



Circles in Palmyra aims to help working poor move forward

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Submitted photo

Lee Smedley

People who have jobs but who can't make ends meet without government assistance are those the new Palmyra Circles Initiative of Lebanon County is hoping to help.

They won't get a handout, or someone telling them what they have to do.

Rather, they'll set their own goals and get direction to achieve them.

"It's not about getting someone to think the way we do," said Lee Smedley of Annville, one of the program's coordinators. "It's about helping someone become self-sufficient ... It's about helping people become leaders of their own life, not doing what we tell them to do."

Circles is a nonprofit, national campaign to lift people out of poverty by providing them with training, networks and "social capital" to better themselves. It also has the goal of changing barriers and policies in social programs and the community that work against those trying to get out of poverty.

It differs from other programs in that it tries to address the Catch-22 that those trying to get off assistance often find themselves in — that as their income rises, they lose government benefits and their income can't keep up.

The typical Circles family is saying, "I want to be a productive and be a contributing member of society, and I don't know how to do it," Smedley said. "Assumptions about why people are poor are often quite wrong."

Circles doesn't provide money, or ways to manipulate the system, Smedley said. Instead, it provides the Circles family with "allies" to help them achieve their goals, which could be in education, finance and life. "We will help them assess what their resources are and where there are gaps," Smedley said.

Lee Smedley describes the Circles program

Lee Smedley, coordinator of the new Circles program to fight poverty in Palmyra, describes how the initiative works.

The Circles leader, or family, is at the center of each group. They must be a working poor family with income at 130-170 percent of federal poverty guidelines. The Circles leader must be employed, have stable housing, no recent issues with drug or alcohol abuse, and must have a desire to “move forward” with his or her life, Smedley said.

They hope to have about 15 Circles leaders to start 16 weeks of training Sept. 17, with the Circles groups forming Jan. 1.

Around the leaders in each group will be their “allies,” who are middle- and upper-class members of the community willing to form a friendship relationship, Smedley said. The allies have skills in social work, finance, education and more, and the Circles leader will be able to pick his or her team.

“They have to support without rescuing,” Smedley said of the allies, of which about 20 have expressed interest so far. For example, they could assist the Circles leader in getting on track to earn a GED or college degree, or with sharpening interview and job hunting skills.

One of the Allies undergoing training is Dave Kestner of Palmyra, a retired business teacher and coach, who heard of Circles through his church. “I thought it sounded like a really unique approach,” he said, in that the family sets its own goals, and the time frame in which to achieve them. “They determine their own destiny, so to speak,” he said.

“A lot of us don’t realize how many folks are struggling to make it in communities like Palmyra,” Kestner said.

Circles has been working with the Caring Cupboard food pantry in Palmyra to find potential families, Smedley said. Invitations went out to 40 families so far. The ideal family for the program is working, but struggling, Smedley said, adding that is “very difficult” for most families to feel self-sufficient until they have an income at least 200 percent of poverty guidelines.

The Circles families are asked to commit to a two-year involvement in the program, which is only a start. “Taking someone from 130 percent of poverty to self-sufficiency could be a five-year process,” Smedley said. Their goal is to work with 15 families at a time, in two sessions per year, Smedley said.

August Fisher, a college intern with the Palmyra Circles program, said Palmyra matches the national statistics that describe one in five people as living in poverty. That translates to about 30 percent of elementary school students being in the free or reduced lunch program. “Even though it’s not really noticeable, it is there,” Fisher said of the poverty in the community.

“We’re trying to work with a group not a lot of other organizations are trying to help,” Fisher said. He said there is a lot of support for people below the national poverty level — \$23,050 for a family of four, — but once they hit 120 percent — \$27,660 for a family of four — it starts to disappear. “As income rises, you decrease your spending power with loss of food stamps, health care,” he said. “Those are the family groups we’re targeting, as they make the process into higher incomes.”

Smedley, a semiretired organizational training and development consultant, was introduced to Circles while working in North Carolina, before moving recently to Annville. "This is what God set me up to do in my semi-retirement," he said.

The Palmyra program grew out of a United Methodist conference last December in Lebanon. Of the 40 people attending, 25 were from Palmyra, Smedley said. The Circles program is not religion-based, however.

They are launching the Palmyra program with \$20,000 in grants and contributions. They don't plan to do fundraising, but accept contributions and are under the nonprofit status of the United Methodist Church. They have an office at Palmyra First United Methodist Church.

Details

The first training session of the Getting Ahead program for Circle leaders will be 5:30-8:30 p.m. Sept. 17 at First United Methodist Church, 520 E. Birch St., Palmyra. The second half of training for Allies will be 7-10 p.m. Sept. 10. Information: Lee Smedley at lee@palmyracircles.org, 610-914-3846 or www.palmyracircles.org.

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