

ENGAGEMENT INCENTIVE GRANT PROPOSAL

PROJECT TITLE:

Together We Can – Making a Difference in Child and Family Poverty

PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

Need:

Though the overall 13.8% poverty rate in Kansas is lower than the nation's average, the poverty rate for Kansas kids is higher than the nation's. According to the Kansas Action for Children, 24% of Kansas children living in which has doubled in just the last decade. A substantial body of research indicates that children in poverty are more likely to have low academic achievement, higher rates of school drop-out, and health, behavioral, emotional problems. The impacts of long-term, family poverty include chronic under employment, increases in family instability, and strain on already tight public funds for communities across the state.

Compounding the situation of Kansas' poor families is the reduction in means-tested, social safety-net programs (e.g., TANF, Medicaid, child care subsidy, limited access to behavioral health). As a result, community-based, non-governmental programs are often the last resource for families in poverty, and many of those programs are not equipped to address increasing needs. Though dedicated and caring, the majority of social service community volunteers and part-time service providers are not prepared or trained to knit together 'homegrown' social safety nets for families with multiple needs and long-term instability. An effective solution includes training and supporting service intermediaries (e.g., local Extension professionals) who can work with other organizations (ie., Circles) to help reduce family and child poverty, and strength family resilience. This the goal of ***Together We Can: making a difference in family and child poverty.***

Engaged Activities

Beginning in 2009, the nationally recognized Circles program (see: www.circlesusa.org/index.php?page=location) has become active in eight Kansas communities working to reduce family and child poverty using a community-based, mutual support approach. The Circles model helps low income leaders to realize their contributions (ie., economically, as citizens, and leaders of their families) versus being consumers of programs or services. It does this by expanding the knowledge and understanding of middle and upper income citizens of the experiences of poverty through direct relationship with low income families. Circles utilizes the social capital of middle/ upper income citizens (ie., allies) to bridge opportunity gaps for those wanting to get out of poverty, and connects 'allies' with families in a multi-generational way versus targeting programs and services to "categories" of people (ie., young, old, disabled, rural, urban, Latino, African American).

More Kansas communities are wanting to join Circles or to begin similar 'neighbor-to-neighbor' approaches where governmental, means-tested programs are limited. ***Together We Can*** will prepare, train and equip local Extension professionals to become Circles 'allies', to offer non-formal education to families in poverty, and to work with local community-based poverty reduction initiatives. Extension's involvement in Circles and similar community-based initiatives will be evaluated so that best practices can be shared with other communities wanting to strengthen family resilience and reduce family poverty.

Engaged activities include:

- **Identify**, with Circles volunteers/staff (ie., Wanda Pumphrey), two cohorts of **6 Kansas communities that are ready to become part of Circles**, and identify the local Family and Child Development Extension agents servicing those communities.
- Once matched lists are established, Extension agents will be **trained** in Ohio State University's "Tough Work" (curriculum to equip community members to work with families in poverty) and Michigan State University's

"Together We Can" program for single parents, teen parents, and/or parents experiencing symptoms of poverty (e.g., depression, poor health, relationship strain, financial instability). Trainers will include Drs. Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Elaine Johannes, Bradford Wiles, Ms. Lisa Newman and Ms. Wanda Pumphrey (Circles coach and trainer).

- In addition to the three-day, 16 hrs training, Extension agents will **meet local Circles 'allies' and experience Circles family meals, trainings and events.**
- Following training, Extension agents and a local partner (e.g., public health department, faith community) will **be able to receive on-going support, consultation to implement the "Together We Can" curriculum, and to offer family resilience-building activities (e.g., resume writing, language and writing classes for parents, stress-reduction activities for children) with community-engagement initiatives such as Circles.**
- **Evaluation of the "Together We Can" project** will consist of assessment of community perception of family and child poverty (stakeholder interview/focus group), strong family attributes (self-report survey), Circles baseline of income and assets (survey), intermediary role of Extension agent (interview and survey).

Timeline for *Together We Can* project (two years; two cohorts)

Activity and/or Benchmark	(July, 2014-July, 2016)
Schedule Circles presenter for K-State Extension agent training (Manhattan)	August, 2014
Identify and recruit 6 communities for Circles implementation	September-December, 2014
Match Extension agents from 6 communities for implementation	September-December, 2014
Complete university IRB for evaluation of project	November –December, 2014
Collect evaluation data: community perception of family and child poverty, strong family attributes, Circles baseline of income and assets, intermediary role of Extension agent (PRE cohort 1)	January, 2015
<i>Together We Can</i> training (implementation cohort 1)	February/March, 2015
Launch of "Together We Can" project with local Extension agents (cohort 1)	March, 2015 – September, 2015 (6 mos.); bi-weekly meetings of Circles families First engagement grant report due July, 2015
Collect evaluation data: Community perception of family and child poverty, strong family attributes, Circles baseline of income and assets, intermediary role of Extension agent (POST cohort 1)	September, 2015
Schedule Circles, poverty reduction presenter for KSRE annual conference (Manhattan)	October, 2015
Identify and recruit 6 communities for	October-December, 2015

Circles implementation	
Match Extension agents, community intermediary partners from 6 communities for implementation	October-December, 2015
Collect evaluation data: community perception of family and child poverty, strong family attributes, Circles baseline of income and asset, intermediary role of Extension agent (PRE cohort 2)	January, 2016
<i>Together We Can</i> training (implementation cohort 2)	February/March, 2016
Launch of “Together We Can” project with local Extension agents (cohort 2)	March, 2016 – September, 2016 (6 mos.); bi-weekly meetings of Circles families Final engagement grant report due July, 2016
Collect evaluation data: Community perception of family and child poverty, strong family attributes, Circles baseline of income and assets, intermediary role of Extension agent (POST cohort 2)	September, 2016 (cohort 2)

COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS:

- **Elaine Johannes and Charlotte Shoup Olsen (Manhattan)**, School of Family Studies and Human Services Extension (co-PIs; *Together We Can* trainers and evaluators)
- **Lisa Newman (Salina)**, Central Kanas Extension District and Circles of the Heartland member/ally (co-PI, *Together We Can* trainer, Extension agent recruiter)
- **Wanda Pumphrey (Newton)**, Circles regional coach, training center (community recruiter, *Together We Can* trainer)
- Extension Family and Child Development Program Focus members who have plan-of-work to build strong, resilient families inclusive of poverty reduction, and who have expressed support for this initiative:
 - Chiquita Miller, Kanas City
 - Pat Gerhardt, Concordia
 - Deb Andres, Junction City
 - Nora Rhoades, Jewell
 - Liz Burchen-Cartagena, Wichita
 - Rebecca McFarland, Ottawa
 - Janae McNally, Coffeyville
 - Chelsea Richmond, Council Grove
 - Fran Richmond, Lyndon

POTENTIAL IMPACT FOR ALL PARTNERS:

At the end of the two-year project, 12 **Extension professionals** will be equipped and positioned to be effective community collaborators in poverty reduction with data demonstrating the impact they have had as intermediaries and family developmentalists. Local **Circles programs** will be benefited from partnering with well trained and equipped Extension professionals to establish or expand Circles in communities across Kansas. Within 12 communities, **Kansas families and children** who are experiencing poverty will have increased opportunities to improve their status in their communities and to strength their family resilience.