

Hello my name is Becky Ambrosini and my husband, Al Ambrosini, and I have been volunteering many hours over the last four years to impact the 19.3% poverty rate in Fayette County. We first began this journey after Al became a county commissioner and witnesses the suffering of this large group of individuals. His entire reason for serving in this capacity was to help lift up people. He has retired from official public service but the solving poverty journey continues. We are not alone in this effort, in fact countless hours have been given to the organization Circles out of poverty. First in Connellsville as you have heard from Chip and now as you heard from Jim and the implementation of a regional chapter that we hope to grow to 7 sites over the next 5 years. The circles mission is to inspire and equip families and communities to end poverty. This is a hands up approach not a hand out. Circles is a volunteer centric researched process that brings existing services and support organizations (including local government) together to focus on helping these families to be financially independent. Creating these partnerships takes advantage of existing resources, prevents costly duplication and permits Circles to concentrate on the social capital required to reach family goals and objectives.

Inspiring and equipping families to get out of poverty is accomplished by providing on-going, peer to peer weekly support meetings for adults and creating individual circles, that match families with the support of middle and upper income volunteers. Families and volunteers gather for a weekly meal that helps build relationships and trust, then the adults, volunteers and family mentors gather for education, goal setting and encouragement, while the children gather for a highly specialized curriculum. They learn how to get out of poverty, improve academics, discipline and have fun! The Circle structure also includes 5 different volunteer collaborating teams that address poverty in the community and support the families. The Community team ensures the weekly meetings are effective and build community. They also coordinate and deliver the children's program. The recruitment teams finds the families and volunteers necessary to make an impact. The jobs and education team identify education and job opportunities in the community. The services team develops relationships with and coordinates existing resources. Lastly the big View Team solves systemic barriers and increases the awareness of poverty in the community.

The newly created Circles Laurel Highlands Regional Chapter has joined other Circle Chapters across the nation who have committed to a 10% reduction in poverty, which research shows, can be the tipping point to end poverty. Circles is an innovative, community driven way to solve poverty. We believe that the responsibility for both poverty and prosperity rest not only in the hands of individuals, but also with the societies, institutions and communities. Our approach is a progressive model grounded in research that shows families must have strong social capital and connections (healthy relationships and resources) with their communities in order to improve their economic situation and overall quality of life.

We are committed to supporting families and the individual in the family who has also committed to earn 200% of the federal poverty rate which is required to survive without assistance. For example, a family of four will need a plan and support to earn \$47,000 a year to achieve financial independence at 200%. Please note you must earn 300% of the poverty rate to thrive. While this may sound daunting or even impossible for some families it is imperative that we publicly acknowledge what it takes to be "out of poverty".

National Demographics of those enrolled in Circles :

Earned Income is the primary indicator of progress:

- 41% more income after 6 months
- 60% more Income after one year
- 88% more Income after 18 months (\$693 per month to \$1,128)

Employment Status

- 12 months unemployment decreased 39%
- 18 months unemployment decreased 44%

The most up to date statistics for Fayette shows that there are 18,000 children below the 200% of poverty rate. These children are often the fifth generation in poverty. Some studies estimate the cost of a child in poverty per child per year to be approximately \$30,000. This has a very negative impact on our economy. The current welfare and other assistance programs have been designed by well meaning individuals but unfortunately they have kept the poor, very poor and created this situation of generational poverty. This culture of poverty has become a way of life, passed down from generation to generation with the last two having no hope and no idea of how to get out. Circles exists to give a hands up to families but our greatest hope are the children.

Circles USA Founder and CEO Scott Miller has over 24 years of research, experimentation, and direct experience with families and communities across the United States. He has identified the following high-impact strategies to decrease poverty and improve the economy.

- Working a job or two is essential to improving earned income and decrease assistance
- Eliminate the cliff effect disincentives that prevent people who are otherwise willing and able to work from advancing in their current jobs or seeking better paying jobs. A gradual phase out that is pro-rated and marches the increase in income.
- Communities must commit to design and implement plans to reduce the poverty rate by 10% within 10 years to create a tipping point
- Engage the business community to provide opportunities for abled body people to work up to their potential.
- Equip workers with the skills needed for our 21st century economy. A coordinated effort among existing resources.
- Implement programs such as Circles to improve the social capital of individuals/families, help people access community programs for training and education, support goal achievement and prepare and help people to get jobs and to keep them.
- Change monthly income eligibility limits to an average over a period of time to more accurately reflect fluctuating income.