

ICMA 2012 Program Excellence Narration: Provo City Boulders Circles Initiative

Problem Assessment

The Boulders is a low-cost apartment complex located in South Provo. It has the reputation of being the housing of last resort in the community due to a high number of low-income families and individuals in generational poverty, the transient nature of residents, a lack of life skills of many residents and a disproportionate use of City services. In 2002, Provo City administration officials began tracking a list of challenges faced by the Boulders. They found that Boulders residents had high rates of poverty, mental health cases and domestic issues and a limited sense of community that put an inordinate and unnecessary strain on city services, particularly police and fire. In order to alleviate this strain and ameliorate the situation in the Boulders, it was proposed to create an on-site mentoring program that would teach self-sufficiency, problem-solving and family skills. In developing a change in perception and life-long skills, it was hoped that residents would find solutions and the community would improve. This preliminary assessment laid groundwork for the creation of the Boulders Circles Initiative.

Program Implementation and Costs

Provo City organized meetings with various stakeholders to discover the best mentoring solution available. Those involved in the process included United Way of Utah County, Community Action Services and Food Bank, the Neighborhood Chair and interested neighbors at the Boulders, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Brigham Young University, Utah Valley University, Youth Corrections, Provo Housing Authority, Wasatch Mental Health, and the Provo School District. Together, these groups decided on the Circles Campaign or Initiative, an established, proven and innovative model, to achieve desired development and involve all stakeholders. The Circles Initiative partners volunteers (who play a mentoring role and are known as “allies”) with families and individuals in need. It aids families in bringing *themselves*

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out of poverty by first helping individuals recognize that they are in poverty and then arming them with the necessary tools and knowledge to change habits and to escape poverty.

The Circles Initiative is an effective methodology that has been successfully implemented in cities across the United States. Though there are specific guidelines that a participating city must adhere to, the program also allows for flexibility to adapt to specific circumstances. For instance, the Boulders Circles Initiative is the only program with a specific geographic focus, meaning that individuals come from one specific area within the city. The program is largely successful because individuals in poverty have to invest a significant amount of time and energy in attending classes, fixing and achieving tangible goals and results, and directing meetings with their allies, and thus become invested in their own future. Instead of the mentor or other community leader, the individual in poverty is responsible for their change and progress.

After deciding on this specific program and defining specific needs and strategies, Provo City applied for a funding grant from the Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families fully supported by both Senators Hatch and Bennett. The grant of \$350,000 was approved. Another \$50,000 pledge from Provo City brought total funds to \$400,000. The program began October of 2010. Costs have been less than originally thought and Provo City will ask for a no-cost extension to continue using the funds on the Boulders Circles Initiative when the grant ends February 2012. The program has also applied for other grants and is currently making changes that will increase the program's self-sustainability.

Results

According to the national data from the pilot Circles Campaign, it is estimated that for every \$1 spent on the Circles program, \$2 in welfare and food stamp subsidies return to the state and \$4 are given back to the communities locally as new earned income. Though the program in

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Provo is still too new to measure these results monetarily, positive changes are occurring. 32 participants have enrolled in the Getting Ahead class thus far (13 of which have graduated), 12 participants are currently enrolled and taking classes, and 30 volunteers are giving time as allies. Many positive changes have already occurred in the lives of the 12 graduated Circles Leaders (individuals who have completed the program) and each of these changes marks an improvement in the quality of life that was not there before. Four of the twelve have gained new or better employment and their total monthly wages have increased by \$2,382; four have moved into new housing outside of the Boulders, two have become involved as volunteers, seven have developed a new personal plan for financial stability, two have improved his/her means of transportation and have paid off credit card bills or payday loans, three have opened or added money to a savings account and four have enrolled in an educational program.

Over the initial 17 month project, 50 families with children, 22 individuals with disabilities and 24 youth have participated in the program with the goal to stabilize and/or move out of poverty. “Bridges out of Poverty” training, a part of the program that informs participants about the existence of class differences and expectations, has been provided to all staff at the Boulders in addition to the allies. The city is currently expanding training to members of the police department and health care community, creating important understanding between classes and helping individuals in the community understand poverty and its implications. The Circles Teams, another aspect of the Boulders Circles Initiative, are groups of individuals within the programs who come together and discuss problems they would like to see resolved in their community. One team developed a plan to have an ombudsman for the Boulders and hired a person that residents can go to and express their concerns about management without problems becoming too confrontational.

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Residents also wanted to create a stronger community at the Boulders and so set up a mini neighborhood program that emulates a ‘block captain’ approach. A certain number of residents oversees a specific number of units, gives information on programs and important notices to others, and helps others get to know each other. These residents are paid a stipend to complete training in “Crucial Communications” for this role. In addition to preparing them to be a block captain, the training helps these residents develop vital skills that will serve them above and beyond being a neighborhood captain. This activity helps individuals help each other, be aware of one another, and get to know one another. Initially, residents remained very isolated. However, as they have become more community-oriented, it is becoming a safer community for everyone.

The results of the Boulders Circles Initiative on people’s lives are tangible. In the words of Michael Sandlin, a Circles Leader, “We’ve been bound down by the chains of poverty for too long and I think the Circles Program was inspired to come forth for our benefit to loosen these chains and give us the freedom we need to escape the low life and excel to a more rewarding kind of life. I have found a few ways of my own how to prepare and conquer all the obstacles that once seemed impossible to remove.” LaRaine Christensen, another Circles Leader, added, “Circles has given us the respect and the self-confidence to be able to share our opinions and views without the worry of being looked down upon, without having to be embarrassed for the way we think and feel. It has let us know that we are not alone.”

The Boulders Circles Initiative is moving in positive directions. It has taken time, but the direction is correct and true. Men, women and children from all different backgrounds participate. This program is having an impact not only on those involved, but on the community as a whole.

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Lessons Learned

While planning and implementing this project, one of the most important lessons learned was that the Boulders Circles Initiative has implications far beyond the Boulders and has the potential to significantly benefit the whole community—both of which take time. Because this program focuses on changing the very lives of low-income individuals and volunteers, it takes time to instigate an effective program and see substantial results. In addition, many clients that live at the Boulders have mental and physical disabilities. It thus takes longer to move through the steps of the Circles Initiative program with them. As a result, classes have slowed some and handling a large number of mental and physical disabilities has been a major challenge of the program. We have learned that we cannot go at light-speed to achieve results and have instead learned that long-term, long-lasting results require intensive, long-term investments.

This program has been a learning process for *everyone* involved. We have learned a lot about the process of inclusion and have had to make program adjustments. Each group involved has learned the importance of their own and, more importantly, *others'* roles in the program. We now know that the Boulders Circles Initiative must include a variety of stakeholders, including low-income individuals traditionally left out of the discussion, or potential benefits and problems that others are not aware of will not come to light and the program will not succeed.

This program began at the Boulders for a specific reason, but it has implications for the entire community. There is great potential to help people in the community beyond the Boulders. Furthermore, the community supports the idea that we can help people find a way out of poverty instead of simply throwing money at them. This program is based on personal responsibility and this resonates in our community. These lessons have helped us move forward with increased understanding on how to work together in our community to end poverty.