper income. Participants are invited to look at poverty differently after learning about the societal factors that influence and sustain poverty through three or six-hour interactive workshops.

Workshops are offered by trained facilitators to help participants understand the causes and impacts of poverty on families, the challenges and strengths of people living in poverty, the hidden rules of economic groups, barriers low-income individuals face to moving out of poverty, and the importance of building relationships across economic groups. Workshops are primarily facilitated by Public Health Sudbury & Districts staff but have benefitted greatly when supported by staff from partner agencies, including co-facilitation support from Our Children, Our Future and Centre de santé communautaire du Grand Sudbury.

## Key Highlights: Bridges out of Poverty

Forty-five Bridges out of Poverty Workshops were delivered between June 2017 and June 2019 (26 half day workshops and 19 full day workshop) for a total of 849 participants from 113 community agencies. Workshops were evaluated by surveys, completed by participants at the end of the workshop, and were based on three main categories: Program Access and Delivery, Program Context, and Poverty in the Community. Overall 693 of the 849 participants completed workshop surveys.

The majority of respondents indicated high levels of satisfaction in all three areas of the survey including access and program delivery (Table 1), program context (Table 2), and poverty in the community (Table 3).

**Table 1: Access and program Delivery – Percentage of participants who agree and strongly agree**

Access and program delivery	3-hour workshop	6-hour workshop
PHSD staff were helpful and knowledgeable about this workshop	98%	99%
Like that workshops are offered during business hours	87%	93%
The location of the workshop was convenient	92%	91%
The facilitators were well prepared for the workshop	96%	99%
The facilitators were knowledgeable about the workshop material	99%	99%

**Table 2: Program Context – Percentage of participants who agree and strongly agree**

Program Context	3-hour workshop	6-hour workshop
Enjoyed this workshop	95%	98%
Have a better understanding of poverty because of the workshop	85%	90%
Satisfied with the amount of content presented	88%	95%
Remained engaged throughout the workshop	89%	93%
The workshop length is appropriate for content	76%	93%

**Table 3: Poverty in the Community – Percentage of participants who agree and strongly agree**

Poverty in the Community	3-hour workshop	6-hour workshop
Happy that poverty reduction programs are being offered in the City	96%	95%
Learning about Poverty Reduction Strategies will help me do a better job at work	92%	94%
Learning about Poverty Reduction Strategies are relevant to me on a personal level	86%	84%
Understanding poverty is important for all members of our community.	99%	100%
Reducing poverty is a priority for our community leaders	81%	80%

**Comments received regarding the three and six-hour Bridges out of Poverty workshops spoke to some of the immediate impacts on participants who attended**

*“As I am not involved professionally in social services, this course won't help me in everyday life, but as a decision maker and volunteer in the community I feel it was valuable in understanding and hopefully supporting initiatives locally if the opportunity arises. It helped me to see a different side to people living in poverty.” (2017, 6-hour workshop)*

*“This training should be mandatory for everyone!” (2017, 3-hour workshop)*

*“Loved the content in this workshop. I felt like it has helped me identify some of the assumptions I was making while in my position.” (2018, 6-hour workshop)*

*“I truly appreciate the information and it will allow me to approach my individuals in a way that is more with their needs in mind when it has to do with poverty. Using empathy to reach out to individuals. Also, being aware of my own biases as to not offend the individual that are accessing our services.” (2019, 6-hour workshop)*

# Circles Leader Training

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 Leader Training is designed for individuals who are currently experiencing poverty and who are ready and able to develop a plan of change with concrete steps to move out of poverty. Participants are recruited into Circles Leader Training through referrals from agencies in the Partners to End Poverty Steering Committee, postings on social media, self-referrals, and through word-of-mouth. All participants are living below the poverty line as determined by the Low-income Measure (Statistics Canada, 2017) and most are receiving financial support either through Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program.

**Table 4: Low income measure thresholds by income source and household size**

Household size	2017 After-tax income
1 person	23,513
2 persons	33,252
3 persons	40,726
4 persons	47,026
5 persons	52,577
6 persons	57,595

Source: Statistics Canada. [Table 11-10-0232-01 Low income measure \(LIM\) thresholds by income source and household size](#)

Circles Leader Training is a program that includes facilitated group discussions, interactive activities, and individual self-reflection exercises. The Circles Leader Training covers materials on the following:

- Budgeting and money tips
- Communication and relationship strategies
- The social determinants of health and their impact on health outcomes
- Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy
- Situational vs. generational poverty

- Predatory lending
- Social capital
- Hidden bias and unspoken rules among economic groups
- Self-care
- Employment strategies
- Community resources and networking
- Personal goal setting

During Circles Leader Training, participants complete a Life Assessment Tool on a range of categories to measure their overall well-being. Categories include but are not limited to food, housing, transportation, support system, well-being and mental health. The Life Assessment Tool asks participants to rank themselves along a 5-point scale to indicate where they see themselves along a continuum of surviving (1) to thriving (5). Participants are supported throughout the training while they work to develop their own personal action plans to achieve economic self-sufficiency.

## Circles Leader Training Demographics

When examining Circles Leader demographics, there is diverse representation regarding age, gender, education, ethnicity, marital status, living situation, physical and mental health, and addictions. These demographics helped to demonstrate that Circles Leader Training participants were from the intended targets. Of the 74 Circles Leader Training participants, 23 became involved with Circles to continue their journey.

### Key socio-demographic highlights of participants

- 45% were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old
- 77% were female
- 68% did not have grade 12 education at the time of enrolling for Circles Leader Training. An additional 8% only had a grade 8 education
- 41% identified as Indigenous and 4% identified as Black
- 65% listed their marital status as single
- 42% had one or more child dependents
- 36% had been diagnosed with or treated for a serious physical health problem or disability
- 42% had been diagnosed or treated for a serious mental health problem
- 43% had expressed concern about their use of alcohol or drugs.



Since November 2017, eight Circles Leader Training series have been offered with over 70 community members at different host partner sites including YMCA of Northeastern Ontario, Barrydowne College, St. Albert Adult Learning Centre, the N'Swakamok Native Alternative School, and Sudbury Vocational Resource Centre (recently renamed Spark Employment Services). In addition to receiving a certificate of completion upon graduating from the training, participants have also received one credit towards their Ontario Secondary School Diploma through Barrydowne College, St. Albert Adult Learning Centre and N'Swakamok Native Alternative School.

The Circles Leader Training program has evolved from being facilitated exclusively by Public Health Sudbury & Districts staff to a co-facilitation model and a full facilitation model with St. Albert Adult Learning Centre, thus greatly improving the sustainability of the program and aligning well with the adult learner curriculum.

## **Key Highlights from Circles Leader Training**

Circles Leader Training is evaluated through pre and post program surveys with participants which capture information on key areas including socio-demographic data, statistics on living conditions of participants, physical and mental health status of participants, and delivery of Circles Leader Training program. The evaluation also compares the perceived stress and self-esteem scores for participants before and after participating in Circles Leader Training using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Survey (Rosenberg, 1965) and the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen and Williamson, 1988). A total of 42 respondents completed both pre and post surveys.

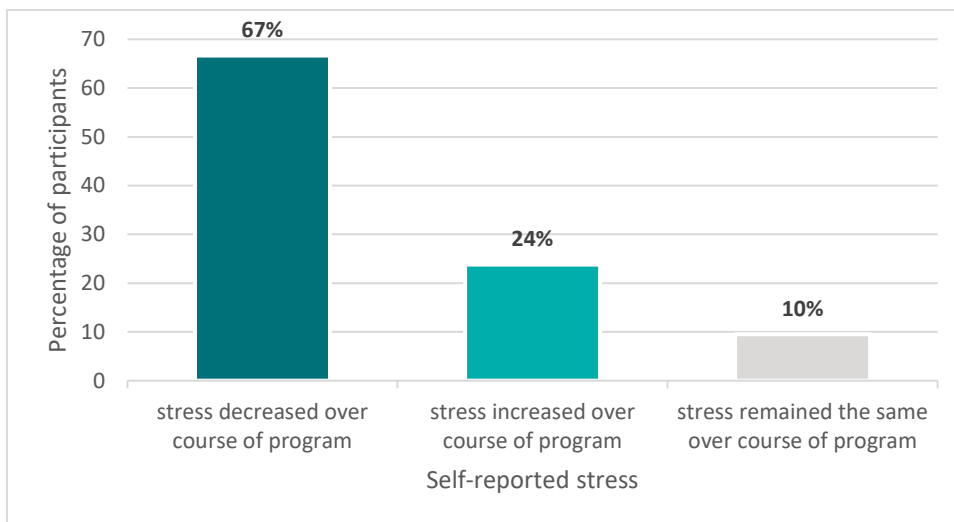
It is not possible to account for external factors influencing the lives of participants during the course of Circles Leader Training that could impact their self-reported levels of stress and self-esteem. Despite this, results from the pre and post surveys from participants are very positive and demonstrate improvements in levels of stress and self-esteem.

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*The majority or 67% of participants reported lower levels of perceived stress after completing the Circles Leader Training program (Figure 2).*

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**Figure 2: Change in stress after Circles Leader Training**

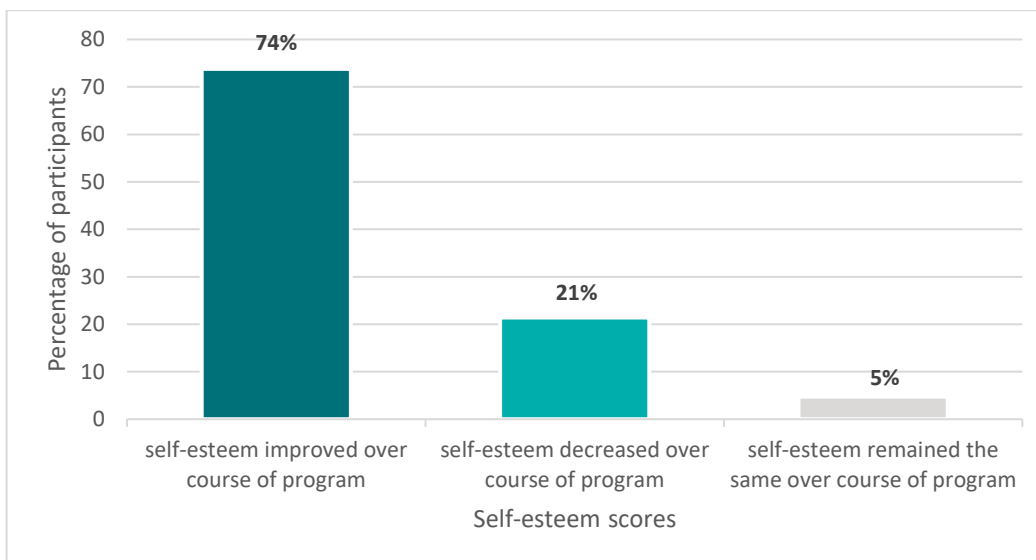


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*The majority or 74% of participants reported increased levels of self-esteem after completing the Circles Leader Training program (Figure 3).*

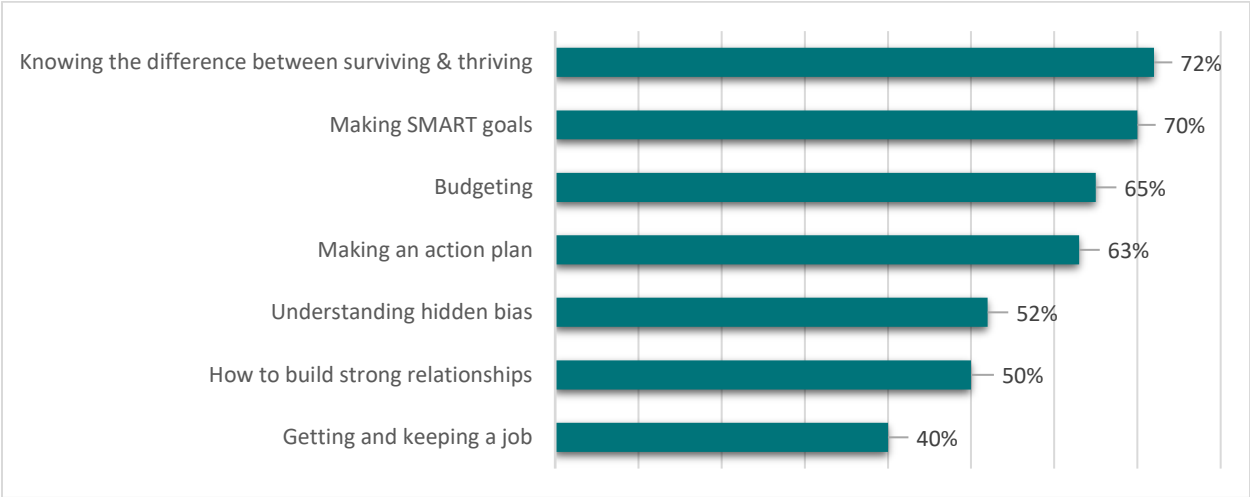
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**Figure 3: Change in self-esteem scores after Circles Leader Training**



Circles Leader Training participants were asked to identify new skills gained through the program. Top ranked skills identified by participants were: knowing the difference between surviving & thriving, making SMART goals, budgeting, and making a personal action plan to exit poverty (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Participants' new skills after completing Circles Leader Training**



**Testimonials from Circles Leader Training participants**

*“I’m glad that I was involved in this program. It really helped me and it gave me a chance to meet new people.”*

*“Please keep Circles going. It is a great experience for people who want to be true leaders. There is a lot to gain from this program.”*

*“Leader Training should be broadcasted through media and made more accessible. This is life changing, let’s make this known.”*

# Circles

Circles is a program developed to support individuals 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 while participants work on their plans to exit poverty. Graduates of the Circles Leader Training program who are ready to move forward with their personal action plan to exit poverty are invited to join the Circles Program. 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. Circles Allies are community members that are often recruited from the Bridges Out of Poverty workshops. Other volunteers recruited in the community are referred to attend a workshop upon expressing interest in becoming a Circles Ally.

Leaders also receive support from Circles Coaches who support them while they create their action plan which includes education and employment strategies. Action plans include short and long-term SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-Bound). Circles Coaches review each Leader's action plan upon entering the Circles program and every six months thereafter until the Leader achieves economic self-sufficiency and graduates from the program. Self-sufficiency is achieved when the individual is earning an income above the Low-income Measure (LIM, 2017) for family size. 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 (dinner) and programming. Transportation is provided for participants as needed and children of Leaders and Allies are welcome. Examples of topics covered in the programming include relationship building, financial literacy, physical literacy, nutrition, respect, and volunteerism. Child programming is a key element of the Circles program and includes strengths-based sessions to foster resiliency and build relationships. The content of the child programming aims to help children develop interpersonal skills that are integral to a full life and precede any success in school and beyond. The focus on themes such as respect, compassion, volunteerism, and financial literacy will give the children an opportunity to move forward, in parallel to their parent, who will be honing the same skills in the adult circle. Child programming is facilitated by Public Health Sudbury & Districts students and Early Childhood Educators.

Circles Sudbury released a video in 2018 to provide a snap shot about the Circles program in Sudbury.

## First Circles Sudbury video - Helping people exit poverty: the power of the Circles program (<http://bit.ly/30AyNb7>)

**The video, which launched on October 12, 2018 features experiences of a Leader and an Ally in the program.**

*“In my case, I really needed the encouragement and support. The Circles program brings together Leaders, Allies, and Coaches to come up with solutions to help participants get out of poverty. This experience has impacted me in so many ways. I would definitely recommend the Circles program to anyone.” - Hughie, Leader in Circles Sudbury*

*“I think Circles is trying to reach out to folks that are living in poverty and in generational poverty and ... It’s showing them that there is a way out, not just that there is a way out of this, but also that there are connections with people. That we are all the same. And building relationships and trust, I think is the first step to moving that piece forward.” - Dan, Ally in Circles Sudbury.*

## The Big View – Tackling Community-Wide Issues

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. Each year, Circles Sudbury participants work collectively with the Partners to End Poverty Steering Committee to identify key issues to focus on at the community level to address 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. 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.

**Table 5: Circles Big View Topics by Year**

Year	Challenges	Corresponding Projects
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of compassion and understanding about the realities of living in poverty, including the challenges of service navigation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Second Circles Sudbury video – <i>A thriving community begins with compassion: stories from the Circles Initiatives</i></li> <li>Greater Sudbury Poverty Challenge</li> </ul>
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mental health supports and stigma of mental illness</li> <li>Affordable housing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Photovoice project</li> <li>Meeting with Canadian Mental Health Association for support with the photovoice project</li> <li>The Homelessness Network (Centre de santé communautaire du Grand Sudbury) presented to Circles Sudbury about housing resources and gaps in the community</li> </ul>

## Big View focus for 2018

To help address the Big View focus in 2018, Public Health Sudbury & Districts hosted a one-day poverty simulation event on December 14, 2018, called the Greater Sudbury Poverty Challenge. The event was held in partnership with the Partners to End Poverty Steering Committee. The Greater Sudbury Poverty Challenge brought civic leaders together to experience poverty and its challenges based on real-life profiles. Civic leaders were offered a glimpse into the life of struggling local families as they try to meet their basic needs.

This authentic experience helped increase understanding about the realities of living in poverty. They were asked to experience several real-life scenarios. Profiles included some of the following instructions: “You are unemployed. Jobs are scarce. You live in subsidized housing. You need help finding temporary housing. You are couch surfing and cannot afford an apartment. You are dealing with your addiction and have no social support”.

Each profile came with a series of environments for civic leaders to navigate. They were given a limited amount of time and set of resources and they were asked to manage a range of common community agency encounters. Representatives from seventeen community agencies were present to interact with participants, adding greater depth to the event.

The Greater Sudbury Poverty Challenge event was designed to raise awareness about the realities of living in poverty and to inspire and sustain commitment to local poverty reduction efforts. The second Circles Sudbury video was released during the event and features the stories and hopes of participants connected with the Circles Initiative.

**Second Circles Sudbury video – A thriving community begins with compassion: stories from the Circles Initiative** (<http://bit.ly/2PeXrND>)

**The video launched on December 14, 2018 features the stories and hopes of participants connected with the Circles Initiative in Sudbury.**

*“Now, I know my mom is my biggest support in the entire world. I don’t know where I would be without her.” - Raven*

*“I have this amazing mentor. She’s been my mentor for just over a year now... She has helped me formalize our tenant group. She has helped me write grants for the garden.” - Lynn*

*“When we made this video, we really wanted to make people think about how they treat people trying to access the services they are providing. We wanted to remind them that we are all human beings, and that we all deserve the same type of compassion.” - Raven*

**A video was released on May 22, 2019 to provide a snap shot of the Greater Sudbury Poverty Challenge event.**

**Greater Sudbury Poverty Challenge Video** (<http://bit.ly/3426WTx>)

*“It was something new to me, the poverty simulation, where you actually place yourselves in the situation of what I would call people living in absolute poverty. We were asked to navigate: Where can I find a place to sleep tonight? Where can I get food? How can I get longer term housing? How can I get connected to a job? And for the most part it was a nightmare. It is still plagued by bureaucracy, by a rationing and by an inability of what is available now, to meet the needs that are out there.” - Dennis Raphael, Professor, York University, Faculty of Health – School of Health Policy & Management*

*“We have to just think of what is possible. I think we need to continue to advocate. I think we need to continue to have these dialogues with our family, with our friends, with our students so that we bring these issues to light, so that if we don’t agree with something that the government is handing down, or we really feel strongly about something that we don’t just sit back and complain about it. What are you, individually and collectively going to do about it? And that’s where the hope is. Bringing people together to fight, for each*

*other. So there is hope in that because I don't think that is lost yet."* - **Karla Gharthey, Professor of Nursing, Cambrian College**

*"It was a great experience in the sense that we took the role of somebody who actually experienced this through their life. When they say the system is broken, it is not because the services is not there, but the process to it is probably what's broken."* - **René Lapierre, Greater Sudbury Councillor, Ward 6, Chair, Board of Health, Public Health Sudbury & Districts**

**To learn more about the Greater Sudbury Poverty Challenge event, please visit: <http://bit.ly/2znDVnl>.**

## Big View focus for 2019

Mental health supports and access to affordable housing are the Big View focus for 2019. A photovoice project was chosen to articulate the challenges of mental health supports and affordable housing in the lives of Circles Sudbury Leaders. The purpose of the project is to raise awareness about the benefits of Circles in the lives of the Leaders and their families as well as understanding what are their biggest barriers to getting out of poverty. The photovoice will give Leaders the opportunity to showcase their stories and have their voices heard by using images and words as a form of expression. Circles Sudbury is currently working on this project with participants and they are planning on disseminating key products in late 2019.

The Leaders started this project by taking photographs that represent their individual perspectives and lived experiences about the benefits of the Circles program in their lives. These pictures were then shared back with fellow participants and discussed collaboratively to pull out connecting themes.

Included below are preliminary pictures and stories that depict the voices and experiences of four Leaders about the benefits of Circles Sudbury in their lives.



## Leader #1



### *Friendships*

“My Ally and I always do a fist bump when we meet. This photo symbolizes friendships that I have made.”

### *Confidence*

“Circles allowed me to gain confidence. Prior to Circles, leaving the house was a challenge. This photo represents not wanting to go but taking little steps and finding your light within the darkness.”



## Leader #2



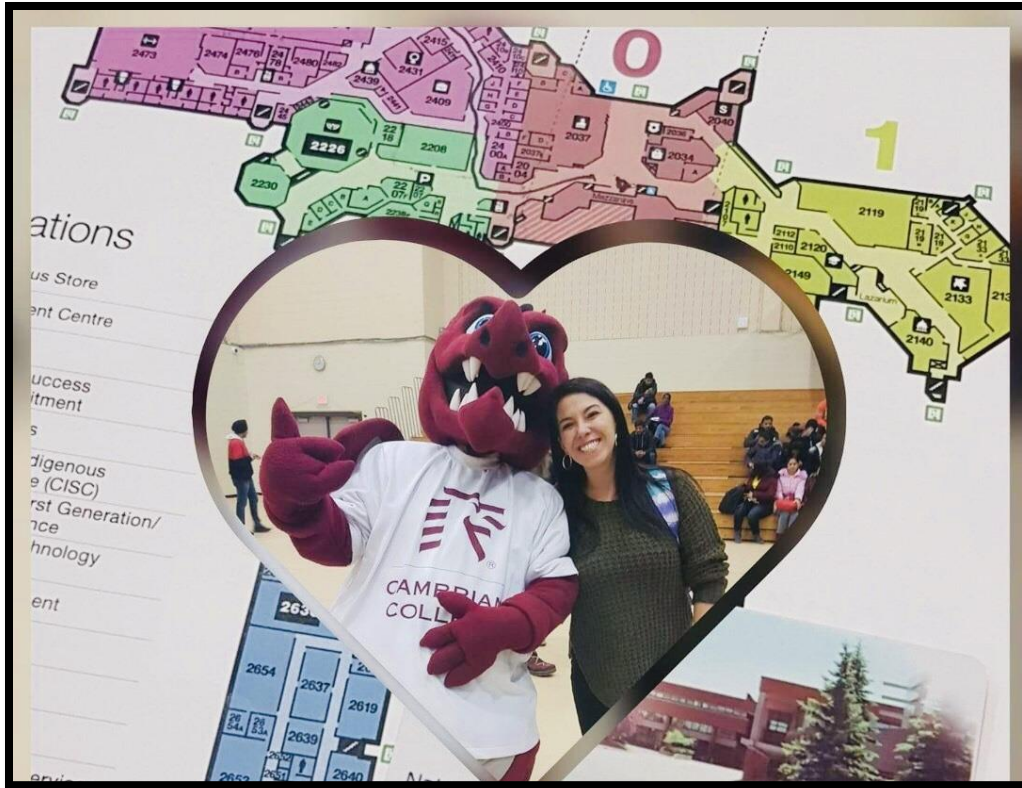
### *Connecting & Community Development*

“The connections I made in Circles helped me flourish, share my interests and give back to my community.”

## *Resilience*

“I didn’t expect to overcome my fears and my past. Circles helped me realize that I am strong enough, I am smart enough and I can achieve my goals.”

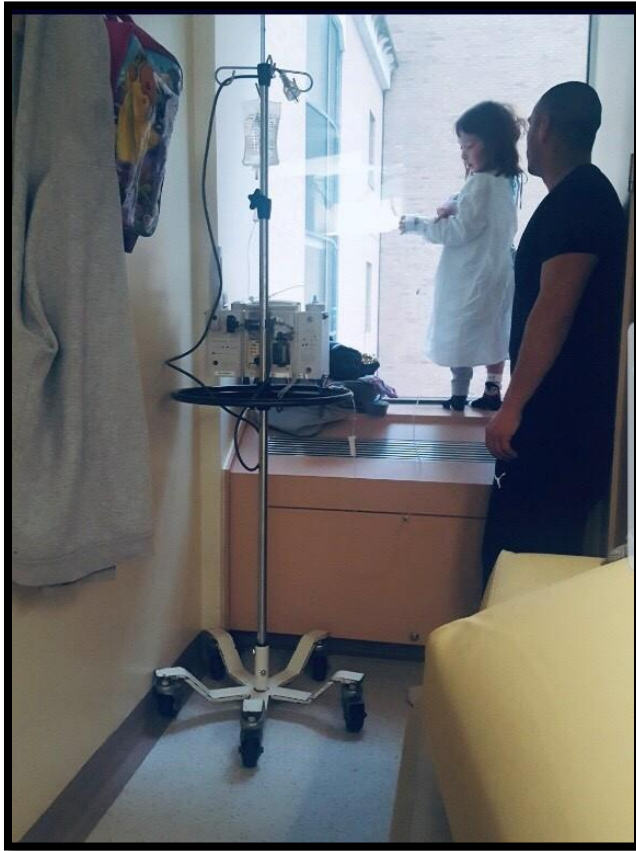




## *Furthering Education*

“This photo wouldn’t have happened without Circles. I wouldn’t have ever pursued college. Circles made me realize it’s never too late to go to school, achieve your goals or strive to be who you truly want to be.”

## Leader #3



### *Breaking from Isolation*

“Circles has shown me that you don’t have to face things alone as long as you have the right people supporting you!”

### *Authentic Support*

“It’s hard to find authentic support in Sudbury. Allies understand, they check in on me and no matter what, they are there.”



*Leader #4*



*Past, Present, Future*

“Circles gave me the ability to let go of the past, helped me be grateful of what’s important to me now, while supporting me to see the strength and resiliency in my life, which makes me look forward to the future.”

# Key Highlights from the Circles Program

Circles Sudbury launched in February 2018. Three community partners graciously agreed to serve as host sites with no cost during this time including: N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre, Jubilee Heritage Family Resources, and Montessori School of Sudbury.

Programming for participants (Leaders) and volunteers (Allies) is tailored to meet the interests and needs of the Leaders to support them in moving forward with their action plans.

Programming also focuses on supporting volunteers build their capacity to serve as Allies to program participants. Examples of topics covered in Circles include relationship building, networking reviewing and updating individual action plans and SMART goals, empowerment and self-advocacy, motivational interviewing, theory of change, and allyship.

Since the beginning of Circles Sudbury, 23 Circles Leaders with their 30 children and 52 Circles Allies were recruited into the program. We currently have 13 Leaders, 23 Allies and 29 children (22 children of Leaders and 7 children of Allies) in Circles Sudbury.

The group has had the pleasure of welcoming various partners to meetings since the launch of Circles.

**Table 6: Guest speakers at Circles Sudbury**

Agency	Topics
Canada Revenue Agency	Benefits, credits, income tax, filing and more
Homelessness Network Centre de santé communautaire du Grand Sudbury	Housing and services offered by the Homelessness Network
Monarch Recovery Services	Building Connections
Northern Initiative for Social Action	Mental Health Awareness and Resources
N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre	Session on National Indigenous Peoples' Day; Other traditional cultural teachings including drumming and a round dance
Ontario Works City of Greater Sudbury – Employment Support Services	Overview of local industries & occupations and other topics
Public Health Sudbury & Districts	Building our resiliency through our strengths Re-defining Allyship Photovoice Project Relationship building activities
Sudbury Workers Education & Advocacy Centre	Services offered by Sudbury Workers Education & Advocacy Centre
YMCA of Northeastern Ontario	SMART Goals Interview skills

# Progress of Leaders

As mentioned previously, Circles Leaders strive to attain self-sufficiently within an 18 to 48-month timeline. Circles staff support Circles Leaders while they explore and develop short and long-term goals that are primarily linked to education or employment pathways.

## Long-term goals

When considering the table below, it is important to note that 72% of the long-term goals that were identified by the Circles Leaders are currently in progress due to the nature of the goals themselves.

Examples of long-term goals set by Circles Leaders:

- ✓ To obtain Ontario Secondary School Diploma
- ✓ To obtain Ontario Secondary School Diploma and complete the Personal Support Worker program
- ✓ To graduate with a Social Service College Diploma within two years
- ✓ To graduate with a University degree in four years

**Table 7: Circles Long-Term Goals Identified and Achieved**

Long-Term Goals Identified	Number of Goals	Long-Term Goals Met			
		Yes	No	In Progress	Total Goal %
Education	26	4	3	19	61%
Employment	13	2	1	10	30%
Financial	1	0	0	1	2%
Transportation	2	2	0	0	5%
Volunteering	1	0	0	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Long-Term Educational Goals

Through the program, Circles Leaders have acquired the skills to set realistic long-term goals and develop plans to pursue post-secondary education. In fact, 61% of goals identified by the Circles Leaders were related to education. A total of seven Leaders have increased their education level by either obtaining their Ontario Secondary School Diploma or entering a post-secondary education institution such as College or University.

## **Circles Leader's Story: Immeasurable outcomes**

Dealing with mental health issues, children with developmental issues and suffering from low-self-esteem from an unhealthy relationship, a Circles Leader was convinced that they would never be able to pursue post-secondary education. However, an influential person recommended the Circles program. Thanks to the help of a Circles staff, the Circles Leader was able to push through their fears, obtain their high school transcripts and apply to college. Having gained the confidence from the Circles staff and Circles Leader Training, within two months of completing Circles Leader Training, the Circles Leader started their studies at College and was able to complete one semester of part-time studies in the social service field. They will be continuing their education starting in the fall of 2019.

## **Circles Leader's Story: A simple goal**

***“I want a better life for my family.”*** A Circles Leader was conflicted after having taken the Circles Leader Training and finally accomplishing their goal of graduating high-school. They were motivated by the simple goal of improving their family situation, but they weren't sure which post-secondary program would allow them to accomplish their goal. Thanks to extensive research into the programs, a pros and cons list, a conversation with the liaison officer at a college resulting in the \$500 sitting fee being waived, the Circles staff assisted the Circles Leader to explore all their options. The Circles Leader will be starting a trades program in the fall of 2019 and will be the first in their family to go to college.

## **Long-Term Employment Goals**

A total of 30% of goals identified by Circles Leaders were linked to exiting poverty through full-time employment. Several of the Circles Leaders' plans included post-secondary studies leading into full-time employment. Some Circles Leaders were recipients of Ontario Disability Support Program and their goals were to obtain part-time work suited to their needs. Several Circles Leaders were able to obtain employment (e.g. personal support worker, superintendent of building, furniture sales associate, automobile sales associate, cleaning services associate, social media channel creator, customer service representative in the gaming industry, team member at a restaurant).



## **Circles Leader's story: Leader turned Entrepreneur**

A Circles Leader was unable to obtain employment after a tragic death in the family that left them with mental health challenges. Due to these challenges, the Circle Leader had to leave their full-time employment and apply for Ontario Disability Support Program. The Circles Leader decided to join Circles and attended every Circles session though they had difficulty leaving their home due to their mental health challenges. With time and help from their supportive Allies, the Circles Leader gained the confidence to pursue their employment goals. Being a creative individual, they turned their hobbies and passion for working with youth into the foundation for a small business. They contacted the Regional Business Centre for help developing a business plan and they are continuing to work with an employee at the Business Centre. They are also moving forward as an online entrepreneur and pursuing part-time employment working with youth.

## **Circles Leader's story: Graduating into self-sufficiency**

In a short time-frame, a Circle Leader graduated from the Circles program and attained financial self-sufficiency. Starting the Circles program in February 2018, the Circles Leader was able to gain the confidence to obtain their G license, buy a car, and secure full-time employment before August 2018. The Circles Leader originally had difficulty pursuing employment as they always struggled with developing job resumes and undergoing job interviews. Thanks to the knowledge gained in Circles Leader Training and the support from Circles staff and a supportive Ally, the Circles Leader successfully completed the interview and gained full-time employment. The Leader states their self-esteem has greatly improved, and they are now currently working.

## **Short-term goals**

Circles Leaders break down long-term SMART goals into short-term concrete steps and tasks. These steps and tasks are short-term goals that can be accomplished within a six-month timeframe. The short-term goals identified by the Circles Leaders can vary from financial tasks (e.g. creating a budget with their Ally) to tasks related to transportation (e.g. obtaining their G driver's license). A total of 45% of short-term goals identified were completed and 43% of them are still in progress.

## Examples of completed short term goals include:

- ✓ Take part in a mock interview
- ✓ Go to Employment Services
- ✓ Finding a vehicle to facilitate going to work
- ✓ Talk to Ontario Works worker about funding for school supplies
- ✓ Complete Laurentian University application form
- ✓ Finding affordable housing

**Table 8: Circles Short-Term Goals Identified and Achieved**

Short-Term Goals Identified	Number of Goals	Goals Met			Total Goal %
		Yes	No	In Progress	
Education	67	27	11	29	41%
Employment	28	21	1	6	17%
Other	11	5	1	5	7%
Financial	16	6	0	10	10%
Transportation	10	6	0	4	6%
Service Navigation	5	2	0	3	3%
Housing	5	2	0	3	3%
Mental-Well Being	5	2	0	3	3%
Brainstorming	5	2	2	1	3%
Health	3	1	1	1	2%
Family/ Social Support	3	1	1	1	2%
Volunteer	3	0	1	2	2%
Criminal Background Check	3	0	1	2	2%
Self-Advocacy	1	0	0	1	0.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>101.5*</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*Totals more than 100% due to rounding

## Circles Leader’s Story: Moving forward from precarious housing

For years, one of the Leaders was struggling to find affordable housing. Several factors contributed to them not being able to obtain “urgent status” for subsidized housing even though they were experiencing serious maltreatment by their landlord. Since the landlord was not a domestic partner, they were unable to access shelters meant to help those impacted by domestic violence. They were also having difficulty accessing other shelters due to conflicts between their volunteering and set housing curfews. Having accessed multiple social services, and unable to access subsidized housing due to existing rent payment arrears, the Leader continued to rent their room with the \$550 that was allocated by Ontario Works. Circles staff advocated for the Leader, checked listings, found housing opportunities, and encouraged the Leader to re-contact the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). A transitional housing worker from CMHA was able to help them receive a rent supplement of \$850 a month. The Circles Leader has stated that for the first time in a long time, they finally feel hope. Currently, the Circles Leader has found affordable housing and will be moving in September of 2019. The CMHA will assist in paying the first and last payments of rent.

## Financial Status

Financial data are tracked for Circles Leaders’ at initial program entry and every six months thereafter. Data from the Circles Leaders who joined in 2018 indicate steady increases in the average annual income or earnings from 2018 at \$24,200 to present at \$27,200. Similarly, average yearly income has increased for those participants who joined the Circles program in 2019 from \$13,200 at entry to \$19,200 at present (See Table 9).

**Table 9: Circles Leaders’ Yearly Average Income**

	Initial income (year)	Current income (year)	% Increase
Average yearly income of participants who joined Circles in 2018	\$24,200 (2018)	\$27,200 (2019)	11%
Average yearly income of participants who joined Circles in 2019	\$13,200 (2019)	\$19,200 (2019)	31.25%

## Life Assessment Tool Outcomes

The Life Assessment Tool is a five-point scale that assesses how participants perceive they are surviving (1) or thriving (5) in multiple categories. This tool is completed by Leaders when they join Circles and every six months while they participate in Circles Sudbury.

Results to date demonstrate increases among Circles Leaders following their initial six-month check up in the following categories: health care defined by adequate coverage, good physical or mental health (25% increase), family and social support defined by the availability of family, friends and resources (25% increase), relationships and role models defined by the availability of others who are safe, supportive and nurturing (27% increase), and negotiation language defined by the ability to improve upon strong vocabulary and negotiating skills (56% increase).

### **Circles Leader's Story: Exciting news – a Circles Leader on CBC**

A Leader from Circles Sudbury volunteered to share their story at the provincial public election forum hosted by CBC radio in the spring of 2018 in downtown Sudbury. The story included one of childhood poverty, substance use, poor housing conditions, and partner suicide. The Circles Leader opened the public debate with their story which led to the candidates sharing how their platforms would address poverty in the community and related social and community supports. The Circles Leader joined Circles in search for a better life for their children and to receive support while working on goals to become the first in their family to go to university. Circles programming supported the Circles Leader by enhancing their negotiations skills to enable them to engage in self-advocacy. Further, the program empowered the Circles Leader by identifying an authentic and powerful opportunity for a Circles Leader to share their story through this public forum.

# Summary of 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

- 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

- 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

- 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%
- 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 (e.g., Apatisiwin On-the-Job-Training Program)
- Venues to host programming and workshop sessions for Bridges out of Poverty, Circles Leader Training and Circles.
- Placement agreements to support programming (e.g., Cambrian College, Laurentian University)
- 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.

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