

# FAMILY CIRCLES

## Sharing Our Experiences

ENGAGING RESIDENTS IN FAMILY STRENGTHENING EFFORTS:  
DES MOINES, INDIANAPOLIS, AND SEATTLE

*Part of a Learning Tool Series from the  
Technical Assistance/Resource Center of  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Participants' Views on Circles.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Community Snapshots .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Des Moines Neighborhood Circles .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Indianapolis Family Circles.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Seattle Study Circles .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Learnings .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Challenges .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Future Directions.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Des Moines.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Indianapolis.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Seattle.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>19</b>

## INTRODUCTION

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Residents and community partners from three *Making Connections* sites gathered in Baltimore to share their experiences on the use of “Study Circles” as an approach to engage residents in strengthening families and their neighborhoods. This paper summarizes the August 2 meeting during which participants exchanged ideas, shared their insights about how “Study Circles” works to engage residents and identified challenges to address as they expand across neighborhoods.

While the term used varies from “study circles,” “family circles” or “neighborhood circles,” the three communities adapted their approach from the work of the Study Circle Resource Center (SCRC). Operating as a project of the Topsfield Foundation in Pomfret, Connecticut, the SCRC offers assistance to over 200 communities across the country on the use of Study Circles to take action on community concerns.

In the SCRC model, eight to ten residents gather weekly over four to six times to explore their concerns about a specific issue such as their neighborhood, education, health or race relationships. Guided by a facilitator, the group progresses through three steps: sharing how the concern affects each resident, exploring how other residents are affected and identifying immediate actions they can take (individually, together, or with others) to make changes. The group uses a resource guide to take them through the steps. A sponsor or host organization such as a community center recruits the initial participants, provides logistical support and arranges for facilitator training.

At this meeting, representatives from Des Moines, Indianapolis and Seattle described how they adapted the Study Circles model. Joined by site team members and the Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC) team, participants discussed a wide range of “how to’s” on such topics as recruiting residents, ensuring local support for Study Circles, using social time and meals to build relationships among participants, supporting “action groups” and expanding into other neighborhoods or with specific groups of residents.

This paper aims to offer insights about how the three communities adapted Study Circles for the interests, uses and needs of neighborhood residents and the benefits that were derived. The paper begins with a snapshot of each community followed by a discussion of the learnings, challenges and future directions. In this paper, the generic term circles is used when referring across all sites.

## **PARTICIPANTS' VIEWS ON CIRCLES**

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The meeting began with participants identifying aspects they liked or found most significant about circles.

### **Des Moines**

#### **Linda Boje: Resident**

*Boje expressed excitement by the opportunities to meet more people in her community and to empower residents to make changes. "It ends up being an upward spiral for everybody. You can't raise the level for one without raising the level for all."*

#### **Kent Newman: Executive Director, Wallace House Foundation**

*"It's adult education, life-long learning and collaborative learning. It's new every day, and there are lots of outcomes. I highly recommend it."*

#### **Sheri Weathers: Resident**

*"The connections I've made are overwhelming."*

### **Indianapolis**

#### **Diane Arnold: Resident, Facilitator and Executive Director, Hawthorne Community Center**

*"As a resident for 30 years and director of a social service agency, I like to think that I know everything about the neighborhood, but this was really interesting for me. It was edifying in that, yes, a lot of the things I thought were true, but there were other things that I learned."*

#### **Dan Duncan: Vice President, Community Building for the United Way of Central Indiana**

*"I liked Family Circles' asset-based approach which emphasizes using the strengths and abilities already existing in a community to create change."*

#### **Julie Koegel: Consultant for working with partners on planning and organizing Family Circles**

*"I liked how flexible the Study Circles Resource Guide turned out to be."*

**Tony Macklin: Director, Community Initiatives for the  
Central Indiana Community Foundation**

*"Family Circles helped the Foundation to look at how to help families at a more grass-roots level. It was some surreptitious community organizing for us."*

**Mary Montgomery: Hawthorne Housing Complex Staff, Facilitator**

*"I'm used to working one-on-one. It was really different to bring residents together in a group."*

**Michael Morris: Resident & Vice President,  
Resident Management Corporation Hawthorne**

*"I got to meet people in my community I never saw, I never spoke to. As a result of Family Circles, I am now vice president of a residential corporation. We started without a resident council, and as a result of the Study Circle we are now a resident corporation."*

**Carol Moses: Americorps Volunteer, Resident and Facilitator**

*"I liked that participants wanted to be more 'hands-on' instead of just talking."*

**Seattle**

**Ogbai-Gabriel Kidane: Resident from Eritrean Community**

*"I liked how Study Circles brought people together from different communities and let them have a stronger voice."*

**Kathy Strand: Staff supporting Study Circles**

*"This is an opportunity to make connections across cultures. Study Circles developed relationships in a way I hadn't expected."*

**Casey Foundation Site Team and TARC members**

**Ira Barbell: Site Team Leader for Des Moines**

*"I like the way Neighborhood Circles leads to community action."*

**Frank Farrow: Director,  
Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC)**

*"What I like is the sense that it does lead to action ... people find themselves able to move forward and do things."*

**Glenna Deekle: Program Assistant for Camden and Louisville**

*"I like the fact that there are lots of resources available, like program manuals."*

**Su'ad Abdul-Khabeer: Program Assistant for Des Moines and Indianapolis**

*"I like how much I have to learn about Neighborhood Circles, the possibilities."*

**Sammy Moon: Site Team Leader for Louisville and TARC Team Member**

*"I like the way circles brings people together and I am eager to learn how other communities develop them."*

**Donna Stark: Site Team Leader for Indianapolis**

*"This is a meaningful experience for people whose voices could make a difference, and this is a vehicle for doing that."*

**Other Participants**

**Jon Abercrombie: Consultant, Study Circles Resource Center**

*"I admire Study Circles' potential to transform relationships, to help get to know each other in a different way, and to act on their mutual concerns."*

**Phyllis Rozansky: Consultant to TARC and Facilitator for the meeting**



# COMMUNITY SNAPSHOTS

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## Des Moines Neighborhood Circles

### Purpose and Scope

The initial target neighborhood in the near Northside is in an “enterprise community” populated with a mix of African-Americans, Latinos, Asians and Caucasians. The Wallace House Foundation played a key organizing role as it had sponsored community groups similar to circles. Wallace House recruited participants from multiple community organizations and the facilitator.

The pilot Neighborhood Circle had a group of 12 participants with a fairly even split of women and men and African-Americans and Caucasians. The participants represented three different neighborhood associations. The group piloted the SCRC *Building Strong Neighborhoods for Families with Children Resource Guide* during their four-week sessions. The purpose was to identify what could be done to improve their neighborhood.

Initial recruitment efforts ran into some skepticism from prospective participants because of their prior experiences with projects that had not produced results. Participants questioned the purpose of Neighborhood Circles as a short-term effort. “They jumped to outcomes, asking ‘What’s the long-term goal,’ ” said Newman.

The participants met at the Neighborhood Finance Center. It provided ample space for meeting and for child care and was close enough so that participants did not need additional transportation. Each group meeting began with a social time around a meal with parents and children.

### Initial Results

“In our experience, once they’re there, people are hungry for this kind of meaningful dialogue with other adults, and having the time and space to do this.” Newman said. During the course of the meetings, participants discovered that many resources, services and programs were available to them in their community.

The participants identified neighborhood needs including:

- ◆ more structured and supervised youth activities, especially at one particular park in the summer (a summer day program);
- ◆ a parent resource center that can provide day care and sick child care; and
- ◆ a better list of resources and services available to residents, especially newcomers – for example, a “new neighbor” packet.

Participants took action around very specific projects including:

- ◆ helping neighbors with efforts to clean up their yards;
- ◆ getting businesses to clean-up their areas by using trash cans;
- ◆ joining efforts to secure a grocery store for the neighborhood; and
- ◆ getting the city to act on environmental concerns and vacant lots in the neighborhood.

After the pilot Neighborhood Circle, Barbell met with families to discuss their experiences. "I was concerned whether families felt used by the Foundation to participate. They gave a very enthusiastic endorsement of the process. Residents said they made connections with each other, learning about other activities and meeting new friends."

### **Key Challenges**

The Des Moines community team encountered a significant challenge in attempting to organize a Neighborhood Circle in the predominantly Latino neighborhood on the Eastside. Efforts by a local priest who also is head of the Hispanic educational resource center to find participants were unsuccessful. Lacking a bi-lingual resource guide and promotional materials became a challenge. The community team is looking at how to bridge across the cultural gaps, and to use more appropriate recruitment approaches in their next round.

## **Indianapolis Family Circles**

### **Purpose and Scope**

Indianapolis piloted seven Family Circles in two different neighborhoods. The first group consisted of residents from a predominantly African-American apartment complex housing 160 family on the Eastside. The Hawthorne Housing complex sits in the midst of a community of 1,200 African-American, Caucasian and Latino residents. Twenty-nine residents participated in two adult and one youth Family Circle for five sessions.

On the Westside is the Hawthorne Community Center (names are coincidental). It reaches a community that is essentially three adjoining neighborhoods - one predominantly African-American, one with a strong Appalachian background, and a one with a growing Latino population. Twenty-nine residents participated in four Family Circles for five sessions.

The Housing Complex and the Community Center became the host organizations for supporting the Family Circles. The Community Center had expressed interest in reaching out to residents. It became a natural match to be a host organization to recruit residents, provide meeting space and offer co-facilitators.

#### **Indianapolis Goals for the Family Circles**

1. Connect residents with each other in the neighborhood
2. Energize residents to come up with ideas for their neighborhood, and take their ideas to the neighborhood association or residents' council for action
3. Connect residents to services they want
4. Identify "grassroots" ideas that can be conveyed to system stakeholders such as social service providers, funders and city council members

The Housing Authority had identified the Hawthorne Housing complex "as a group that seems to have potential. They aren't well connected, and the Resident's Council is only somewhat active, but Mary Montgomery has the potential to get folks together, and can use Family Circles as a first organizing tool," Macklin recalled.

The partners opted for a co-facilitation approach that teamed a neighborhood resident with a staff person from the host organization. The residents served as the "hands-on" facilitator in the group while the host organization's facilitator handled the supports and the logistics. Given the "experimental" nature of the effort, the host organizations also opted to provide a stipend for all participants. All Family Circles participated in the evaluation conducted by the community partners.

"The groups followed the agenda in the Resource Guide closely at first, then "took off" on other topics. Action plans for family strengthening and family development sort of mashed together - which is OK by us," noted Macklin.

"We're a city that doesn't have a strong background in community organizing and community building. The SCRC Study Circle model looked like it would work well, but we wondered if it would hold up to the test of involving families that were not connected to their communities," said Macklin.

## Initial Results

Within days of the last Family Circle, participants, facilitators, host organizations, community partners and Casey site team members gathered at the Indianapolis Children's Museum to share their successes. The Sunday afternoon celebration brought together dozens of participants and their families to eat, play and share their experiences. Participants spoke about what they liked, what they learned and what they would do next to act on the ideas generated from their Family Circle.

"We started with a non-functional Residents' Council, and now have a corporation with a board, and we are taking action."

*Michael Morris, Indianapolis*

Residents presented their ideas for actions.

- ◆ Have family nights
- ◆ Organize block parties
- ◆ Fix and build more basketball courts
- ◆ Put a bulletin board of activities at the entrance to the park
- ◆ Start a bi-lingual newsletter
- ◆ Start a neighborhood safe house for children
- ◆ Get older residents to come to the Community Center to read to children and to tell the stories of the neighborhood
- ◆ Involve suspended students in an "adopt a neighborhood program" to cut grass, clean up vacant lots
- ◆ Protect young children in the neighborhood (Youth Circle)
- ◆ Break up fights in the neighborhood (Youth Circle)

Community partners felt that Family Circles made great progress in meeting the four goals. Morris cited a specific success regarding the residents' council. Arnold noted that "I was able to write the application for the community block grant based on what I learned in those four weeks. Now, I have resident input on priorities to use on an on-going basis."

"Family Circles brought out people on the fringes, who had never been to neighborhood association meetings, and gave them a chance to speak without interruption. Facilitators kept the usual leaders from dominating the conversation. It was very interesting to see neighborhood leaders have to sit there. Now, we have new leaders emerging."

*Diane Arnold, Indianapolis*

## **Key Challenges**

"Now, the challenge is taking the plans to action. The host organizations are continuing to play a role. They are asking participants, 'What are the top three things you want to act on?'" said Macklin. Additionally, they are helping them think about budgeting, and sources of support such as mini-grants, other organizations, and corporations with employees who are willing to volunteer, and so on. As for linking people with community services and resources, "We haven't hit that hard enough," said Macklin.

The community partners are concerned about supporting the community change process that Family Circles began. The community partners did not anticipate the amount of time it would take to support seven circles. They concluded that expansion needs to be approached very carefully and thoughtfully.

"Follow-up time is VERY important...more important than the organizing process. If you don't follow through, it becomes just another conversation process imposed on the neighborhood by some outside entity, even if it felt like it was generated from the ground up."

*Tony Macklin, Indianapolis*

In considering expansion plans, Macklin noted that "we have to keep all neighborhood groups apprised of the Family Circle plans. If a neighborhood association hosts a Family Circle and has a conflict with the community center then we'll have staff to help mediate. We didn't do that during the pilot, and got some noise about not doing that. We must keep the whole chain of command informed, if not involved, as we roll out the expansion."

## **Seattle Study Circles**

### **Purpose and Scope**

Over a year ago, efforts began in the two neighborhoods under consideration to be *Making Connections* sites to seek out key leaders and residents to start conversations. The two neighborhoods in south Seattle have a heavy concentration of immigrant populations. As Kidane notes, "our school district has children who speak 93 different languages."

The Holly Park Study Circle in Southeast Seattle includes Oromo, Cambodian, Somali and Eritrean immigrants and African-Americans. The White Center Study Circle in Southwest Seattle includes Vietnamese, Latino and Cambodian populations.

Recruitment to Study Circles came through asking school leaders, foundations, government officials, neighborhood organizations and social services agencies, "To whom should we be talking?" After the initial meetings brought more providers than residents, several individuals from the community partners served as recruiters to various cultural groups.

Seattle's approach presents the most variation in the use of the Study Circles model. While the aim is to engage residents in identifying needs and taking action is consistent, the use of an on-going meeting process is different than the four to six week sessions. Generally, the two Study Circles meet monthly together. Between these meetings smaller cultural clusters meet. The Holly Park-Rainier Valley Circle generally had five smaller groups meeting while the White Center Circle had four groups. These smaller groups would bring their concerns back to the neighborhood Study Circle.

The Study Circle goals focus on strengthening families. The goals include learning about family strengthening, understanding how groups define family strengthening and to creating long-term relationships among residents.

The Study Circle groups meet generally monthly at community centers and eat dinner together. Between meetings, smaller groups meet in cultural clusters. Each Study Circle had \$25,000 to propose projects for family strengthening projects. Seattle also used a variety of supports for gathering residents together including meals, child care and stipends. The community team reasoned that because service providers are paid for their time, the local residents should be too. "We want to value peoples' time," said Kathy Strand.

## Initial Results

The community team realized that the communities they had brought together were more ethnic than geographical. "We realized that we really don't have a neighborhood here," Strand said. Family strengthening meant very different things in the Cambodian than the Oromo communities. Still, residents found common ground for conversation.

Through the mini-grants, the cultural groups started several projects.

- ◆ Cooking and sewing classes for women in the Eritrean community
- ◆ Buying a van for the Oromo community's after-school program
- ◆ Literacy program for Somalians who are not literate in their first language
- ◆ A parenting class in Vietnamese, with a Vietnamese teacher who designed the class based on what parents wanted to learn
- ◆ Soccer program for Cambodian children
- ◆ ESL classes

"It was very, very interesting. This was an eye-opener. When you come together, the common interests that people share in their daily lives come out."

*Ogbai-Gabriel Kidane, Seattle*

## **Key Challenges**

“Having a common language was, and is, a challenge for our multi-cultural and thus multi-language groups,” remarked Strand. In the White Center Study Circle we used translators. However, translators also can slow down the communication and can be frustrating for some people.

Finding the right mix of guidelines for decision-making about the use of the mini-grants provided both a challenge and a learning opportunity. Strand notes that “we really didn’t have any guidelines about the decision-making.” When the small cultural groups returned with their proposals for family strengthening projects, the total amount exceeded the available \$25,000. To our surprise the groups volunteered to reduce their budgets in specific areas. Everyone was very polite with each other. In the future, we may have to divide the money equally across all groups,” Strand said.

## LEARNINGS

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Participants shared their discoveries, lessons and insights into using circles. While the communities adapted the SCRC Study Circle model differently, they found that many learnings apply across their communities.

### One-to-One Recruiting Works

All three communities cited personal recruitment as effective in engaging residents to attend circles. The recruiters knew many of the individuals through their use of services, living in the housing complex or being a member of an association or community group. The recruiters varied across communities. They included staff from the host organization, other residents or service providers.

The personal recruitment worked with residents who tend not to regularly get out or attend neighborhood events. Arnold noted that we emphasized that the Family Circle “needs you.” “We said, ‘It’s a great thing that you’re invited. We need your help.’ People seemed to like being asked to do something.”

*The Making Connections* recruitment approach differs from the traditional community-wide SCRC Study Circle approach noted Abercrombie. “In the community-wide approach, the co-sponsors publicize the Study Circle topic and use more of a general advertising with some personal recruitment through their organizations.”

“I can go out and recruit, because once I’ve been through it, I can tell you about it. Besides, word of mouth has always been the best advertising anyway.”

*Michael Morris, Indianapolis*

Linda Boje shared her reaction to being asked to participate. “I felt compelled to attend, because as a parent I feel it’s important to practice what I preach, and I can’t tell my children they’re important, valuable members of the community, and then sit back and not do anything myself.”

Some residents indicated that they would be part of the effort to recruit in the next round.

### Neighbor Resource Guide Helps Focus Conversation

Des Moines and Indianapolis piloted the newly developed SCRC’s *Building Strong Neighborhoods for Families with Children Resource Guide*. Participants noted the use of the Resource Guide varied depending on the facilitator and the group’s interest and “personality.” By and large, the groups found them useful even when they did not follow them closely.

Groups used the Resource Guide in different ways. As Moses notes, her group was eager. “Everybody was always looking ahead to the next week!” As one group found out, the homework assignments between meetings can generate important connections. One resident took the homework assignment of *talking to your neighbor about what you did tonight* quite seriously. She reported that “I talked to my neighbor for the first time in six years. Now, we go over once, twice, three times a week and have coffee.”

One of the Indianapolis Family Circles adapted the Resource Guide to serve their interest of inviting guest speakers each week from organizations such as the police department and the United Way Helpline. "To their surprise the group discovered they had covered the guide's prescribed questions about community and action," notes Arnold.

## **Circles Need Supports**

All communities identified that operating circles takes multiple types of supports.

As one participant said, "Food works!" All three communities provided meals and/or refreshments. "One of the first things that the SCRC told us was, 'This is an important civic process, not a social process, so we encourage you not to have food.' As I listen to how this works in your communities, you all are eating a lot ... this is one adaptation that makes sense," Abercrombie said. All three communities found that the social, relationship building is highly valued by residents.

Having food and child care helped parents feel comfortable. "One of the fathers told me that the idea of the stipend got me there the first time, but it was a place I knew my kids were safe, and they got well fed, so I could participate without worrying," said Farrow.

Indianapolis found that stipends worked to initially attract residents and especially youth to the Family Circles. However, reports from participants made it clear that it was not the stipends that kept them coming. In general, participants started to attend to get their stipends, but continued for other reasons. "After the first couple of meetings, they came not just for the stipend, but for the camaraderie," Morris said. In the end, one participant did not want the money. "A gentleman in one of our groups, who did not have many resources turned around and gave the check back to me to use for our baseball program," said Arnold. This story inspired the meeting participants to think of other ways to distribute and use stipend money, such as giving residents the opportunity to donate stipends to the local cause of their choice.

## **New and Long-time Residents Find Opportunities**

Participants from all communities noted that circles have value for long-time residents and newcomers. Both groups of residents discovered new resources that their families could use. Both groups met people they didn't know. Residents almost seem surprised when they learned about programs for their children, the history of their neighborhood and the views of other neighbors on needs and issues.

## **Resident Facilitators Add Value and Build Leadership**

Indianapolis opted to use co-facilitators for their Family Circles. A resident and a staff person from the host organization worked as a team. The resident served as the hands-on meeting facilitator to attend to the needs of the group and to make sure that all voices were heard. The staff person coordinated the logistics of meetings including taking meeting notes, arranging child care and food, calling members who missed a meeting etc. Participants liked the role of resident facilitators and felt it was empowering. Those who were facilitators also felt some tension. They recognized that they could not give their own opinions.



## Sustaining Momentum and Generating Action

The communities all learned that Study Circles creates lots of enthusiasm and excitement with residents. In Indianapolis the celebration after the end of the Family Circles created a momentum. However, we did not meet again for two months, and the momentum was lost. "Now, we have to go back and re-create enthusiasm," said Arnold. "People were excited, then we jerked the rug right out from under them. Now we have to go back and do some more building up for the neighborhood work." One idea is to provide periodic social gatherings such as cookouts to bring people together and recognize their work. Participants from Des Moines agreed that follow-up has to be timely or momentum slows.

Keeping residents informed and engaged in the action plans takes time and money. "It is unreasonable to expect a host organization that is providing space or volunteers to simply take this task on. That's another program! If that is the expectation, then it needs to be made very clear. You can't expect them to just take on this new project with no money," said Koegel.

## Including and Supporting Neighborhood Populations

All communities recognized that there are very practical matters associated with being inclusive in engaging residents in the circle groups. One area involved representation.

Another area included residents who speak different languages. Several participants noted that supporting residents whose first language is not English requires very specific supports such as translators and calls for a different way to facilitate to keep the process moving and provide a way for individuals to make their concerns known.

"We can't have 50 people at every meeting, but who really represents families?"

*Kathy Strand, Seattle*

Seattle used translators at their Study Circle meetings. "We had so much of a language issue, that interpreters did slow the process down," said Strand. "It did also create some relationships that were very good. The language issues forced the community team and the facilitators to do more preparation between meetings and with the cultural groups. This preparation helped many participants voice concerns to the Study Circle that otherwise might have been neglected.

"In our community (Indianapolis), where there is already tension building between the Hispanic and non-Hispanic community, will using an interpreter actually slow things down and maybe increase the tension?" asked Arnold.

The Seattle community team considered doing single-language Latino, Cambodian and Vietnamese groups. They may do so in the future to ensure that all participants have a voice and can read the meeting materials. Facilitators could not use the Resource Guide with the groups because it is only in English.

In the future, "I'd be more prepared, and could prepare the whole group for using translators," Strand said. "I could say, 'This is going to take time. When you hear this noise in the background, it's not someone being rude – it's interpreters.'"

## CHALLENGES

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### The Impact Expanding Circles in Neighborhoods

The participants noted that they did encounter resistance from existing neighborhood groups. In Des Moines, "There was resistance and there is resistance," Barbell said, "The neighborhood non-profits, who are the historical spokespersons for the neighborhood prefer that we not do this and just convene them to find out what the neighborhood residents really think needs to be done." The same concern applies to neighborhood associations. "A neighborhood association tends to be made up of groups of people with an agenda. Is it a representative agenda?" Newman asked.

According to Barbell, neighborhood associations worry that the priorities identified by local residents in Neighborhood Circles might not be the same issues that the nonprofits are working on. "They're worried. They don't oppose the process, but they aren't broadly endorsing it. It's kind of a 'watch and wait' process," he said. One issue that emerged during conversations was how well each neighborhood association represented the interests of the residents.

Participants felt that the issue is power. "It's a threat that something is going on in my neighborhood that I don't know about, and don't have my hands in," Macklin said. In Indianapolis, the partners presented Family Circles as a "done deal." "The community response was 'We didn't help design it. It's a great idea, but we don't like it. It wasn't our idea,'" said Duncan. "It became clear that as part of the roll-out, we need an advisory board of neighborhood leaders and residents with some participation from institutions so that they have a chance to take this pilot experience and help us design the next round," noted Duncan.

Another issue is competition for resources. "We realize, as a funder, that we set up some of those fights artificially. We set up parallel institutions that compete, for no other reason than that we have competitive funds out there," said Macklin. "The Family Circles are owning up to that responsibility in some small way, and saying, 'We're going to help you break down that barrier.'"

"Neighborhood Circles are good to bring families together and have conversations, but there is the potential, if you play it out, that it may affect what gets funded in this neighborhood. This is not lost on the people who have struggled for years to get a piece of the pie," said Barbell. The very language outsiders use to describe the problem can be

"What you're asking the agencies to do is 'Participate with us and find out what residents need.' The neighborhood priorities could be such as to leave some providers out of business."

*Ira Barbell, Annie E. Casey Foundation*

threatening to neighborhood providers. "We had a meeting with neighborhood association leaders, and they really reacted negatively to the term 'isolated family,'" said Duncan. "In some way, that's telling them they failed. There are isolated families in their

neighborhood because they failed, even though they say they're not out there trying to find everyone."

On the other hand, neighborhood associations that are "friendly" to Family Circles can create challenges as well. "What if you're invited by one faction, and the other faction isn't interested in speaking to you? What do you do? Each has its own agenda, and if one invites you in, it'll have its own agenda," remarked Koegel.

## **Connecting with Policy and Funding Partners**

"How do you prepare public-sector policy types to hear residents' voices differently than they have? And, how do you at the same time prepare funders to hear them differently?" asked Moon.

In Indianapolis, site team members have worked with the Mayor's office to support Family Circles from the start. In Des Moines, these discussions have recently started.

Strand noted that "We have a different problem. Seattle has tons of money, but it is saying, 'We don't know where to put it.'"

Local funders are very interested in Family Circles' outcomes. Community partners can say, "Here are specific things people are asking for. It's not what social service agencies are asking for; it's what families are asking for. The United Way of Central Indiana recently adopted stringent requirements that local nonprofits and agencies have ties to the community where they are physically located. If the agencies aren't connected with neighborhoods, then we're not going to fund them," said Duncan.

## **Finding Common Ground**

Once a circle begins carrying out its action plan, the group sponsoring the circle is viewed as having positions. It is important to find a process that keeps circle open, so that the next round can still bring different factions together to talk. "Once you are a circle with an action at the end, it's political. People will say, 'They say they're neutral, but they've been doing these things.' Once you start to act, what is your role? A group can suddenly become politicized, isolated and exclusive. How do you keep it open?" Abercrombie asked.

Circles need to find their participants' common ground. The circle process itself can help. "If people came with their own personal agendas, once they participated in the process, they set their own agendas aside. We had people from different neighborhoods who came over and discovered they were dealing with the same issues," said Arnold.

"Find out what they disagree about, let them air that – people need to vent a bit – then move on to common ground, issues to work on together."

*Linda Boje, Des Moines*

## Expansion Strategy

The SCRC recommends that communities create a community-wide working group of local leaders and identify sponsors to recruit circle participants followed by starting Study Circles in neighborhoods. In contrast, the Making Connections sites have worked to recruit residents who are not the visible community leaders. The residents decide what topics to address not community leaders or organizations. Using the Study Circle model of a community-wide planning committee would bring a very “top-down” organizational approach.

In the future, circles could involve local associations, “little groups of people who are meeting, and have a representative – the book club, quilting group...this is the heart of the struggle for asset-based development,” said Abercrombie.

The Des Moines community team noted that they will have to think hard about the purpose of the Neighborhood Circles, and how they fit into the overall *Making Connections Initiative*. “What will it look like three years from now? Will we still do 50 Neighborhood Circles a year then? Or is the goal to get us to some other point, some other process that comes out of this, where communities represent their own interests with governments and Neighborhood Circles are the vehicle for that?” asked Barbell.

“The organization is close to transparent; the emphasis is on the resident discussion. I get nervous whenever we talk about incentives for organizations to participate. That’s moving back to a traditional way of looking at things, that organizations represent people instead of people representing themselves.”

*Frank Farrow, Annie E. Casey Foundation*

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

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All three communities are proceeding with plans to continue and to expand their efforts based on the pilot round. This section briefly describes their plans and includes an update since the meeting.

### **Des Moines**

The Des Moines community team is aiming to adapt the expansion of Neighborhood Circles as both a resident engagement and community organizing strategy. The Wallace House Foundation is taking a lead role to support the expansion of Neighborhood Circles in the near Northside and the Eastside. The Foundation is recruiting partner organizations in the two neighborhoods such as the Boys and Girls Club and the YMCA. As host organizations, they will use their neighborhood base to conduct 30-40 Study Circles. Residents from the first round are helping by identifying other residents to participate. The Wallace House Foundation will link the efforts together and provide technical assistance for training facilitators and providing resource materials.

On the organizing side, Citizens for Community Improvement (CCI) will conduct a door-to-door canvassing of approximately 200 residents to learn about their interests, needs and concerns firsthand and to begin building relationships.

With the completion of the next round of Neighborhood Circles and the canvassing, an action forum will be held early next year to discuss the priorities that surfaced through these combined efforts.

The community team also is bringing together a community-wide group of leaders and stakeholders to keep them informed about efforts underway.

### **Indianapolis**

The expansion plan for Family Circles is underway. The partners including the Mayor's office, the United Way of Central Indiana and the Central Indiana Community Foundation are working on the plan. Indianapolis has hundreds of neighborhood associations and community-based organizations that can serve as hosts for Family Circles. "We don't have to go where we're not invited," said Macklin. At the same time, the site team wants to be sure that the Family Circles do not become a divisive organizing tool.

The goal is to launch 18-32 Family Circles in 6-8 neighborhoods in mid-January 2001. Neighborhood-Based Organizations (NBOs) have received a brochure about how they can participate as a host organization. Interested NBOs can file an application for a grant of \$1,500 for each Family Circle they host. Each NBO is expected to host three to four Family Circles.

An advisory committee composed of neighborhood leaders, the pilot host organizations and Family Circle participants will choose the NBOs. The announcement of the selected NBOs will be made at the Mayor's Family Strengthening Summit the 19th of November.

The Central Indiana Community Foundation contracted with the Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center to support the next round of Family Circles. The Resource Center hired two Community Builders to work with the NBOs and residents.

According to Duncan, the goal is to use Family Circles to do "asset-based" organizing, to create neighborhood-based, people-based solutions to problems. "How can we make connections so that residents can say, 'This is what we want in our neighborhood,' and the agencies can be more responsive?" said Duncan.

The site team will continue looking to Family Circles to find new community leaders, including youth. The Indianapolis staff plan to give "crash courses" to residents who are asked to serve on community boards for the first time, to teach them what their responsibilities and roles are likely to be. This could have a lasting effect on the individuals and the community. "Once you get in a situation to be a leader, it's hard to go back," Morris said.

"Some people are leaders and don't know it."

*Michael Morris, Indianapolis*

The planning team intends to recruit volunteers to perform many services while it expands the number of Family Circles – offering child care, transportation, or even facilitation. "[It will] allow people to participate on a number of different levels," said Macklin. Stipends will not be paid during this expansion. Instead, the partners are looking at the incentives social service agencies give residents, such as tickets to the zoo or a basketball game.

## Seattle

The community team intends to continue with the existing Study Circle approach in the Holly Park and White Center neighborhoods. The community team wants to support the strengthening of relationships within the cultural groups and across groups. Participants continue to point out the importance of Study Circles in reducing their isolation and helping them do what they believe is important to preserve their culture within their family.

Residents from all of the four cultural groups in the Holly Park neighborhood met to share their successes from their mini-grant projects. The Somalian women who had conducted a cooking class as their project prepared the meal for the 40 plus Study Circle members and community partners attended the meeting. Each of the four groups reported successes with the language classes, recreational programs for children, cooking and sewing classes.

The four cultural sub-groups (African-American, Oromo, Somali and Eritrean) along with the Cambodian group (that was unable to apply in the first round) will each have an equal amount mini-grant of under \$5,000 to propose a continuation, expansion or a new project for this fall.

The White Hall Study Circle is planning to meet to discuss the results of their group projects. They also will have the opportunity to apply for an additional round of mini-grants.

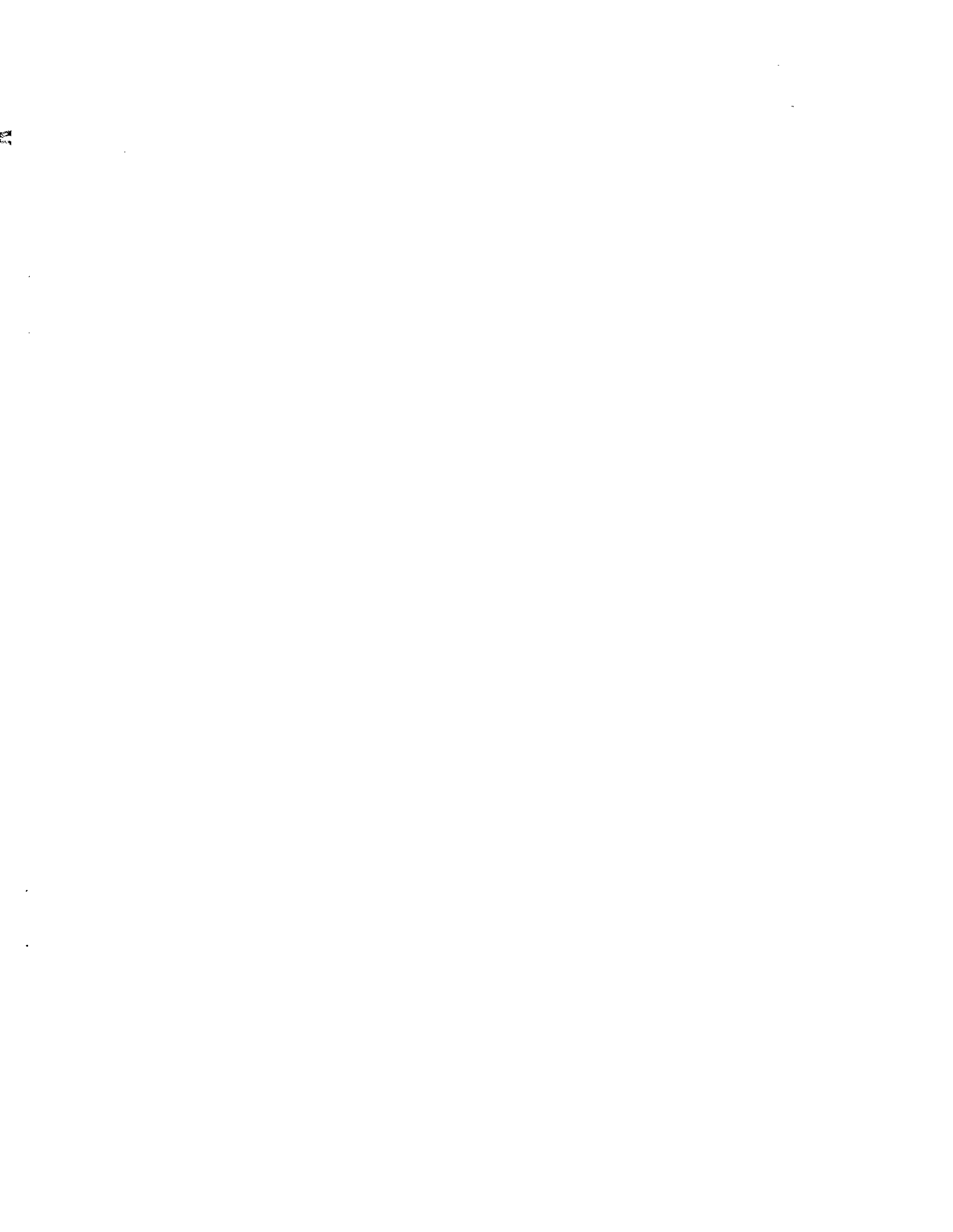
## **CONCLUSION**

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All of the participants agree that the adapted use of the SCRC Study Circles proved effective for engaging residents in family strengthening efforts. Participants express high level of enthusiasm for circles. They are hopeful about the potential for circles to reach wider and deeper into neighborhoods and to connect better with other community stakeholders. Des Moines, Indianapolis and Seattle have decided to move forward with this approach as one way to engage residents in strengthening families. The communities are well aware of the challenges they face and intend to continue their peer-to-peer assistance to help one another advance their efforts.













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