

# Circles Initiative

Final report – Fall 2020

Executive summary

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

## Authors

Health Equity Team, Public Health Sudbury & Districts

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## Contact for More Information

Health Equity Team  
Knowledge and Strategic Services  
Public Health Sudbury & Districts  
1300 Paris Street  
Sudbury, ON P3E 3A3  
Telephone: 705.522.9200, ext. 771  
Email: [equity@phsd.ca](mailto:equity@phsd.ca)

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# Overview

The [Circles Initiative final report](#) provides an overview and results from the introduction and pilot of the Circles Initiative to the City of Greater Sudbury between 2017 and 2020. The Circles Initiative was launched in 2017 following receipt of one of Ontario's Local Poverty Reduction Fund grants totalling \$217,000 in late 2016. The Bridges out of Poverty training program, licensed through aha! Process is also connected with the Circles Initiative but was not directly funded through the grant. Public Health Sudbury & Districts implemented the Bridges out of Poverty training initiative through in-kind dollars to ensure all three programs that make up the Circles Initiative were introduced into the community for the pilot. The pilot lasted between January 2017 to September 2020. The Circles Initiative includes three linked programs:

**Bridges out of Poverty:** a training opportunity for individuals living with a 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:** 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 support participants while they 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 out of 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. Self-sufficiency is achieved when the individual is earning an income above the Low-income Measure defined by Statistics Canada<sup>1</sup> for family size. The goal for Circles Leaders is to achieve economic self-sufficiency within 18 to 48 months of joining the program.

Together, the three programs work to reduce poverty by building relationships across all economic groups and community partners to help individuals and families get out of poverty and build communities where everyone can thrive. 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 with the focus on multiple sectors working collaboratively to alleviate poverty, and members from all economic groups in the community mobilized to support low-income participants.

The planning, implementation, and sustainability of these programs was 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. 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 Steering Committee met monthly throughout the pilot and worked 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 Initiative provides a platform for community agencies and providers to work together for the common goal of ending poverty in our community.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Steering Committee transitioned to virtual meetings and met more frequently to share timely information and resources with the goal of supporting the increased community needs resulting from the pandemic and negative social and economic impacts on the most vulnerable community members.

The Circles Initiative is strongly aligned with both the provincial public health focus on the social determinants of health and health inequities and the local population health priorities of the City of Greater Sudbury. 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 City of Greater Sudbury believes in recognizing the specific needs of all citizens and ensuring an inclusive, accessible community for all<sup>2</sup> and the Circles Initiative aligns with Greater Sudbury's current focus on population health.

In keeping with a community-wide approach, each year through the Circles program, Circles Leaders and staff work collaboratively to identify one key issue or community barrier to focus on as a collective, in addition to continuing to work to advance the individual action plans of each Leader. This annual focus for the Circles program is called the **Big View**. The Big View is intended to benefit Leaders in the program and their families as well as all members within the community currently living in poverty.

## Pilot highlights

In less than three years, the Circles Initiative has influenced over 1500 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 and compassion, 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

- Fifty-nine Bridges out of Poverty Workshops were delivered between June 2017 and February 2020 (35 half day workshops and 24 full day workshops) for a total of 971 participants from 134 community agencies
- 98% of participants enjoyed Bridges out of Poverty training
- 93% 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

- Between November 2017 and December 2019, nine Circles Leader Training series have been offered with over 70 community members
- 41 Leaders have earned a high school credit towards their high school diploma for completion of this training
- 69% of graduates indicated that their stress levels decreased throughout Circles Leader Training
- 67% of graduates indicated that their self-esteem increased as a result of Circles Leader Training

## Circles

- The Circles Sudbury program was launched in February 2018
- Since the beginning of Circles Sudbury, 29 Circles Leaders with their 34 children and 57 Circles Allies were recruited into the program
- Two high school students and 18 post-secondary students have assisted with this initiative
- There are currently 12 Leaders, 21 Allies, and 25 children (18 children of Leaders and 7 children of Allies) in the Circles Sudbury program
- Participants who joined in 2018 reported an average increase to annual income of 34.4%
- 42% of the short-term goals created by participants have already been completed
- 47% of goals identified by the Circles Leaders were related to education
- 35% of participants have increased their education by working towards their high school diploma, by obtaining an Ontario Secondary School Diploma, or by pursuing post-secondary education
- 41% of long-term goals identified by Circles Leaders were linked to exiting poverty through full-time employment

Due to COVID-19, the face-to-face meetings over a meal together were suspended. Instead of meeting for meals three times a month, the Circles program continues with a shift to virtual

meetings on the same schedule. Circles Leaders, Allies, and Coaches meet virtually for group discussions, sharing lived experiences during the pandemic, navigating community barriers, and identifying resources. Circles Coaches also contact Leaders through regular phone calls and virtual connects for six-month check-ins and working on actions plans to move out of poverty. The program also provided all Leaders with large Good Food Boxes each month over the summer into the fall 2020 in efforts to minimize food insecurity during the pandemic.

## Circles Big View – Intersectoral action to tackle community issues

For the Circles Sudbury program, the Big View is intended to benefit Leaders in the program and their families as well as the 21 000 other members across Greater Sudbury 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. Mental health supports and access to affordable housing were identified as key issues by Circles Leaders in Sudbury as the Big View focus for 2019 and 2020. On March 11, 2020, Public Health Sudbury & District’s Circles Initiative partnered with the Northern Ontario School of Medicine Dean Speaker Series to co-host a public event at Science North titled “Fighting Stigma and Finding Support”. The event featured a talk by mental health advocate Amy Willans and an interactive art exhibit of the photovoice project developed by Circles Leaders featuring their experiences with mental health, stigma, housing, and support.

The overall 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 as detailed throughout this report. The Circles Sudbury program could also not exist without the commitment, dedication and compassion of the community volunteers who serve as Allies and friends in the program. Their ongoing support, networking and allyship with Circles Leaders have been invaluable. 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. It is hoped that through continued partnerships and support from multiple sectors, that the Circles Initiative can continue to be sustained beyond the pilot funding that ended in September 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. (2017). [Table 11-10-0232-01 Low income measure \(LIM\) thresholds by income source and household size](#)

<sup>2</sup> City of Greater Sudbury. (2019). About Greater Sudbury. Retrieved from <https://www.greatersudbury.ca/live/about-greater-sudbury/>